

18 DECEMBER

Poetry and a Plucked Chicken

Today is the last day of term, and I am moulting. Mum says that means I'm growing up, and that it's lovely. Shows how much *she* knows!

When Billy Flicktail moults, it is absolutely cool. He flaps his wings and the loose feathers pop out, just like that, with the new ones already perfect underneath. Me? I moult in clumps. My plumage is totally patchy. I have to wonder if this is normal. When Billy pops his feathers, they float to the ground 'as lightly as seed-pods in the breeze'. (That's what Indigo Tuk-Tuk said in poetry class.) Whereas my feathers practically plonk. And underneath it is not a pretty sight. I am almost certain I can see raw skin. What if I go completely bald?

Will Indigo Tuk-Tuk ever compose poetry about a plucked pukeko? I doubt it.

25 DECEMBER

Christmas, the Wekas, and a Slightly Stinky Frog

At last, it's Christmas! Problem is, the Wekas are coming for lunch. Dad says, "Can't we just uninvite them this year?" and Mum says, "Of course we can't, they're family," but I can tell she's tearing her feathers out because she knows Auntie Weka will drink too much swamp water and go on and on about how weka are a threatened species. Sure enough, this is exactly what happens.

"Pity you're not extinct," says Grandma, not that quietly, and Mum says, "Do have another spider, I made them myself." Uncle Weka starts telling bad jokes and Auntie Weka laughs that stupid little "Coo-eet, coo-eet."

I try to slip away to practise the Swamphen Stomp for the Tuk-Tuk's New Year's Eve dance party, but Bekka Weka follows me. She thinks she's hot stuff but she's as plain as a drain, not a

splash of blue anywhere. If only she could see Indigo Tuk-Tuk, she would know what true beauty is. Indigo has cobalt-blue plumage and the shiniest legs in class.

Then it's time for lunch. Uncle Weka says, "Oh, it's frog again. I thought we were having snail," and Grandma says, "We always have frog, it's tradition," and Uncle Weka says, "I really like snail," and Bekka says, "Actually, I'm on a diet," and Auntie Weka goes, "Coo-eet, coo-eet," and Mum says, "Oh dear, I hope the frog's not a tiny bit past its use-by date."

When they leave, Mum has to lie with her feet up for three hours.

"Never again," says Dad.

"Oh, come on," says Mum. "They're family."

31 DECEMBER

New Year's Eve!

I am anxious to be the first to arrive at Indigo Tuk-Tuk's dance party tonight, but Mum says she's not letting me out of the house till after dinner, which is leftover frog. This is nothing new. She has been trying to make us eat it all week. If it was past its use-by date before, it is now seriously putrefied. Dad waits till Mum's back is turned, then throws the leftover frog in the swamp. Mum says, "Maybe we'll have snail next year."

I'm late to the dance, but in the end it doesn't matter, because guess who gate-crashes? Billy Flicktail and his brothers! First, Billy tramples the weed I have been specially saving to share with Indigo. Then he swallows thirteen caterpillars, one after the other, just to impress her. Then, worst of all, he asks her to do the Screech and Squawk with him, and she says "Yes."

I have never been so humiliated in my life. Billy Flicktail had better watch out. This is war!



18 MARCH

Old Plastic Bags

Today in class, Indigo waggles her tail feathers at me. I get a little over-excited and tell her I can fly like a swallow.

"Can not," she says, and I say, "Can too," and she says, "Can not," so I show her . . .

My beak is only a little bit chipped and the tree is not damaged at all. Billy Flicktail sniggers, so I peck him, but Mrs Crake catches me.

I have to stay on after school. I have never been on detention before. As if I needed any extra torment, Mrs Crake tells me that she is pleased I am interested in the art of flying, and that she has put my name down for the school triathlon in October. The Swim-Run-Fly fills me with dread. Everyone knows that Billy Flicktail will win. I will be totally annihilated.

"Stay cool," says Porp, when Mrs Crake has finally let me go. He has been waiting for me

in the sheep paddock. Porp is a great mate. "Stay cool," he says again, but I am not cool. I am completely overheated from picking up every scrap of rubbish in the entire school grounds. Plus, my beak has a funny taste in it from carting round those dirty, crinkly, tangly things that Mrs Crake says human beings call Old Plastic Bags. Human beings are disgusting.

"You can train with me," says Porp.

Porp may be a great mate, but he has actually *volunteered*

for the Swim-Run-

Fly because he thinks it will be

fun. He does

not understand

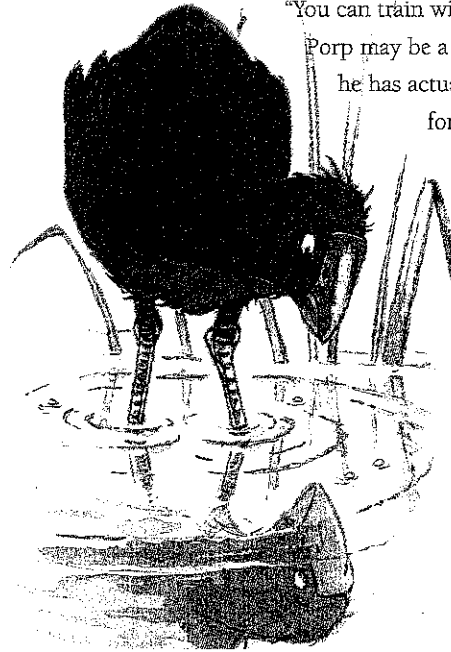
what it is like

to be a physical

misfit. I pause to

drink some water

from a puddle.



My reflection looks dirty and crinkly, like an Old Plastic Bag. I am rubbish on legs.

"Come on," says Porp. "Let's go to the roadside and get some grit. I bags the red grit, you can have the yellow and the blue."

"No way!" I laugh. Everyone knows that the red is the tastiest.

We run all the way.

"See?" puffs Porp. "You're not so bad at running."

Not so bad at running, maybe. But flying? Flying is another story. And the triathlon is seven months away, and counting . . .

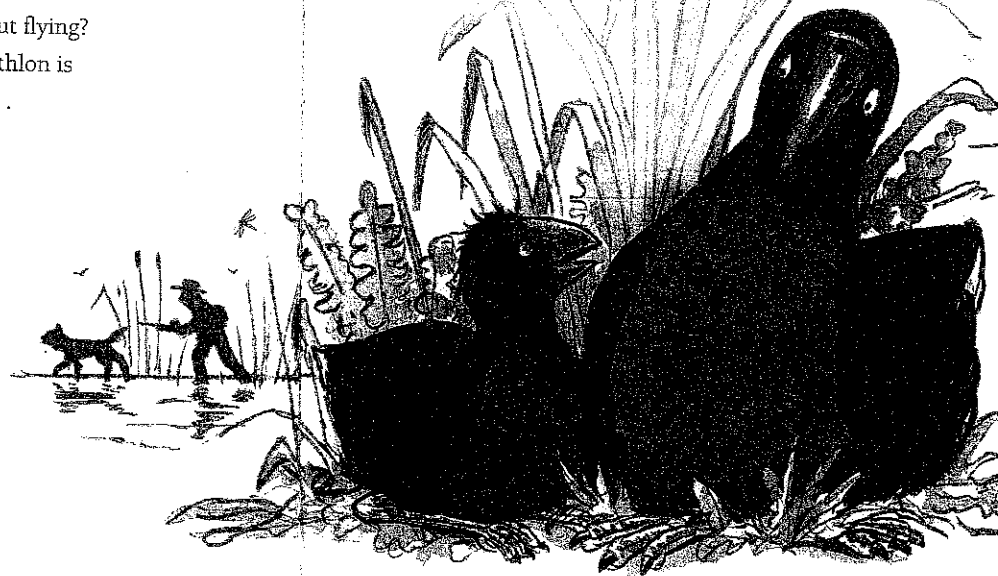
4 MAY

I Spy

Today is the first day of the duck-shooting season. School is closed for one week as a precaution.

"Keep your feathers low," advises Mrs Crake.

I'm pleased to get away from Billy Flicktail, but I miss Porp. Also, disturbingly, I find myself day-dreaming about Indigo Tuk-Tuk's shiny black beak and enormous frontal shield.



It's too dangerous to go out into the open, so Mum and I hang around eating pickled slaters and playing I spy. It goes like this:

Mum: I spy with my little eye, something beginning with D.

Me: Duck?

Mum: No.

Me: Dung?

Mum: No.

Me: Dog?

Mum: Yes!

It's boring and scary at the same time.

The duck-shooters wear ugly clothes and funny hats and smear mud on their faces, which they think makes them look like bushes. They also blow little whistles, which they think makes them sound like ducks.

Eventually, they decide there is no bird life here, and go away. We all agree that human beings are a very primitive species.

29 MAY

The Great Potato Adventure

Today, during training for the Swim-Run-Fly, Billy Flicktail comes up behind me and Porp and hisses: "Want an adventure?"

I'm not at all sure that I do, but Porp says, "Sure!" and I don't want to look like a coward, so I nod.

"Then meet us in the potato field at two a.m.," he says. "We're going on a plunder."

That night, I lie wide awake, tossing and turning. Should I go? Sometimes it's hard to be a pukeko.

30 MAY, 2 A.M.

I'm going! It's pitch black this early in the morning, and freezing cold. There are weird noises coming from the reeds by the edge of the swamp: little scratches and squeaks. What if there's a rat or a stoat? I'm shaking so hard, my

feathers rustle. We hide in a ditch till Billy gives the signal.

“Charge!” he shouts, and we run into the middle of the field and start digging. The others eat their potatoes straight away, but I roll mine out of the field and all the way home without taking so much as a peck.

I hide it under my nest but I feel so guilty, I can't sleep. I'm a criminal! I can bear it no longer. I wait till first light, then roll the potato all the way back to the field . . . but disaster strikes. Indigo's younger sister Violet is already up, doing her *tai chi*, and she sees me!

I'm sick to the stomach. She'll tell Indigo, then Indigo will know I'm a coward. I'm sunk.



17 JUNE

A Sob, a Sniff and a Valuable Lesson

The Rail family is in mourning. Today is the fifth anniversary of the death of Great-Uncle Perky, whose life was tragically cut short by a pink Fiat Bambina outside the tearooms on State Highway One north of Wellsford.

"Remember, son," says Dad. "No insect is so delicious that it's worth dying for."

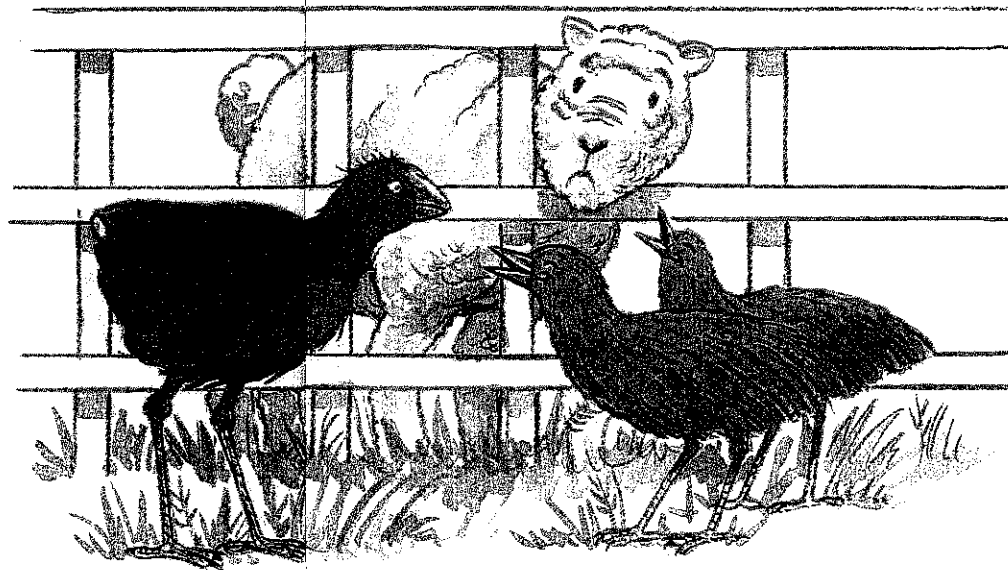
Grandma stifles a sob. Mum sniffs and says, "He was playing chicken on the road. There's a valuable lesson in this for us all."

I know, I know. *A pukeko is not a chicken.*

5 JULY

Pukeko Soup

Today the Wekas come back for a visit. Dad is calm, Mum mortified. Grandma fakes beak-ache and slips away. I escape into the paddock and try (unsuccessfully) to strike up a conversation with the local sheep, but Bekka Weka and her disgusting little brother Webfoot follow me.



Webfoot tells me all pukekos stink because we've got poo in our name, so I tell him he's a cretin and it's not pronounced "poo," it's "pu." Bekka Weka tells me she has a new secret recipe, and would I like her to share it with me? Sure, I say – unwisely.

"It's for pukeko soup," says Bekka. "You boil a pukeko with a stone for three hours, then throw out the pukeko and eat the stone." She and her brother kill themselves laughing.

I tell Bekka that she's a silly old coot, which is not only rude, but also biologically incorrect. But hey, who cares? I was provoked. Luckily the Wekas remember the rotten frog at Christmas, and leave before dinner. Mum's exhausted, so Dad picks up takeaway crickets. There are some advantages to having annoying relatives after all.

1 AUGUST Kidnapped!

My feathers are all in a ruffle. Something sensational has happened: Billy Flicktail has been abducted by humans! Indigo is in the depths of despair. Mrs Flicktail is hysterical. Porp is thrilled.

I'm just plain confused; why on earth would anyone want to kidnap Billy?

"There's nothing for it," says Dad. "We need to visit Mister T."

Dad is standing, still as stone, up to his belly in swamp water. We are fishing. It's incredibly boring. We never catch anything.

"Who's Mister T?" asks Porp. Honestly, sometimes I have to wonder about that bird.

"Mr T," says Dad, "is a takahe. He's a prophet. He looks back into the past, and foretells the future."

"Cool," says Porp. "Can I meet him?"

I pretend to keep fishing, but secretly I'm in turmoil. There is no way I have any wish to meet Mister T.

"You bet," says Dad. "We'll all go together in the morning."

I stick my beak deep into the swamp and stifle a squawk. By complete fluke, when I come up, my beak has a fish in it. Porp whistles and claps his wings, but I'm not fooled. I need to face facts: Porp is a great mate, a super athlete, and a hero among birds. And I am a coward. Just think of the potato.

2 AUGUST

Mister T

Mister T is one big bird. He looks about three times heavier than Dad – and Dad, before he met Mum and got middle-aged and scrawny, actually won the avian heavyweight championship (pukeko division) two years in a row. Mister T

is old enough to be dead about three times over. In fact, when we first arrive we think that maybe he actually is dead, because he's just sitting there like a big blackberry bush with his beak slumped down into his feathers.

But then Dad pushes forward the grass shoots we've brought as a gift. We bow deeply, tails up, wings drooped.

Mister T squawks, "Clowp!" I nearly jump out of my feathers. And he speaks.

"Clowp! Yes, Billy will be safely returned."

At this point, Mrs Flicktail faints with relief and needs to be revived with an especially juicy grub. I feel a pang of something suspiciously like disappointment.

"But why have they kidnapped him?" Porp blurts out.

I clap my wing over his beak. Mister T glares at Porp and blinks like an owl. He looks as if he's about to pull Porp's feathers out, one by one.

"Billy will be trained," he says at last, "for a television commercial. The last one had to pull a string to make a light come on."

I have not the foggiest idea what he is talking about, but I am far too afraid to ask.

Mister T's beak sinks to his chest. He closes his eyes, and goes back to being dead. Porp turns to me and says, "Do you think we should wake him up and ask him who's going to win the Swim-Run-Fly?"

This is too much for me. Coward that I am, I turn and run. Honestly, if I run like this in the triathlon, I will win wings down, prophesy or no prophesy. Old age is a terrible thing. I'm never going to let it happen to me.



7 AUGUST

Too Much Zonking, and a Bad Case of Guilt

It's the weekend, and Porp and I are supposed to be practising for the Swim-Run-Fly but the water is freezing, and full of paradise ducks going, *Zonk, zonk, zonk*. All that zonking is enough to make me wish that the humans had kidnapped *me* instead of Billy. Drat that bird! I hope they put him in a pie.

Then I remember the duck-shooters. Humans really do like eating birds. I feel guilty now. And confused.

"What's the matter?" asks Porp, and I confess.

"I was just thinking about Billy," I say. "I know he's my enemy and everything ... but ... I'd feel kind of bad if ... you know ... he ended up as a pie."

"Pie?" repeats Porp. Then he shrugs. "Don't sweat the small stuff," he says.

Actually, I don't think this is small stuff. Small stuff is whether the dance moves in the Screech and Squawk go *flap, peck, dip, chirp* or *flap, dip, peck, chirp*. Actually, I'm confused about this, too. I mention it to Porp. We practise the Screech and Squawk for the rest of the afternoon. We really, really should be concentrating on the Swim-Run-Fly, though. There's only two months to go, and counting.

26 SEPTEMBER

Bombshells

Something truly disgusting has happened. I should have guessed when I saw Dad beating down a clump of reeds by the water's edge, but I was distracted, thinking about Indigo Tuk-Tuk's eight shiny, perfectly formed toes. By the time I catch on, it is too late. Mum has laid.

"Mum!" I shriek. "You don't need another baby. You've got me!"

She says nothing, but her face goes all kind of faraway and squeezey, and when I look down, there's another egg. I could have just about forgiven her for that, but then she drops the real bombshell.

Guess who she's invited to share her nest? Billy Flicktail's mother! My own flesh and blood has turned against me. I have been betrayed by the bird who laid me. It is a dark day.

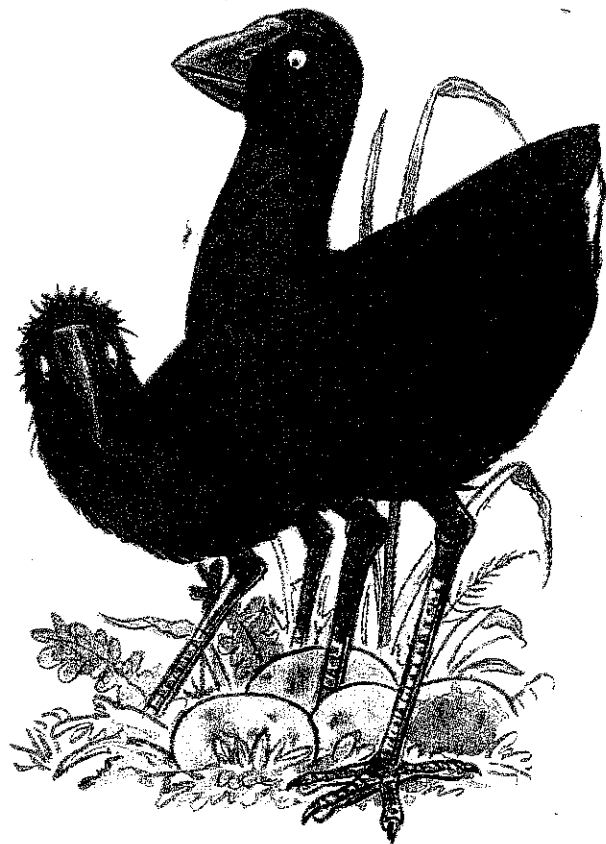
"Chill out, son," says Dad. "Mrs Flicktail's really nice when you get to know her." He winks at me. Winks!

When Mrs Flicktail lays her first egg in Mum's nest, I stalk off and go into a sulk for an entire day. When Dad takes over nest duty for the night and Mum comes looking for me, I hide behind some raupo reeds.

But the next morning, I feel ashamed. I get up at dawn and go down to the nest to apologise.

"Hello, darling," says Mum. "I knew you'd come round," and she lets loose another egg, just to rub it in.

Has any bird in the history of this entire swamp EVER had a mother as embarrassing as mine?



3 OCTOBER

Pecker, Maths and a Mind-Reading Mother

Today, the running tally of eggs in the nest is as follows:

Mum	4
Mrs Flicktail	7
Total	11

Billy's brother Pecker stops by on his way to training for the Swim-Run-Fly. "How many you got, Ma?" he asks. Then: "Ha! Seven!"

I may not be a maths whizz, but I know who is winning here. Suddenly, I'm thinking that maybe I shouldn't be so negative about Mum's egg-laying abilities. Maybe, in fact, I should be encouraging her to push out another three, just to even things up? Or, better still, four?

"It's not a competition," says Mum, sternly.

It's freaky when she reads my mind like that. But what will Billy say when he comes back and finds he's got nearly twice as many new brothers and sisters as me?

Mum glares. She's reading my mind again. "It doesn't matter what anybody says," she hisses.

Well, what did I expect? This is the mother who gives me slug in my school lunch.

11 OCTOBER

Drama in the Duckpond

During training today, Pecker Flicktail, who is usually an excellent swimmer, gets his foot tangled in an Old Plastic Bag and nearly drowns. Dad has to pull him out and give him beak-to-beak.

"No pain, no gain," says Porp when he hears the news. He once fractured a wing bone in a collision with a macrocarpa, so he should know.