

Farrakeet

Will banged open the front door using his wrist and shoulder. His hands were cupped together.

“Get a shoe box.”

Becca jumped up from the kitchen table. “Did you find a bird?”

Becca quickly moved past Will to retrieve an empty cardboard box she’d tossed in the would-be baby’s room that morning.

She placed the box on the table and held the flaps apart just wide enough for Will’s hands to descend into it. Becca imagined a brown finch or sparrow with a damaged wing, the type she found several times in her childhood and nursed back to health in just such a cardboard box. She hoped it wasn’t a bald new hatchling that would require being fed with an eye dropper. Yet maybe she hoped it was.

Once it was sealed in the box, still unseen, Will said, “It’s a parakeet.”

“A parakeet! Really? What was it doing outside?”

“It was sitting on the sidewalk with its head tucked into its wing. It was freezing. I just picked it up.” Will examined his palms. “It bit me a lot.” His hands looked chapped and red, but there were no cuts. She didn’t even tell him to go wash.

Becca lifted one flap of the box just a tiny amount to look inside. She gasped. The bird had a lemon yellow head and the brightest green wings that seemed to be artfully outlined in black “It’s gorgeous!”

Will laughed. “You look about twelve years old. I haven’t seen you like this in a long time.”

Becca flashed him a big smile. He went to the bathroom to wash his hands.

Two months earlier Becca had a second trimester miscarriage. The fetus was far along enough that they had to go through a D&C, an abortion. Will and Becca had opted to see the “remains” and have some time alone with the four inch daughter they would never know.

Becca found a tiny bowl in the kitchen and filled it with water. Before lifting the flap again, she wondered what they had at home that it would eat. A slice of bread. She tore a slice into pieces and then opened the box slightly, lowered in the water and the bread and shut the box again. Would it even be able to see in there?

“Are we all ready?” Will asked re-entering the room.

“Yeah.” Becca stared at the box.

“What are we going to do about the bird?”

Becca was working it out in her head. “We’ll load the car and bring the box and before we get Avery we’ll stop at the pet store and pick up a small cage and some bird seed.” She made up the plan as she said it.

They were taking their three year-old son on his first skiing trip, picking him up from pre-school in twenty minutes. Will had thrown together the ski trip after the miscarriage. A treat for everyone. Now that she wasn’t pregnant she could ski, Becca had thought grimly.

“I guess.” Will answered dully. “It might have just flown out of someone’s window ten minutes ago.”

“It probably did. I know, I’ll quickly make a few flyers, we’ll tape them up on the block. Maybe we’ll hear from the owner before we get on the road.” Becca grabbed three sheets of white paper from Avery’s art supplies and yellow, green and black markers.

Will was already in their bedroom throwing his bag together. She smiled to herself, anticipating him complimenting her handmade flyers, with cartoonish parakeet drawings. She couldn’t wait to surprise Avery with the colorful bird.

Before they left, Becca opened the lid one more time to look at the parakeet. Its eyes were closed. The water was splashed on the bottom of the box and the bird had pooped already. It was exhausted and stressed she imagined, to fall asleep under these circumstances.

While Will loaded their car, she hastily taped up three flyers in their building’s lobby, on a lamp post and in the window of their corner bodega.

Becca waited in the front seat while Will went in to buy the cage and food. She had asked Will to take the box into the store and transfer the bird into the cage in there. It would be quite awkward inside the car she imagined. But he had refused.

Will emerged with an adorable white and purple cage and a brown paper bag full of bird seed. He gave Becca a big smile and she understood and felt the same pleasure in their new acquisition and imagining Avery’s awe.

Will got into the front seat and already there was no room to maneuver with the cage on his lap and the box on hers.

“Really, Will, take it into the store, where you can grab him out of the box and put him in there with more space.”

“No, no, the car is fine.”

“It’s too crowded. I’ll get out.” She put the box on her seat and got out to watch. The second Will lifted a flap of the box, the bird was out and loose in the car. “Jerk!” Becca hissed.

The bird nose-dived to the floor in the backseat, and then disappeared under the driver’s seat. Becca imagined it breaking a wing. But miraculously, Will recaptured it and managed to push up the sliding door on the cage and drop the bird in. When Becca got back in the car, the bird was huddled low on the purple plastic floor of the cage, its tiny chest heaving. It looked pissed.

“Hmm. At least you caught him fast.”

“Yeah. That was way more awkward than I thought it would be.”

“Should we just drop some seed in there?”

“Let’s go get Avery first, we’re late. He can feed him too.”

When they pulled up in front of the pre-school, Becca got out of car. She leaned through the open door. “Should I tell him while we’re coming down or surprise him?”

“Tell him.”

Becca started to shut her door.

“Wait. Tell him we found someone’s parakeet. That we have to try to find the owner. But we can keep it for the weekend.”

“Oh yeah. I will.” Becca knew she might have otherwise just said, we found a parakeet, or we now have a parakeet. As she ascended the two flights of stairs, her breath caught in her

throat. She still felt it acutely when she came to his school. The teachers and other parents all were aware of her miscarriage. They had all known she was pregnant. She was showing plenty. She'd had to tell them all the horrible news. And Avery too, he knew she was pregnant. They'd had to back-peddle the baby. She'd explained to him that the baby was not coming as they thought, that she wasn't yet ready to come. Once they knew, they said she. Avery had asked a lot of questions, but for less than a week. *Did she go somewhere else? Will she come back? Why isn't she ready? Did she come and then go back?* It all made Becca regret the way she'd chosen to explain it. And mostly she just wanted to say yes to all these accidentally wise questions. Yes, she went somewhere else. Yes, she came and then went back. And yes, yes, yes, she will come back.

Becca stopped climbing the stairs. Maybe the parakeet was bad. Was she going to tell him he had this lovely pet for the weekend, but then it might need to go back?

It's just a bird. Avery hasn't even mentioned the baby in over a month. She started mounting the stairs again.

They were aiming to pick him up before naptime. But they were ten minutes late and for the first time Becca saw the room crowded with cots. All the blankets and "stuffedies" from home littered about. Avery had been told no nap. But he must have gotten upset, because his nap cot was out too and he was sitting on it with his shoes on. Becca went directly to him and kneeled beside him before he saw her. "Hi, Sweetie."

He hugged her around the neck tight and stood up to leave. One child got off her cot to give Avery a hug. "Bye, Avery." And then like they'd received some silent command about what

to do when a peer leaves at naptime, one by one, the children left their cots to give Avery silent hugs goodbye.

Becca and Avery went through his usual routine, pee in potty, get goodbye pretzel rod from the Director, gather lunch bag and stuff. Finally they were heading back down the stairs.

“Something so funny happened today, Avery.”

“What?” Avery was walking slowly, but his question came fast.

“Daddy found a yellow and green bird outside, a parakeet. Maybe someone lost it, or it flew out their window. But we found it and we have it in the car, in a birdcage. We’re going to take it on our trip.”

Avery had a lot to process. Eventually he said, “It’s in the car?” His pace down the stairs was unbearable.

“Yeah. It’s not scary. It’s a pretty little bird, and it’s in a cage. Do you want to see it?”

“Yeah.”

Avery was now old enough to climb into the backseat without help. Becca had learned awhile back that to help was to prolong the whole process by him insisting on starting over. He climbed in, but instead of getting into the toddler car seat, he stood between the two front seats, on the hump. Will moved the cage to be right in front of Avery’s face.

“Hey, Buddy. See what we found? What do you think?”

“It’s good.” Avery stared. The bird looked to be falling asleep again.

“Can I touch it?”

“Yes.” Becca said quickly.

“Well, hold on. They do bite when they’re scared,” Will said. “Why don’t we give it some birdseed first and watch it eat.”

“I want to give it the birdseed!”

“Okay. You can do it.” Will opened the brown paper bag and filled his palm with the little round seeds.

Before they could advise him, Avery pinched some seeds and showered them into the cage on top of the parakeet. The bird began eating voraciously.

It made Becca laugh. “Maybe it didn’t just fly out a window. It’s starving.”

All three of them added pinches of seeds to the cage. The bird never stopped eating.

“We might not be able to keep him, Avery. We’ll look for the people whose bird it is. We’ll try to find them.” Will explained. “But just for the weekend, do you want to give the bird a name?”

“Farrah.” Avery said definitively. Becca’s body jerked. Farrah was his best friend at school. It was also the name he had chosen for the unborn baby, even before they knew it was a girl. Did he remember?

“Let’s give it a different name. That’s Farrah’s name.” Will said softly. He meant his friend, Farrah, but Will and Becca exchanged a look. Her throat grew sore, remembering the tiny fetus in a metal fucking bowl. Becca felt like they’d been set up somehow. Where had the fun gone from finding the bird?

“Okay, Parakeet.” Avery said.

On a different day, either Will or Becca would have objected to naming the bird nothing more than what it was. But, they simultaneously said, “Okay, Parakeet.”

“Can I touch it now?” Avery pleaded.

“Okay, let me see if it’s feeling friendly first.” Will lifted up the cage door again, and slowly inserted his hand. He just let his hand rest there a moment. Then very slowly he extended his index finger and stroked the bird’s chartreuse back.

Becca had noticed Will’s fingers the first time they’d fooled around. His shovel-like finger nails. His guitar-playing hands. And she’d thought, these are the hands of my new boyfriend. It was that clear what they’d proceed to.

Will kept stroking the bird, which was too dazed and too trapped to protest. His index finger was the same length as the whole parakeet. And it had been the same length as their deceased daughter too.

“Okay Avery. Stick your hand in here too, very slowly.”

Avery gave the bird’s back one quick touch. He climbed into his car seat. “She’s not ours to keep, right?”

Will and Becca looked at each other a moment.

“I’ll go buckle him in.” Becca said quietly.

When they returned from their weekend, Becca made some real flyers at work. She used a stock photo from google image of a green and yellow parakeet. Typed the date and location of where it was found and gave both her and Will’s cell numbers. She printed ten. While on-line, she looked up how the tell a parakeet’s sex. Apparently the color of the flesh right above the

beak was the clue. That night at home as she peered in the cage she said to Will, “Well, it’s a girl.”

They had expected a call on the first day, from the three handmade flyers. Now, Becca taped up flyers on the biggest avenue near their apartment. But they both already suspected that the bird would not be claimed.

Seventeen weeks of pregnancy is enough time for a lot to happen. First of all, you take for granted that you are pregnant and that you are having a baby pretty soon. You know the due date. So do your parents and friends. Travel plans of helpful grandmas and aunts are even discussed. You are wearing maternity clothes, taking prenatal yoga, taking prenatal vitamins, mentally rearranging your apartment, pondering names non-stop. It’s a lot of landscape to tear down.

Becca asked Will to do all the communicating, except her parents and sister. Right away she threw away the maternity clothes, even though all her normal clothes were way too tight. She began drinking alcohol and coffee with a vengeance. Literally, taking revenge on her body. She jumped back into running. The hardest thing to tear down and eliminate was just her thoughts. Thoughts of Avery with a sibling, thoughts of maternity leave, thoughts of late pregnancy, thoughts of breast-feeding. Even some of the mental to-do lists wouldn’t disappear overnight. Becca thought of the D&C daily. Maybe they had been wrong to want to see the “baby.” She certainly wished now that the image wouldn’t keep returning, more than once every day. Dark pink skin, a wrinkly skull, a full-featured face, knobby knees, hands and feet with fingers and toes, there were even fingernails. Stop.

Eight weeks after the loss, Becca thought she was starting to feel alright again. Getting over it. She didn't avoid the other pregnant moms at pre-school anymore (she was going to Avery's school again). She didn't have half-awake thoughts about washing Avery's old baby clothes anymore, and she had willed away all the names they were thinking of. But the image of the girl's body persisted. It just would, Becca accepted, losing a milligram of power each day.

On Friday night, Will and Becca lay on the couch, heads on opposite ends. The parakeet was screeching like a monkey inside the cage. Impossible to believe it wasn't waking Avery.

"That noise!" Becca said.

"They scream when they're bored." Will did not turn around to look at the cage, but kept reading the paper.

"How do you know?"

"I had one when I was a boy."

"You did? Why didn't you tell me that?" Becca was amazed.

"I didn't think it was critical."

Becca stared at his forehead and eyes above the paper. "Wow."

Will lowered the paper. "Wow? Is it the kind of thing that couples share before having sex, before marriage?"

"Seems relevant this week. When I'm trying to figure out how to take care of a parakeet. So it's bored?"

"The cage is too small."

The screaming was persistent and Becca couldn't tear her eyes away from the cage that sat on the windowsill. Will turned back to the paper. Becca thought, I don't want to keep it. I rather it live a short life outside, than spend five years in that cage.

While she watched, the bird hopped from its wooden perch down to its attached water dish and adroitly began lifting the cage's door with its beak.

“Will, it's opening the door!”

He turned and looked, saw nothing, and turned back to the paper.

The bird opened it five times in a row. Each time the door slid back down along the cage bars. Becca was mesmerized. The next time the bird lifted the door it stuck its head through before it could shut. But when the door landed on its neck it withdrew its head back in. “It's gonna come out!”

Will kept reading.

“What kind of person doesn't look when a bird is opening its cage door?”

Will smiled and didn't look.

The second time it stuck its head out and the door landed on its neck it wriggled until its body was outside the cage, but still perched on the lip of the door. A second later it began circling the room flying frantically, one foot below the ceiling. Becca leapt up.

“It's out!”

The windows were dark with night and within seconds the bird had slammed into the living room window and slid down it.

They both let it be, sitting on the windowsill, its small chest heaving. It was no longer screaming.

For about ten minutes the bird intermittently flew around, seeming to have terrible depth perception, seeming to have no skill at gauging its landings on various surfaces, and sometimes just sliding down walls and hanging out on the floor for a while. They let it be. Becca scanned the room for potential hazards—behind the entertainment center, in the wires, the stove and hanging pots.

“Yours came out of its cage, then?”

“What?”

“When you were a kid. Did you guys let your parakeet out?”

“Yeah. It used to walk around on the floor. It was out some everyday.”

Becca shook her head and laughed. “Unbelievable. Well I can tell you one thing. I’m much happier with it out. I’d rather keep it, if it can live in our apartment, then be stuck in that cage.”

“Yeah. It’s gonna hurt itself now though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s flying like a spaz. If it keeps banging the windows, it’s gonna get hurt.”

“Jesus, Will. Then catch it!”

Will eventually caught the bird after a particularly hard bash against the kitchen window, and put it back in the cage. Becca thought about latching the door with a twisty-tie, but wanted to see how long it would take the bird to let itself out again.

“You know what would be funny?” Becca said.

“What?”

“If we thought we were doing some good deed by taking in this bird, and she was desperately trying to get back to her babies in her nest.”

Will smiled wryly. “Good story.”

It took the bird one full day to come out again. And miraculously, she’d calculated how to fly in an apartment in that time. Right out of the cage, she made completely different, tight and controlled circles of the room. She chose landing spots that were high and purposeful. She landed skillfully. She didn’t bang a single window or wall, she didn’t slide down any surfaces. Becca admired her intelligence.

She wanted to teach the bird to sit on her finger, to speak.

She approached the bird on Sunday afternoon, while it sat on their bookshelf, its favorite perch. And she held out her finger, “Here, Farrah, come her girl, pretty bird.”

Avery and Will both looked up from the art table.

“You called her Farrah!” Avery yelled. “Can we call her Farrah?”

Becca was confused. “What’s her name? I thought it was Farrah.”

“It’s Parakeet!” Avery was manic. “Can we keep her?”

“Farrakeet,” Will said with a smile.

The phone rang and unlike her usual self of late, Becca picked up when she saw the unknown number.

“Hi, is this Becca? I’m calling about the parakeet.”

“You’re kidding me. Is it yours?”

“Well, no. We’re just so glad you found it. I saw the picture and I couldn’t believe it. We were feeding that bird from our feeder for months. It was living with a group of sparrows, and would come feed with them. I saw it every day for months, but then when it got cold in December it disappeared.”

Becca didn’t bother to say the picture was from google image. “Wow, that’s amazing. I thought maybe it lived on the street for a while. It just acts like a wild bird.”

Becca circled the room with a smile on her face while the woman told her all about caring for this bird and watching it with her two neighbors. They lived on a distinctly wealthier block, five blocks away. Becca stayed on the phone for nearly ten minutes, exchanging bits of information about what the bird seemed like now, and how it had behaved during the fall outdoors. She hated being on the phone with friends and family, even people she dearly missed, but as she walked and talked and peered at Farrakeet she had no desire to rush off.

“You know, I have some pictures of the bird, at my feeder!” The woman said. “Give me your email, I’ll send them to you.”

Becca happily gave the woman her email.

“My neighbor might call you too. We’re both just so happy someone found that parakeet.”

And the neighbor did call about an hour later, and once again, Becca cheerfully talked at length about what the bird had been observed doing in the fall, and what it was doing now, loose in their apartment. Learning to fly tight and controlled, learning to land with ease. Singing.

Late that night an email came through with three pictures.

Becca and Will sat on the couch to look at the pictures on her cell phone.

They rotated the phone and enlarged the pictures, trying to get the best view of the bird, perched on a wooden backyard feeder.

They were silent while they looked, and then they looked at Farrakeet, on their book shelf, preening and ruffling her feathers with her beak, and back at the phone.

“It’s not her.” Becca said finally.

“Yep. That’s incredible. It’s a different parakeet.”

Becca placed the phone on the coffee table and still leaning forward, twisted and looked at Will. She started laughing. She wiped away tears and was unable to stop her laughter. Will had always liked seeing her laugh uncontrollably. When they were dating he had driven her to that state many times. He laughed watching her.

Finally Becca calmed down and picked up the phone again to view the pictures. It looked like she was ready to write back.

“Are you going to tell her?”

Becca shook her head. She gazed up at Farrakeet and smiled. “Why would I?”

Several weeks passed and Farrakeet lived in one place, the top bookshelf, atop a large vase they kept there. It was also the only place she pooped. The bird was potty-trained. Becca gave her fresh food and water daily, leaving the cage door tied open with a twisty-tie. Farrakeet entered the cage regularly to eat and then immediately flew back to her vase. She also made laps of the living room several times a day for exercise. And she was noisy. She chirped, whistled, sang, screamed, and warbled. Whenever she made her noises, Becca stopped what she was doing to talk to Farrakeet. She would hold out her finger but the bird didn’t want to make physical contact. It was clear she wanted to talk though. Avery almost never paid attention to the bird. Will swatted a dish towel at it when it was too loud. It nagged at Becca that the bird’s life was limited. She was loose, that was good. But, Becca noticed Farrakeet was often doing call and response with some unseen bird outside.

One morning Becca awoke from a dream she’d had throughout her life. She was swimming through beautiful coral. The ocean was silent, but for a whoosh. There were bright colorful fish everywhere. The feel and temperature of the water were so real. When Will stirred she said to him, “Birds and fish are the most free beings on the planet.”

Will moaned and stretched. “What time is it?”

“Just think of their freedom.”

“Fish are not that well off. If you think about it. And “that’s for the birds”, implies something pretty undesirable right? They don’t get too much either.”

“Stop. I mean to not be earth-bound. I had my swimming dream, like snorkeling. It seems so free to whisk yourself away anytime.”

On the weekend, Becca made pancakes and bacon for them. Avery marched around the living room in his pajamas, pretending markers were swords. Will was making coffee. Becca looked at the calendar hanging in the kitchen.

“I’m twenty-eight weeks today.”

Will spun toward her from the coffee machine. “Jesus.”

“I’m sorry. I haven’t thought that in so many weeks. I don’t even know how I kept track.”

“It’s hard to let go of. The tracking.”

“What are you talking about?” Avery yelled.

Becca and Will were quiet a moment. “Just how time passes.” Becca said.

Just as she spoke, the smoke alarm went off in their guest room. The bacon had filled the apartment with smoke.

Becca headed toward the unused baby’s room. She climbed on the dresser and disabled the alarm by pulling the battery out. The silence was lovely. She went to the window, lifted it all the way up to let the smoke out. Becca leaned her arms on the sill and looked out across Brooklyn, she could see the skyscrapers of Manhattan in the distance.

Before she saw her, she heard the tiny motor of Farrakeet’s wings overhead. The bird had never entered this room before. Just as Becca turned her head, Farrakeet used her yellow and green wings like a parachute and descended to land on the back of Becca’s hand, resting on the sill. Her claws tickled Becca’s knuckles.

They both looked out the open window a second.

“Oh, birdy. Bye sweet birdy.”

Farrakeet burst out in a sudden move and flew straight away.

“Avery, Will! Come see!”

They ran in and all three of them watched as Farrakeet grew smaller and smaller, heading off into the sky. Her colors disappeared first, then other birds seemed to cross paths with her and then Becca could no longer see her at all.