

For Context: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svskmSd8Xrl>

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Another beautiful, humid day was progressing throughout eastern Australia. The tall, wet forests of sclerophyll, resplendent with their greenery, muffled much of the sun's glare from overhead. But this did nothing to stifle the mugginess, present as a faint sheen of dampness on the vegetation. The air rang with the calls of the kookaburras as they staked out their boundaries, warning others to keep well away. But down on the forest floor, a much different story was unfolding.

It was September - courtship time for the local bowerbirds. And evidence of the males' yearly lek was already present. In the middle of a clearing, the foliage had been cleared away, replaced with a yard-long carpet of dry sticks and thin twigs on the bare earth. This circle was dotted with a strange collection of items - pen tops, snail shells, flowers, straws, leaves, bottle caps. All of which were either a brilliant blue or yellow. And in the centre of this carpet was a bower - two parallel walls, formed of more sticks woven together, the inside painted blue with the juice of berries.

This bower was currently under inspection by a female bowerbird. Her dappled olive-green feathers glinting in the filtered sunlight, she sat between the walls, head darting this way and that, violet-blue eyes taking in every detail. It was the nature of the females to tour the lekking area, inspecting bowers in search of an ideal mate. For although they may have many partners, all were fastidiously choosy about just whom they mated with, and thus based their choices upon the quality of the bowers and the items the males collected.

And this one seemed quite pleased with what she saw.

"This *is* a nice stick," she mused, admiring the construction. The handiwork was not too shabby - the original tenant had obviously been taking care of the bower over the years, ensuring it was not messy or scratchy. Whoever built it clearly knew just what a bower should be - strong, sturdy and pleasing to the eye. The collection around it wasn't too bad, either, but it was the craftsmanship that impressed the female, for it eschewed the overcompensating finery many other birds would have gone for.

"I like sticks," she finished, simply. She was a bird of simple tastes, and she knew what she liked. And as she pecked idly at a twig on the floor of the bower, impressed by the solidity of the weave, she wondered if she would also like the one responsible for its construction. It was still early in the breeding season, but the sooner she found an ideal mate, she reasoned to herself, the better.

Unfortunately, she was to be disappointed.

"Lemme smash," came a voice - young, low and with a strangely pitiable quality. "Please?"

Startled, the female looked up just in time to see another bird - a male - flutter down and land on a nearby log. To the untrained eye, he looked like a prime example of a male bowerbird, with his glossy black feathers, pale beak, strong wings and firm, upright stance. Yet there was a sort of hopeless, uncertain quality about his bearing, and his words alone would have set off alarm bells if his voice hadn't already. And one of his violet eyes was now fixed upon the newcomer in a clear display of intent.

The female cursed her luck. Of all the birds, it *would* have to be him...!

"No, Ron." she said, simply. "Go find Becky."

But though she'd made her disinterest quite plain, Ron seemed to not take the hint - or perhaps he deliberately chose not to. He remained on his perch, staring with his one eye in a manner that, to the female, was just piercing enough to be uncomfortable. She felt something like a piece of meat, and that was *not* how she wanted to be treated by a prospective mate.

"You want..." Ron quickly swivelled his head around, now fixing her with both eyes, before speaking in that same soft, low tone. "...some fuck?"

The female sighed and rolled her eyes. Great. Not only was he dense, he was *very* transparent. More tactful birds would have inquired about her day, or offered her something to eat after taking the time out to pay a visit. But not Ron. Like an immature fledgling, he got straight to brass tacks with seemingly no clue or respect for the rules of courtship. How old *was* he, anyway?

"No, Ron," repeated the female, looking pointedly away. "I don't want some fu-"

"I got you blue!" Hopping down from his perch, Ron picked up the ring from a bottle cap and held it up for inspection. His demeanour was insistent, almost desperate - but the fact remained that he was holding up a flimsy piece of plastic, instead of a more attractive bauble. Only now did he seem to remember what his collection was for, and even if he hadn't already gotten on his guest's bad side, he'd chosen possibly the worst thing to present to her first. The female looked upon the ring disdainfully, the nice shade of blue being the only positive quality she could say about it.

But she didn't get to contemplate it for long. Abruptly, Ron dropped the item and moved in front of her, as if to block her from leaving the bower with his body. The message was clear - he wasn't going to take no for an answer, nor was he going to cease his advances until his guest gave him what he wanted. Thenow- baffled female wondered how he could possibly make such a fine bower and amass such a large collection, yet treat the whole business of courtship as a mere formality.

*Definitely not a keeper*, she decided.

"Hey, girl," Ron crooned in what he probably thought was a seductive manner. "You want some tail?" And he ducked his front half down and flicked the glossy plumes of his tail behind him, as if to demonstrate their length to his guest. It seemed respectable enough in size, even from that angle, but he flicked it with such confidence that he seemed to think it was far longer.

A groan of disgust and annoyance escaped the female - this was exactly the kind of insecure, selfish attitude that she despised from a male. Did he really think that one trinket and some posturing would be enough to make her lift her tail for him? She didn't come here to be treated like a sex object by some fumbling, clueless idiot!

"Ron," she snapped, her patience wearing thin, "your tail is small." And there it was. Not that it was a lie - she'd definitely had bigger before. But perhaps that statement would penetrate that thick skull of his. If he didn't sort his act out soon, she wasn't going to give him any more attention - not that he deserved any more, anyway.

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"What?"

Ron, now clutching a blue drinking straw in his beak, was confused. Did he hear that right? No, he couldn't have - he was more than confident that his tail was big enough for any female. Besides, he'd presented his trinkets and made his proposition clear, so it was a complete mystery to him why she refused to take the invitation. The mention of Becky had nearly made him falter - but he'd managed to get this other female in the bower, and there was no backing down now.

Maybe something to get her in the mood...?

"Swiggity swooty?" he chanted, bobbing his head as he spoke. He'd heard humans use this strange mating call before, and although he didn't understand the words, he knew that the males often directed it at females they perceived attractive. Perhaps he could achieve similar results by using the same call on this female here - bowerbirds were pretty good mimics, after all. Maybe she would be impressed by his use of a phrase most animals weren't even capable of understanding!

But all it got him was a flat stare - she wasn't impressed in the slightest. Panic flared briefly in Ron's mind, and he dropped the straw and scanned the twig carpet in search of something else to tempt her with. If blue things weren't working, then maybe...

"You want yellow?" he tried, holding up a bundle of yellow leaves in his beak - perhaps a change of colour would sway her? But the only response he got was another cold, unimpressed stare.

*She doesn't want yellow*, he realized as he lowered the leaves back to the floor. What else could he do now? This female's standards were a lot higher than he'd realized, and despite

the initial admiration she'd given his bower, nothing he had in his collection had impressed her so far. But if he didn't figure out something soon, she'd be off to some other male's bower - and he couldn't have that. Not after he'd gotten this far.

"Blue and yellow?" Experimentally, he picked up another leaf along with a bottle cap and held them up to her. But almost immediately, he dropped them again, chastising himself for the thought. If neither alone had caught her attention, then why would combining them be any different? But surely there had to be *something* she'd like...

Racking his brains for a solution, he reached for another pile of leaves-

"Ron," said the female, suddenly. "I'm leaving." And before Ron could utter anything more than another "What?", she stepped backwards out of the bower and fluttered away into the jungle, leaving the poor male on his own with the leaves still in his beak.

"No, wait!" cried Ron, despair and panic flaring within him. "Lemme smash!" And he dropped the leaves and fluttered a short distance after her, trying to catch her attention. But it was too late - she'd already vanished into the dense sclerophyll undergrowth, and his protest was lost amidst the foliage. Silence reigned for a while, except for the continuing cries of the kookaburras, who's laughter now seemed to be in mockery of his failure.

Then a sudden change came over Ron, and he sagged as if deflated. Moving listlessly, almost mechanically, the bird picked up a leaf and a straw from the carpet of sticks beneath his feet. Holding these items in his beak, he trudged around the bower a little way before coming to a stop, just outside the entrance between the two walls. He stood there for a time, staring into space. But while he stood there in dull silence, misery blackened his thoughts like storm clouds - clouds that he thought he'd seen the last of.

"What has my life come to?" he muttered, sadly - partly to himself, partly to the unhearing, uncaring Australian forest.

It was a loaded question; one that Ron himself didn't really know the answer to. This failed attempt at seduction was the latest in a long line, and he still wasn't sure how it could be happening. Oh, females came to his bower, alright, but they rarely stayed. And no matter how many gifts he flaunted or how much he flicked his tail, they never responded positively or took him up on his offers. Some laughed, some scorned him, some just flew off without a word. So many failures, back to back, had made him the laughingstock of the entire avian community, who called him "Baby Ron" when they thought he couldn't hear..

But there had been one, once upon a time, who had been taken in by such simple and superficial charms as his.

"Becky thought my tail was big," Ron continued, flicking said appendage idly. "Becky used to lemme smash."

Becky. The name still sent a twinge of pain through his heart, even now. Satin bowerbirds, as a rule, have many partners in their lives, and romantic love isn't something they normally contemplate. But something about that particular female had kept Ron coming back to her. Perhaps it was her beautifully dappled plumage, her keen eyes or her strong posture - Ron never knew. All he was certain of was that she responded positively to his advances, and repaid his efforts with the copulation that was, to him, the highlight of their relationship.

It seemed shallow and superficial on the outside - because, in truth, it was. But Ron firmly believed it to be love, and staunchly rebuffed anyone who said otherwise. How could they possibly understand? It had been a better time, one where he didn't have to resort to courting random females like any other bird.

Ron stood for a time, remembering the happiness that he'd experienced so long ago - but then darker thoughts bubbled up. Thoughts of loneliness, bitterness and betrayal, that made his head sag as if from the weight of the memories that came flooding back to him. The leaf and straw in his beak seemed a lot heavier all of a sudden.

"But Becky is smashing Ben," he muttered, savagely.

Ben. The name was like raw coffee beans on his tongue. An older bird, who's own bower was some miles away, and who had ruined Ron's life the moment he'd swaggered into it. Any other male might have conceded that Ben was probably more masterful in his craft, knew more about how to impress a female; and yes, that he was more well-endowed in the tail department. But Ron saw only a smug and self-satisfied intruder, who'd stolen his female from him and ripped a gaping hole in his heart in the process.

He'd cried at the time, bawling like a new-hatched chick. But now he couldn't even muster up the energy to do *that*. Cold depression had gradually replaced the heartbreak to the point where, no matter how hard he thought about that awful day, he couldn't get worked up about it anymore. He often joked to the others that he'd run out of tears to cry with, but there was no humour in the statement to him. As far as he knew, he very well might have done.

He looked upon his bower, suddenly insignificant and small in his mind, and for a moment he seemed to see his Becky, *his* bird, sitting comfortably between the twig walls. Instinct compelled him to bob his head, as he had done for her in the past - but he knew it was for no good purpose. Did the problem lie with *him*, he wondered? Did becoming so attached to one female prevent him from learning how to solicit any other? But he quickly dismissed that idea - he wasn't doing anything different from what any of the other males did, as far as he knew. And it had worked for Becky, hadn't it...?

Besides, it wasn't *his* fault that she suddenly decided to abandon him for some other bird just because his tail was allegedly bigger. That was all on Ben.

"Ben is a hoe," was Ron's final conclusion - a baseless slander that only served to fuel his bitter jealousy. As far as Ron was concerned, everything that had gone wrong was Ben's fault. His bouts of depression, his inefficient courting, his mockery by other males... all of it

was Ben. He had no way of proving it, of course, but it was comforting to blame the bigger bird. Because the idea that Becky had merely been taking pity on him until a better man came along, or that he'd never been good enough at all...

He couldn't accept that. That was too much.

With all of these conflicting thoughts churning inside him, he let the straw and leaf slip from his beak at last. For a moment, sadness cloaked Ron's mind and heart as he stood there, contemplating all that had transpired. Then the sadness suddenly gave way to anger, the white-hot, irrational rage that comes from betrayal and emotional injury. It was an emotion he hadn't felt in a long time, and certainly not on such an extreme level - not since the pain of his heartbreak when Becky left.

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The net thing he knew, he was at Ben's bower. He knew it was Ben's

With a screeching cry of "FUCK THIS NEST!", he launched himself at the bower, ripping violently at the construction with his beak and talons. The walls gave way and fell beneath his onslaught, sticks flying into the air as he stomped and tore and pecked in a blind, unco-ordinated fury. So violent was this aggressive act against the structure, it seemed as though he were picturing his enemy's face on every twig he could reach.

"FUCK BEN!" he screamed as he continued his assault. "I NEED YOU, BECKY! BECKY, LEMME SMASH!" His only thoughts now were of Becky, the one bird he'd truly loved - whom he couldn't ever stop loving despite how she'd left him, and without whom life seemed hollow and empty. A sudden hot wetness pooled in his eyes, and as he blinked it broke away and slid down his face in little rivulets. In the back of his mind, he realized that those were actual *tears*, but the rest of him was too busy inflicting wanton destruction upon his bower to give it any further thought.

It was then that a fire of desperation suddenly flared within his breast. His frantic and grief-stricken mind grasped desperately onto the one thread of logic that made sense to him at that moment - how to win Becky back from the thieving and deceitful Ben. And as he pulled apart his enemy's construction, heedless of whatever consequence might come to him, a half-formed plan came together in his head.

"I'mma get that bitch a stick," he gasped, tears pouring down his face. "Bitches love sticks."

It was a million-to-one shot, he knew, but it was part of how he'd courted her in the past. She'd complimented him many times not just on the collection he'd amassed, but for the handiwork and quality of his bower - something that many other females looked for. There was no telling, of course, if the same tricks would work again, or if Ben, hoe that he was, had expunged those old affections from Becky's heart. But Ron wasn't running on logic anymore, but desperate emotion fueled by his latest rejection - and how poetic would it be to win her back with sticks taken from the bower of his own enemy?

With all that solidified, Ron tore at the bower with his beak, seeking the perfect stick with which to bring back his former love.

For a moment, the black-feathered bird seemed to go into a kind of mad fit. He pulled out one stick that seemed likely, decided immediately that it wasn't good enough and threw it down, only to repeat the process once more. A mantra of "wrong stick, stick, stick, stick," flowed out from him in a breathless monotone as he kept up his frantic search, and any animal that had passed by would be justified in thinking he'd finally lost his mind after all these years.

"Stick, stick, stick," Ron muttered, tugging frantically. "Stick, stick, stick, need stick, *got stick!*" And on that last triumphant cry, he pulled from the wreckage of the once-proud bower a sizable clump of twigs, all of them pale in colour and dotted with the occasional tiny branch or fork. It was possible he'd only meant to retrieve the one stick, but in his emotional state he hadn't bothered to differentiate one from the other. As long as they were good enough to impress Becky, he couldn't care less how many he had.

"BECKY!" he cried past his full beak. "I GOT STICK! LEMME SMASH!"

And off he flew on his doomed mission.