

Ticked

BY ESTHER PACKARD HILL

Air New Zealand's check-in is opposite JAL. Every well-ironed Japanese person wheels an upright suitcase, banded with a cartoon-character strap. Her luggage is her bouldering mat stuffed with undies, climbing shoes, thermals and chalk (as ever, she hopes she won't be hauled off for questioning about cocaine importation).

The check-in bloke peers at her 'pack'. 'It's for rock climbing,' she says, 'we land on it.' He looks concerned and offers a choice range of window seats.

At customs, she stares at her arrivals card. The purpose of her trip? She's going bouldering. Which is more or less a *holiday*. But she'll be *visiting friends* too. Stupid prescriptive tick-boxes. She pauses, pen hovering over *friends*. No, really, she is going for the climbing.

Except *he's* her climbing friend.

She waits on the kerb and waves 'no thanks' to taxi drivers. When a well-worn Subaru Legacy pulls up she smiles. The perfect craggin' wagon. The boot pops and before he gets busted for picking up passengers in a 'Strictly Drop-Off Zone Only,' before she can tell if he's friend-level excited or especially excited, before she can even think about him, she swings her mat/pack in, stuffing it on top of the stack of others, they say hello and she's talking about climbing.

The wagon winds west out through Christchurch and she's introduced to his friends: friendly noisy guys who are keen for a solid week of sending. She's the only girl (she often is). This is no problem as long as she climbs hard enough to not come across as just some climbing groupie. She stretches her fingers.

Passing green, flat fields edged by tall angular hedges, they all talk about what they've ticked lately, their new projects and whether Chris Sharma's *Es Pontas* and Dai Koyamada's *Wheel of Life* should be given bouldering or climbing grades. They're familiar, universal conversations, ones that she can slip into. Then she looks at his neck and watches him smile. She doesn't think about them together. She doesn't. She doesn't.

They boulder a little at Spittle Hill that afternoon. The mountains, all stripped with scree and leftover snow, are magnificent and the air is cold and the friction is good. Except that, travel-tired, she slaps repeatedly for a sloper that usually she'd stick but right now requires a lot more juice than she has left. Frustrated, she worries that his friends will wonder why she's even here and that he will be embarrassed.

But at the bach in the village, everything is fine. There is beer and laughter and pasta. Everyone was encouraging and beta-ready today. So now she's sitting next to him and desperately wants to reach out for his chalky hand—but they're just friends, remember? Then his friends tease him about the hot chick who's been chasing him back in Christchurch. She laughs along with them. But later she can't get comfortable or fall asleep, and hugs her pillow close.

She thinks about his emails from the last six months—emails about epic flappers, endurance training and new routing. She scours them for subtext, for signs of romantic interest. She rolls over. Although her replies—things like: 'had an awesome weekend up in the Blues!' kept the same light, causal tone—surely they subtly conveyed how she felt about him? Maybe not.

Bouldering at Spittle again the next morning and she's resolved not to think about their past anymore. She's here for the climbing—that's what she ticked. Under cold blue sunshine there's a collective onslaught of classic problem tickage. She climbs

much better, and after a grovelling, swearing send of an often-ignored tough mantle, she's pretty pleased.

They eat a universal climbers' lunch amongst the tussocks. Tuna. Tuna. More tuna. With appropriate grunts and sound effects, everyone re-enacts the moves they made and falls they took that morning. Then he tells the story about a time they climbed together at Froggatt. A dark, wok-sized gobbling ball of feathers flew past her on lead and she squealed and took a whipper. She interjects—who knew turkeys could fly? Aerodynamically impossible bastards.

Everyone still laughing, he then launches into a more risqué tale of their skinny-dipping adventure but she cuts him short with the sharp look he remembers. She shivers. It's bloody freezing. Thick grey cloud now hangs low in the sky. The air around them has slowed down. She stands up, needing to boulder to stay warm; the others are leaving. He stands beside her.

If they're just friends, just climbing friends, why doesn't she look at him? She opens and closes her hands to re-heat her fingers. I've missed you, he says.

He misses her. She's missed him. Still misses him. But what does this mean? What does he want? What does she want? On both counts—she's got no bloody idea.

Quiet, she looks at him and says she's missed him too. She shakes out her forearms and touches a nearby boulder, feels the lightly textured rock. But I've missed climbing with you even more. They both grin. So, she adds, want to give me a spot