

A climb above ourselves

By Ruth Ostrow

We're all out in the wilderness. But nothing has changed

"And way, way past Z is a letter called Itch
And the Itch is for Itch-a-pods, animals which
Race around back and forth, forth and back, through the air
On a very high sidewalk between Here and There.
They're afraid to stay There. They're afraid to stay Here.
They think There is too Far. They think Here is too Near ..."

I AM curled on the bed reading my daughter her favourite Dr Seuss book: On Beyond Zebra. We are not at home, camped instead by a river, during the Easter holiday. She is frightened by the newness, and the ferocity of the wind through the trees, so I'm going through our regular routine to get her to sleep.

We're surrounded by other Itch-a-pods like us. Their flaming campfires are reflected romantically in the shimmering water.

"And since Here is too Near and out There is too Far
They are too scared to roost where-so-ever they are."

The Itch-a-pods have brought their cars, their children, their burners for cooking, their logs and tarps and comforts from home. One happy camper has brought a port-a-shower. Another has a marble basin sitting in the middle of his camp site. It has a naked woman's body as a base. It is hideously kitsch and looks alarmingly heavy.

The Itch-a-pods are here to have an adventure. But they have all brought something from There so as to feel safe and at home in nature. One has a carpet rolled out in front of its camp site. Another has a park bench. The family of six sit along their make-shift sofa, in front of the fire, for hour after hour, drinking beer and staring at an invisible television screen.

An evil Itch-a-pod across the way has a radio that blares all day and night through his open car door. The music is bad enough. Thumping doof, cutting the silent country air and terrifying the birds. But the ads are driving the wildlife to kamikaze, as the owner wallows in the brutal familiarity of consumerism.

We're all out in the wilderness. But nothing has changed. The man in the camp beside us may be chopping wood instead of carrots, but patterns are the same, carried like a heavy, marble basin from one location to the next.

"Don't chop so many pieces," huffs the controlling wife. "Don't tell me what to do," huffs the tired husband, turning his back on love. Tonight he will fall asleep too soon. Tomorrow she will try harder to get back in control of something she lost control of too many years ago.

Later, when our daughter is asleep, my husband and I laughingly agree that we are Itch-a-pods who have driven for hours to this pristine environment, in search of stimulation, greener grass. And yet we carry our same routines and baggage

with us too. A doona, heavily smelling of home as a security blanket, a coffee plunger, a hot-water bottle.

My husband is reading 10 favourite books at once, and eating Belgian chocolate by candlelight as I rant about the radio noise, and worry aloud that my daughter has head lice.

The next day the wind is high, it's drizzling. I feel like staying close to the fire. Reading, doing familiar things. "Let's do something different. Let's take a risk," I say to my husband, who beams with joy.

"Let's climb Bald Rock!" he says. It is a hard walk, off the beaten Itch-a-pod track. No creature comforts. No sure footing. A real challenge, and quite dangerous if it starts raining heavily and the rock is turned into a giant waterfall.

And so off we go. On our steep ascent. Three Itch-a-pods out of their comfort zone. The surface is slippery in parts. The clouds threatening. This is what therapists call a circuit-breaker.

I read once that we grow only when we leave the security of what we know and venture into uncharted terrain. When we face our fears, our limitations, ourselves - who we are, who we could be if we stopped running in search of our identity "back and forth" along the comfort-zone continuum, carrying bits of ourselves long outgrown.

Closer to the top and the rocks are slipperier. The rain clouds closer. The ledges are razor-thin in parts. I can see what would happen if the skies opened. My daughter is clinging to my arm. My heart is pounding in fear, in exhilaration.

The wind nearly blows us off balance, and still we climb higher. Until we are at the summit. And when we do finally stop, we are in awe. We can see the whole world. We can see ourselves too. Open, awake, HERE now, in our full potential. Not "too scared to roost where-so-ever they are" but unfettered by past or future for one brief moment.

My husband opens his backpack. And pulls out a gentle remnant of There.

Just a small reminder. Neatly cut Vegemite sandwiches. And so we sit. Three Itch-a-pods with three sandwiches, alone, alive, amid the very black clouds, "On a very high sidewalk between Here and There", breathing.

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