

In a World Full of Birds

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Imagine a piece of elastic string. Actually, not a string. A band. Like an elastic waistband. Okay, maybe I need to come up with something better than a waistband. But, imagine you're holding both ends of a long strip. Pull it so tight that tiny gaps begin to appear between the fibres. If you were an ant or something, no – much smaller – like, oh I dunno, one of those micro-organisms you see under the microscope – if you were one of them, these gaps in the string would swell to the size of cities. Because the strip is still tightening, drawing outwards. Soon individual atoms are separated by gulfs of nothingness. Electrons whizz about with miles and miles between them. Space is split, further and further, deeper and deeper we go. Got that? (They nod at me, they've got it.) Now. Imagine that the waistband is *time*. Because this is what I sense each time it happens. I sense time expand until each moment is in fact only an infinitesimal speck of presentness. And during one single speck my life is abruptly transferred from the body that just died – my old body – to a newly formed body I've just created from my own phlegm.

This isn't some delusion; trust me, I wish it was. It's a regular thing. It happens once a month; I think it's somehow related to the moon. Yes, you can laugh, I don't mind. A man with a period. But it's not just me and chicks who're affected. Think of werewolves.

I sense it coming a few minutes before it happens. I start to feel all light-headed, and my spine creeps like there's something living in there. Whatever it is crawls slowly upwards, like a cold drip in

reverse, and by the time it reaches my neck my heart is pounding fast. Suddenly I have an uncontrollable urge to cough, and when I do something tears inside my chest. This hideous ball of gunk comes out. You ever watched someone donate platelets? (A man in the jury meets my eye. He has. He can explain it to the others later, in their hidden room.) It's like that, all thick and yellow, and semitransparent. As it hits the ground it splats, spreading out like a paintball. And then it slides back, coalescing in a sickening, calculated kind of way. I don't really understand what happens next, but I guess the cells multiply. Very quickly. Within three or four minutes that glob of phlegm is the size of my leg. A few more minutes and it's fully human formed. *My* human form. It's me. Lying there. The hair comes last, sprouting through like new grass. And SMACK, I get that feeling I just told you about. About time. It's a beautiful feeling, actually, like seeing the colours you hear birds and cats can see, but you never thought you could. It's like being given a key to unlock the universe. But before I can fit it to the lock I'm opening my newly formed eyes.

Yes. That's how I'll start it. I'll get my lawyer to ask something like, "Can you describe your process of renewal?" I figure he'll agree – or, she'll agree, can't be too sexist, can I, and I don't have enough money to be choosy with my lawyers – that a few decent analogies will make me look intelligent, which can only help my case. Holy shit, what am I saying?! Nothing can help my case! Who on Earth would believe this mad shit? If I'm not sent to prison I'll be sent to the loony bin instead! Okay, calm down, Ben, don't panic. I mightn't even need a case. Even if they don't find Kelly – which which they won't, the goddamn walkabout – they can do blood tests, right? They can prove this shit. It's not like the States. They can't hang me before I've had the chance to prove myself innocent. All I have to do is sit tight for a month. I'll probably even be famous.

Okay, I'm starving. All I've got is this, what'd Ruth call it? 'Textured vegetable protein'. TVP. Jesus. Reminds me of when, back at school, we'd make recycled paper. I think it must've been part of the art curriculum, though everyone's cruddy paper ends up looking the same, so it's hardly what you'd

call good art. Before it dries and can be used again, it's just this grey mash sitting on the wire grill. That's TVP. Except it's the colour of mud, not grey. Ruth seemed pretty keen on the stuff, but I can only presume she's never actually tried it. Even the birds won't touch it. If I sit here long enough, though, they'll probably make a feast out of me. The big eat the little, until the big cark it, then the little eat the big. I read that once, in a men's health magazine, and it's always stuck. Ruth'll be back soon, I expect, with others. She'll lead them through the forest, straight to my uncle's cabin, though she'll hang back, I know, afraid of being hurt. But when they come I'll just be sitting here on the steps, all peaceful, no threat, no cause for alarm. Shit, they'll probably have dogs with them.

(“When did it start happening to you?” My lawyer prompts me. She wears square-cut glasses and her teeth are just crooked enough to be appealing.) The first time it happened, only eighteen months ago, I was in my bedroom, which was lucky. I'd just come home from a pretzel-mission to Countdown, back when the local was open 24 hours. I had a real pretzel fetish around that time. I'd buy maybe two, three bags at a time, and upend them into the flat's only large bowl, which is one of those plastic bowls that looks like Tupperware, stained darker on the lower half from when we had a flat party and —. Actually, I won't tell them about that. I'd just begun a game of on-line Scrabble against this guy in Switzerland, already feeling a bit off. I remember he wrote AWKWARD, and I wondered, what's the chance of getting two Ws and a K, along with all those other letters that make up the word, when I coughed. Hoicking forth the huge yellow clot, I stared at it in horror. Not only was a guy who spoke English as a second language already kicking my arse with AWKWARD, but what the fuck, I mean, what the heck (don't swear in court, Ben) was wrong with me if I could cough up an ice cream scoop of mucus? I went to fetch some toilet paper to clean it from my carpet.

When I came back I thought someone had dragged a mannequin into my room. That's seriously what I thought. But no one else stayed up so late, so who could've done it? And why? And then, you know what it's like when there's, say, an old pie that's been left outside in a rubbish bin for a week, and

you think nothing of it, but then you realise it's moving, because it's actually full of maggots? That's what the mannequin looked like. It was rippling, muscles forming, moles erupting, bones gelling, fingernails growing. And then the hair, like nature footage sped up. As I watched, transfixed, the divine sensation of unrealised colours transported me to a higher place for the briefest moment. And then I heard an almighty CRASH. My newly deceased body slammed into the computer desk, snapping it in half, like it'd been karate chopped. The computer slid through the middle on top of the body while the pot of ginseng tea, which I'd been drinking because I'd heard it was slimming, flew into the dresser mirror. I sat up, staring at my bare arms and legs, wondering what the hell had happened, wondering why I was naked, when immediately there was a knock on my door.

“What's going on in there? It's 2am!” It was Keith, my flatmate. His name is on the lease, which by definition makes him Flat-Nazi.

“Nothing.” I could see my body sprawled beneath the ruin of my desk.

“Open the door, Ben.”

Thank fuck I always lock it. I cast around. Nothing made sense. That was me, *me*, beneath the rock slide of cables and hardware. I crawled over to myself – to the body – and shook it. I held my hand in front of the mouth, you know, like you're supposed to. I couldn't feel any breath. Keith was still thumping on the door. I threw on my dressing gown and dragged the body beneath my bed. Then, making sure it was completely hidden from sight, I opened my door.

“I... I slipped,” I told him. “I think I fainted.”

“Who are you?” He demanded.

I stooped to peer into my broken mirror and nearly leaped backwards. No longer the bread roll of a man who shopped at the Big Men shop, I was now lean as a slice of toast. I bought a whole new wardrobe of clothes the next day, even my shoes went down a size. But that wasn't the limit to my bodily transformation. My receding hairline had snuck back up to where it'd once started. And my skin

was flawless.

“Ben?” Keith was staring at me up close. “What's happened to you, man?”

“Uh, I dunno... um... I'm on a diet.”

We both took in the debris of pretzel packets that covered each item of furniture like a light snow.

“It's the ginseng tea,” I shrugged. “It's slimming, you know?”

“Slimming?” Keith began to laugh, the kind of laugh someone lets loose if they've won the lotto or just survived a car crash. “Man, you could sell this shit! Women's Day would totally give you big bucks for your before and after shots.”

For the first few days after that I pretended everything was normal and fine. My flatmates made tons of jokes, and took pictures of my god-like figure, and I had to keep introducing myself to people I already knew. My mum, who hadn't seen me for a few months, saw my photo on Facebook and shouted me dinner. When I got my diploma she didn't make as big a deal as this. I drank the ginseng tea religiously, as if to prove it really was the miracle drug that changed me into this better man, and I even tricked myself into believing it was.

But then my room began to smell. It was winter, and the flat's about as insulated as a kitchen colander, so I reckon it took the body a bit longer to rot than usual. But after a couple of weeks the flatmates began to complain each time they walked past my room. Up until then I'd drawn a mental chalk line around my bed, crossing it only when I needed to sleep, at which point I leaped across from my computer chair. I never checked beneath my bed, because that'd be crazy, right? Obviously the entire ordeal had been a dream. If I'd died I couldn't still be alive – that's an indisputable fact. But the smell became too much.

I waited until the flatmates were all out before I hauled the body out from beneath my bed. Insects had partied in there, for sure, and the skin bulged like it had pockets. The carpet was a festering puddle of brown muck. Even though I scrubbed it there's still a big stain. Actually I shouldn't mention that in

court either, cause Keith'll no doubt be at the hearing, front bloody row. Choking on the hot chips I'd just eaten, I grabbed the body beneath the armpits and dragged all 120kgs to the bathroom and locked the door. I've never been a religious person, but Jesus did I pray that no one came home during the next hour. I put on the dishwashing gloves and heaved the body into the bath. An extension lead ran from the hallway, under the bathroom door. I plugged in the electric bread knife.

It was tougher to work through than I'd expected, and the bread knife didn't cut it – excuse the pun. No, no puns, I don't want to look cocky at a murder trial. I stripped down and jumped in the shower before venturing out of the room to find something better suited for the job. I tried different knives. I contemplated using the kitchen whizz and flushing it all down the bog. In the end I found the axe Keith uses to chop up the bits of wood and old chairs and things he finds on the street the best thing to use. When the body was in hunks about the size of my hand, I put it all into a black plastic bag, along with my bloody clothes and the slab of wood I'd used as chopping block, put that bag into another bag, and that into another. I washed the bathroom very carefully before showering one last time. When I came out, clean, everything looked unsuspectingly normal. I heard the front door click.

“Urgh, god!” I heard Sally, one of my other flatmates, in the hall. The sound of a rattling bag.

“Sally, don't touch it!” I screamed, struggling to see a towel in the bathroom. I couldn't believe I left the bag sitting out in the hall.

“What's in this?” She coughed. “It reeks!”

“I know, I'm sorry!” I swear, had I not just pissed in the shower I would've pissed myself right then and there. “I realised what was making my room smell,” I yelled out. “It was a dead dog under the floor. I crawled under the house and found it. I wouldn't look at it. I think it's diseased!”

“And you brought it inside? Gross! Can you get it out of here? It's stinking out the whole house!”

(An old, fat guy in the audience smiles at my attempt to sound like a girl.) So that's what I did, each time. Each time except *this* time. I told people I got migraines, then I'd feign a headache, lay low

in my room, literally lie down too, and wait for the process to finish. I biffed the plastic bags into a rubbish bin on K' Rd – nice and conspicuous, and all those bins are emptied daily – and no one suspected a thing. And why would they? No one was out looking for a dead body. (“So, to make it very clear for the jury, you have never, at any point, ended the life of another human being?” My lawyer takes off her glasses and nibbles on one of the... er, bits you put over your ears.) No! Christ, Julie, of course not! (My lawyer and I are on first name basis.) I wouldn't even hurt a fly. Or, at least, I wouldn't hurt anything as big as say a dog or a cat. Whenever people are out collecting for the SPCA, and I'm not about to catch a bus or buy myself a coffee, I'll happily give over my spare change. Our cat Maggie, who we had when I was little, came from the SPCA.

Shit I'm hungry. My stomach's gurgling like a blocked drain. I figure Ruth's made it back to Palmy by now and all hell's been raised. Mum and Dad have probably already been notified by the police. Mum'll be so peeved. She'll be talking to Daphne on the phone, ashtrays overflowing on each of their Formica tables. They'll be screeching at each other like parakeets. “Oh God, how can it be, who could've predicted it, I never would've thought, who else knows, do you think, when will, if, but, I know!” and on and on. Maybe they'll be watching me on telly. Is it too soon for that? If they've put a photo of me up on the news, I hope they chose a recent one. If the world's to know about my affliction, I'd rather they didn't know I used to be fat, too. Then they'll just think it's because I'm reborn each month that I stay looking so trim, when actually I've made real efforts with my diet. I pretty much only drink ginseng tea and nothing else.

But I think Mum knew all along what was going to happen to me, so it actually serves her right if the world thinks I'm a criminal for a few weeks. The first clue came when I was nine years old, when I was looking under her and Dad's bed for my orange, glittery bouncy ball – which I never found. I found a shoebox, though, tied tight with a black shoelace. It was knotted fairly well, and I was forced to use my teeth to open it. Inside was a wad of old photos, ones I'd never seen. We've got other family photo

albums. My folks have known each other their whole lives, even went to the same primary school in Palmerston North, so I know what they looked like as kids. The photo on top was of my dad when he was twelve or so, dressed in his Boy Scout uniform. Next to him was a man, maybe in his mid-twenties, with very dark, very curly hair. Dad's hair is fair. So is Mum's. But my hair is dark and curly. I was thinking about this when Mum came in.

“Ben? What are you doing?” Hairs rose on my neck. Such a simple question, and said so calmly too, but I knew it was just a veneer of calm, a thin plastic wrapping of calm containing a bouquet of rage. I hadn't heard that voice since the time I thought it'd be a good idea to reproduce the tropical scene I'd just watched on an Air New Zealand ad, and tipped the turquoise house paint Dad had just bought into the bath.

“I, ah...”

She peered over my shoulder, and I heard her suck in her breath.

“Who's the guy with Dad?” I asked, trying to diffuse the situation by being extra casual.

“Put that back!” She screamed in my ear, and snatched the photo from my fingers. “You're not to look at these things! These don't belong to you! What right did you think you had, rifling through my things? How *dare* you?” And she grabbed my wrist so hard I cried out. As she dragged me from her room I realised with dismay we were heading for the kitchen. She yanked open the kitchen drawer, the cutlery rattling in that terrifying way – cutlery draws still give me heebie jeebies – and pulled out the wooden spoon Dad liked to use. Until that day I'd always thought mums just used their hands.

I should've confronted my parents way earlier, especially after my monthly cycle began. Instead – believing, I guess, that my parents wouldn't lie to me my entire life, hiding probably the biggest, most fundamental secret a parent could hide from their kid – I spent whole days on the internet, looking up genetic mutations, the evolution of species, butterflies, projectile vomit, and watching documentaries on alien sightings. Some scientists think there used to be advanced civilisations, you know, like way

before our first Neanderthal ancestors stood up on two hairy feet. But it all got wiped out and life started again. I watched a lot of X-men during that first year, too. And I thought about Jesus. It seemed perfectly obvious I'd somehow reverted to some perfect physical form of myself. Like I'd been purified, and continued to be purified, monthly. And in many ways this seemed pretty sweet, since, like, I'd never be ugly. But then I began to think of the elves in *the Lord of the Rings*, who basically live forever. There's a loneliness in that, I think, and it's even worse if you're the only one of your kind. And one day the world will die – I mean, that's a fact. So I worried that one day I could actually be the last human alive, maybe the last living *thing* alive, my skin blistering in the heat, my hair turning to ash on my scalp. I cut my fingernails and tried burning them, and yes, they burn, too.

Then something even freakier happened, which finally spurred me to confront my parents. One of the lines on my forehead suddenly disappeared. Actually, my lawyer could ask something like, “What motivated you to find your uncle's cabin in the forest?” and I could start with the earlier memory, then sort of segue into this part, couldn't I? Because it's all part of the story, all these interlocking threads of truth and deceit. Actually, I could use a photograph of my forehead as evidence. (“If you examine Evidence D, you'll see that the accused, Benjamin Grey, used to have five distinct lines on his forehead. Ben, please tell the court about these lines.”) Thank you, Julie. For my whole life I had those five lines; really, they were hard to miss. People used to joke about it, at school. You know how there's that band called Ben Folds Five? People used to joke about Ben's Five Folds. You can't forget those kinds of hurtful words. (Sympathy can only help my case.) But when I was looking in the mirror a couple of months back I was suddenly struck by the realisation that one of my wrinkles had... well. Disappeared. I have four, see. (Evidence E.)

“I'm here to find out about those photos under your bed.” That's what I said to Mum, no “hi” or anything, even though she wasn't expecting me. She was out the back of the house, digging up potatoes.

She looked up, confused, and wiped the back of her gloved hand across her brow, drawing an earthy stripe.

“Those photos under your bed,” I said. “You probably think I don't remember, but I do.”

She hmph-ed, and turned her back. But she didn't really dig, then, just stood leaning on the spade. “I thought you'd grown up a bit,” she said at last, dryly, like she was telling a sophisticated joke. “But you're still dreaming things up.”

“They weren't a dream. You were scared.” I bit my tongue. It was a gamble saying that.

She stood on the shovel, moving the dirt. “They're just old photos.”

“Then you won't mind me looking at them,” I said, and strode through the back door of the house. Mum and Dad have moved since I was a kid, so it felt weird kneeling on their unfamiliar diamond-patterned carpet, pulling back their bed sheets that hung to the floor. Mum came clattering in behind me, all hot and heavy breaths, as I lay on my stomach and pulled out everything within arm's reach, like a drift net hauling up whatever was there, whatever lay hidden. I was in prime bottom smacking position if Mum had been so inclined. The old shoebox tied with the black shoelace came bobbing up alongside the worn shoes, Mum's old wedding dress still in its bridal box, Dad's tennis racket he won a tennis trophy with way back in 1992.

“Get out of there!” Mum shrieked. “You can't waltz on into our house and start pulling things out like you own the place!” Her eyes landed on the box and she lunged towards it. I scooped it up, hugging it to my body as I scrambled to my feet. I held it above my head where Mum couldn't reach.

“Those don't belong to you!” She was panicking now. I saw true fear, and my stomach churned. I did something then I never dreamed I'd do. In one movement I threw the box of photos on to the bed and grabbed Mum around her waist, throwing her over my shoulder. I stumbled to the back door, dumped her outside, slammed the door, and turned the latch. I ran to the front to make sure that door was locked, too. Mum pounded on the back door, kicking, screaming, and then, even crying. I upended

the box of photos onto the bed. Nothing could've prepared me for the shock. The man with the curly hair was present in all the photos, every single one, as if all photos of him had been systematically removed from the photo albums. And the man was me. He and I were identical.

My mum was at the window now, palms pressed against the glass. "It's me!" I screamed at her, holding up a photo of myself giving my father a piggyback ride.

She shook her head, slowly. "He was your father's uncle." Her voice was muffled by the glass. "Uncle Arthur."

"Why haven't I ever heard of him?"

"He disappeared before you were born. He was a nobody. A waste of time."

I picked photos at random and gawped at my doppelgänger. An old envelope had been pressed flat by the photos. Inside I found a folded piece of paper, obviously torn from some book, but I couldn't make much out. The writing was hopelessly messy, the ink smeared across the page. Amongst the pile I found a photo of my folks getting married, seen from a slightly different angle than the framed photo hanging in the hallway. Uncle Arthur was there, in the background. He hadn't aged a day, I swear, since my dad was a kid.

My mother lit a cigarette and sucked on it like she was about to dive deep down underwater to retrieve something heavy, still watching me.

"He didn't age," I shoved the photo against the window. "Did he tell you why? Was he sick, or something?"

"I wouldn't have cared if he was."

"Did you sleep with him?" I demanded.

"That's it!" Mum exploded. And suddenly she ducked down and came back up with a brick in her hand. As she threw it through the window, with no regard for my safety, she honestly looked at me like she wanted me dead. "What do you think of me?" She screamed, unlatching the window and hoisting

herself through, charging at me as I backed down the hallway, smoke snorting through her nostrils. “How dare you? How dare you come into our house and treat me this way! After everything I've done for you, after everything! Your father's uncle was a good for nothing, dole-bludging, thankless piece of work! When he finally pissed off into the Ruahines for good it was good riddance!”

“The Ruahines?”

Mum grabbed me then, by the wrist, and shook me hard. “If you go looking for trouble it's trouble you'll get! No more lying to Work and Income about you being estranged from us, you'll be fending for yourself, you hear? Not another word about Uncle Arthur!”

I could probably admit that part in court, since lying to WINZ is a much smaller crime than murder, and people do it all the time anyway. I'd say it'd even make my story seem more credible, because you're hardly going to admit to cheating the government if you're already telling a major fucking whopper. And they can't do you for an unrelated crime, can they? At least not in the same trial. And frankly, by the time they hear my story, estrangement from my parents won't sound so implausible. My folks didn't even know about Ruth, never gave a toss about my personal life.

(“What was the nature of your relationship with Ruth?” When Julie first asks me this, seated on the edge of my bed, in my private cell, the grind of the guard's booted footsteps echoing down the other end of the long passage, she glares at me from behind her glasses, then blushes and glances away.) Ruth and I met about eight weeks ago. (The court hearing will be held in about three weeks. Julie hopes that, if timed properly, I'll actually regenerate mid-trial, in front of a courtroom full of witnesses.) I was out shopping for an axe. Keith had recently complained that the handle of his axe was sticky, and went on a bit of a rampage trying to figure out who'd been using his property. I persuaded him it smelled of cat piss, but after that he kept it locked in his wardrobe and threw glasses of water at any cat that lurked through our property. So, I was at Hammer Hardware in Newmarket, tossing up between a long handled axe with a good swing, or an easily concealed hatchet, when I noticed a girl vacantly

wandering around the store. It was a Saturday afternoon, and all the customer reps were busy helping other people.

“Are you looking for something?” I asked her. Dunno why. I don't usually talk to strangers.

“Are you an employee?” She asked. She wore a bright yellow singlet.

“No, but I might be able to help.”

She looked dubious. “Well... all right. I'm assisting my sister with the task of stringing up a washing line in her porch, and we require rope. The only rope I can find is this yellow cord, which is slippery, and likely won't hold a load of washing.”

She showed me the rope. Now, I did both Cubs and Scouts when I was younger, so I know a thing or two about knots. In no time I was able to demonstrate a variety of knots that'd be sure to hold any amount of weight. As I adjusted one of her knots my hand brushed hers, and I asked her for coffee.

She's studying to be a librarian. When I found that out I couldn't believe it. It's so old fashioned. She told me she was in Auckland visiting her parents.

“Where do you live, then?” I asked, as I stirred the leaf on the top of my latte into a spiral of tan and white.

“Wellington.”

“Ah, the windy city.” What a stupid thing to say. Still, she gave me her email address before she left.

Ruth and I must've emailed each other a thousand times in the next few weeks. Sometimes up to twenty times per day. Just little things, sometimes. Like, about what she was having on her toast. Or about the old lady farting in front of her on the bus. She has such a quaint way of putting things – maybe because she's going to be a librarian. Instead of saying, “I'm tired,” she might say, “It's time to let my eyelids fall.” I say that now. When I'm tired.

She picked me up at the Palmerston North bus station. She has an Audi. She kissed me on the

cheek, and smelled feminine, like she'd sprayed herself with some of the fragrance girls at high school used to use after gym class. I always wondered about those sprays, back when I was at school. Every girl I sat next to in class smelled the same, so I'd wonder, did they all share the same can, passing it between their semi-naked bodies like a secret note? I never had a girlfriend at school, or until Ruth actually, so I never found out.

("If you knew your monthly time was due," Julie asks, pouting as if she asks the question off the cuff and we haven't rehearsed it numerous times in the quiet seclusion of my cell, "why did you journey to Uncle Arthur's cabin when you did? Why not at a safer time, perhaps a week earlier?") Good question Julie... Jules. The entire embarrassing mishap would've never happened had it not been for Ruth – though I don't really blame her. She thought she was being helpful. I told her about Uncle Arthur, you see. Not about my monthly problem. And not that I suspected my mum had had it off with my dad's uncle, or anything like that. But I told her I was interested in finding out where my great-uncle used to live, like, pretending I was into family history. Ruth's a real whizz at finding things out. Within a week she'd located the plot of land where he once lived. It's quite close to the national park's border, and back in the sixties, when he bought it, his section wasn't state owned like it is now. The fact that he actually owned land shows quite obviously that he wasn't as much of a waste of time as Mum thinks. I was pretty excited, and surprisingly, Ruth was too.

"When shall we go?" she emailed.

"You don't have to come," I replied. "It's not going to be much fun hiking through the bush. And it's probably just some run-down shack. I think my dad and I are going," I lied. "I've been doing the research for him, mostly."

"Excuse me? What research? As far as I'm aware I did all the work for you. I spent hours poring through archives and staring at aerial maps. Did you tell your father that? And what does it matter if your father's there? Surely I would be welcome?"

I considered making up some sort of lie about my dad being super sexist, but I figured that would backfire on me later if my relationship with Ruth continued. Before I knew it she'd set a date, and even booked us into a hotel in Palmerston North, where we'd meet and spend the first night before we embarked on our journey. The date set was Monday the 21st, giving me only four days to get back to Auckland before the start of my next cycle. But then, that seemed enough time. I'd never been irregular before.

The hotel room was painted a dark green, and there was a wee fridge, and an electric jug, and a box of boutique teas. There was an en-suite too, which was really only a shower. Through the dusty blinds you could see the back of the Indian restaurant where we ate that night. Two old Indian dudes sat on crates, smoking. We had sex. But it was her choice, she even bought the condoms.

Ruth chattered away a million miles per hour as we drove down the country roads. And she opened up all the car windows and yodelled along to a tape of the Cranberries. They're not my favourite band, though I understand chicks dig listening to chicks. She also has a thing for pointing out farm animals. Like, "Look at that adorable pair of ducks, are you aware that paradise ducks mate for life, whereas for regular ducks it's only a seasonal affair?" or, "Don't you think that goat's chain is too short?" I liked the way her hair, still wet from the shower we had together, curled under her ear. She looked like a pixie.

The roads grew thinner, and eventually we were grinding along a gravel lane. I was going over the mental list in my head of all the things we'd brought: a little portable cooker I bought at the Warehouse for thirty bucks, my dad's old scratched compass, a torch, a few litres of water, our sleeping bags, a ton of two minute noodles, my axe – which I brought in case I needed to chop firewood (Jules recommends I make this point explicit, otherwise there's no telling what conclusions people might jump to). I was hoping that Ruth didn't expect me to carry the lot, when she finally pulled the car up in front of a turnstile.

"Here we are," she said with a flourish. "I believe we'll find a trail nearby, which we can follow

most of the way.”

“How will we know when to leave the path?”

“You're the boy scout.”

She was teasing me, and I felt myself sweat a bit. It was only 11am when we started out, but the day was already stinking hot. Grassy tussock sprawled for miles, and the track crisscrossed all over the place, up and down the hills like it was bouncing. My shirt clung to the back of my neck, cicadas hissed like radio static. I looked at the map again. If it was accurate, and Uncle Arthur's cabin was a whole finger's width into the trees – which we hadn't even reached yet – it'd take all bloody day to get there. And then I suddenly realised, for the first time, that it might not even be there any more.

Ruth had gone on ahead. I've never seen someone strut quite like she does. This fantail seemed to be following her, flitting around the sky above her head, and she was talking to it, though I couldn't hear what she said. She picked up a small stick and held it out, coaxing the fantail to perch on top. I saw that fantail eyeing up the branch. And he eyed me, too, the little bugger. I know it sounds weird, but I felt the bird judging me. Sizing me up. I think he would've preferred I wasn't there, so he could have Ruth to himself. “Come on,” I heard her cooing to him, as I came closer. “Clasp the branch with your glossy claws.” So I made a lot of racket, stomping towards them and throwing my arm around Ruth's shoulder so the stick she held dipped. The bird, realising his defeat, flew away.

Under the trees it was cooler. Ruth didn't talk much – I guess after the previous night we no longer needed words – but as the day deepened, my shadow stretched out and merged with hers. We stopped a few times and ate the vegemite and alfalfa sprout sandwiches she'd made. I wasn't exactly thrilled with them, I have to admit, but I wasn't going to say anything.

“It's 5pm,” she said at some point. It must've been about 5pm.

“Shouldn't we have left the trail by now?”

“You're the one holding the map,” she said.

“I thought you were leading the way.”

She rolled her eyes, then – something I've always hated in girls. “We're on the lookout for a stream. I don't believe we have come across it yet.”

“Keep walking another ten minutes, you'll find a stream,” a voice rose from the undergrowth. Ruth squealed in a really girly way. Then this dude suddenly stepped out from behind a tree, zipping up his pants. He pointed his thumb up the path. “But I wouldn't leave the track. Never a good idea.”

“We know where we're going,” Ruth replied, trying to cover for her squeal, I think. “His great-uncle was once the proprietor of a cabin up that stream.”

The guy raised his eyebrows, interested. I was annoyed. Why would Ruth tell a stranger something like that? And not just a stranger, but an American called Kelly – which is a girls' name, I don't need to point out – who hadn't cut his hair since he was probably six. He was decked out like a congenital camper, with tramping boots, floppy hat, stripy thermal t-shirt tucked into tan shorts. His “fanny pack” – high tech tramper style with drink bottle holder attached – had an 'I LOVE KIWILAND' badge sewn on. He bored us for a while with details of his walk-the-planet hippie lifestyle, the tracks he loved, the caves he frequents. I coughed loudly several times before Ruth finally dragged herself away.

We found the cabin quite quickly after that, though “cabin” is too generous a word. Uncle Arthur lived in a one room hovel, propped up from the ground on poles, with a rickety old stair leading to the door. Since its abandonment, I can only assume, the rain's got in, and all the floor boards in the middle have been munched through by rot, leaving a gaping hole. Cobwebs lace the windows, but even they've worn thin and gone wispy like hair. The place stinks of dirt. I dunno how Uncle Arthur used to cook or clean, because there's no sink, or basin, or anything. Other than a small table, which we dragged out of the hole in the floor and leaned against the wall, there's a single bed, a shelf crammed with dusty and rusted cooking implements – there's a tin of Milo in there that's turned into a chocolate brick – and a tall stack of books. Faded photographs decorate the walls – mostly pictures of crew-cut kids and cars,

including an amazing photo of an old 1940s Chevy truck – as well as hand drawn pictures, in pencil. Ruth wandered around, ooh-ing and aah-ing at it all, pointing to sketches of birds and plants. She crouched and began picking up his books, peering at their spines.

“Don't do that!” I told her. Jesus. It was me who should be poking through his stuff, not her. What if she found out something? Maybe I was misguided, but I felt my monthly problem should stay, you know, private.

“Why ever not?” She stared straight into my eyes, eyebrows concaving.

“They're old,” I replied. “I don't want to ruin them by mistake.”

“They were left to rot,” she replied, opening a book and flicking through it. “I'm helping to air them out.”

And then I spotted a book beside the bed. It was a red-bound diary with a large patch of the cover scraped clean of red so that only grey card was left showing through. On the grey Uncle Arthur had drawn a picture of a snake eating its tail – you know, the stereotypical image you might see on some middle-aged woman's swollen ankle. Written boldly above was the title, *A Record of My Unique and Extraordinary Condition*. I pocketed the book quickly, while Ruth's attention was on the stack. Soon satisfied there was no other evidence left lying around, I allowed Ruth to look at what she wanted. The cabin slowly went dark.

“We'll leave tomorrow morning,” I said, later. It was unbearable having the diary yet not being able to look at it. Also, I was thinking about the fact that I'd only three days to get home.

“Are you glad we came?” She asked, sitting next to me on the cabin's steps. I noticed she'd taken out the little portable cooker I'd brought, which she must've ferreted from my pack. Bloody good thing I'd the sense to keep the diary actually on my body.

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “It's been fun.”

We listened to the birds. A breeze crept in, and I sensed Ruth shivering beside me, so I wrapped

my arm around her shoulders.

“There's a richness to a starless night, don't you agree?” she asked. “It's so dense and thick and moist that, like a black peat, you could sink in and never again emerge.”

I tried to kiss her then, but for some reason, she turned her face away.

I offered her the bed that night, you know, like a gentleman should, and she accepted. I thought she'd say I could sleep with her too, but when I suggested it, she told me I could have the bed if I wanted. In the end I slept beside the door, scared the whole time the floor would give out entirely and swallow me in one large gulp. And I was starving, since all Ruth gave us for tea was more of her sandwiches. After a terrible sleep I was woken by a BANG BANG right next to my head. Kelly, the bloody Yankee tramper, was standing on the steps, grinning from ear to ear between his long locks.

I should've shut the door in his face. Then none of this would've happened. I'd be back home, disposing of my body in an orderly fashion, not waiting for the special op police to come charge me with the crime of his bloody murder. I realise I'm going to have to act all nice about him, but *really*? While I'm catching lice from coarse grey prison blankets and crapping in a bucket – I heard once that some Auckland prison inmates still squat on buckets – he'll be out here, somewhere, oblivious to the trouble he's put me through. Probably making himself a headband from elderberries and moth saliva, sitting lotus-style on the highest branch of some tree, praying to the god of hebe bushes. You know, I bet even his underwear is biodegradable.

“What are you doing here?” Is what I asked, when I should've shut the door.

“Partly I was curious. Partly I was checking up on you two. This your uncle's cabin?” He stood back, squinting at the mouldy wreck like he was assessing a vintage car. “Quite a recluse, was he?”

“Hi Kelly,” Ruth said, sitting up, yawning.

“Came across an abandoned house once, in Quebec, that had a family of bears living in it,” he continued, like we were interested. “Gave me a hell of a scare. Except I hadn't come to steal their

porridge.” He grinned, and I noticed an actual leaf stuck in his teeth. “Fancy a walk? Plenty of walking tracks around here.”

“That sounds lovely,” Ruth said, already pulling on her shoes. “Although we need breakfast first. Do you know how to operate this?” She passed Kelly my cooker.

“We're actually heading off in a minute,” I said.

“It needs gas,” Kelly ignored me. Quite blatantly.

“Ben, did you buy gas for the cooker?” Ruth put her hands on her hips.

“I...” I realised I hadn't.

Kelly lit a fire outside, and Ruth boiled stream water in her little camping pan, breaking up the noodles into little bits before she dropped them in. I was annoyed, watching her do that. We might as well eat rice instead of noodles. I was starving, though.

“You can go for a walk,” I told her after we'd eaten. “I think I'd rather stay here.”

She frowned at me, a little frown, but didn't say anything. She took a jumper from her pack and tied it around her waist, then waltzed off after Kelly without even looking back. Glad to finally be alone, I ran inside the cabin, shut the door, dragged the table in front of it, sat on the table with my back to the door, and opened Uncle Arthur's diary.

I won't tell anyone the next bit. Not the court. Not my lawyer. In fact, no one needs to know about the diary at all. Perhaps one day someone will study it, some biologist maybe... but it'll probably just come off as some eccentric's weird poetry. Or, more likely, some old crazy man's lunatic ravings. I could bury it somewhere round here, dig it up later. Or burn it, fuck it. Burn it before the cops show up. I'd be happy to see it burn. Jesus. He had no idea what was coming, the poor guy. At the start he convinced himself that being renewed each month was good for his health, kept his cells from getting stagnant. He hid his condition from the family, buying the cabin so he could retreat here each month. Holy shit, the ground must be littered with bodies – I'll tell my lawyer that, too, that's hard evidence. He

taught himself all about plants, and hoped that, a bit like a woman going through the change of life – his words – he'd have some relief from it one day.

But then his face began to change. Starting... oh god. Starting with the lines on his head. No, I can't think about this now.

The weather turned bad, and when Ruth and Kelly finally returned they were soaked. Ruth sprinted up the stairs, shrieking like the rain had daggers attached to it. But she was laughing, I realised, and as Kelly took off his shirt to wring it out I wondered if Ruth would've let *him* share her bed last night. I began to wonder if I knew anything about her at all.

“Let's go,” I told her as I unlocked the door to let them inside.

“Hilarious, Ben. It's raining cats and dogs out here. We're stuck for the night.” She even seemed excited by it, excited somehow by the rain rattling the tin roof and streaming down the windows. And even as she spoke, thunder whipped the sky, and the rain pelted down even thicker. “How far away is your tent?” She asked Kelly, giggling.

“About three hours walk.”

“Is anyone waiting there for you?”

“Not unless some critter has stolen in. You know that.”

“Kelly's parents died,” Ruth told me, like it was somehow related to what he'd just said, and gave Kelly a little sad face. She was shivering, so I gave her the shirt straight from my back. Kelly is fit, but he doesn't have the body I've had since my first regeneration.

As it got dark, Kelly ducked outside, and like the hero he is, managed to get a small fire going beneath the cabin's stairs. He broke up the noodles, too, just like Ruth likes them, the bastard.

“That's all our food, you know,” I told Ruth, as Kelly took his share from the pan.

She nodded, unconcerned that Kelly had bludged off us two meals in a row.

We found some cards on the windowsill and I taught them how to play 500. I won both games.

Ruth kept going on about Kelly's lost family, seemingly impressed by the fact he'd spent the last two years in a one-man tent without phone or address, and was unable to even tell us which month of the year it was. As it got nearer and nearer to the time we'd have to sleep I began to stress about the sleeping arrangements. There wasn't enough room for two to sleep comfortably on the floor. But if I asked Ruth to sleep with me in the bed and she said "No", it'd prove to Kelly that he had a shoe in. I couldn't very well let them sleep together, yet I couldn't make Ruth sleep on the floor. The feeling of panic grew. I felt like a rubber-band about to snap, when Kelly suddenly yawned, folded his arms behind his head, and leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. Ruth looked at me, smiled shyly, and shuffled past the hole and into bed. By the time I'd pissed outside and come back in she'd already turned her back and pulled her sleeping bag up to her neck. The only option I had left was to also lean against the wall, but only someone who was half-ape could sleep that way.

("The next day you and the purported victim had an argument, is that not true?") Yes, we had a row, but it was nothing major. It was still pissing down. The stream roared like some huge warehouse ventilation system, the kind that reuses the same stale air until there's nothing left that's good in it. A small lake had sprung up around the cabin's front steps. But we had no food, and I was starving, having only eaten sprout sandwiches and abused noodles for the past two days. And I'd only 24 hours to get my arse back to Auckland so I could renew in peace.

"We have to go," I told Ruth as soon as she woke. I, of course, hadn't slept a wink.

She crept past the hole and to the door, peering outside. "You're welcome to leave," she said. "But I'd prefer not to spend half the day toppling down banks."

Kelly roused himself and joined her at the door. He leaned, hands on either side of the door frame. Ruth was still standing there, so his chest literally touched her back.

"Too dangerous," he said. "Slip and break a leg out here and no one will be able to rescue you easily."

“Either that or starve to death,” I said, knowing I'd a very good point.

And then, absolutely out of nowhere, Kelly dug inside his fanny pack and pulled out a pack of emergency TVP he'd been holding back. I couldn't believe it. That parasite sat and ate *our* food when he had food of his own! He couldn't have known there'd be an emergency the next day. If the storm had ended he wouldn't have given it to us at all!

“Yum!” Ruth clapped her hands at the sight of the plastic bag, which displayed smiling green beans.

“And when were you thinking of telling us about that?” I asked, pointing to the TVP.

“Excuse me?” He asked, as if he didn't know what I meant. As if.

“That!” I yelled, still waving my hand at his secret stash.

“It's only textured vegetable protein,” Ruth said, laying a hand on my shoulder. “And isn't it marvellous? Now we won't go hungry while we wait for the storm to cease!”

I shook off her hand. I guess in hindsight I acted a little over the top. But really, I was steaming. I'm not made of money, you know. I'm on a benefit. And I bought those noodles with my own cash.

“Get out, Kelly!” I shouted, picking up his pack and shoving it into his arms. Surprised, he took a step backwards and would've toppled into the hole had Ruth not grabbed his hand.

“You serious?” he asked.

“For your information, yes I am!” And I yanked his pack back off him and threw it through the open door. It landed deep in the puddle. Kelly gave me this hurt hippie look, passed Ruth the TVP, then ran after his pack. I slammed the door shut.

“You asshole!” Ruth screamed, throwing the TVP into my face. “It's pouring out there! What's wrong with you?”

“He took our food, he stole my sleeping spot!”

“What the fuck?!” She swore, sounding almost normal and not like a librarian at all. She ran to the

bed and started collecting up all her things.

“Where are you going?” I asked. “It's raining out there, like you said!”

She didn't even answer me, but ran out into the rain after Kelly.

And it was then, I'll tell them, right that minute, that I began to feel it. Suddenly very light-headed, my spine began to creep and twist. “Oh God no!” I thought. “Not now!” I'd never been early before. But I'd never been pushed to such limits of stress, either. Panicked, desperate, I grabbed my hatchet and fled outside into the trees.

(“Tell the jury what you saw,” Ruth's lawyer says. I'm sitting now, watching the proceedings from the front row. The lawyer's an older man, balding. His tie's too thin, too pink. Like a long tongue. Ruth doesn't look at me, though I sit directly before her. Her hands fidget on the table.

“I couldn't find Kelly,” she says. “It was raining heavily, so I returned. The door to the cabin was left wide open, but Ben wasn't inside.” She pauses.

“Go on,” says her lawyer.

“I... I waited for a while. I felt terrible about the way I had acted. I knew that Ben was upset with me, and I regretted not allowing him into my bed the previous two nights. I would have believed that he had left like he had intended to, however his belongings were still inside the cabin. Maybe, out of heartache and rejection, he had chosen to do something foolish? I decided to risk my own safety by running out into the rain, to find him.” And she looks at me then, her dark eyes beseeching me, begging for all of this not to be true. “I ran out behind the cabin. I'm not sure what led me to him, exactly; perhaps the instincts of a lover. But then,” she stops, choking. She hides her face in her hands, her shoulders rising in silent sobs. “But, then I saw him. He was only wearing his underwear. He was wielding an axe, standing over a...” She can't say it. “A *body!* The body was hacked to bloody chunks. Ben was smeared in blood, it dripped from his hands, his legs, his face. Oh mercy!” When Ruth is unable to properly recover she is led from the courtroom. The case will reconvene in an hour.)

Christ, when will this waiting be over? I've already burnt a bunch of Uncle Arthur's old books to cook this god-awful TVP, and I don't fancy having to do it a second time. This place is really starting to get to me – the trees block all the light, and sound like they're whispering all the time. Man, I'm in deep shit. I was in deep shit from the moment I was born. Maybe even earlier.

Uncle Arthur went to some length to record the details of his affliction – it's all there in his diary, described and dated, over a period of nearly twenty years. At the start he mostly just wrote the date he renewed each month. Well, that, and about a series of investigations he made into the cause of the condition, all of which came to diddly squat. About three years in, when he was twenty-seven, he mentioned losing a facial wrinkle. But then nothing else happened for years and years, except he thought he'd lost some of his chest hair. He inserted a photograph of himself, one of those old-style square shaped ones that are rounded at the edges. He looked the same as he ever did. Underneath he wrote, “Is this it?” He mentioned my parents wedding, and wondered whether he could ever consider marrying. He was thirty eight years old.

When I read it yesterday, and got to that part of the diary, I felt a little bummed out. Seems to me that librarians would rather go for older men. But then, it's not like I have the chest hair to lose. Could be worse?

Ha. Not much later he skipped a cycle – first time – and then suffered one major hell of a transformation when he renewed the following month. When he came to – because it actually knocked him out cold for a few hours – his body was fully bald and his face completely smooth. He totally freaked out, and didn't leave the cabin for the entire month, eating only stuff he found in the forest. The next month it happened again – a break, followed by a huge change. But this time his arms and legs had become noticeably shorter than they used to be. He drew a self-portrait, though there's no mirror in the cabin so I dunno how he knew for sure. He looked like a newly born tortoise. His handwriting used to be really neat, but after that it looked like he could barely hold the pen.

It just gets worse from there. He began drawing these these horrible, crude pictures of this snake-like thing, with stumpy limbs. And then, oh God... he said he felt a movement inside of him and his cycle stopped.

I think he actually went nuts after that. There are pages and pages of drawings of trees. Apple trees, avocados, elms – the fine print is difficult to make out. It made no sense until I read further and realised they were species where all the plants were clones of each other, cuttings from the same original parent-tree. The address I grew up at was scrawled at the edge of one of the pages, and the names 'Adam', 'John', and 'Arthur' were crossed out, leaving 'Benjamin' exposed. A page from the diary was missing, torn from the spine.

There are a few more entries, later, though each one is months apart. The writing is pretty much indecipherable. He cut out a page from a book about insects and glued it in, a page about the earthworm, and circled a sentence describing its reproduction. Asexual reproduction, apparently, is when a baby is created from the cells of the parent. The baby is pretty much the parent, themselves.

The diary eventually stops. The last page is literally covered in inky smears, like he could no longer control the pen, like his arms were in fact a fat tail, wriggling uncontrollably, destroying everything he put down the moment he wrote it. When I read it, in the cabin, I had this image of him as a huge worm, no longer resembling a human at all, slithering through his floorboards and into the earth.

And here I am. When the rain stops properly I'll try sharing the TVP with the birds again. Ruth probably likes the brown mash because she's part-bird. That'd explain her homing abilities, how she was able to find Uncle Arthur's cabin in the first place. And birds eat worms. There's something to consider in that. What hope does a worm have, really, in a world full of birds? Even when the worm is entirely innocent?

END