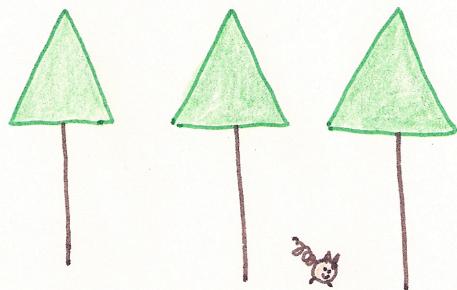
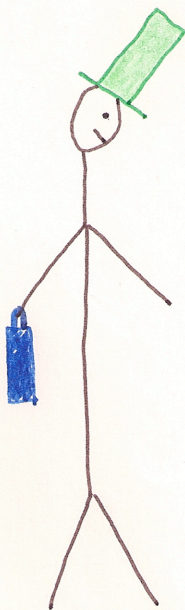


RUSSEL

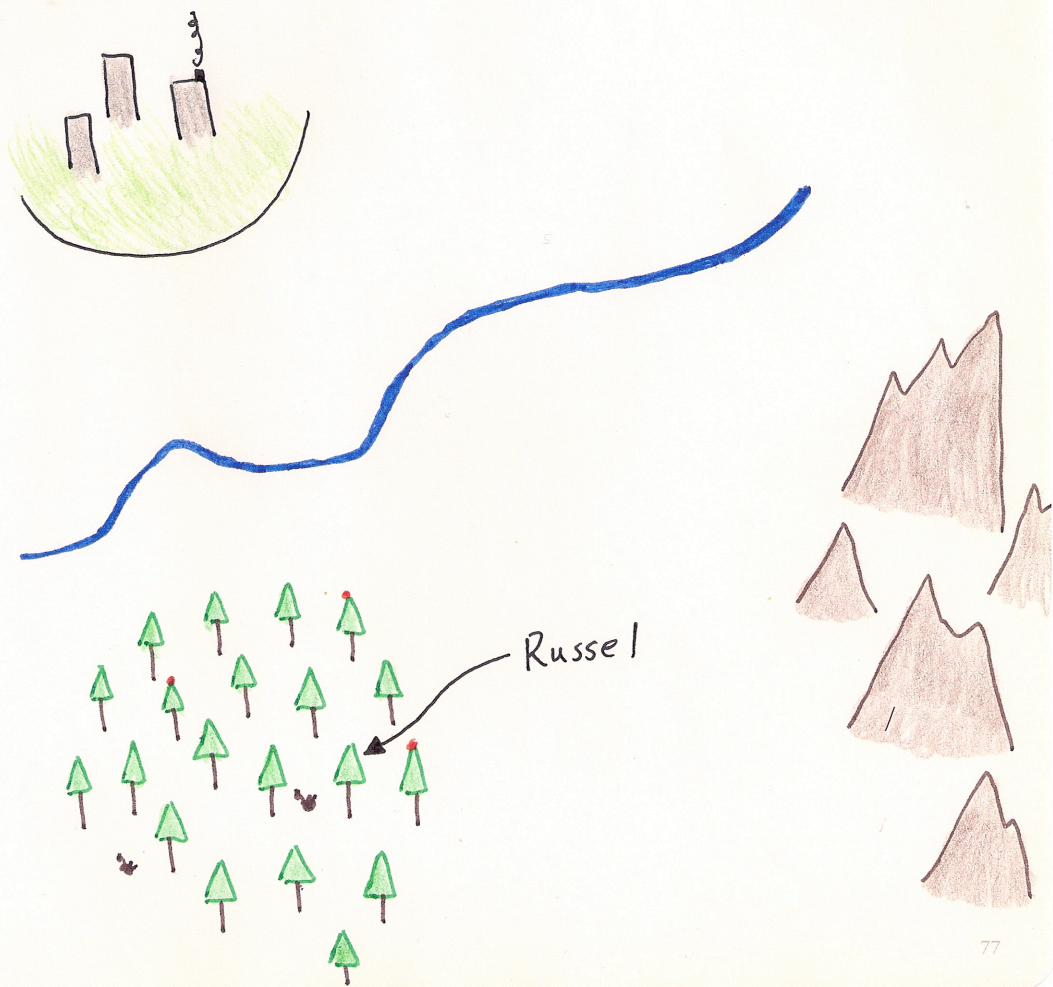
THE BOY WHO USED TO BE A TREE



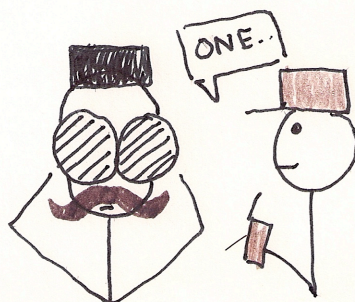
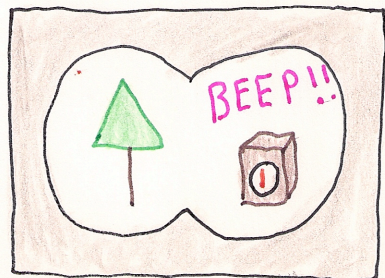
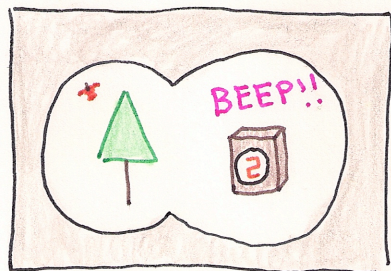
He was a little taller than average, maybe, but in most ways Russel was a typical boy. He had friends and he went to school. He liked the summer and – every now and then – he liked falling asleep with a big thunderstorm raging outside. Unlike most boys, however, Russel was once a tree.



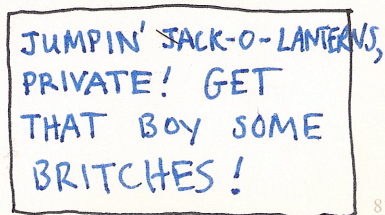
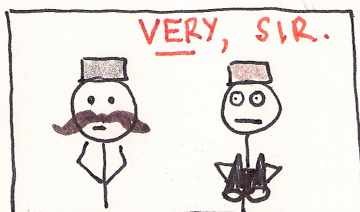
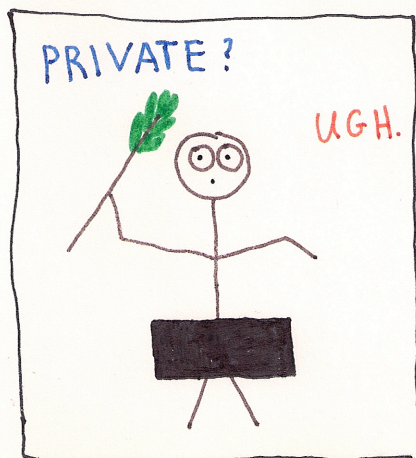
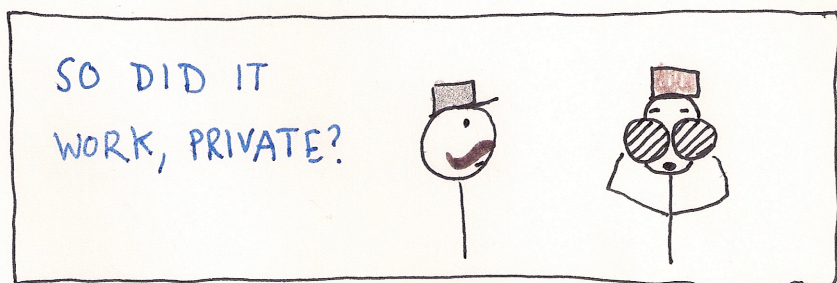
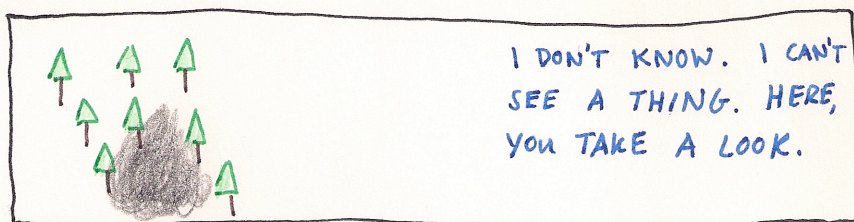
Russel (though he wasn't called that yet) started life as a small acorn and grew up in the Bartleby Forest about ten miles south of the ARBO Proving Grounds. It was a pretty nice place to grow up. There was a crystal clear brook that bubbled along to the north and a magnificent mountain range in the east with jagged peaks that made each sunrise just a little bit different throughout the year. All that and his friends and relations lived no farther than a short squirrel's scurry away. Sure, there was an occasional rumble from ARBO, but you got used to that quick enough.



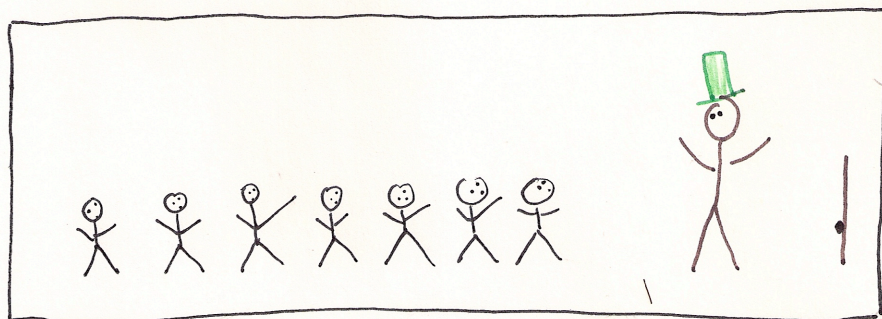
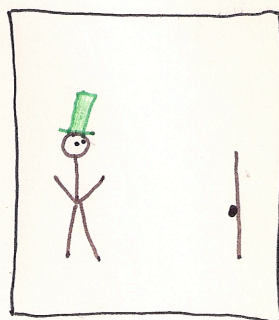
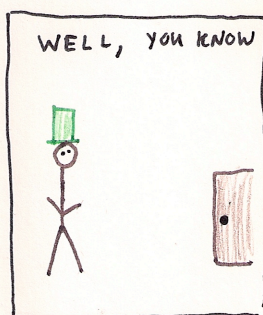
For a long while, Russel was a tree, was content with being a tree, and was completely unaware that there was anything else he could be besides a tree. That all changed one day when the folks at ARBO decided to come down to Bartleby Forest to test out their newest invention – a defoliant called Agent “Aren’t You Glad I Didn’t Say Orange?” Defoliants are chemicals that kill trees, but Russel didn’t know that. The Agent AYGIDSO was stored in a bomb, but Russel didn’t know that either. He thought it was a friendly new tree. It did make a beeping noise, though, which was strange. None of the other trees he knew made beeping noises.



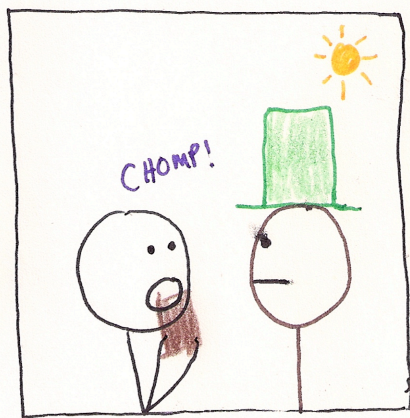
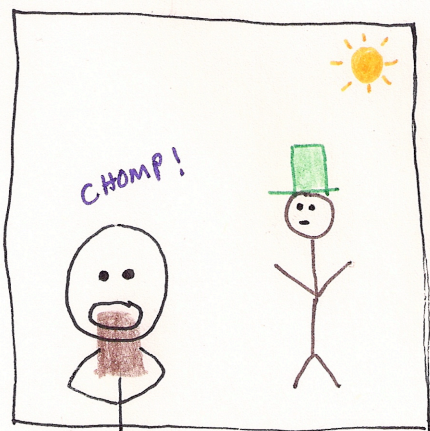
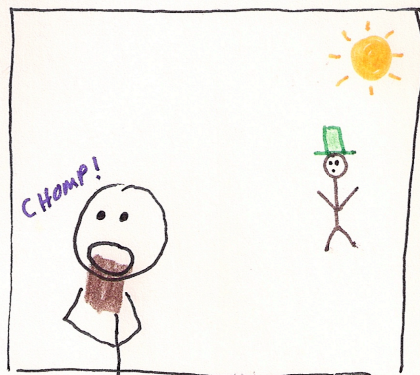
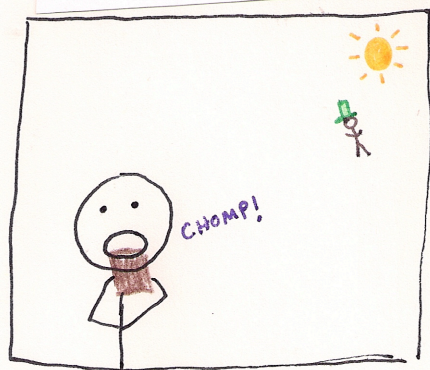
Suddenly the beeping stopped. *Silence.* Then a faint whirring noise and a click. *Silence.* A bright flash, a loud noise, and strange sour smell – these were Russel's first sensations. His first thought was *Where'd Mr. Beepers go?* His second thought was *What?* Somehow (it is still not clear how exactly) the Agent AYGIDSO had changed Russel from a tree into a boy. The ARBO technical report called it "a technically successful, but tactically undesirable defoliation event."



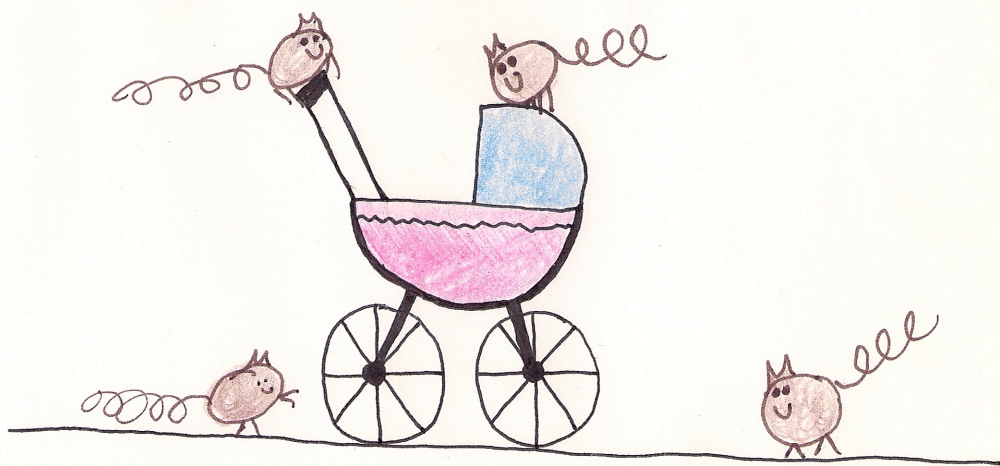
Sgt Septimus Slapbatter, who already had seven children, adopted the boy, figuring one more couldn't really hurt. The Sgt named the boy William Russel Slapbatter, but everyone just called him Russel. On the first Monday after his deforestation, the boy was enrolled in school. On Tuesday, the Sgt shipped off somewhere overseas to either fight or help some local revolutionaries. "I'm sure they'll tell me which when I get there," said the Sgt before he left.



Like everyone else, Russel would have to learn what it means to be human all by himself. As he soon found out, it was very different than being a tree. The pace of life was the first thing he noticed. There's this common misconception that trees just sit still all day doing nothing, but that's not true. Trees move. But it's a gentle movement, somewhere in between a sway and a twirl. A tree's whole life is just one slow-motion dance toward the sun. You see, trees are solar powered, they get their food from the sun. But people can't do that. Instead, they have to run around frantically all day looking for stuff to put in their faces. If they don't put in enough stuff, they wilt. It takes some getting used to.



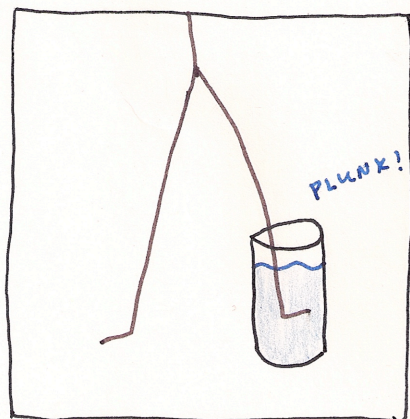
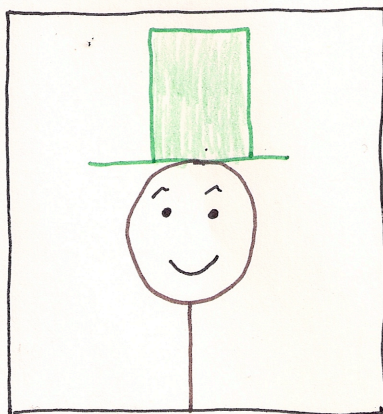
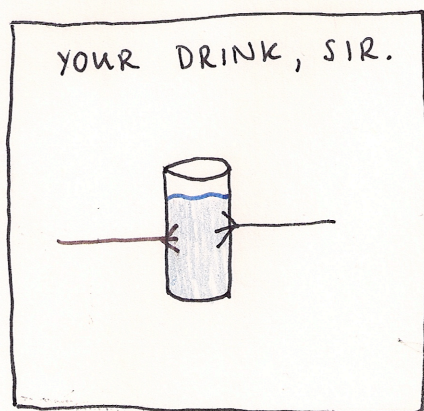
Though he was initially frightened by the speed at which people moved around and their constant chattering into each other's faces, Russel soon got used to it. After all, squirrels do almost exactly the same thing and trees get along just fine with squirrels. But unlike squirrels, people had lots of rules that were sometimes hard to understand. For one, you always had to put on this soft bark before you went outside or people would get upset. And apparently, you are never supposed to give their acorns to the squirrels (luckily, though, they are too big to bury).



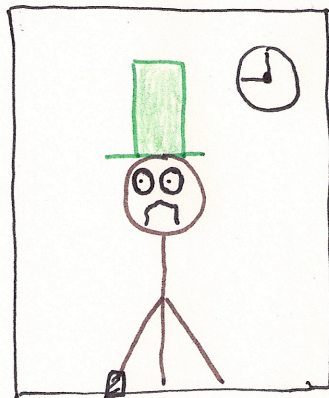
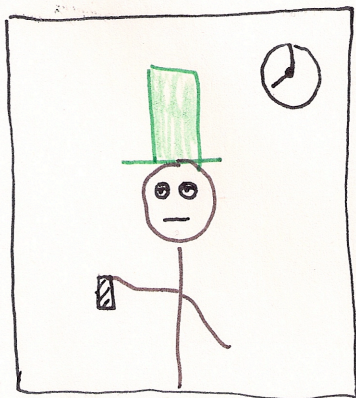
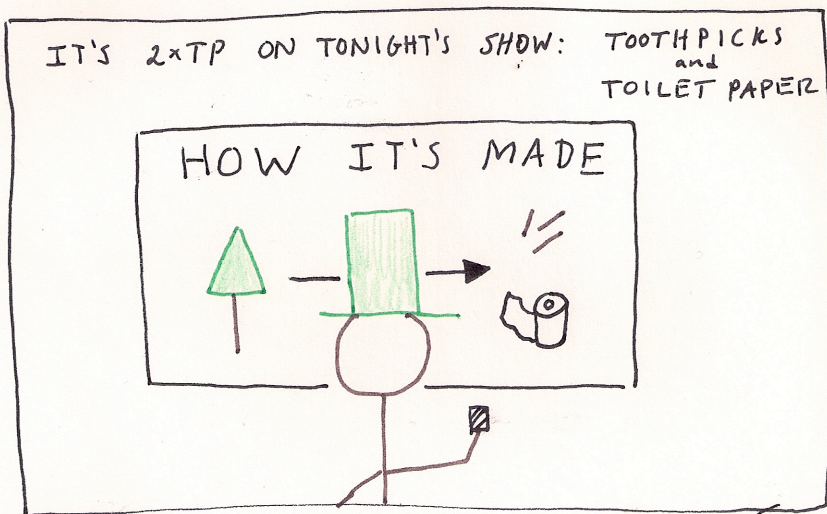
The most confusing rules of all were about little green rectangles. It seemed to Russel that just about anything you wanted to do you had to give somebody some rectangles – and they sure got mad if you didn't. But even this, with time, Russel was able to get right. Well, mostly right.



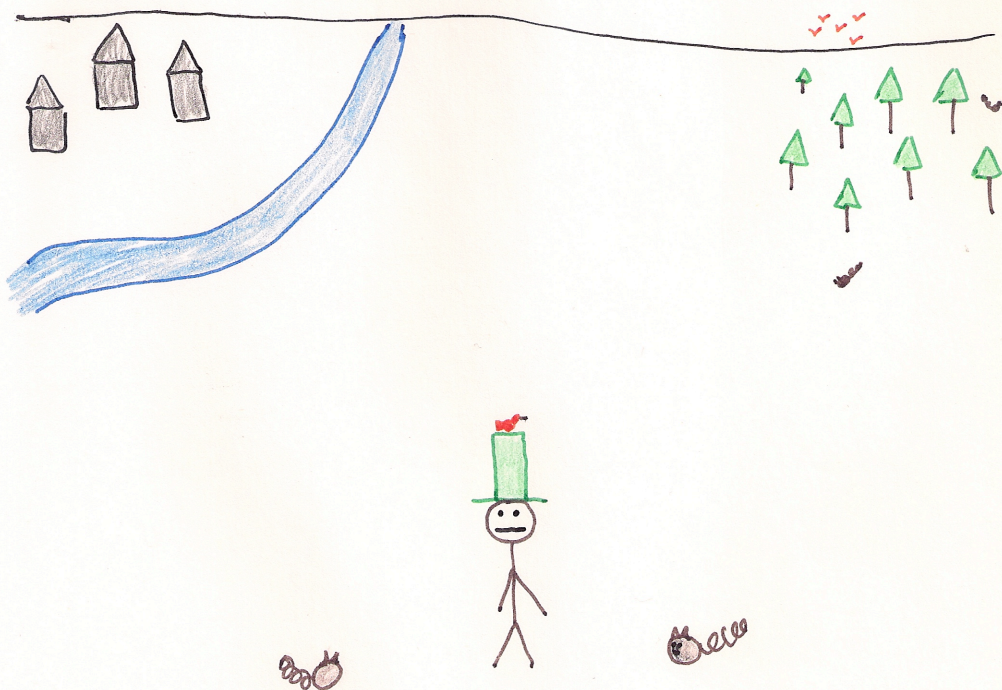
And so, that was that. Russel was learning how to be human and for the most part was doing alright. Every once in a while there would be an embarrassing misunderstanding. But that's not too bad if it's only every once in a while.



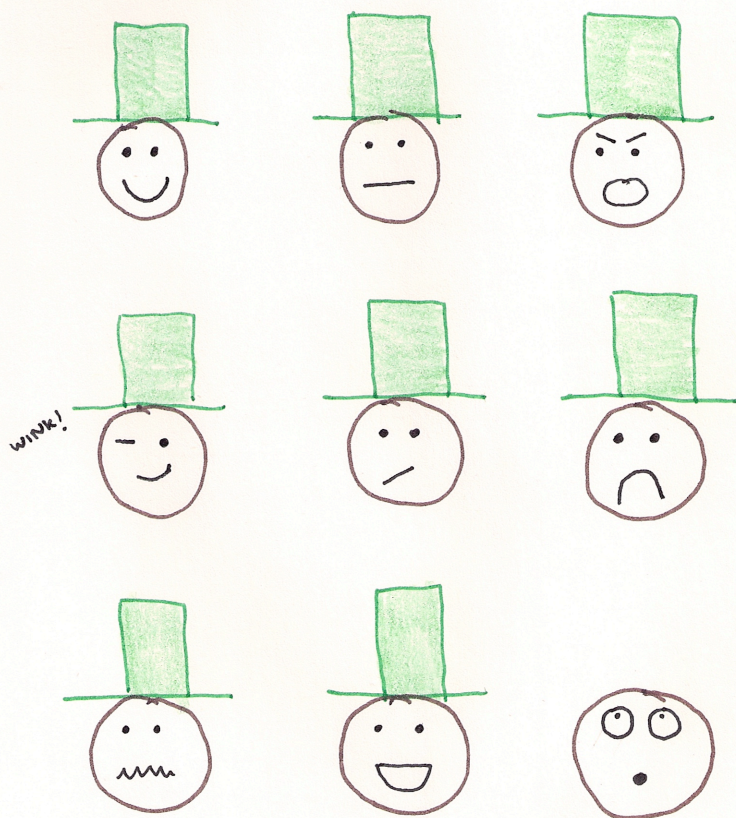
Russel got along pretty well with people. More than once, a person he had never met would smile at him and say "Nice hat, kid" or "What's up, penny dude?" He didn't understand everything they said, but he liked smiling, so he would smile back. Though people were nice to him, they were not always so nice to other trees. He learned this from a horrifying show called *How It's Made*.



Whatever minor conflicts he may have had with other people, the hardest part of being human for Russel was simply being human. There was an almost unbearable amount of sensory input – sights, smells, sounds – all around. When it would become too much to bear, Russel would go out to an isolated field and just stand there. But even in the middle of nowhere, he couldn't block out the thoughts and feelings pinballing around inside his head.



You see, trees typically only have two feelings: “sunny” which is warm and green, and “wintry” which is nice and cozy (if a little grey sometimes). As a human, though, Russel felt all kinds of things – sad, happy, scared, anxious, jealous, angry, annoyed, proud, embarrassed – and they would just show up, sometimes for no obvious reason. Sure, some of them were nice, but the constant jostling back and forth was very disorienting.

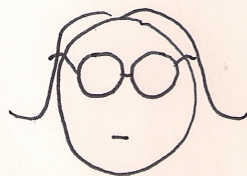


Russel wondered if all people felt the way he did and, if so, how did they deal with it? He decided to ask some professional people-helpers to see if they could help him.



Sounds like a case of the *wood* made flesh! Ha! But this is a very interesting case, my son, that of man corrupting a tree in a reversal of the Fall. Man, having gained the knowledge good and evil from a tree, uses that knowledge (or perhaps ignores it?) to create a tree that knows the same. Sounds a bit like turnabout is fair play, I'd say. Although, I am also reminded of Deuteronomy 20:19 – *Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?* But to get back to your original question, perhaps you should instead consider Matthew 12:33 – *Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit...*

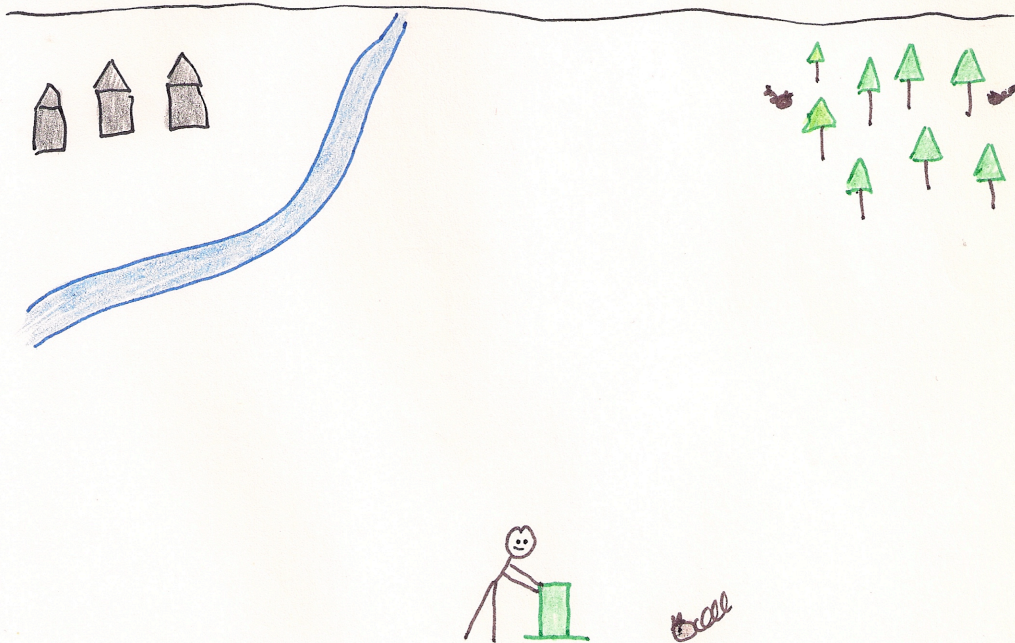
Hmm. What we have here seems to be a classic case of repressed memories manifesting in fantastical ideation and delusions of importance through some sort of overwhelming organized persecution. This will require a significant amount of targeted therapy, which, combined with the right medication (anti-depressants and anti-psychotics to start with) ought to begin to mitigate the symptoms within a few months. Of course, this seems like a particularly severe case so we'll probably also have to bring in a few specialists, I have a few I can recommend. But first let's talk insurance...



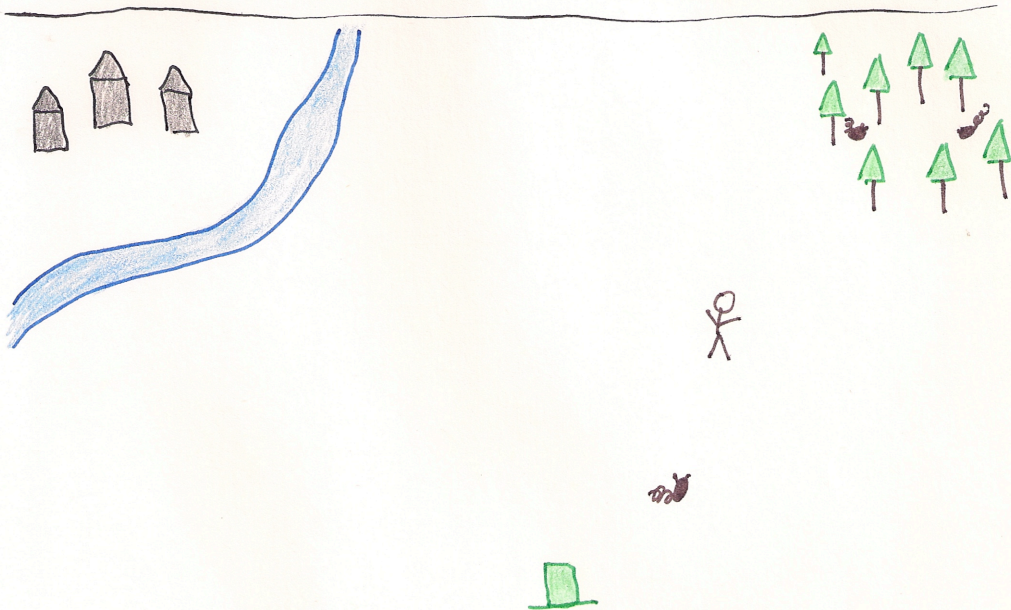
Yes, I think I can shed some light on your situation. Have you heard the story of l'arbre du Ténéré? The tree of Ténéré? No? Well it was a single tree that grew in the great arid vastness of the Sahara desert. It was the most isolated tree in the entire world – the only one for hundreds and hundreds of miles in any direction. But it was its isolation that made the tree so important. You see, it was a key landmark along the caravan routes passing through the Sahara. For decades and decades it was the very last outpost directing weary travellers along a safe passage out of the desert. What happened to it? Oh, well, it was ripped to shreds in the seventies when a drunk guy hit it with his Range Rover. What are the odds...

Apparently, they could not.

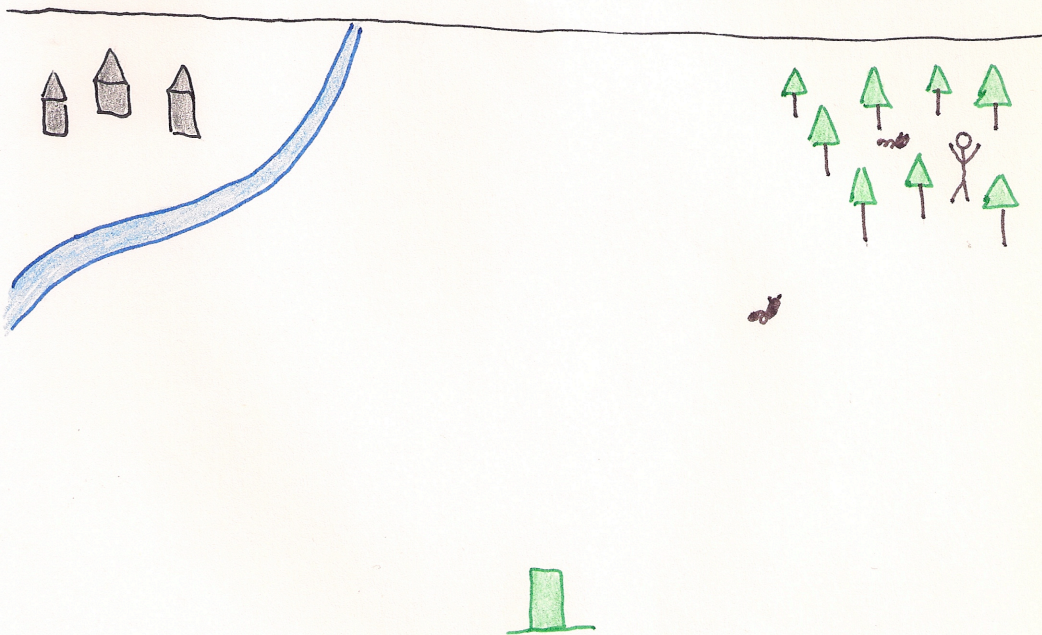
This was all getting to be a little too much for Russel to handle. One day, as he was standing in a field and ever-so-slightly swaying, he thought to himself, *I don't very much like being a person any more. I think I want to be a tree again.*



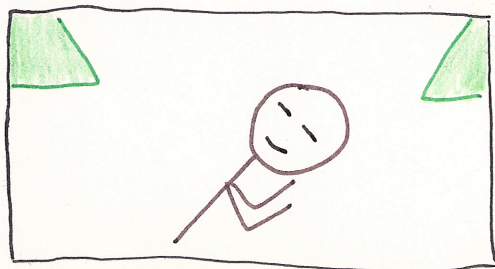
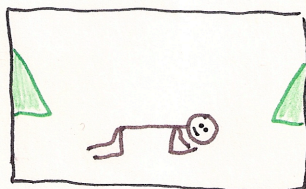
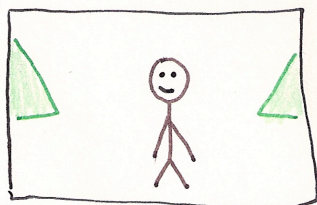
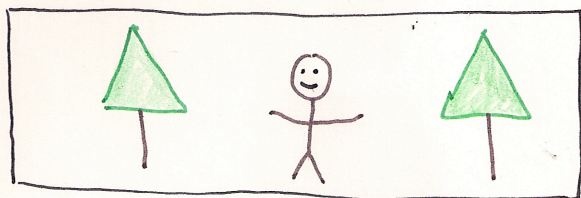
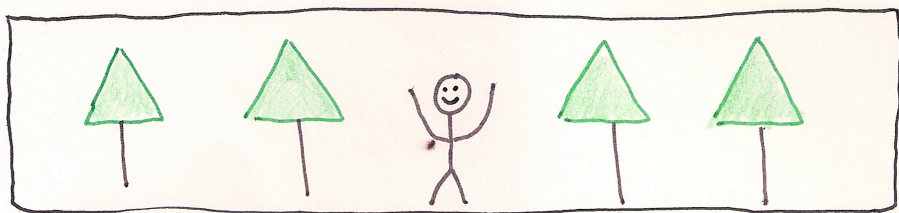
So he walked back to Bartleby Forest.



Found his old spot.



And did just that.



T H E



E N D