

Birds of a Feather

*“She was not quite what you would call refined.
She was not quite what you would call unrefined.
She was the kind of person that keeps a parrot.”
Mark Twain*

Frank, an elegantly plumed parrot, sulks from the back seat of Annie’s nifty new car, a little box of a thing with flat-circled rubber floors and plastic seats. Her ridiculous dachshund Zazu, costumed in a baby dress and booties from the Nearly New Shop and yapping commentary the entire way, occupies the front passenger seat. Andrew, a large curly dog about the size of a pony, lies listlessly in the luggage-hold next to several paper grocery sacks filled with shoes and a Louis Vuitton suitcase Annie inherited from her mother. Andrew is at an advanced age for such a large dog. He now derives his sole delight in life in peeing lake-size puddles dead in the center of whatever carpet is handy, the more prized versions... say, a 120-year-old Oushak smuggled out of Iran... being the more worthy target. The fact that Frank will outlive both Andrew and Zazu by at least half a century gives him considerable solace in enduring the small dog’s silly costumes and the larger dog’s gargantuan farting presence.

Frank and Annie and Andrew and Zazu have spent the night at a pet-friendly motel (five dollars extra for each animal) in Spartanburg, the halfway point from dreary Cincinnati to Savannah, where Annie has lived for the last decade. They have been away for nearly six months now, while Annie saw to the dying days of her 94-year-old lothario of a father in Cincinnati. The funeral is finally finished. All the socially correct things Annie’s long-dead mother would have deemed necessary have been either delegated or ignored. Annie and menagerie are at last returning to Savannah.

Frank has been with Annie for some thirty-five years now. He has endured her parade of lovers and offered encouraging parrot-jabber ever since Annie showed up in Puerto Vallarta in a shiny VW and a teeny trust fund income, courtesy of her grandmother. She hooked up with Frank's proprietor at the time, a small-potatoes drug dealer by the name of Jerome, who had acquired Frank as partial payment for a deal gone awry. Jerome soon married Annie, her primary attraction evidently being the promise of a regular, though barely livable, income. Annie claims that she married Jerome because he had a heart condition that would give him only another five years of life. When the judge said 'til death do you part,' Annie was convinced that Jerome's wonky heart was her only chance of living up to such a vow. And sure enough, Jerome left the planet just about five years later. Not that Annie was present for the occasion, as Jerome had since disappeared, leaving Annie with a legacy of soured drug deals, a wreck of an airplane on the edge of the landing strip at Puerto Vallarta, and Frank. But they were still legally attached, so Annie took to calling herself The Widow, though at the time she was barely thirty. She has persisted in widowhood to this day, eschewing marital commitments for a virtual compendium of sequential (well, mostly) lovers.

By the time they reach I-95 and turn south for the last two hours of the trip, black clouds gather and begin to sprinkle rain, then let loose a torrential coastal downpour. With the first really good bolt of lightning, Zazu dives to the floor, puts her head under the front seat and begins to whimper. Her little brown body shivers under her dress. Frank ruffles his feathers in imitation, then hangs himself upside down in his cage, warbling coos, his sign that he is glad to have Annie to himself.

"So. Frank, you old buzzard. You're not scared of anything, are you?" Annie's voice is gritty from decades of cigarettes and alcohol and weed.

“GOODNIGHT,” Frank screeches. It is getting very dark.

“Remember, Frank, when we went to the rez with Jaybird?” Frank loves it when Annie talks to him in this way, and remembers it well. The Indian reservation in Minnesota had not been at all to Frank’s liking, nor Annie’s either, for that matter. Jaybird was the twenty-something son of Louie, Annie’s most recently departed lover at that time. The result of Louie’s casual copulation with a so-called Indian princess, Jaybird had shown up at his father’s door, that being Annie’s door, as Louie the Lover had been living for some months in Annie’s house in Savannah when this occurred. Only days before Jaybird’s appearance, Louie had taken his mustachioed charms to a woman of lither limb, a habit of Louie’s, Frank had noticed. Annie thought it would really piss old Louie off if she seduced Jaybird, a feat she pulled off in a matter of hours. Jaybird assumed his father’s place in the household, much to Frank’s dismay. In fact, when he was out of his cage, he would fly at Jaybird in hopes of at least pecking his eyes out. Frank liked this little escapade so much that, after Jaybird, he took to escaping his wire domicile and attacking any male person who entered Annie’s house. If he drew blood, he cackled gleefully, a demon parrot laugh. Frank had to be padlocked in his cage after that, unless Annie was alone or had only female guests.

The rain stops, as suddenly as it began and the sky opens up to a clean, cloudless blue. The familiar stench of the paper mill begins to assault everyone’s noses. Even Andrew stirs. Annie announces loudly, “we’re heeeeeere.” They drive over the splendid bridge connecting South Carolina to Georgia, much higher than Frank could ever think about flying, then past several blocks of slums in the process of being cleared for the continuing gentrification of the historic district. Annie’s little house, on a once tawdry block, is now surrounded by elegant restorations. There was a sensational murder some years back, and then a book, and then a

movie, and then the skyrocketing popularity of this tatty old dame of a city. Frank wonders how all these fashionable new residents from Connecticut and Seattle could possibly tolerate Annie's offbeat lifestyle, but they have seemed preoccupied with themselves and their never-ending renovations, so Annie lives in shabby, if not genteel, comfort.

Andrew's tail thumps the floor of the car in recognition of where they are, Zazu emerges from under the seat and jumps up and down in her silly dress, and Frank squawks hellos and whistles his appreciation out the open window to anyone who passes. Annie is belting out her best James Brown imitation of 'Georgia on My Mind,' when the flashing blue lights come up behind the car. Annie sinks her chin into her chest. They are two blocks from home.

Officer Sneldon, walking like a plastic doll whose legs have been screwed in askew, clanks toward the car. "Your driver's license, ma'am." Annie scratches around in the bottom of her over-stuffed purse. Frank can tell by the way she is stalling for time that the license is past due for renewal. Her mother's fine gold bracelets, four of them, chink against the door jamb, precious metal against plastic, as Annie hands over the license.

"Au revoir, do svidanya." Frank squawks goodbyes, his signal that he is about to fly into any member of the male gender within a yardstick of Annie. Unfortunately, Annie has padlocked his cage, so Frank turns his head in anger and fixes the one-eyed glare of his profile against the officer. "Adios, mother fucker."

In minutes, Frank, padlocked securely in his cage, is loaded into the back compartment of the black and white squad car, along with Annie and the two dogs. Even Frank, who in all these years has not been known for his acceptable comportment in testy situations, is quiet. Not only have Annie's license plate and driver's license lapsed, there is the matter of the evidently

forgotten traffic ticket from six months past, which requires that the car be impounded and Annie taken to jail until someone can post bail for the triple offenses.

On the way to the jail, they stop at the Animal Control Center. Andrew, so arthritic he can barely walk, is loaded into a very large wire box on wheels. Zazu, in a smaller cage set atop Andrew's, whimpers frantically. The two men in gray coveralls refuse the bird. Frank cackles his audible delight, as the men push the dog cages into the dirty yellow building. The squad car moves off toward the jail. Frank, still securely caged, is next to Annie, she, too, caged in the backseat of the car. Frank stares out the window, his gaze intent on two of Zazu's dirty pink booties that have fallen onto the sidewalk. The little socks become smaller and smaller.

At the Chatham County jail, a large, dark-skinned woman wearing a wildly patterned pink muumuu presides behind the counter where Annie is to be booked on the traffic charges. Muumuu's fingernails are long and black-red and pasted on, a different piece of artistry on each one. She points the finger with the little plastic diamond on it towards a flat wall and takes Annie's picture, front, then each side. Then she collects the information about Annie's identity, which Annie delivers with uncharacteristically obedient resignation. Frank notices that Muumuu's fingernails create some difficulty with the computer keys. He flexes his own vicious talons.

Muumuu directs Annie to a long bench against the wall and tells her to wait. Then she turns her attention to the bird cage that rests on a chair near the entrance. Frank has been quietly nattering nothing syllables since their arrival at the jail.

"Hello, beautiful," he responds to Muumuu's gaze. Then he turns himself upside down, rubs his lower body against the swing bar in the cage, and curls his head in a coy posture.

"Well, ain't you something," Muumuu says. "What won't they haul in here next?"

She looks in the direction of Annie, who sits with a glum expression on the bench near a heavily secured door. Muumuu squeals in Annie's general direction, careful not to establish eye contact. "What this bird be eating? You gone be here for awhile and I don't want anything with these many colors to be needing for nothing."

Frank preens, plumps his yellow breast, and ruffles his emerald-hued wing feathers.

"Chinese stir fry vegetables," Annie says. Her lip curls. "And Ritz crackers with peanut butter."

Recognizing where his next meal is likely coming from, Frank steps up the flirtation with coos and cackles and finally a loud, clear "I love you." That's when Muumuu hauls her big self across the room and pushes the chair containing cage and bird to a spot next to her throne behind the counter.

"Come to Tanitra, Sugar. Tanitra take care of big bright bird while yo mama in the jailhouse."

By the time Frank tires of flirting with Tanitra, who looks somewhat like an inflated parrot herself, Annie has disappeared from the room.

As Frank was to learn later from Annie's telephone recitations to her assortment of pals, she was in the clink for eighteen miserable hours. She recounted the story so many times, at such length, and in so many versions that Frank took to squawking "goodbye" in all the languages he knew when the story veered too far off what he thought was a reasonable retelling of the event. What he was to discover is that the entire episode in jail actually wasn't so bad as 'miserable.' After all, Annie had some new material for her frequent visits to the friendly neighborhood

watering hole, where she regaled the regulars with tales of her adventurous past. Her spiel went something like this, and it got a little more outrageous with each telling:

‘When the guard came in to the waiting room to escort me to the holding cell, the big muumuu’d thing at the desk was cooing into Frank’s coop. He was rubbing his head against the cage in that coy manner he reserves for women he likes, crawling upside down against the side of the cage, evidently to expose his private parts, as if they might be visible. Have you ever seen a parrot’s penis? Of course you haven’t, because they don’t have one. Which might be a boon to womankind if that particular genetic issue were prevalent among more advanced male primates. Once when I was at the zoo, a gorilla went after my painted toenails, stuck his finger in his mouth and then did something he might have thought was a cartwheel. That was when I realized Frank was no different from any other member of the male gender. In fact, all men go after something just as ridiculous as paint on the end of a woman’s fingers and toes. Muumuu momma must have really attracted the oddballs, as her fingernails went out to the next county, so long she couldn’t even type, and were encrusted with an assortment of bling somewhat resembling emeralds and diamonds. Makes me wonder, if birds are so damn smart – and Frank is certainly a smart bird, after all, he can say goodbye in seven languages – how come he has no taste?

To get on with my story, Andrew and Zazu had been carted off to god knows where, something called an animal impoundment facility which had no place for birds. So Frank had come along with me to the jail, and was in the foyer of this most unpleasant place, entertaining himself, not to mention anyone who happened to pay attention, with his flirtatious behavior.

I was beginning to wonder just who I was going to call to spring me. I eliminated Arnold from the list, a ginky little guy who supplies me with lovely packets of weed. Just as soon as I get out of bed in the morning, I load my teenie little pipe. My substitute for coffee, it puts a more

mellow hue on things. Frank begins to imitate my hacking cough. Ah-keh, ah-keh, he goes, then laughs his gleeful cackle. Sure enough, when I inhale the first beautiful breath of my elixir, there I am, parroting Frank in a coughing fit. As to Arnold, he's presently in prison, so no good as either supplier or bail provider, which is actually a stroke of good luck. Had Arnold not been in the slammer, I would have had weed in the car, which would surely have upped the ante and I never would have gotten out of here. But what clanky cop would look at a post-menopausal, frazzle-haired, bejeweled woman and think to search her car for recreational drugs?

Then there was Gregory, or more appropriately Gregoire, as he likes to call himself, the aging queen, my dearest pal and faggot of all faggots. But it's already well into cocktail hour, so he's too drunk to drive over here, much less negotiate me out of this place. I could go down the rest of the considerations, and I would like to think the list is long, but to tell the truth, it is perhaps what one might call thin. I was in a quandary.

But most importantly at that moment, there was the matter of the jewelry. When I had suffered the indignity of the arrest, I was, of course, dressed for travel, that consisting of my skinniest jeans and a powder blue silk shirt, accessorized by my mother's gold bracelets, diamond stud earrings of significant size, and a couple of flashy rings, the real thing. Muumuu had spotted the jewelry as I was escorted in the front door.

"Leave your valuables in this sack," she said, proffering a cloth bag with a number stamped on it, "but we don't take nothing like that gold and them diamonds you got dripping all over your person. You better take them things off. And keep that shit hid, or you won't never see it again."

Fortunately, I had had the good sense – good sense being of dubious existence on numerous prior occasions in my life – to grab a knitted pullover from behind the seat of my car

before I was so unceremoniously escorted to jail. Fortuitously, it had a nifty kangaroo pouch across the front, the only place on my person I could stash the jewels I was wearing. But there was the problem of the rest of my mother's jewelry, which was nestled in a velvet travel sac I had hidden in the zippered leather compartment of my handbag, a stunning lizard number that looked more like Grace Kelly than this late middle-aged trust-fund hippie. I had found it in a nearly new shop and traded it for one of my mother's authentic Chanel suits, which I could never in my life have fit into, nor would I ever have had a place to wear such a thing.

I glared at Muumuu as I removed the jewelry I was wearing. I put the gold bracelets, a domed ring with a dazzling sapphire, and the diamond studs from my ears into the velvet sac. It was already crammed with Mother's finest: more earrings, a diamond bracelet, fifty-two inches of ivory pearls, and several glittery brooches. I even had the elegant Chopard watch my father had bought his second wife, who had most obligingly checked out of this world before he did. Her untimely demise (for her), along with my occasional attempt at socially acceptable comportment for the last year of my father's life, left me with a big fat inheritance, for which I had been waiting at least twenty years. I slipped the bulging and now heavy sac into the kangaroo pocket of my sweater, hoping no one in the waiting room had noticed.

My next stop was the holding tank, which greeted me with the aroma of piss and sweat and vomit, not to mention the sharp twinge of industrial cleaning agent. I was told to wait there until someone came for me to escort me to a telephone to make one phone call to heaven only knows whom. I had still not figured that out yet.

The concrete block room was about ten by twenty feet, painted the vague institutional green color of school and hospital hallways, and badly in need of repainting. There was a toilet in the corner, behind a half-wall partition – also of concrete block – and no privacy door. The

seating consisted of concrete ledges along both long walls, nearly all of the space occupied by supine sleepers, fellow incarcerates, an amazing array of malfeasants who were, as I, waiting for something to happen. There was not a blanket or a pillow to be had. Of the four women in the room, two were asleep, one snoring loudly, both drunk and passed out, I surmised. The other two looked me over when the door opened, and the big one moved more towards the corner so I wouldn't have to sit on the floor.

“About time we get somebody decent in here,” said an attractive honey-colored blonde with a nasty scratch down her face. “Those two hookers been here since the witty-bitty hours of the morning, waiting for the jerdge...” she said it just like that, a rural Southern twang, “and they been sleeping it off since I got here a few hours ago. Just so’s you know, nobody in here has killed any babies or even murdered any boyfriends. Just your everyday run of the mill sluts and drunks. Except for me... I’m a nail tech at Sassy Nails.” She waved her fingers at me, showing off her fancy French manicure. “And then there’s Cantaloupe here, who don’t say nothing much, but I can tell by looking at her that she didn’t have no boyfriend to murder, and no babies neither. And now there’s you.”

Honey was aptly named with her honeyed voice and honey-tinted hair. As she was to tell, she had been minding her own business in the hospital, holding her sweet old husband’s hand as he wheezed and gasped his last breaths. “We was just barely back from our honeymoon at his condo in Florida when he took ill. His two bitches of daughters think I had something to do with it and came to the hospital and physically attacked me. We got in a fistfight, and I’m the one what got arrested. Some things just ain’t fair. After all, he is ninety-two. It’s time for him to meet the Lord God in heaven. Which is surely where he’ll be, sweet old man like that.”

That was when I started to laugh, because there but for the grace of a god I don't even believe in could have been my own father, had it not been for my dutiful daughter attentions for these last six months. I laughed so hard thinking about Honey and me being in the same boat – both about to be newly rich, both in jail – that it got the interest of the one Honey had identified as Cantaloupe. A big dykey-looking woman with short cropped hair, she had been staring into the corner for as long as I had been there. She wore a man's shirt, tail out, and, except for her large breasts, had more of a man's body than a woman's. She looked me over top to bottom, and she must have recognized my Belgian loafers as some indication of my heritage. So she started up with her life story, how she had been a philosophy major at Vassar, but in an effort to offend her brain surgeon father to the utmost degree – as if her being an obvious lesbian weren't enough – had become a migrant fruit picker in the western part of the US.

I understood completely. I told how I got preg my first year at Sarah Lawrence so I could piss off my father. When I said that, there was a snort from a woman on the facing bench. She was in some sort of dazed state, more like a stupor from drug than drink. I've been both places in my past, finally settling on marijuana as my liberator of choice, generously enhanced with gin. As the years had flown by, the hangovers seemed to be less intense. And at least, when I woke up the next morning, I knew it was going to be the worst I would feel all day.

Cantaloupe didn't bother to account for exactly how she had come to be in Savannah, nor did she offer any explanation as to why she had been arrested. I wasn't sure of the protocol, as if there might be such a thing in jail, but being that we had clearly hailed from a similar socio-economic heritage, I thought it might be more polite to refrain from inquiring.

Protocol didn't seem to affect Honey and she asked me right out, "What are You doing here?"

I looked out the top of my eyes at Honey and then at Cantaloupe. “I was arrested because my driver’s license and my auto tag had both expired and that when you couple that with a traffic ticket for something as inconsequential as running a stop sign six months ago, and then, uh, forgetting to pay it, it is automatic arrest.”

One of the sleepers rolled over and tittered. She got up, stretched her arms, went to the drain in the center of the concrete floor, hiked her short skirt up to her waist, fiddled at the crotch of her thong panties, and peed into the drain.

“Damn you,” Honey whined. “Can’t you use the toilet like a civilized human being?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Thong Panties said, and resumed her sleeping position on the concrete ledge.

The room had begun to seem very small, considering what was concealed in my kangaroo pouch. I surveyed the four women. None of them was as massively built as Cantaloupe. Surely six feet tall and broad shouldered, she could have played football. I sat next to her thinking that she could protect me from whatever might be about to occur. I did not under any circumstance want to lose my mother’s good jewelry. If I had chosen to learn anything from her, it was that jewelry is a token of a woman’s worth to her ardent admirers. Or, if not so ardent, then a gift to assuage the admirer’s guilt over some transgression of loyalty. It was something a woman paid dearly for. The more bejeweled a woman, the more she had given up her soul to some son of a bitch. I kept my hands clasped around the velvet sac in the pouch of my pullover, much as a pregnant woman might caress the baby curled inside.

I needed to concentrate on just who the hell was going to get me out of here. Thank God Daddy was dead. At least I didn’t have to worry about his customary horror and disgrace at my uncivilized behavior. And he certainly can’t disown me ever again.

I started to repeat the word Path. No mantra-shmantra for this old girl. I've never followed all that hocus-pocus. The word just feels good in my mouth, smooth, like melting an orange M&M, or the way home-made creamery ice cream feels when it coats the roof of your mouth. Path. Saying it over and over is a comfort to me. I can't imagine why, since my life has had little in the way of a path. Maybe that's what it's all about. If you repeat a word often enough and if it feels good enough in your mouth, your tongue against your teeth as it ends, with a whispery sigh, this Path, then it seems as if I might have a path after all.

I kept saying the word.

That's when Honey started to shriek, just when everything had quieted down and I was finally concentrating on my dilemma. "Shit. I've got the curse." And she started banging on the door, hollering for the guard to bring her some Tampoons, as she called them.

Path. Path. Visualize the path, I told myself. Concentrate on the fricking yellow brick road. And that's when it came to me. The wizard at the end of the rainbow could only be Louie.

We met several years ago in a gay bar, just a few weeks after I had moved myself and my animals and my mother's beautiful furniture to Savannah. I was at the bar with Gregoire, who is why I ever went to Savannah in the first place, he being the safest male in my life. Whatever Louie might have been doing there is anybody's best guess. And as I was to learn, it certainly wasn't because he was of any persuasion other than purely, though indiscriminately, heterosexual.

Louie was living at the time on his boat, though even Savannah's January was not the optimum season for boat-dwelling. I left the bar with him that very night and we headed straight to his boat. But it was tiny, and there was no toilet, so when the urge necessitated, I had to dangle my bare butt over the side of the boat. While I normally would find anything that would have

horrified my parents something I might like to try, I found this rather unappealing, particularly in the dead of winter. And so Louie came to my house – in the beginning just for a night or two – and before you know it, I found his Hawaiian shirts and his collection of rainbow-hued flipflops, which he wore year-round, littering my closet.

Yep, it was Louie I called to spring us out of the clink. As luck would have it, he was just breaking up with his most recent amorata, a motorcycle-riding lady cop who was twenty-five years his junior. I would like to think she might have ridden off into the sunset with a twenty-seven year old, but that was information I was not to have. You have to hand it to old Louie, he was there when I needed him. He didn't hesitate a moment and showed up first thing the very next morning, the first thing part being a surprise, considering Louie's need to sleep off the previous evening's activities. He said he had tried to come the night before, but the jail only let people IN after 8pm and didn't let anyone OUT until the next morning.'

“Whaddya know, Lou-bo? Au revoir and arriverderci.” Frank screeches from his post on the chair beside Tanitra, as Louie enters the waiting room of the jail. Louie puts his hands in his pockets, as Frank had been known to bite them, expressing his general disapproval of any member of the male gender and of Louie in particular. Now he is being as protective of Tanitra as he normally is about Annie.

Louie announces his purpose for being there to Tanitra. She is dressed today in a purple and lime green jungle design. For his benefit, Frank is sure. She takes Louie's identification, directs him to sign some papers, counts out the cash he has given as bond, and then points a glittery fingernail toward a row of chairs and tells Louie to wait. He appears to know the drill.

When Annie comes out, she looks like hell, but she seems awfully glad to see Louie, something Frank didn't think she ever would have admitted. Actually, Louie looks like he is pretty glad to see Annie, too. He is even polite enough, uncharacteristically, to refrain from mentioning her seduction of his son Jaybird and subsequent expedition with Jay to the Indian reservation, where she ate peyote and puked herself into reality. That was when she and Frank and her dogs escaped back to the sweet comforts of Savannah, where, until Daddy-O took to needing care in the last days of his life, she made herself content with the companionship of her menagerie.

Louie drives Frank and Annie straight to the Animal Impoundment Center, where they are informed that Andrew has given up and passed quietly into the hereafter. Annie wails one long loud sob, until Louie points out to her that Andrew was practically dead anyway, and now she doesn't have to go through the agony and expense of euthanizing him, which by Louie's calculation she should have done a long time ago. Nor does she have to have the rugs cleaned anymore.

Frank gives evidence that he is pleased to hear this by laughing his best fake haha. Zazu, that whimpering idiot, is returned to Annie's arms sans costume, naked as a jaybird, as one might say. Frank was hoping that the experience of being around other dogs, none of which possessed Zazu's exaggerated canine nobility, coupled with the loss of her pal, the pony-sized Andrew, would so traumatize Zazu that she might not recover. In such a case Frank would not have to listen to Zazu's incessant yipping, nor have to endure her silly costumes. He would have Annie, once again, all to himself. Save the reappearance of Louie. Which Frank can well take care of, he thinks.

After much conversation about what they are going to do next, Annie realizes she can't pick up the car from the vehicle lot until she resolves the expired tag and driver's license issues. At this thought, she directs Louie to take her to the corner liquor store before heading home. It's only nine-thirty in the morning, but Johnny's is open, double doors standing ajar, ceiling fans quietly stirring a breeze. Annie bounds out of Louie's car, the most energy she has evidenced since she saw Officer Sneldon's blue lights come up behind her. Frank can see the two old guys behind the counter smile as Annie comes in. They know her well.

"Quick, boys," Annie says. "A big bottle of gin. I just got out of jail." Her voice and the guys' chuckles waft out to the car. Louie bursts out in such laughter that Frank begins to think maybe he's not so bad after all. It might be OK if Louie does stick around.

Another three blocks and they are in Annie's sweet little house. Though it smells of mildew and dust from being closed up for six months, a dirty house is not something Annie would normally notice. She heads straight for the secretary in the living room, a handsome antique piece bequeathed by her grandmother, opens a tiny hidden drawer meant for cached love notes, and pulls out a small enameled box. Her face lights up to find it still there. As she begins to pack her elegant little pipe, Frank coughs. Ah-keh, ah-keh. And then he cackles, a gleeful laugh.