

Yellow Brick Road by Witi Ihimaera

*Follow the yellow brick road,
Follow, follow, follow follow,
Follow the yellow brick road ...*

We're almost there! Almost at Wellington, the Emerald City! Me and Dad and Mum and Roha, we been travelling for two days now in our car which Dad bought from Mr Wallace last week. No dents and honk honk goes the horn. Dad, he said I could have a drive of it myself when we left Waituhi but then it conked out on the Whareras and that made him change his mind.

- I told you we wouldn't get to Wellington in *this*, Mum said to him while he was fixing it up.
- We'll get there.
- But I want to get there in one piece! Mum answered.
- Throw some of your junk out then, Dad told her.

Our car sure is loaded down all right. Mum's stuff is in the boot, some belongings are tied under the canvas on the roof and there's even some squeezed in here with us. Boy.

But you won't conk out now, ay car? There's just one hill to go and we'll be there. So up we go, up the hill, slowly but surely. And who cares if cars bank up behind us! They can beep all they like. We got as much right to be on this road as they got.

Road, road, yellow brick road, yellow with the headlights sweeping across it. Just like in that book Miss Wright, my teacher, gave me before we left Waituhi. A neat book. About the straw man, the tin man, the cowardly lion and the Emerald City and ... we're almost there!

I bounce up and down on the seat. I can't wait to see all the sparkling green towers glittering in the dark ahead of us.

- Matiu, you just sit still! Mum growls. What's gotten into you, ay?
- Sorry, Mum.

Poor Mum. She's very tired and still unhappy about leaving Waituhi, our whanau, our family. Her eyes are still red with the crying when all the people had waved goodbye to us like little flags fluttering far away. At least she hasn't cried as often as Roha has for Hone though! Roha and Hone, they went round together and once I saw them having a pash. Eeee!

I grin at my big sister. Never mind, Roha. Plenty other boys down in Wellington and you can pash up large with them when we get there, ay.

- What you grinning for, Smarty? Roha snaps.
- I'm allowed to grin if I want to, aren't I? I ask, suddenly hurt.
- All right, all right, you don't have to scream.

I make a funny face at her. It would teach her a good lesson if even the pakehas didn't want to pash with her! Lots of pakehas in Wellington. Not like in Waituhi. Makes me scared to think about it.

- Dad, will the pakehas like us in Wellington? Dad?

He doesn't answer me because he is driving carefully. He has to lean forward to see the road in front of him. It has started to rain.

Wish I was older and knew how to drive better. Then I could give him a rest at the wheel.

I press against him and he puts an arm round me. His face looks tired, just like it looked when we were walking to a garage yesterday after our car ran out of petrol. There we were, miles from anywhere, walking along the road while car after car sped past us without stopping. Some of them blared loudly at us. Others made a lot of dust come over us. And always as they passed the faces would be looking back and staring at us. I felt puzzled.

- Why don't they stop, Dad?
- He had shrugged his shoulders.
- We're in a different country now, son.

I began to hate those faces. I wanted to throw stones at them all. But things will be different when we get to Wellington, won't they? And we will be happy, won't we?

Course we will. You just wait and see, Dad. We'll make lots of money and be rich as anything because Wellington is where the money is. And you have to go where the money is, ay Dad. No use staying in Waituhi and being poor all the time, ay.

I lean back in the seat and burrow under the blanket. It is getting cold and there is a draught coming through a hole in our car. I feel my bag of lollies in my pocket.

- You want one, Mum? You want one, Dad? Roha?

I pass the bag to Roha and she takes two, the greedy thing. I put one in my mouth and count what's left. Seven.

Boy, these are the dearest lollies I ever bought. When we stopped at the shop yesterday I gave the man thirty cents and he didn't give me any change. When I asked him for it, he told me thirty cents was how much these lollies cost. But he was lying. He was a thief and he stole my money. How would he like it if someone rooked him? What's more, these lollies stink, just like him.

I watch the road as it twists ahead through the dark. Every now and then, there is a loud whoosh of a fast car passing us. Those fast cars don't like us. We're too slow for them.

Suddenly, I see two lights ahead like eyes glaring at us. The eyes open wider, grow larger, looking like the eyes of a...

- Dad! I yell, afraid.

A big truck descends on us with its headlight blazing full. I seem to see taloned fingers reaching out to claw me.

- Bloody hell, Dad mutters.

He swerves. The car kicks gravel. The truck thunders past, screaming in the wind.

I look at Mum. Her face is shaken.

- I better keep both my hands on the wheel, Dad says.

He lifts his arm from me and I feel suddenly alone. I begin to think of Waituhi, our whanau, and that makes me sad. All our family was there and Emere was our cow. Haere ra, Emere. And haere ra to you, e Hemi. You'll always be my best mate.

I start humming to myself. Quietly.

- *Follow the yellow brick road,*

Follow follow, follow, follow...

Miss Wright, she taught us that song at school. A neat song. We made a long line, joined by our hands, and danced crazy patterns over the playground and...

There is a snapping sound and the flapping of canvas. - What's that, Dad?

He pulls the car over to the side of the road and steps out. Mum winds down her window.

- What's wrong?

- Rope's snapped, he yells back.

- You better get out and help your father, Mum says to me.

I jump out into the rain. Boy, it's sure wet and cold out here. Dad is struggling in the wind to pull the canvas back over our belongings.

- All this junk! Dad mutters. No wonder the canvas came away. He takes a box from the top and dumps it on the side of the road. My books spill out and the pages fly away like birds in the wind.

- Dad. No, Dad...

I run out into the road in panic because those are my school books and among them is my best book. My best book.

- Mati! Get off the road! Mum screams.

My best book. In the wind and the rain. My best book.

- *Matin.*

And there it is. Lying there on the road. I run to get it and car brakes scream in my ears.

But I have it in my arms and hold it safe to me. And I don't care if I get a hiding. I don't care...

Mum hits me very hard.

-What you want to do that for, you stupid kid.

But I don't care. I don't care...

And the driver of the other car is saying angry words to Dad:

- What the bloody hell do you think you're up to, eh? Letting your kid run out like that, what's wrong with you! Look, never mind about bloody arguing. Christ, you shouldn't be on the road at all. Your car's bloody dangerous loaded like that. And why the hell didn't you pull further off the road, eh? Oh, what's the use. You Maoris are all the same. Dumb bloody horis.

He steps back into his car and roars off. Dad comes towards me and his face is full of anger.

Go ahead, Dad. Hit me. I deserve it.

But he doesn't. Instead, he hugs me and asks:

- You all right, son?

- Yes, Dad. I'm sorry, Dad. That man...

- That bastard. Never mind about him.

I clutch my book tightly. I carry it into the car with me. Mum starts to get angry with me again.

Tuni tuni, woman, Dad says. It's all over now. Let's forget it.

- It wouldn't have happened if you'd tied down our things properly like Sam told you to do, Mum answers.

Sam is my uncle and we stayed at his place in Hastings last night. Uncle Sam didn't even know we were on our way to Wellington.

- Down to that windy place" he'd said. You fullas better tie yourselves down or you'll be blown away! Don't you know how cold it is down there'? Brother, it's liquid sunshine all the year round!

- We don't care, I'd answered him. We're going to make lots of money down there. Not much room left for pa living anymore. That's what you said, ay Dad.

Dad had looked at me strangely.

- No more jobs back home, he told Uncle. Plenty of the seasonal work, yes, but me and Hine had enough of that. We had enough of shearing, the fruit-picking and the going down South to shear some more. No, plenty of work in Wellington. Plenty of factories.

- Who told you that! Uncle snorted.

- Jim, Dad answered.

Uncle Jim is Dad's brother. He lives in Petone and we're going to stay with him until we find our own house.

Uncle Sam had shrugged his shoulders..

- Well, Jim should know, he'd said.

- I want us to have a good life, a new start, Dad tried to explain. A new start for my kids. Me and Hine, we've always had nothing. But my kids? They're going to grow up with everything. I'll fight for it, because they must have it.

But I'd seen Uncle Sam hadn't understood Dad's words. He'd simply shaken his head and wished us luck. And in the morning before we left he'd told Dad to tie the canvas down tight.

- Otherwise that wind will get under it and before you know it you'll be flying into Wellington!

Dad had tried his best with the ropes. He'd said to Mum:

- How about getting rid of some of this junk, ay?

She'd answered him:

- This junk is all we've ever had. I'm not throwing away one piece of it, wind or no wind.

It sure is windy all right, outside the car. The clouds are rushing in the night sky just like the Winged Monkeys. The wind moans and chatters and cackles among our belongings, and I must close my eyes and put my hands to my ears to shut out the sights and sounds of this night.

Then, suddenly, all the noises stop. Even the car has stopped.

- There it is, Dad says.

I open my eyes. Far away are the lights of Wellington, streaming with the rain down our window like glistening towers. And it looks so... so... beautiful. Just as I'd imagined it to be. Just as I'd pretended it would be. Emerald City.

- Isn't it neat, Muni'?

She stares ahead. Her face is still. - Roha? I ask.

My sister's face is filled with a strange glow.

- Dad?

He looks at me and smiles.

- You and your dreams, son.

He starts the car. We begin to drive down from the hill. I look at Dad and Mum and Roha, puzzled. How come I'm the only one to be happy!

Can't they see this is where our life begins and this is where our dreams begin'?

And dreams, they come true, don't they? Don't they?

I look out the car. I see the sign: STEEP GRADE. All along the yellow brick road there have been signs like that. STEEP GRADE. CHANGE DOWN. ONE WAY. LIMITED SPEED ZONE. ROAD NARROWS. STOP. WINDING ROAD. GO. CONCEALED EXIT

TRAFFIC LIGHTS AHEAD. GREASY WHEN WET. NO EXIT. NO PASSING. NO STOPPING.

Many signs, all telling us where we have to go and.... I begin to feel scared.

If ever we want to, will we be able to find our way back'?

I begin to sing to myself. Not because I'm happy, but because I think I want to feel sure myself everything will turn out alright.

It will, won't it?

Follow the yellow brick road,

Follow, follow, follow, follow,

Follow...

Once you have finished reading, have a go at filling in the gaps:

The story "Yellow Brick Road" by Witi_____ follows the journey of a Maori family to _____, from Waituhi near Gisborne. The first three lines of "Follow the yellow brick road" come from "The _____ _____. Their car is loaded down with their _____. _____ is really excited about going to Wellington and gets told off by his mother. She is tired and ___ about leaving their home. They run out of _____ and have to walk to a _____ station and nobody stops to help them. Matiu believes things will be _____ for them in Wellington and that the family will make lots of _____. However, the cost of the bag of _____ may be a sign of things to come. Matiu's dad drives dangerously because he is _____ and they nearly hit a _____. Matiu almost gets run over when he chases after his _____. The family get yelled at by a pakeha man who is p_____ against them. When Matiu first sees Wellington, he compares it to the _____ City. But, like the Emerald City, it does not fulfill his expectations and he gets scared when he reads all the _____.