

The New Cage

by Stefan Laszczuk

I owned my first budgie when I lived in the first house. My bedroom was next to the family toilet. Four kids with weak, nervous bladders made for a lot of flushed awakenings during the night. I used to lie there and listen to the cistern spluttering and gurgling like a pot boiling over, as it refilled time and time again. Each time as the noise subsided, I would arch my ear, hoping for silence. Sometimes I got it, and slept. More often than not I would be kept awake by my parents' voices. Voices muffled by twelve stairs and a thirty-foot corridor of thick brown carpet, so you couldn't hear what they were saying. You could only hear they were angry. My parents' eventual and inevitable break-up was also their own painful rebirth. Embryonic friendship became foetal love became two writhing bodies forcing their way out of a cunt of a situation, to find themselves screaming and crying in a new life without each other. It was only rebirth of sorts though. My father still needs his amniotic fluid and my mother still kicks against her walls.

The worst of it was over years ago, and I can only remember the whole time as some kind of surreal road accident. A lot of speeding, swerving arguments and then suddenly, my brothers, my sister and I wandering off the side of a highway covered in blood and shock, wondering just what the hell happened and just where the hell we go from here. My father drunk and asleep at the wheel. My mother bundling him out of the car and coming back frantically to pick us up and tend to our wounds.

I used to open the cage door and let my budgie fly about the house. People said I was mad doing that in a house with four cats. I probably was a bit. Probably my extreme allergy to cats combined with the fact that I lived with four of them kept me in a sort of mad state. I didn't like those cats much. My dad hated them. His hatred for those cats must have made it slightly easier for him when he became unwelcome in our house. When the swinging lead boot of my mother the goalkeeper kicked my father straight back out of the door he rolled in. Kicked him all of three suburbs away. I bet he didn't think three suburbs seemed that far at the time, but I bet he didn't realise that it would take him longer than the rest of his life to get back. About a week after he was gone, one of the cats decided to migrate across the road. A few months ago, I bumped into the neighbour whose house it had snuck away to in those early years. She told me it had recently died in terrible pain from the cats' version of AIDS.

I shrugged my shoulders at the news. My little brother had literally bawled for hours when we told him his favourite cat had left us for the Browns. I told him I would share my budgie with him. That worked out fine for about a month. Worked out fine until the budgie nosedived onto a pan of frying potatoes while we were all waiting for dinner in front of the television. Mum investigated the clatter in the kitchen to find him sizzling amongst the spuds. I waited until the ad break to identify the body. It almost seems comical now, in a charred black humour sort of way, but it wasn't particularly 'anything' to four hungry knee-highs at the time. We had already been hardened by the leaving of one cat and one father. We had pork sausages on their own for tea. And the next week I bought another budgie.

It was almost a year before I would let the second budgie out of his cage, and I only did it outside of meal times. As I was approaching my own feathery existence, my mother was beginning to let me fly about a bit too. Being a typically trustworthy teenager, I spent my weekends getting stoned with my buddies or stealing their parents' grog. I was carefree for a while. Then one night I woke up in the dark in my friend's spare bedroom. There was a man on my bed with his hands inside my underpants. When I sat up he pushed my face hard into the pillow and ran away. The whole fright lasted maybe twenty seconds, or twenty years—depending on which way you look at it. Sleeping on my own hasn't been quite the same since. Anyway, the next day I got home to find my second budgie had been attacked and killed by our crazy cat—the one that we couldn't ever get near enough to pat because we had apparently terrorised it as a kitten. The one that would eventually shit out its stomach on the kitchen floor before it died hating us.

As upset as I wanted to be about the second budgie, I was still in shock from the night before. My friend's parents hadn't believed my intruder story when I had woken them at 4:30 in the morning. They'd said it was a bad dream. Yeah, right, I thought. A bad dream that left the door open on the way out. Still, even I preferred to believe it had never really happened and told myself a dream was all it was. Two weeks later, I found out that the man came back again. This time he went next door and chloroformed the neighbours' twelve year-old boy, took him away and fucked him for three days. Then he dumped him in the park down the road. I still think about what would have happened if I hadn't have woken up that night. Anyway, I ended up telling mum what happened to me. She had too much work to do to really fix

anything, but she let me sleep with the light on for a while. She didn't let me have any more budgies though. There were too many predators around, she said.

I had to wait until I moved out of home to get my third budgie. My new flatmate and her boyfriend didn't like it. The boyfriend always complained about the smell. He apparently had a very sensitive nose. As far as I was concerned the only thing he was good at sniffing out was a bargain. Within days of arriving at her tiny flat, I found that it was unofficially a home for three. I paid half the rent and the bills and he smoked a lot of dope in our lounge room. Many people wouldn't tolerate an extra person living for free in their space for seven nights a week. As it was my first share house, I did. Ironically, in the end, it was my flatmate who asked me to leave. Perhaps it was because I drank a lot. Perhaps it was because of the night I drank a lot and tried to put my hand inside her knickers. Or because of the night that I drank a lot and then interrupted their midnight sex to empty my swollen bladder on their bedroom floor. Either way, the budgie and I didn't last long in that flat. Not nearly as long, I hoped, as the lingering smell of urine on the bedroom carpet does for a sensitive nose.

The eventual death of budgie number three was nobody's fault and everybody's fault. Picture this. A family reunion of sorts. I even brought the budgie along to sit with us in the backyard at my sister's house. It was her twenty-fifth birthday. First time in nearly fifteen years we were all together in the same space, not counting hospital rooms. All four of us kids were seriously hospitalised at some stage in our lives. Mum and Dad would tolerate each other's presence for our sake then, but it wasn't exactly a cheery atmosphere. This day, however, everybody put their personal grievances aside for a couple of hours and seemed determined to sit it out peacefully. It was all very dormant, even slightly enjoyable, until my brother noticed my budgie sitting out in the open air on the side of a cracked pot. My sister's desperate lunge was only enough to serve as a sort of push. The budgie exploded up into the air and disappeared over the neighbour's fence. Our far-knit little community formed a search party.

We searched fervently for two things. One: the budgie. Two: someone to blame. Eventually we gave up on the futile birdcalls. Instead, futile blame-laying became the order of the day. As for the budgie, he probably became lunch of the day for some hungry moggie. Or perhaps he managed to avoid the cats and starve to death instead. I never knew what happened to him when he disappeared over that fence. I

just knew he wasn't coming back. Unable to find someone to blame, the members of the search party settled for telling each other to get lost. Then we each disappeared back over our own fences.

Quite a few years passed before I bought my fourth budgie. I bought him when I moved into a flat of my own. He's still alive and seems happy enough. A little nutty, I suppose, from staring at himself in a swinging mirror for the last six years. But then, I guess we all get like that. He's a feisty little bugger and he knows how to work his beak. Changing his food and water trays means getting near him, means pain. In a couple of years there won't be much of the hand that feeds him left to bite. It hurts, but I like his style, admire it even. I always open the cage for him to fly around, but it's a privilege that, unlike my previous birds, he seems indifferent to. He barely leaves his perch. Now and then he'll unleash a flurried blizzard of tiny feathers as he makes a quick bolt around the main room, but he never stays out long. The budgie and flying is like a fat guy and jogging. He's what you might call a perch potato. He seems fairly content, but I've always felt guilty about the size of his cage. So two weeks ago on my birthday, I bought him a new one.

The new cage was black. It was easily three times as tall and twice as wide as his old one. The bars ran horizontally around it, instead of vertically. To a human, this gave it less of a sense of being jail-like. To a budgie, I don't think it made a difference. The new cage had three perches, unlike the old cage with its well-worn lone roost. Also, you could open it right up. Even the roof folded outwards in two halves so that the budgie could take straight off into the air and fly if it wanted to. The front panel of the cage could be unlatched so that it swung completely open, removing all visual barriers in front of the perch. The food and water trays were big enough for a family of small pigs, let alone a single bird. There were mirrors and bells everywhere. In the corner, a huge branch of gum leaves hung down, alongside a massive slab of compressed seed and honey. The perch potato would be in heaven.

At least he would be eventually. To get to a heaven, I guess the budgie first had to believe in a god. And that god was me. A god that had just been to a birthday dinner with his father and his father's verging-on-illegally-young girlfriend. A god that had got drunk to the point of telling his father to stick his life-after-thirty advice up his cancer-ridden colon, and her to stick her life-in-general advice wherever she stuck old men's cocks. A god that had broken two bottles as he struggled to grab the rest of the beer from their fridge. That had held his bleeding finger hard against his

earlobe so he could hear the cab phone operator over the wailing and the shouting. That had given up trying to hear anything and just walked home.

I suppose it didn't help that I tripped over with the cage in the dark when I got back to my room. The noise of me sprawling across the floor and my bottle smashing in the corner was more than enough to put the budgie on the alert. After that, it took me about two hours of slurred coaxing to realise that the six years of trust I thought I had built up with the budgie amounted to squat. Apparently I wasn't even his friend, let alone his master, let alone his god. I was bloodshot eyes and dried-blood ear stuck to a sweaty pale face swaying on a chair. I was endless cigarettes and coughing up of lungs.

The budgie sat cautiously, a little defiantly, at the opposite end of his tiny white cage, while I leered through tobacco smoke like a cat at a mouse hole. My initial tender attitude soon gave way to drunken apathy. I decided to simply reach in and pull the little bugger out. It's the best thing for him, I told myself. I had never tried it before, though I suspected, and I believe the budgie did too, that it would be a simple enough task to grab him. I deliberately tried not to use too much force. I didn't want to scare him shitless. I had grown quite close to the ball of feathers over the years and I didn't want him dying of a panic-related heart attack.

I should have been more firm. Each half-hearted grab only resulted in a panicked flurry of feathers and a shrill scared click of the throat. The only things I managed to hold on to were his beautiful tail feathers. The sight of them caught in my own bloody fingers made me stop. After all, the whole idea was to *not* freak the budgie out. I wrapped a strip of my shirt around the bleeding and sat down to think of another less tail-feathers-caught-in-bloody-fingers way. Then it struck me like a dull, throbbing pulse.

I placed the budgie's old cage on top of the new one, both with doors open. Then I gradually began removing all of his landmarks. First, the food and water trays which I put on the floor of the new cage. Then I cut the wires that held his little loft bed of three sticks which I then individually dragged out of the cage or snapped as required. Next went his red mirror with its tiny bell. Last of all, I gently reached in and removed the perch he was sitting on. He hopped away as I dragged it slowly through the door, until he got to the end and simply dropped down to the cage floor. I backed off and let him stand there in the empty cage, among the sand and his own shit. Perhaps out of resignation, or simply out of curiosity, he almost immediately

poked his little head out of the front door and started climbing to the top of his cage. As soon as he was out, I shut the door and held the cage with him perched on top, in front of his new home. Quick as a flash he jumped inside. I shut his door, locked my door and stumbled to bed.

After much tossing and turning it was the next day. My drawn curtains would have rendered the room dark, except that I had fallen asleep with the TV on again. I still couldn't get used to sleeping alone in total darkness. Through a flickering haze I awoke to see the budgie sitting quietly on the perch. Usually by this time he would be singing me awake, or at least fluttering around a bit. There was nothing. He just perched there and stared at me like I'd stolen his home.

Over the last two weeks he has made feeble, pathetic attempts to access his new food bin. He used to be able to slide down his vertical bars to the food below. It isn't possible with the horizontal ones. He has to step cautiously, weighing up every move for a few seconds before he continues his descent. Now and then he slips and plunges to the cage floor where he chirps in dismay and rights himself with all the fumbling grace of a three-day old chick. I don't know if it's deliberate or not. All I know is that it makes me feel very guilty. He's completely ruined my present, the selfish bastard. He has a bigger cage. More room. More playthings. More doors to get in and out. He's supposed to love it. Instead, he's thrown himself into defiant depression. And so here I am, dancing like a naked muppet to the sounds of the new Tom Waits album, hoping to cheer my fourth budgie up. And I'm wondering if a budgie could actually die of depression, and I'm really hoping not. And I'm wondering what people would make of this if they saw me springing around my room naked. I'm wondering whether they would still say I was mad. But I know they won't see me or say anything. Because you can't see through locked doors and drawn curtains.



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