SOLO

Backcountry adventuring in Aotearoa New Zealand

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For Rob Hosking. For all the tracks
you didn't get to tramp, and the book
you didn't get to write.

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PREFACE

IN PART, THIS BOOK is the story of my quest to find home. It's also about feminism and its intersection with mountaineering.

Perhaps the biggest contrast in mountaineering can be found in the difference between historic climber Freda du Faur, who wrote *The Conquest of Mount Cook and Other Climbs*, and early author and mountaineer Samuel Turner. Both were admirable climbers in their own right, each with notable firsts. Du Faur was the first woman to summit Aoraki/Mount Cook; Turner, first to solo. Du Faur wrote a book on her climbs, while Turner wrote several. Du Faur emerges as a punchy character, pushing boundaries and bending gender norms, whereas Turner simply comes across as an arrogant egotist.[1]

Having read a number of books on mountaineering, adventuring and wilderness experiences — from du Faur and Turner to Peter Graham's biography, Lydia Bradey's *Going Up Is Easy* and international bestsellers such as *Into the Wild* (Jon Krakauer) and *Wild* (Cheryl Strayed) — it's clear to me that men remain unconscious of their gender as it relates to these activities, while for women it is very much a consideration. That's not to say that women dwell on the physical aspects (management of menstruation in the wilderness, for example), but more on confidence and ability (or lack thereof), or on the discrimination they experience. Even though women now make up a greater proportion of, say, attendees on snowcraft courses, we still feel 'othered'. Alpine clubs accept women members, there are plenty of women guides — so why are we still so astounded to see a woman in the wilderness? At what point do we, as women, not only *become* normal, but also *feel* normal?

This book is also about risk and death. Among those backcountry stories I unearthed there are some real tragedies.

A friend commented that while writing this book I'd become quite obsessed with people who have perished in the wilderness. My treatment of them may at times sound glib but I trust that any family member of the deceased mentioned who reads this will know that I've considered this, and the stories of their folk, with the utmost respect and regard.

When you spend a lot of time in the wilderness, and especially when you have a few near-death episodes, you think a lot about how it might end for you. This awareness is nearly always with me and perhaps that's

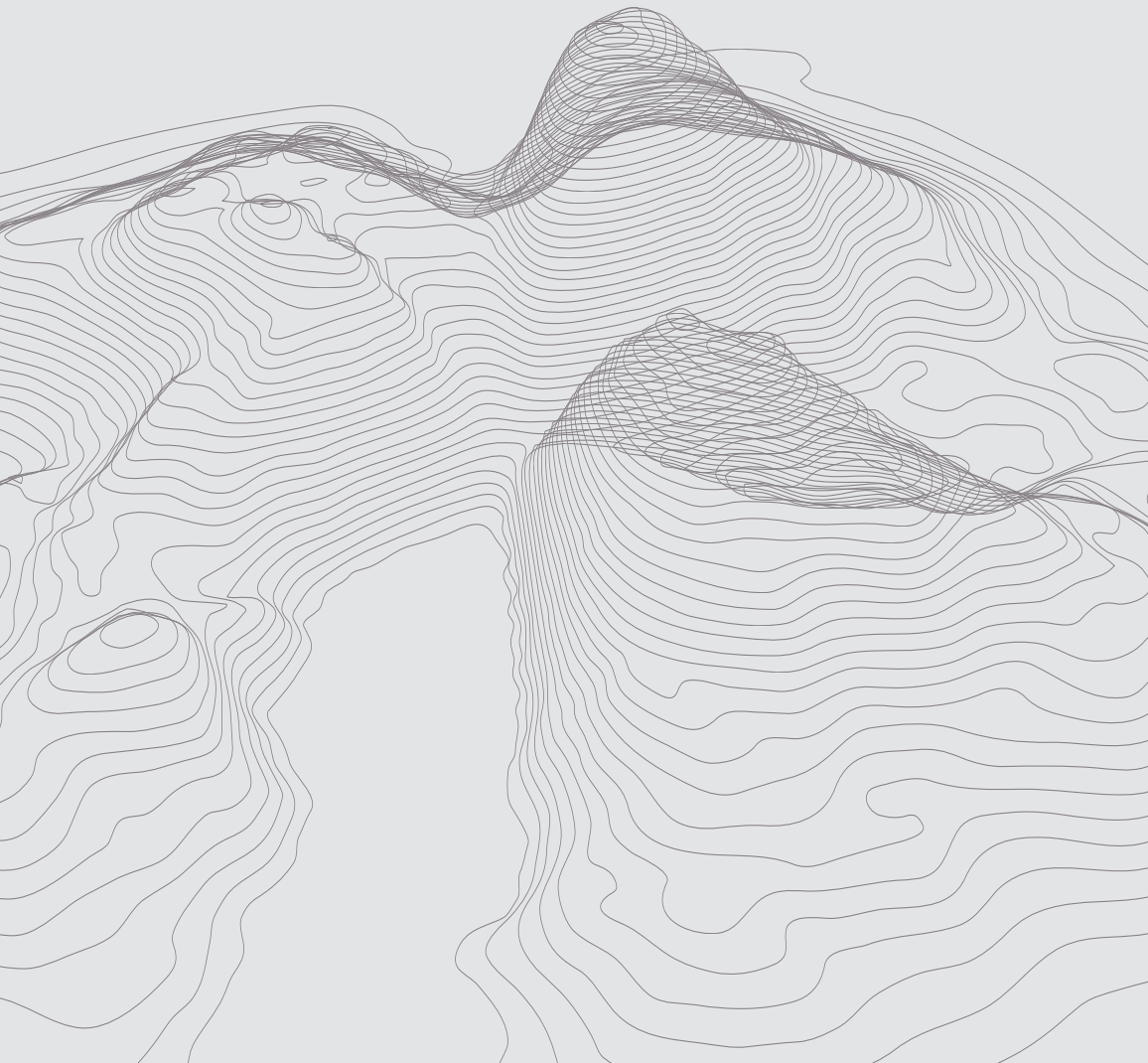
why I take such an interest in these stories. If you, too, are interested, I recommend the two books by Paul Hersey listed in the select bibliography.

Most of all, I think about it in conjunction with the value of these experiences: is it worth it, the risk? It's a question you need to answer each time you go — it's specific to each activity. Mostly, I'd say no, but I know many mountaineers are driven to climb regardless of the risk.

There's a saying: there are old mountaineers, and bold mountaineers, but no old, bold mountaineers.

Introduction

Strategically homeless



IN 2016, DISILLUSIONED WITH what Auckland had become, I left. I didn't know where I wanted to live, but I figured that packing up and going on the road would at least help me figure it out.

I was also disillusioned with the standard 40-hour-work-week approach of being chained to a desk, and I had switched jobs to a new gig where I was the only staff member in New Zealand. The rest of the company was based in Australia, so I was left on my own to get on with it. My work became entirely doable remotely, and flexibly — everything was done with my 13-inch laptop, iPad and mobile phone — and eventually it just seemed silly to stay in Auckland, with its housing and traffic challenges. (In the age of Covid-19, it now seems unthinkable, perhaps ridiculous, that we once demanded that people be tied to a specific desk, in a specific office, for a specific period of time each week.)

And so I left. I packed up my whole life — except for a tramping pack, boots and ski gear — and cut a fast track south.

For the next three years I was strategically homeless. Home became wherever I'd chosen to be at that moment. Sometimes it was an alpine club lodge, sometimes a Department of Conservation (DoC) hut, sometimes camping out in the bush or bedding down in a bivvy bag if I'd stuffed up and had nowhere to sleep. Sometimes it was a nice hotel in Sydney, when I had to travel for work, which always presented a bizarre contrast of lifestyles; I once spent the night at Rangiwahia Hut in the Ruahine Range, tramped out the next day, drove to Wellington Airport, flew to Sydney and went to bed in a hotel that night.

Strategic homelessness allowed me to be in the hills every weekend and sometimes on weeknights, too. A typical excursion would start on Friday afternoon, when I'd haul on my pack, don my boots and walk into the wilderness until Monday morning. I'd usually have until around midday

before I needed to be back online; that's when my Aussie colleagues would begin to down their coffee and switch on their computers (and, possibly, wonder where I was).

To the casual social media observer, it looked like I was living a dream life — always skiing, tramping, mountaineering, with beautiful photos to show for it. What wasn't quite so obvious in the dishonest social construct that is Facebook, was that it demanded more energy, enthusiasm, time management and *work* than ever. If I stole a chunk of Monday morning tramping out of the bush, it meant a late-night Monday. If I took off camping up a stream bed on Wednesday night, it meant a long Thursday workday. It was a constant juggling act — but it was worth it.

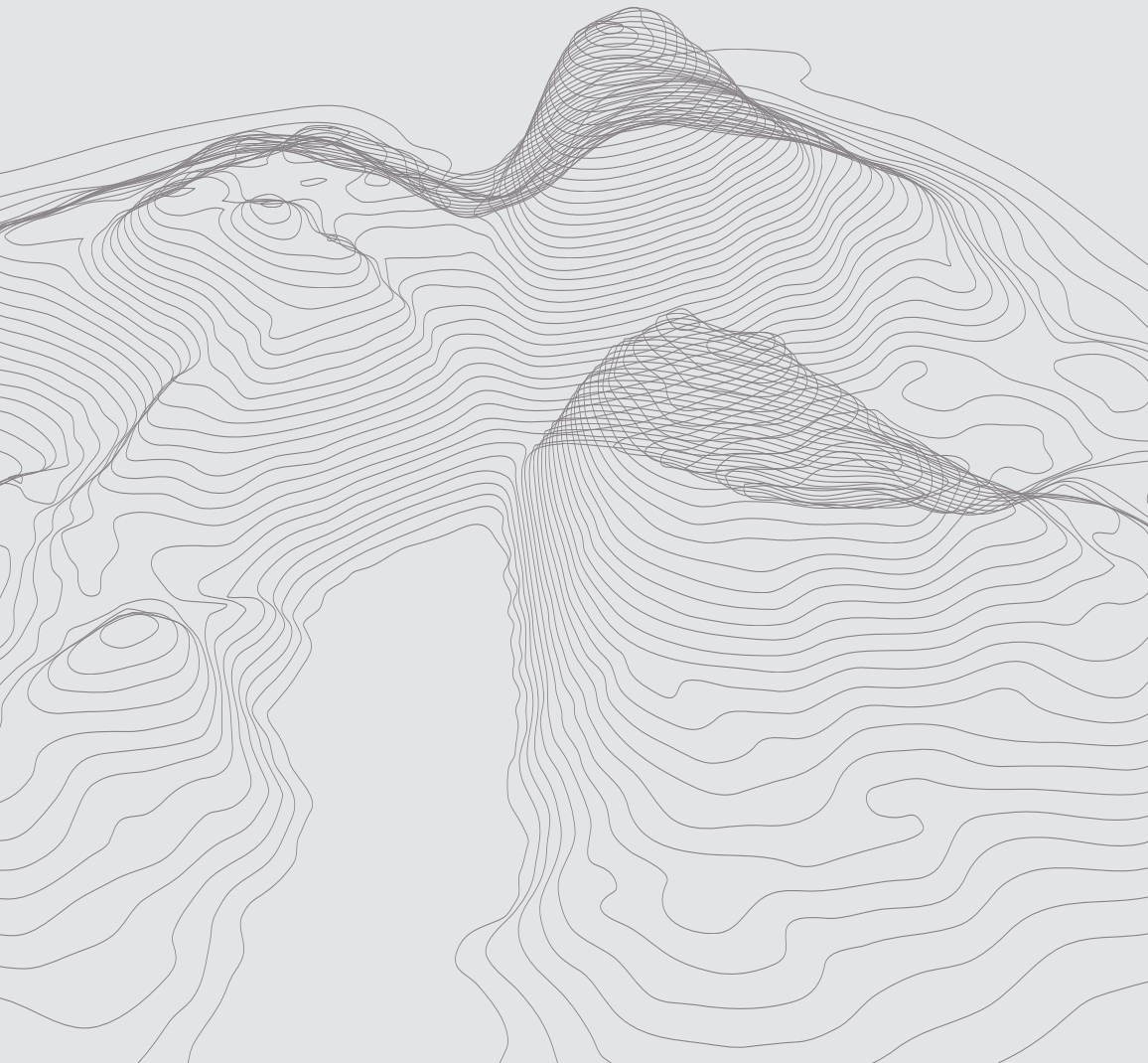
Over those years, I tramped my way up and down the country, from the Hump Ridge to Ruapehu and across the Kaimanawa and Kaweka ranges. I destroyed three pairs of boots, two packs and four sets of gaiter straps. Countless packets of dehy food and tasty snacks were consumed. People were met. Land was traversed. Books were read.

During this time I watched my good friend and fellow journalist Rob Hosking fade from the earth after losing his battle with cancer and never getting to do all the things he'd planned. His death and these years taught me that you only get one shot at this stuff. Make sure you give it heaps.

Taking in the stars and snow on a night-time traverse of the Tongariro Alpine Crossing. We started late in the evening under a full moon, which lights up the landscape as it reflects on the snow. It was cold. Very cold.
MIKE HEYDON, JET PRODUCTIONS

Ruapehu

The ice likes to bite



THEY SAY THERE'S more than one type of fun. In fact, there are three types. Type one is the sort of fun 'normal' people enjoy: hot tubs, beer, Netflix. It's fun at the time, requires very little effort, but isn't particularly memorable. Type two is the sort of fun only masochists enjoy: mountaineering, tough multi-day tramping, bush-bashing. It requires hard effort and it's certainly not fun at the time, but it's fun in retrospect — and it's also indelibly marked on your memory. You never forget type two fun. (Then there's type three, which is not fun at the time, not fun in retrospect, and someone probably went home in an ambulance.)

Type two fun typically involves unknown unknowns — the stuff you don't know you don't know about. I considered the concept of unknown unknowns after hearing the word 'ante-library' in an episode of *Downton Abbey*. It's the Victorian concept of a smaller, annexed library, where books that hadn't yet been read were housed. Here, in the ante-library, were one's known unknowns: knowledge you knew you were yet to acquire. The main library housed the known knowns: knowledge you were already familiar with. Presumably, bookstores were the mothership of unknown unknowns: that wide, terrifying world of things you didn't know you didn't know.

It was on a traverse of Mount Ruapehu, from the Tūroa ski field across to the Whakapapa ski area, that I converted a few unknown unknowns into known unknowns. Specifically, while sliding out of control down a steep snow face, wrenching my limbs in ways I would only properly comprehend the next day when soreness set in, frantically trying to self-arrest to prevent myself from an undignified end in the steaming crater lake. Thinking I was going to die. (Spoiler alert: I didn't.)

My tramping buddy Jen bought me an ice axe as a birthday present one year. I'd been vocal about my opinions on alpine climbing, or snow

tramping; as far as I was concerned it was a silly way to expend effort and one that only Unduly Fit Types indulged in. Why spend so much time going uphill on snow when there were perfectly good chairlifts to take you up high, affording you the pleasure of zooming down, then rinse and repeat? I loved doing hot laps on my skis, and anything else was a profligate waste of the small window of winter we get each year. But having this delicious, shiny silver axe (Jen had chosen well) was a constant reminder of a challenge I hadn't been equal to. The axe glinted at me from the corner of my bedroom. 'Why haven't you used me?' it seemed to say accusingly. (I stashed it in the naughty corner of my wardrobe for a while to give me time off from all the guilt.)

Eventually I caved, as Jen had known I would. I signed up for a snowcraft course with an alpine club (not to be confused with *the* Alpine Club, the New Zealand Alpine Club) that had a lodge on Whakapapa and appeared to have a young and enthusiastic climbing contingent. I was intimidated; I'd heard stories of course attendees getting yelled at, of accidents, of bad practice. I didn't care to find out if those stories were founded; the idea of getting yelled at was enough of a deterrent.

The course included lots of rope work in a climbing gym before the practical weekend on Whakapapa. I was too inexperienced to recognise that so much rope work wasn't appropriate or useful for beginner mountaineers, and felt disappointed in my failure to master complex party-trick knots such as the Alpine Butterfly (go look it up, I'll wait here).

I was apprehensive about my chances of success on the practical weekend, but my friend Phil armed me with his climbing harness, avalanche transceiver, a good snow shovel and a few other crucial items for fooling around with on snow when you've decided to shun the chairlifts, and sort of told me to harden up. I also bought brand-new crampons, which was a committing act but one that matched Jen's ice-axe gift to me. I was all kitted out and ready to be yelled at.

I did get yelled at, and I hated it. I think this comes down to a gender difference. Stereotypically, men like the idea of the military, of hardcore instruction and toughness. Women want things explained with the opportunity to ask lots of questions, and not to feel stupid. I definitely felt stupid.

But there I was, feeling stupid, getting yelled at (for failing to move up a ridge as fast as the instructor would ideally have liked, and I still mentally give that ridge the middle finger whenever I see it), but clad in new, robust crampon-compatible boots, said brand-new crampons, and clutching a brand-new ice axe. Was I going to be one of those people who gave up after one go and put everything on Trade Me, further admitting defeat?

I brushed off the dirt from that weekend and used the skills I'd picked up to do a few alpine tramping trips with friends who were qualified to a similar level. We did a trip to the Ruapehu summit plateau, another one up Dome (2672 metres, one of Ruapehu's 12 summit peaks but very easy), and the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, which is glorious in winter.

Each came with its own micro-challenges, and I felt like I was progressing appropriately every time. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky pioneered the concept of scaffolding — you take what the learner knows and you build on it with small steps very gradually, landing you in your 'zone of proximal development'. The idea is that what you need to know next is what you already know 'plus one'. (What exactly or how much constitutes 'plus one' is undetermined, it's just a concept.) I felt that I was slowly gaining more known knowns, plus one by plus one.

But I also had a lot of unknown unknowns, and that's a dangerous place to be. My unknown unknowns were lurking, hiding behind icy outcrops and under cornices, waiting for me to slip up.

In May 1936, a man died after falling into Ruapehu's crater lake. James Gordon, a solicitor from Taumarunui, was at the crater lake with a party that included his two sons. The day was icy and the chosen site for climbing was bullish. 'The locality is very dangerous and the frozen surface is as smooth as glass,' read one media report.[1] The party had eaten an early lunch at 11.30 a.m. on the edge of the crater lake and set out to reach the summit proper, Tahurangi (then known as Ruapehu Peak), overlooking the lake. One of the party had cut only 12 steps when his instincts seized him. He turned to his companions and told them that it was too dangerous.

Downclimbing from the Great Pinnacle (aka Grand Pinnacle, 2190 metres), a distinctive peak on Whakapapa, Mount Ruapehu. I'd snapped both of my own crampons, one on each successive climbing weekend leading up to this climb, and was using a friend's pair. It felt pretty dodgy. KENT HUTCHINS

'The words were hardly out of his mouth when Gordon, who was sitting down at the time, started to slip, gained speed, and went right over the edge of the crater,' read another report.[2] His climbing companions peeked over the cliff and could see him in the water a few metres from the edge of the lake. Gordon managed to pull himself up to sit astride a small rock, but with such demanding terrain and icy conditions, and lacking an adequate rope, the party deemed it too difficult to reach him down the 'icy precipice slopes'. All except one man, Sefton Mannering, set off to Chateau Tongariro to raise the alarm.

Mannering stayed at the scene, cutting steps to help the impending rescue effort and encouraging Gordon to keep his spirits up and assuring him that help was on the way. 'All right, old man,' Gordon yelled to Mannering.[3] About waist-deep in water, he moved to another rock near the edge of the lake. Mannering couldn't reach him — the drop was simply too sheer — and after a while he saw Gordon fall back on the rock. He disappeared, and Mannering, still preparing for the rescue effort, later saw his body floating in the lake.

'Mr. Gordon [had] hung on to the rock for nearly three hours,' the *Evening Post* reported, 'battling grimly and courageously for his life. However, he weakened, probably from injuries and the cold conditions, and slipped off the rock into the water at 2.30 p.m.'[4] Carl Risberg, who was chief guide at the Chateau Tongariro at the time, achieved a speedy ascent and arrived with ropes at 3.30 p.m. but it was too late. Gordon had died in the steaming waters of the crater lake.

It was deemed too late in the day to attempt a retrieval without risking further loss of life, so the party returned to the Chateau. The next day, a 14-man team including Risberg arrived at the crater lake just after sunrise armed with long ropes, ice axes and crampons. Three of the men were lowered down into the tricky terrain, a drop of 400 feet, meaning they were at times suspended in mid-air, depending wholly on their co-rescuers to keep them safe. Gordon's body was found half-floating, face downward, just metres from the shore and close to the spot where he had originally fallen. The water wasn't deep, indicating that Gordon could have reached the shore safely, had he had sufficient strength left and not been completely exhausted.[5]

Risberg experimented two days after the accident by intentionally sliding on a similar slope, and found that ice axes did nothing to help

him self-arrest, refusing to 'hold or make the slightest impression in the ice'. Even crampons and a rope didn't help in his experiments, which were carried out to see if other climbing gear and methods could have prevented a 13-stone man from sliding.[6]

They teach you how to self-arrest in snowcraft courses. You intentionally throw yourself down a steep snow slope, ice axe in hand, using the pick to brake your fall in the snow and ice. You try it first on your tummy, head uphill, and progress to doing it on your back with your head on the downhill end, which feels inordinately dangerous. You need to be able to self-arrest in every conceivable position, and you've got to be able to react quickly, because a small trip or slip will soon gain momentum and have you out of control, careening towards the Grim Reaper without a hope to grasp on to.

'You've got to keep practising not just until you can do it,' said Phil, my climbing mate who lent me his gear for the snowcraft course, 'but until you can't get it wrong.'

Self-arresting hurts — particularly if the snowpack is icy. It also wrecks your clothing and leaves your knickers full of snow. But I guess snow in his undies would have been the least of Gordon's problems on that day in 1936.

One weekend in August 2016, I had a bright idea. A few of my ski-club buddies were going around to the Tūroa side for the day. We usually skied on the Whakapapa side, and the club lodge was in National Park. This gave me transport options to execute an alpine traverse on foot from Tūroa to Whakapapa. I left a pair of skis in one of the cars at Tūroa, in case I changed my mind and decided to retreat and ski for the day instead. I had people to pick me up on Whakapapa, so long as I made it before the lifts stopped at 4 p.m. The weather forecast was stunning, with a high sitting right over the North Island. I had my shiny ice axe, still reasonably new and glinting, and I'd had enough time on crampons to feel confident going solo. It would be an adventure, scaffolded appropriately, a modest 'plus one' to challenge me just enough.

What could possibly go wrong?

In 2017, skier Richard Ebbett died after falling into the crater lake. He had stopped at the Whakapapa Col, between Dome and Paretetaitonga, taken his skis off and approached the lake, maybe for a photo. The snowpack that day was hard ice covered with a skinny dusting of fresh snow — just enough to be deceptive. Ruapehu's ice likes to bite. That same day and on a different mission (and by this point far more experienced), I'd made it halfway up the Whakapapa Glacier by myself before deciding to turn back, mostly because the blue ice underneath meant it wouldn't make for a pleasant ski down. Sure, I was cautious, but also partly lazy. Laziness saved me. I'm not sure that's a great claim to make.

The edge of the crater lake has high walls at the Whakapapa Col side; some are as high as 80 or 100 metres (put it this way: I've seen a helicopter with a bucket on a longline completely disappear from view). Ebbett was on a different side of the lake from Gordon, but the result was the same — and just as deadly.

On the day of my bright idea and big traverse, I cheated and used my season pass and three successive chairlifts on Tūroa to gain the upper reaches of the ski field. The highest chairlift, the High Noon Express (or the Afternoon Express as many skiers call it, given it usually requires extensive de-icing in the morning and hence tends not to operate until after midday), spits you out at 2300 metres, giving you just under 500 metres of vertical ascent to stand on top of Tahurangi, the highest of Ruapehu's summit peaks at 2797 metres. It's the highest point in the North Island and I was determined to reach it. Summit fever, even at lesser altitudes, is very real. Scarcity is a common heuristic trap — the notion that you've only got this one shot to do something, to ski an untracked line even though it might be avalanche-prone, to scuba dive a particular site after a long boat ride even though a wicked current is ripping through, to do a mountain traverse because the transport opportunity isn't often there.

For a while I simply plodded across moderate snow slopes above the High Noon Express. I had people watching me, curious to see my

progress, and knowing I was being observed made me nervous. A friend had advised me to take the Summit Ridge route rather than the common path straight up the snow slopes to the col beneath Tahurangi, so I angled there, at first not noticing how challenging it was for my (low) level of ability. The ridge was crusted with rime ice — a particular type of ice prone to developing on North Island snow slopes. Being a maritime climate, wet air comes in from the ocean and freezes — on chairlifts, buildings, ridges, rocks, and even people, if you're unlucky enough to be out there in the wrong conditions. Taranaki gets the worst of it, but Ruapehu's massif also gets a fair whack. (De-icing crews on the ski fields use 'Yeti sticks' — like baseball bats — to bash the ice off structures and lift lines.) Rime ice makes interesting and pretty features, but on slopes it can build up in odd ways that are tricky to navigate, especially for novice mountaineers without enough experience to know how to climb on them on steeper terrain.

And it was steep, for my ability then. I didn't realise how steep until it was too late — I was partway up the ridge navigating awkward bulges of ice in a position that made it more terrifying to turn back and try to climb down than keep going. Occasionally I looked down, but only long enough to decide that looking up was the better option. Full steam ahead.

After three hours of terror — longer than any moderately experienced climber would need to ascend Summit Ridge — I finally reached a flatter part of the ridge. It took only 10 very tame minutes to plod up the remaining easy ascent to stand atop Tahurangi. I snapped a couple of selfies, did some deep breathing and messaged Phil, who was going to ski tour up the Whakapapa Glacier to meet me at the col near the crater lake once I'd made my way down from Tahurangi and across the crater rim slopes. Texting him from the summit, I put in a special request for him to pack some chocolate biscuits. I'd definitely done enough for a MallowPuff.

Standing on Tukino Peak ready to ski down, with Te Heuheu Peak in the background. I had cramponed up from Whakapapa ski field and by this point I'd had a lot more experience and felt pretty comfortable, even solo.

One bright but windy spring day in 2018 I reached the Whakapapa Col with a group of ski-club buddies. We had ascended to the top, above the ski-field boundary, using ski-touring gear ('skins' that are furry on one side with a glued surface on the other that adheres to your skis, giving you the ability to grip on snow uphill), mostly because the ski field was crowded, we were restless, and one of the guys wanted to test out a snow kite on the flatter part of the col. Arriving at the 2600-metre mark where you first see the crater lake, we were met by a couple of snowboarders. 'Someone fell into the crater lake,' one told us. 'Looks like they're alive though — getting fished out now.' We could see the helicopter going back and forth with a sort of net on the bottom.

Sadly, they weren't. Climber Magesh Jagadeesan died after chasing runaway gear on a flat section near the crater lake. He and his companions had stopped for lunch, and gear had started to slide. Another person also fell in the chase but managed to stop himself. Jagadeesan, however, couldn't self-arrest and slid over the crater edge into the lake. He was experienced and well equipped, and a lovely guy by all accounts. It's that crater lake monster, though.

Standing at the col that day watching the rescue, and nervously watching our mate snow kiting for the first time in an area that had just proven itself to be deadly, we saw a badly equipped and inexperienced tourist slip and fall off the Dome peak. He lost his ice axe and it rocketed past me so fast I couldn't grab it. One of the others charged towards the guy to stop him from sliding further, where he would've gone into the lake. Later, we heard stories of a ski tourer on Dome who had had a similar narrow escape.

Back in 2016, on top of Tahurangi, and after celebrating the summit achievement, I descended to the Tahurangi Col using some awkward manoeuvres but clinging on with everything I had. Most of my difficulty was in having only one ice axe and not knowing how to 'front-point' — which is when you use the very front two spikes of your crampons to dig in to the snow and ice, and you face into the hill. It's much more secure than moving with crampons in a regular walking style, and it feels

that way too, even though it's counter-intuitive because you have fewer spikes contacting the snow and ice. But we hadn't covered the technique of front-pointing in the snowcraft course, so I had no knowledge base to work from, nor the gear to execute it, and all the Alpine Butterfly knots in the world weren't going to help me now. (After this trip I bought a second ice axe, a semi-technical one more suited to shoving into ice, thereby further committing to the abject madness and type two fun that is mountaineering.)

The col beneath Tahurangi sits at 2620 metres and is the place usually referred to as 'the top' by non-mountaineering skiers and snowboarders who sweat their way up there each year in soft spring conditions. It affords luscious views across to Ruapehu's other summit peaks, such as Te Heuheu in the north (2732 metres, named after the chief who gifted the area),[7] Paretetaitonga on the western side (2752 metres), the aforementioned Dome (2672 metres), and the craggy Cathedral Rocks (2663 metres, also known as Matihao). Crucially, there's plenty of flat space to stop, sit down, have a rest, question your life choices, and turn around. I felt incredibly relieved to have gotten off the steep and icy summit ridge. The next step in my journey was to climb down directly from the col on the northern side and traverse the western side of the crater lake to meet Phil with his chocolate biscuits at the Whakapapa Col and from there it would be a doddle.

They say that the most dangerous time for a backcountry snow user is immediately after they've done an avalanche awareness course. That's because a little knowledge is a dangerous thing — you think you've quickly gained a lot of known knowns, and your known unknowns are neatly packaged up inside an avalanche handbook. But when it comes to snow science, there's a whole world of unknown unknowns out there. In my case, I had a plethora of unknown unknowns, and all of them were about how to judge a snowpack, and why you don't mess with a north-facing snow slope that's been baked by the sun, especially later in the day.

The first 15 steps down from the col went okay, I suppose, in that I stayed on my feet. My gut told me that things weren't going to go well and I was probably going to lose it, so I was sort of prepared for that. Each step encountered a different condition in the snowpack — some hard ice, some slush, some slush over ice. It was a lucky dip, and I had the losing ticket.

Step 16 is where the fun began. I triggered a tiny wet slide, the sort of avalanche that happens in warm conditions, and while the slide was small, the consequences had me knocked off my feet. At first I thought everything was fine. *I'd stop, wouldn't I?*

I was sliding on my bum, head uphill, the first position they teach you in self-arresting school. But I wasn't stopping, even though the snow was sticky and clumpy. Suddenly my position changed, and I'm still not sure how. My sore limbs the next day indicated that perhaps I caught a crampon and cartwheeled around, wrenching my legs. Then I was flying — at pace — down a steep snow slope, on my back with my head downhill.

'You're not going to stop if you don't do something,' I told myself. I began to give myself a serious talking-to. 'You're the only one who can do something about this right now. You have to act, or you're going to die!'

Then all the training kicked in, or perhaps just sheer self-preservation instinct. I rolled over (no mean feat when you're careening downhill) and threw the pick of my ice axe into the snow. It bit immediately and swung me in a large circle, bringing me to an abrupt stop and wrenching my arms painfully. Covered in snow, including my face, I couldn't see anything, but I knew I was neither dead nor in the crater lake. I'd ripped my pants and my underwear was full of snow.

'Are you okay?' a couple of guys yelled to me from a peak. My scuba diving training decided to kick in, and I touched my hand to my head in the long-distance dive signal that means 'I'm okay'. One of them must've also been a trained diver, because he gave me the same signal back, meaning he understood, and then did the sign for 'crayfish' — you simulate two wiggly feelers on top of your head with your two index fingers.

Out of a possible 160-metre fall from the col, I'd lost about 100 metres, and I suppose that's not a bad self-arresting effort for an idiot with far too many unknown unknowns in her back pocket. Later on, I consoled myself by examining the topo map and concluding that if I hadn't self-arrested, I probably wouldn't have ended up in the crater lake itself, but I may have had an interesting trip towards the crater lake outlet and the frozen headwaters of the Whangaehu River.

On the top of Girdlestone (Peretini, 2658 metres), one of Ruapehu's summit peaks. Note the second ice axe, acquired after the challenging day climbing Tahurangi. We took a rope, but conditions were good enough to go without.

Is it better to fall to your death knowing it's happening or being blissfully unaware?

Three years before James Gordon's fall, John Wall, a 19-year-old from Whanganui, slipped and fell over the edge of the crater lake, but he did it so quietly and unobtrusively that his climbing companions concluded he must have fainted before he fell. It was 19 May 1933, the same time of year Gordon died. The party was on a guided climb from the Chateau and stopped near the crater lake's edge to take photos. Wall had moved away slightly from the group and his companions were gazing off in a different direction at the time.

'When they looked round they could see no trace of him,' newspapers said.[8] 'At first they thought he had walked away, but on investigation they saw his body lying on broken ice about four feet from the hot lake. [His friends] think he probably fainted before falling, for they did not hear him call and did not know that he was missing until they turned round.'

Nobody could reach him — it was deemed 'humanly impossible' to get down the sheer face to the lake, as the ice conditions were very bad. It was 2 p.m., too late in the day to do anything about getting to the body, so the party left. A retrieval effort the next day involved 1000 feet of rope and a different approach angle to the lake as the glacier overhung the spot where he fell, with ice above constantly breaking away from it, creating further danger.

Wall had been educated at Wanganui Collegiate School; he was a prefect and a model student. He was due to head off to Cambridge University, and was considered to be fit, a solid tramper, and of 'marked ability'.

'Don't drop your guard on the way down.' That piece of advice, dished out to me by Phil before my silly trip traversing Ruapehu, has always stuck with me. It's echoed in the title of Kiwi climber Lydia Bradey's book *Going Up Is Easy*. Bradey was the first woman to climb Everest without oxygen, and she did it solo. Going up is easy because getting down off a mountain safely is often more of a challenge — fatigue sets in and the climber tends to be imbued with a sense of success. George Mallory and Andrew Irvine

might well have been the first people to summit Mount Everest, before Sir Edmund Hillary, but they didn't make it back to camp alive. In the mountaineering world, returning safely to base camp is an essential part of being able to claim a first ascent.

As mentioned earlier, I am still alive, and I made it back on my own two feet, under my own steam and without requiring an ambulance, for which I'm eternally grateful, and a fact that allows me to categorise the outing as type two fun rather than type three. Not only that, I didn't end up going for an unplanned swim in the crater lake. My guard was definitely up as I traversed the western side of the lake to meet Phil at the col and consume an inadvisable number of chocolate biscuits. I told him about the fall and he didn't say much, which I felt was his way of communicating that he thought I was indeed a halfwit, only he was too polite to spell that out for me in such obvious terms. The rest of the day featured an uneventful snow plod back down the Whakapapa Glacier and through the ski field and getting back to the ski club lodge. When I woke up the next day I couldn't move. (Much.)

'The edge of the crater is usually safe, and visitors are frequently taken there,' said a New Zealand provincial newspaper, three days after John Wall's accident.[9]

In winter 2016, a keen Auckland man named Richard Parker ascended to Tūroa ski field and spent several hours building a snow cave near the top of one of the chairlift lines. After setting it up late at night, he went mostly unnoticed and managed to live in it for three days, with the aim of having some time away from the big smoke. It was no small undertaking; he continued working on it to build out his palace quite thoroughly. 'Inside there was a big archway and the igloo roof coming over it for the snow layers and a big entrance with a main room and an opportunity for different entranceways and it was going to have a nice window down the bottom,' he enthused. He was nearly finished building his new home when he was arrested for disorderly behaviour and resisting arrest, after a dispute involving Parker moving a bench that presumably belonged to Ruapehu Alpine Lifts, the ski-field operator. Local policeman Sergeant Mike Craig

told media it was the first time police had ever had to remove someone living in a snow cave. 'I've been here for 14 years and I'm not aware of another incident quite like this.'[10]

Reading between the lines, I'd assume there's more to the story than what was publicly reported — the area is a national park with free and open access, but users do need to be mindful of the need of the ski-field operator as a concession holder to carry out operational activities. Was he perhaps a hermit looking for a place to hole up? I had aspirations to construct a hermit-style life myself, although life itself always seemed to get in the way; I suppose it doesn't help that you generally have to take an active part in society in the name of gaining a pay cheque.

A mountain ranger named Arthur Cowling spent a decade, from 1921 to 1931, largely by himself on the slopes of Ruapehu in the name of caretaking on the maunga, living in a tiny hut at around 1400 metres altitude. His lifestyle ended thanks to a government retrenchment policy, forcing Cowling into city life to look for another job.

Cowling had no company except a horse (named Kitty the Outcast) and a cat, the latter of which had strolled out of the forest one night to check out his fire and decided to stay, turning from utterly savage to quite tame once properly fed. He would roam the mountain huts at the foot of Tongariro and Ngāuruhoe on Kitty's back, delivering supplies and making sure all was well. Eventually, the horse succumbed to rheumatism, probably from spending so much time in damp, cold conditions.

Cowling was a fixture at search and rescue operations on the Central Plateau, having gained a lot of alpine experience in his youth at Aoraki/Mount Cook, where he helped to build Mueller Hut, among others, a task requiring strenuous, back-breaking work.

I admired the tenacity, motivation and pure introversion of both the snow-cave bloke and Mr Cowling. A friend once commented to me, after learning I'd been on a nine-day solo tramp and hadn't spoken to or seen anyone for much of it, that I must be quite introverted to do something like that. I thought about that for a while; every personality test I'd ever taken (and there'd been a lot, mostly prompted by some sort of hand-

Sleeping under the stars in a bivvy bag on Ruapehu. They say you get all the peace and quiet you want once you're dead, but I don't mind some solitude while I'm alive, too.

holding exercise within corporate life) always showed me to be an 'ambivert', equally introverted and extroverted.

I didn't feel that way and so I never vibed with the results of those tests, until doing the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which marked me as 'INFJ' (introverted, intuitive, feeling, judging), along with luminaries such as Goethe (okay), Marie Kondo (makes sense), Mother Teresa (oooh, caring) and Lady Gaga (strange, but I suppose complimentary). Turns out, INFJ personalities are often mistaken for extroverts, or coded as ambiverts, because they're drawn to people. However, they need deeper, more meaningful connections — quality over quantity. Also turns out I'm 92 per cent introverted, a revelation that helped me finally put the conundrum to rest of why I feel so introverted but all the other personality tests in the world told me I wasn't.

I learned, also, that many INFJ types are writers — it's one of the most common career choices. Writing is the only way we can properly explain ourselves. Sometimes I have a thought and try to share it with someone, only to be interrupted, smacked down, or invalidated. 'You're wrong,' someone will say, 'this is how I see the world,' without listening to the full completeness of the thought I am trying to express. Writing that same thought down is a way of validating my own experiences in a way that's unmediated by anyone else's voice, in particular, a *male* voice. A few of those voices were always so ready and enthusiastic to correct me, explain things to me, tell me how wrong I was. For this reason I was reluctant to ever post things in the various social media forums that existed for alpine climbing and mountaineering; for fear of being ripped to pieces.

I'd witnessed it before: women being shredded online. In 2013, climber Mary Jane Walker appeared in the media after hiring crampons to ascend Mount Aspiring, which then (both) broke, leaving her unable to complete the climb. Walker wasn't impressed, particularly as she'd taken a chunk of time off work and paid to be helicoptered in. The store owner, Steve Hart, cast doubt on Walker's ability, implying the issue was her own fault and that there was nothing wrong with the crampons and perhaps it was all in her head: 'They're back on our rental shelves. There's nothing wrong with them at all. I'm quite happy to rent them out again. The only assumption I can make is that the crampons have been misused. We see it every year. People get out of their depth and go up

into the mountains. I don't know what sort of climber she is.'[11]

Her climbing partner Murray Ball told the media Walker had lost her confidence after the crampons failed and could have completed the climb anyway — though he admitted the crampons were faulty and needed to be wired up. I found Ball's comments to be condescending: 'It was an unfortunate set of circumstances but not life-threatening. She's not a mountaineer. She's a tramper.' Walker's own lived experience was invalidated by two male voices in the story — amazingly, one of them was her own friend.

The brand of crampons was well known for failing, regardless of the user's level of experience, so much of the conversation hinged on the safety aspect — the company's lawyers were trigger-happy when firing off threatening letters to shut down speculation or fault claims — while a small amount of discourse went back and forth on the patronising tone of the two men quoted in the story, which positioned Walker as an ingénue in need of instruction by higher minds.

Some people on social media got stuck into Walker on a personal level: 'I had the "pleasure" of doing a snowcraft course with this particular climber about 18 months ago. Her reaction doesn't surprise me at all.'

Walker hit back: 'I am not a dickhead, I am a member of your organisation for the past 18 months and have done two courses. So hello people, I belong to your group, and I was pissed off I hired faulty gear.' And: 'I am not a dumb woman so change your attitude.'

More condescension rolled in: 'Go to bed Mary Jane.' And: 'Put the kettle on.' 'Woah . . . let's NOT descend into a debate about climbing and gender please,' said another.

A few brave women continued to put across their own views. One said she had disengaged completely from formal involvement with climbing clubs because they didn't provide a way forward for promoting climbing among women. Said another: 'Believe me, if you could spend some time as a female climber I think you would find that there is a tendency for your skills and experience to be underestimated again and again. We do live in a world where women are frequently assumed to be less competent than they are.'

I briefly delved in, got roundly smacked, and withdrew from comment, disinclined to partake further. A group of women discussed it privately, all of us agreeing that it wasn't worth trying to highlight the

gendered tones in the story. Any attempt was successfully shut down by a couple of forceful voices who wanted to tell us what's what.

'I completely accept that sexism happens,' one male commenter finally conceded.

I had further encounters that made me consider the intersection between gender and confidence levels in outdoor pursuits.

A few weekends in 2017 had proven spectacular in terms of snowfall on the Bruce Road leading up the northwest flank of Ruapehu to Whakapapa. One weekend, approaching the Top of the Bruce was like being in *Ice Road Truckers*. Absolutely everything was white, and when I was forced to stop near the top car park, my car began sliding backwards, slowly, non-responsive, and I had to steer it past a line of parked cars and into a snowbank. I was quite happy with my emergency reversing skills — my experiences made me realise I could handle it.

The next weekend there was a road restriction — chains or 4WD. I drive a Subaru, which is a poor man's 4WD, so sometimes if the conditions are really bad they'll specify '4WD with good ground clearance, chains on all other vehicles' and you know the Subaru won't pass muster. But that day it was just '4WD', which indicates your Subaru will get through okay.

I saw an identical Subaru two cars in front of me go through the checkpoint. 'Have a good one, mate,' I heard the guy say to the driver. But when I got there, it was a different story.

'Is this car 4WD?' he asked.

'Yep,' I said.

'Well, I think you should put chains on it,' he said. 'It's very risky up there. Lots of snow and ice — it's dangerous.'

'So you're saying there's a restriction of chains on Subarus?' I asked.

'No, but I think you should put chains on your car. You'd be a very silly girl to go up there without chains.'

'Well, seeing as there's no restriction of chains on Subarus, I won't do that, but thanks for your advice.'

Shaken, I pulled over and questioned whether I really should continue. I watched him wave through three carloads of guys driving Subarus