

[UNTITLED]

Ruby Barton

The lady with the microphone bends down clumsily, meeting me eye-to-eye, all the while smoothing her creased skirt and blazer. It is hot for late March, and she looks wilted, energy fading from hours perusing the rest of the Show. A thumbs-up from the camera man and she beams in my direction, at once revived.

“Alright sweetheart, can I get you to say your name and how old you are? That’s right, just into this big, black microphone here.”

Leaning in slowly, making sure to enunciate, I reply:

“I am Ruby. I am almotht thix.” Then, for further detail: “My birthday ith tomorrow.”

The ‘s’ sounds had been an issue of mine for a while, ever since I lost my front teeth back in October, around the same time Ginny was planted. Although she wasn’t Ginny back then, just an embryo, a pure abstraction.

The seeds arrived in an envelope, addressed in unceremonious script: The Bartons, Parua Bay, Whangārei. Pumpkins, even the giant ones, are remarkably unexciting in foetus form. Small, bone-coloured discs that I pinched between two fingers and glared at with growing scepticism. They looked dead. Even as a five-year-old I could grasp this particular oxymoronic notion. What manner of organic life could be festering within, waiting to emerge in a glorious expanse of vines and flowers? How could these ossified shells possibly give birth to such an array?

Yet Dad seemed unperturbed by this moment of bathos. I remember his excitement as we planted the seeds into an optimistically large plot of land that had been set aside. He told me that these little babies’ Mum and Dad had been Massive with a capital M, 782 and 692 kilograms respectively. I raised my eyebrows in disbelief, a response I deemed appropriate given his tone of voice. I had no idea what a ‘kilogram’ was, but any number over a hundred could garner my respect.

“Wow! So young and already a record breaker. I understand you have a special nickname for the pumpkin as well, is that correct?”

I relax at the question’s simplicity, my eloquence taking a downturn in the process:

“Yep! Yeah, we uhh, I like to call her Ginny”

It was my idea that we should name the pumpkin. The notion didn't come to me until well after her infancy, at which time she appeared little more than an orange in both size and significance. Only once she really began to grow did she distinguish herself from her brothers and sisters. Burgeoning up from the surrounding flora with an aggressive vitality, I remember gazing at her in wonder while swathed in aromas of lavender and rose, doing their job in masking the manure odour that would otherwise emanate from the soil. In her growth spurts, she was putting on 20kg a day, Dad told me, and that's where eating all your veggies would get you. I sat in silent contemplation with this information, eventually concluding it to be equivalent to five whole Rubys, give or take. A considerable amount, yet not quite worth it for the price of finishing my broccoli.

Size aside, she wasn't really what I had been expecting, misled as I was by cartoon pumpkin beauty standards, with their perfect symmetry, and shades of brilliant marigold. Ginny was more of a dirty beige, in all honesty, maybe passing for ivory when the light hit her just right. And her figure was far from spherical, instead a misshapen form that moulded itself to the dips and curves of the soil beneath. Most of all, though, I remember the cracks that etched themselves into her skin, an entanglement of veins that shifted in dynamic sequence. A constant reminder that she was moving, growing, if only I could concentrate long enough to catch it. She was so very ugly. And yet, in a sense, altogether quite beautiful, bulging up out of the paddock in all her comical enormity. As much a freak of nature as she was a masterpiece.

It seemed illogical to presume that a being of such size was without a conscience, without its own thoughts and feelings that made it deserving of a personal moniker. Under some innate childhood morals, it did indeed feel disrespectful to address such a sentient creature by common noun. Ginny it was then, for no reason at all.

"So, how did you help Dad with the pumpkin?"

I pause for a moment to articulate my thoughts.

"Watering? Weeding?" She prompts.

"Um... thum of the time I did that. Mothtly guarding though."

"I'm sorry sweetie, did you say guarding?"

At this, I allow myself a light sigh. City folk can be woefully uneducated on the finer points of agriculture. Reaching behind me, I place a hand protectively over Ginny's skin and gaze at the woman with solemn eyes. "Yeah. I guarded her."

When Ginny was growing, my brother was two years old. He was utterly useless at everything, and on top of that a very dull person to talk to, issues which time has failed to resolve. Left to my own devices, I resorted to the same thing many young children do in times of boredom, indulge in the company of a gargantuan gourd.

Sometimes, we'd take the time to relax, and I'd just read to her. Ginny, as luck would have it, had a real penchant for Rainbow Magic books-just like myself. She would listen to them for hours in silent rapture, not daring to make a sound for fear of missing a word. *James and the Giant Peach* was a tumultuous affair, if I remember correctly. On the one hand, a great source of plus-size produce representation. On the other, the ending never really sat well with Ginny, what with the whole devouring of the peach by a swarm of ravenous children. And then there was *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*... I didn't even dare.

On other occasions, however, I needed to step into the role of protector. Unbeknownst to many, the world of competitive agriculture is cutthroat. Too often I found myself confronted by the pigs in the next paddock over, whose eyes fixed on Ginny's sumptuous flesh with hunger. Marching the perimeter, I chased off many an overzealous magpie who impinged upon her boundaries. Yet even the avian predators couldn't compete with the threat of bandits. Pumpkin bandits, I convinced myself, were a matter of grave severity. I spent hours constructing traps to lure them into, in addition to signs which warned 'KEEP OWT' and 'BARTONS ONLEE'. By the time the Show rolled around, I could only feel a palpable sense of relief that my efforts had not been in vain. Sure Dad may have taken on the more practical tasks, but in my eyes, I was of equal importance. That summer was defined by her presence, an emblem of independence and the remarkable power of manure fertilisers. Pumpkins may be temporary, but the feeling of individual and familial pride is one without an expiration date.

"Okay, final question sweetheart, you're doing amazing. What do you think you will do with the pumpkin now, once the competition is over?"

"Oh!" A brief gap-toothed grin emerges. "Well, Mum and Dad thaid that they're going to cut it in half, and I can put my togth on and go inthide. After that we'll feed it to the pig."

The woman looks towards the camera in confusion, an emotion quickly disguised behind a 'kids say the darndest things'-style chuckle.

"And that is all from the 2010 Auckland Royal Easter Show. I've been here with Ruby Barton, who along with her family smashed the New Zealand record for largest pumpkin with their 721kg specimen. Back to you in the studio."