

I am writing this in the back of a book I found in a drawer in this room. Some trashy novel. There were several blank pages so I am using them as a kind of diary. I need to record my thoughts, to help keep them clear. Because otherwise I am afraid I will go mad. What is happening to me could not possibly be happening.

My name is Robert Powell-Sycamore.

I am seventeen.

I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm here. The door's locked.

Last night I was on my way home from a party. Yes, I'd had some alcohol. Yes, I know that's illegal. And stupid. And driving while drunk is the dumbest thing ever. But I wasn't drunk. I had two beers and I spaced them out over the whole night.

I remember the other car flying through the intersection, not giving way. Maybe they were the ones

who'd had too much to drink. I definitely had the right of way.

I don't know what kind of car it was. I remember it was red. I know that because that was all I saw before the impact and everything went black.

What else do I remember? I'm not sure. It's all kind of fuzzy. Laura, my girlfriend, was not in the car with me. I know that. We'd had a small fight at the party. Not a big one, but big enough for her to go home early with her friend Catherine.

I know my address. 192a Goldfinch Lane. My mum's Diane Powell and my father's William Sycamore.

Moving is difficult, my back hurts and my legs are stiff. My shoulders, too – probably all as a result of the accident. But there's something more.

I'm seventeen.

I am seventeen.

I keep writing that because it's true, but something is very wrong here. The skin on my hands is brown, wrinkled and splotchy. My hands look like old man's hands.

There's no mirror in this room, but the base of the lamp on the nightstand is made of polished metal and I just looked at myself in it.

The face staring back was not mine. It was the face of an old man. I stared at it for a long time, wondering if it was a face I knew. But it wasn't. I've never seen this man before in my life.

The walls are a shade of off-white. The curtains are blue, like robins' eggs. They're up high, because that's where the window is. High. Where you can't reach it. Even if you could, it's too narrow to climb out.

There's a cross above the bed. Jesus hangs from it, looking down on me with sad eyes. Is he sad for me? Or for himself? Probably both.

The floor is lino. Easy to clean. In case I make a mess, I suspect.

Maybe I died. That's all I can think.

Maybe the old man was driving the other car and I died and somehow ended up in his body.

Maybe when the cars smashed together our – souls – if you want to call them that, crashed into each other too and he ended up in my body and I in his.

Now I'm here.

Wait. There's a door in the other wall. I hadn't noticed that before. The main door is locked, but I'll see where this other door leads to.

It's a bathroom. There's a toilet with one of those sitting frames for old people. Also a shower with a similar kind of contraption. I guess this body, whoever it belongs to, is kind of unsteady. There's a mirror above a small sink. Holy mackerel!! The polished metal on the lamp doesn't show the half of it. This fella is really



old! I mean really old. He has, I mean, I have only a few wispy bits of hair sprouting like weeds on a bare patch of ground, but blotchy like my new hands. His, my, face is wrinkled like an old prune and his neck is just loose folds of skin that hang like turkey wattles. How did I know that word? The loose bits of skin on a turkey's neck. They're called wattles. But I never knew that word. I thought they were called giblets, but giblets are something else.

Maybe this old fella was a turkey farmer or something like that and I've inherited some of his memories.

Another thought. Maybe I am this guy. Maybe I've been in a coma for eighty years and have only just come around. Holy mackerel! I've missed my whole life!

But then, how would I know about turkey wattles?

No, I think that somehow I've swapped bodies. I hope you're enjoying mine, you disgusting old creep. You must be a hundred and suddenly you're back in the body of a seventeen year old. You get to do that fun stuff all over again. You get my flat stomach, my broad shoulders, my pecs. Oh no - hang on.

Oh my God! I'm wearing nappies! You dirty, smelly old man! Are you kidding me? What are you: two months old?

What have I done wrong? Is this some kind of revenge from God? Was it that thing with what's-her-name? That other girl. Her name escapes me just now. Was that wrong? It was only once and we both agreed that it was a mistake and that we should stay faithful to our partners.

Was it the fact that I lied to Laura about it? Was that where I went wrong? Or because I didn't go to church very often and when I did I was usually thinking about something else, like Laura or how I played in the football game the day before? I never really listened to Reverend De Vosy.

I must have done something powerfully bad, God, for you to do this to me.

I'm seventeen for Christ crying out loud!

Is this a test? Do I get to swap back? Like soon? I don't think I could stand a whole day in this dribbling body. And the thought of what this old guy would be doing in my body right now makes me sick.

Does he have my memories? Or am I now stumbling around Goldfinch Lane like an old loser while my parents call the men in white coats to take me away to the psych ward?

This is awful. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me.

I don't have much life left to live. Not unless I can find a way to switch back. What have I got: a couple of



years left? A few months? Days? And all of it condemned to be spent in this rundown old shell of a body.

Condemned. That's what this body should be. It's a derelict old building and someone should knock it down.

Maybe that's it. Maybe if I kill myself, this old body I mean, then maybe my soul will escape back to my own body.

But what if it doesn't? Then I'll just be dead.

Why me?

There are footsteps in the corridor and the rattle of keys. I'm going to hide this book away in case they find it. I have no idea who *they* are, but I'm not going to take any risks until I find out.

It was a nurse. She had a strange uniform on, like one I've never seen before, but she was definitely a nurse. She had a glass of water and some pills on a white tray. She wanted me to take them.

I tried to say no, and to explain that I wasn't who she thought I was, that I had swapped bodies and was now trapped in this old man's body.

It was hard to talk. The guy's voice is strange. Weak and rattling like he's got no breath. Like reeds shivering in the breeze down at the lake where I used to go and lie in the long grass with Laura back when I was seventeen. Twenty-four hours ago.

She didn't believe me. I wouldn't have believed myself either. She clearly thinks I'm going crazy. Well, who could blame me? I must be at least a hundred and ten!

I refused the medication but she insisted and said that if I didn't take it, I wouldn't be allowed any break-fast, and that she would come back with orderlies and force me to.

I think she might be a Nazi.

Maybe this whole thing is some kind of Nazi experiment.

But there are no Nazis. Not anymore. Are there?

I took the pills, intending to hold them in my mouth and spit them out later. But the nurse-Nazi was onto that, checked inside my mouth and made me swallow them before she left.

We'll see who wins that fight. We'll see tomorrow.

I need to make a plan. There must be some way of reversing this. Of getting back into my own body.

There has to be!

I'll miss everything. Everything I was planning to do with my life.

I wanted to be a soldier. Or perhaps a policeman. Or maybe a farmer. I wanted to fly an aeroplane, to learn to sail. To climb some tall mountain.

I wanted to travel the world. I wanted to see America, England, maybe even parts of Europe. When I think



back on all the things I'd planned to do, I can feel tears coming to these old eyes. I wanted to get married, one day. To have children. A boy to teach football to, a girl who would be as pretty as her mother, whoever that turned out to be.

All my hopes, all my dreams. Are they gone, really? Is that all I get: a couple of years in a clapped-out old body?

I need some paper. I'm running out of pages in this old novel. The novel itself is trashy and I wouldn't even touch it if there was anything else to use. On the front cover there's a picture of a woman with her top undone and a man with long hair. Who reads stuff like this? The old man whose body I'm in? Surely not.

He's eighty-eight. Not quite as old as I thought. I found a birthday card in the drawer of the nightstand and although it was undated, it looks recent. There's a wish with lots of love for his eighty-eighth birthday. 'To my darling husband', it says. It's signed with just a 'V', in pretty fancy handwriting. Gee thanks. Now what about birthdays eighteen to eighty-seven? How about my twenty-first? I was supposed to get the symbolic key to the house and laugh over photos of me as a baby. My fortieth? That sounds so old, but from where I am sitting now I'd be happy to be that young! How about my wedding day? The birth of my first child? All the events that make up a long and happy life?

My life. My whole life gone! This can't be happening to me!

Voices in the corridor.

An old lady just visited me, with an even older lady. I guess I was supposed to recognise them, but I've never seen them before in my life. I didn't want to let that on, though, so I acted happy to see them.

'Hi,' I said. 'How lovely of you to come.'

I thought the old lady might be this fella's wife, and the even older lady might be his mother. But I was wrong. The younger one is his daughter. The old, old lady is his wife. For as long as I could, I kept up the pretence of knowing them, but they twigged pretty quickly.

'What's my name, Dad?' the younger one said.

'You're my daughter,' I said, as if I'd known that all along.

'Yes, but what's my name?'

I stared at her for a few seconds, hoping the word would pop into my head. I knew what turkey wattles were, after all. But the only name that kept coming to me was Laura, so I tried that.

She smiled at me, but there were tears in her eyes. She told me her name was Helen.

Okay, fine. Nice for you. What did you expect? I've only been in this body for a few hours. Come back



tomorrow. I'll know your name then, won't I! (If I haven't swapped bodies back before then.)

The older lady told me her name so I wouldn't have to guess. Vera. The 'V' from the card. That made it easy. I just tried to pretend that I knew it all along. I even threw in a few dears and darlings like old people say to make it seem believable.

'I knew that, darling,' I said. 'You just beat me to it, dear. Hello, V.'

They looked at each other, but I couldn't tell what they were thinking. Perhaps I fooled them, but I don't think so.

They seemed really sad that I didn't know their names and I'd be sad too if I was them. I'd be thinking that the old fella (me) had gone senile or had dementia or whatever they call it. Maybe he does. But as long as I'm stuck in this body I'll try to make the best of it.

They stayed for a while, and we chatted about the weather – not that I could see much of it through the tiny window in my cell. That's what it is, a cell. A door that's locked and a window too high and small to climb out of. I'm a prisoner.

Anyway they filled me in on all the movements of the clouds and every drop of rain and breath of wind that had happened since – well I guess since they'd seen me last. Then they started on the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren. I did my best with those,

but there were a lot of names to remember. Someone was playing the tuba and someone else had just graduated from university and on it went.

Before they left they asked me if I wanted anything. I said yes, I'd like some writing paper.

When the door finally closed (and was locked) behind them I shuddered. Violently. I couldn't help it. I'd kept a grip during the entire visit, but all the time at the back of my mind had been this thought: the old, old lady was this fella's wife. God! Imagine kissing that!

And the old fella and that old Vera lady had a daughter. Which meant they had done – *it*. Even the thought of those two old people making love turned my stomach.

Helen came back about twenty minutes later. I'd already made my mind up. I knew it would sound insane, but I had to tell someone. And she was his daughter, right? So if there was some kind of conspiracy going on, she wouldn't be part of it. Surely.

She brought me the paper I'd asked for. A lined pad with a spiral ring at the top. She brought me a new pen, too, although I hadn't asked for one. It was a fancy kind I hadn't seen before. No matter. As long as it would write.

'Helen, I need to talk to you,' I said, as she turned to go.



She turned back, pleased, I thought, that I had remembered her name. Jesus, it was only a few minutes ago.

'What is it, Dad?'

'Something very strange has happened to me,' I said. She waited for me to continue.

'I'm not who you think I am,' I said. 'My name is Robert Powell-Sycamore. I'm seventeen. I live in Goldfinch Lane in Lakefield. I am a student at Lakefield High.'

She smiled, pleasantly, I thought, although clearly a bit confused. Who wouldn't have been?

'I was in a car accident yesterday,' I said. 'Something bizarre happened. I've switched bodies somehow with your father.'

'Oh, Dad,' she said, wet-eyed.

'Helen, I'm telling the truth,' I said. 'I'm not your father. I'm seventeen. I don't know how this happened, or what to do about it. But there has to be some way to switch again. To undo what happened. I need to get back to my own body.'

'Dad, have you taken your medication today?'

'It's nothing to do with medication,' I said.

'But have you taken them?'

'Yes.' I could feel my voice rising. 'The Gestapo nurse forced them down my throat before breakfast.'

'Okay, then,' she said.

'I know this sounds unbelievable,' I said. 'But I mean it: I'm not your dad. He's - somewhere else. Maybe he's gone. Maybe he swapped bodies with me. Maybe he died, and I died, and God's just using his body for me until he can find me another body, or a place in heaven. Jesus, I know how crazy this sounds, don't think I don't. But I'm not him. You gotta help me. I'm seventeen. I've got my whole life in front of me. I can't just skip forward to age eighty-eight and miss all the good bits.'

'You didn't miss all the good bits,' she said, crying openly now. 'You were there. You've been a great dad.'

'Look, Helen—' I said, unsure how to continue, how to convince her.

'No, Dad, you listen,' she said. 'Do you really not remember how you used to take us out in that wooden kayak that you built yourself?'

I smiled and shook my head.

'You spent months making that thing. Curving the timber into shape, gluing it all together. And when I was little, I think about four or five, I wanted to go out like Ben and Ivor did, but Mum said I was too small, so you tied a rope to one end and let me go out anyway.'

She was watching me carefully for some sign of recognition, but how could there be any? I wasn't that person.

'Or how about your terrible dad jokes?' She laughed.

I sighed. I needed to pee.



'A policeman sees a man driving down the highway with a zebra in the back seat,' she said. 'He pulls him over and says, "Where are you taking that zebra?" "To the zoo," the man says, so the cop just nods and lets him go. Next day the same cop is on the same road and he sees the same man drive past in the same car with the same zebra in the back seat. He pulls him over again. "I thought you said you were taking that zebra to the zoo," the cop says. "I did," the man protests. "Yesterday I took him to the zoo; today I'm taking him to the movies." I forced out a bit of a laugh.

'You really have been a great father, you know.'

I took a deep breath. 'Thanks, but I'm not that man,' I said. 'I hope one day to be like that man. I truly hope that when I'm your father's age, someone will say such things about me. But first I have to get back into my own body. I have to live my own life.'

'Dad—'

'I'm not your dad,' I said. 'I'm still a virgin. I couldn't be your father.'

That shocked her a bit, which had been my intention.

'Will you please at least try to believe me?' I said.

'Humour me for just a few minutes.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I was in a car accident,' I said. 'I hit a red car. I was on my way home from a party so I would have been taking Great Falls Road. If I'm right, then the

accident probably happened at the intersection with First Avenue.'

'So—'

'So find out about the accident. See if there was a police report. If I'm right, then you'll know I'm telling the truth. You'll find there was a young man, seventeen, involved in that accident. Find out what happened to him. Is he still alive? If not, then I guess I'm stuck here.'

'And if he is still alive? What then?'

'I know this sounds crazy, but see if he recognises you. See if he knows your name when he sees you. Ask him some questions. Maybe, just maybe, he'll turn out to be your father, in my body.'

'Then what?'

She still didn't believe me, but she was starting to soften, just a bit. That was all I needed.

'Bring him here. At least ask him if he'll come. That's all I can think. I think we've swapped bodies. If we get the two of us together again, then maybe there'll be a way to swap back. Of course he may not want to. I wouldn't,' I said.

She stared at me for a long time, thinking about that.

'Please, Helen,' I said. 'I can't — this can't — It's not fair.'

'Great Falls Road,' she said.

'And First Avenue, or somewhere near there,' I said.

'I was heading home so it had to be around there.'



If there was no accident, then just assume I'm crazy and forget everything I said.

'Okay.' She didn't take notes, just memorised what I'd told her. 'What else do you remember?'

'I had a fight with my girlfriend. Her name's Laura,' I said. 'It was over another girl. I was angry and in a hurry, and I'd had one or two beers.'

'Let me see what I can find out,' she said.

'Please,' I said. 'Please see what you can do.'

'I'll see you later,' she said, 'Dad.'

'Thank you,' I whispered in that croaky, rattly voice.

Helen came back this afternoon. She told me – I don't know what to think about what she told me. It doesn't make any sense.

The moment I heard footsteps in the corridor my heart started beating so fast that I wasn't sure I'd make it to the point where the door actually opened. Would there be someone else with her? Me? My body at least, with a different person in control of it? Please, please let there be two people, I prayed.

There was only one. Helen.

That was the first devastating piece of news.

She had checked with the police and there was no record of any accident. That was the second devastating piece of news.

The third was the kicker.

Helen said she had spoken to her mother, Vera, this old fella's wife. She had asked Vera about the accident. Vera *knew* about the accident.

My first thought was, how could that be?

Maybe this old fella actually had been in the red car. Maybe he had escaped from this place and taken someone else's car. He certainly shouldn't have been driving. Or maybe he'd been on an outing. But at night?

'The accident happened just as you described it,' Helen said. 'You remembered it well, even where it was.'

'I thought you said there was no accident,' I said. 'Had the news just got a bit better?'

'But it didn't happen last night,' she said.

'Last week? Last month? When did it happen? And what happened to me, to the kid in the other car, I mean? To Robert?'

'Dad, your name is Robert Powell-Sycamore.' She was struggling to get the words out between tears. 'That accident happened in 1946. That "other girl" you talked about was Mum. Vera. You broke up with Laura that night and married Mum in 1950.'

She said some other stuff, but I wasn't really listening. I was still trying to make sense of what she had said. But it didn't make sense. It was insane.

I asked her to leave. I'm afraid that I was quite rude about it. That hurt her, but I didn't care. I didn't want to



Brian Falkner

hear her tell me that I was eighty-eight. I'm not eighty-eight. I'm seventeen.


I am seventeen.

I am writing this in a spiral-bound notebook I found on my nightstand when I woke up. There was an odd-looking pen on top of it, but it writes well enough.

My name is Robert Powell-Sycamore.

I am seventeen.

I don't know where I am. I don't know why I'm here. The door is locked.



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