

ZEROES ON THE PAGE

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Apparently I'm mature for my age. Dad says no eight-year-old reads the newspaper. It's only specific stories that interest me though, I skip straight to the nature section every time without fail.

You see, I like watching birds. I've been counting them ever since I was seven and three quarters. Mum gets me magazines about them and I recently bought my first pair of binoculars! I bought the binoculars with pocket money that I had been saving for exactly four months and twelve days.

I check my watch and see it is 4:32 PM. I missed it! I throw myself off the couch and slam my feet up the stairs as fast as they can. My body flashes through my bedroom door and back out again with notebook and pen in hand. My foot makes contact with the study door before it is forced open. Before I know it, tattered pages splay themselves onto the stained wood of the desk and my hand slams down onto the cracked paper. I unsheath my binoculars and glare out glossy glass.

Two grey warblers! Fluffy undersides, sharp flight feathers, and rutilant pupils hungry for some food—their small bodies dance across the long branch enlarged through my lenses.

My pen strikes the paper in two sharp lines, *Grey Warbler — II*.

The ink stares back at the empty page, hesitating before scribbling ten more lines. How could I forget, I need the date too! *June 10th*.

In the backyard, there is a special tree. I call him *Mono*, it's short for 'monolith' which is a really cool word meaning a humongous stone or slab that's made into a monument. Mono is like a monolith, he's a monument that all the birds enjoy and is sturdy like stone. Mono is a tōtara tree, and Dad told me they can live for over a thousand years.

Mono has thirty-seven main branches, and his trunk is exactly two metres and thirteen centimetres in circumference. I know this because I measured it with Mum's tape measure. His canopy spreads in almost a perfect circle, it covers 8.3 metres from east to west and 7.9 metres from north to south.

Every day at exactly 4:30 PM, I sit at the study window with my notebook. This is when the birds are most active before evening, according to *The Complete Guide to New Zealand Birds* that I got from the library.

I usually stare out the window for thirty minutes, sometimes an hour if dinner is late. The birds that I see follow patterns. Grey Warblers like the middle branches where the leaves are thickest. Fantails prefer outer branches to dart after insects. Tūis love the very top where they can survey everything.

For the birds I don't see, I write a zero on the paper. I didn't see any Waxeyes or Kererū today, so I write zero for those. The letter 'O' and the number zero can get confused when reading sometimes, and I hate confusing things, so I like to put a cross through my zeroes.

Today I stayed for 42 minutes and 36 seconds and counted seven Grey Warblers, four Blackbirds, three Fantails, and one Tūi. This was a good day, above my average. I keep a track of

my averages in the back of my book. Maths helps me understand things because it is clear and makes sense.

Another week passed. I noticed that the amount of Chaffinches in the garden was going down. On Sunday there had been five, Monday four, Tuesday three, and today on Wednesday only two. I wondered if they had gone somewhere new.

But it wasn't the off-season for Chaffinches. All my books said it wasn't. Something else was making them leave, and I didn't understand what. This made my stomach feel uncomfortable.

On Thursday I came home and went up to the study at 4:30 PM sharp. That's when I noticed something very, very strange. Men in orange vests had come from the street and had put up a whole lot of orange fencing around Mono. They were all pointing at him, gazing up at his branches and his canopy swaying in the wind.

The men had clipboards and were writing things down. One of the men had a device that looked like it was measuring something. They would look at Mono and he would stay still as they nodded at each other. I didn't see many birds that day, only two Grey Warblers and one Blackbird. The birds didn't seem to follow their pattern today. They stayed in the very top branches, where the men couldn't reach.

I wanted to ask Mum and Dad what was happening, but dinner wasn't until 6:05 PM. Instead, I watched the men until they left at 5:23 PM, counting everything they did.

At the dinner table that night at 6:07 PM, I decided to ask Mum and Dad, "Mum and Dad, men in orange vests have come into our backyard and have put fencing around Mono. What are they doing?"

Dad put down his fork and swivelled his body towards the window where the men were working. He met Mum's gaze, expression unreadable, before turning back to me, "This might be a little hard for you to understand. Mono isn't actually on our property, our backyard ends just a few metres before where he's planted."

"Okay," I say. "But what are they doing to Mono?"

Dad's pupils dilate, and he looks down at his plate, "Oh, I wouldn't worry about it, kiddo. They're probably just going to trim a few of his branches so he doesn't disturb anyone."

This didn't make sense. Mono's branches had never disturbed anyone before. They had been the same for the entire time I had been watching birds, which was 298 days now. Sometimes adults say things that aren't logical though, so I nodded and continued to eat my dinner.

The next day, I came home from school and all the men had gone. I was happy about this. At 4:28 PM I went up the stairs like usual, grabbed my notebook and pen, and sat at the window.

It was then that I realised that Mono was not there anymore.

This confused me. Trees don't disappear. Trees are permanent things, like mountains or buildings. I blinked three times to make sure my eyes were not playing tricks on me, but the space where Mono should have been remained empty except for a pile of wood chips and a fresh, raw stump.

I stared out that window for thirty minutes before dinner was called, but I couldn't write anything in my notebook. My hand wouldn't work properly.

Strike. Strike. Strike. Strike. Strike. Strike.

A tear hit the paper as I struck through my last zero on the paper and the ink streaked watery black down the ruled lines.

Trees don't migrate. Where could Mono have gone?

That was a silly question. I knew where Mono had gone, really. Mono had been cut down and taken away by the men in the orange vests. Dad had lied about trimming branches. He had lied to protect my feelings, but lies only make the truth harder to understand when it actually comes.

I walked outside, past Mum and Dad calling my name for dinner. I had to see for myself. The stump was still warm from the chainsaw, and it smelled like fresh wood and sadness. I counted the rings on the stump and counted ninety-three. Mono had been alive for ninety-three years. He had been watching over this place well before any of the men in orange vests were born.

I sat down and took out my binoculars. I looked up at the empty sky and saw where Mono's canopy should have been filtering the light into soft, green patterns. I looked at the bare ground where his roots had been holding the soil together. I looked at the space where thirty-seven branches should have been swaying in the afternoon breeze.

Everything was different now. The ground looked naked and exposed. It was unnaturally quiet. The birds would have nowhere to land, and they would have nowhere to feel safe. They wouldn't be able to build nests, or raise their babies, or sing their evening songs.

Tonight I will not bother to open my notebook. Without Mono, there will be no birds to count. It will only be zeroes on the page. Tonight, I would sit here with Mono, and I would remember every bird that I had ever seen in his branches, every afternoon we had spent together.

But tomorrow at 4:30 PM, I will still climb those stairs. I will still sit at that window. Perhaps I will count the shadows, or perhaps I will continue to write zeroes.

Until the paper runs out. Until I use all the ink. Until my hands cannot write anymore.