

Velvet and Elvis

For over a century, Velvet, a remarkable Longfin Eel, has made the cool, protected waters of Lake Rotoiti her peaceful home. Her soft, velvety belly—now swollen with millions of tiny eggs—rests on the lakebed. She has lived safely here, but the time has come for her final journey. Her life has been shaped by the rhythms of the lake, but now something more important than survival calls her away.

Velvet begins her last migration. The water, once fresh and clear, has become warmer and cloudier since her youth. Still, she swims on, determined to reach the place where eels are born and where they die.

One moonless autumn night, under starlight that shines as brightly as her wide eyes, she leaves the shallows. The lake narrows, and the pull of the current draws her long, heavy body through the river and out to sea.

The temperature drops. The water has grown saltier. She has already passed waterfalls, logs, and hungry mouths. She keeps going. Finally, she reaches the Tonga Trench—a vast, dark chasm beneath the sea. She is tired and starving, yet her belly is too full to eat. Our old eel has one final duty.

Velvet slips into the black depths. Far below, male eels release their milt while Velvet and others release their eggs. Together, they swirl and shine like galaxies. Her duty complete, Velvet disappears into the dark water.

Among her hatchlings is Elvis, a thin, see-through larva no longer than a leaf. He has been drifting in the ocean for months, carried by currents back towards the Tasman Sea. During this long drift, he has grown, changing shape and colour until he looks like a young eel—an elver.

Now, Elvis and his siblings begin the difficult journey upstream. Many have not survived. He pushes his growing muscles over rocks and across sand, breathing through his skin. At last, he finds water—and food. Some eels swim into long, woven tunnels, but Elvis stays cautious. He has learned to be careful.

Seven years pass. Elvis and a group of young eels reach a dam—an enormous, smooth wall that blocks their path. Below, strange and dangerous fish wait. Then, human hands surround him.

But this time, it's not a trap.

He is gently released into a clear, calm mountain lake. Elvis has finally arrived. His journey, although dangerous, has made him stronger and wiser.

He is ready to begin the next part of his life.

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