

## Pretty Bird

Psychology, for all its good graces, is a narrow science at best and a contrivance at worst. For that reason, I insist everything you are about to read is true, even when the minds of the world wish it were not.

On the evening of a wintry Thursday, I left my work feeling more embittered than usual. Sales is a difficult profession, and I loath to admit that I was never one for conversation and persuasion, thinking myself a better listener than speaker. Clients came slowly to me, and my pay was meager. On that wintry Thursday, my pay was especially meager, being no more than a few green bills slick with sweat and coated in pocket-lint. I made my way along Fifteenth, passed the old pauper with a stump for a leg, and around the skinny billboard for Raleigh cigarettes, the one that depicted a strapping fellow in a fine suit with a well-to-do wife at his back. In her hands was a pack of golden Raleigh's. *Your wife will love the smell as much as you love the taste*, it said in big red lettering.

A wind blew in from the bay, cruel fingers that clawed me to the bone. What I would have given then for a nice suit and a pack of Raleigh's. I ducked through an alley whose walls were crying and followed a familiar string of potholes and ruts that led to mine and my wife's apartment. It was an ugly brick square with windows stained in pigeon droppings. Climbing the iron stairs—the lift was out of order—I found the way to my apartment, wondering whether the door would be stuck. It was, and I pushed till my shoulder was sore, and only then did it yield..

Of all the dark displeasures that haunted me, there was one light that gave me life. There, on the wall opposite the door, passed the dirt-brown couch and beneath the peeling wallpaper, stood a black cage framed with iron bars more slender and shapely than a young dancer. Within this cage, a green parakeet bobbed its head, singing a song in a shrill and incomprehensible voice. Its eyes, blacker than onyx, simmered with what I had thought was requited love. Cursed with hindsight, writing on my infatuation with that bird fills me with such dread and frustration that I can hardly steady my own hand. I had loved that pretty bird—that was what my wife and I called him. Pretty bird. And how pretty he was. After dinner, I would sit and talk with pretty bird, just as I always had.

I set my coat and hat atop the crooked rack that guarded my stuck door, then set about my routine that began with the parakeet. "Hello, pretty bird," I would say. Somedays, if I was lucky, he would mimic my words and speak as a person might. But that wintry Thursday, I was not so lucky.

After our exchange, I started for the kitchen, conscious of how the floorboards creaked under my heel. A meal would be laying out for me, cold and lonely and forgotten. That night, it was tomato soup.

As I write this, I become aware of my deceitful nature, realizing now that I lied. I had said there was only one light that gave me reason to live, but in truth, there were two lights. While one shone with the splendor of St. Peter's gate, the other burned a sinister orange like the Pits of Hell. That other love was smoke. Cigarettes! Taking the soup in hand, I dug through a pant pocket, groping for that slender and smooth box. The tobacco burned, ensnaring my senses. At one taste, my chill dissipated. Upon the second, that colorless and dull living room blossomed as a spring flower might, impressing upon me a jovial and dizzying vigor. Even the soup tasted as a good soup should!

Pretty bird felt it too, as he danced and sang within the bounds of his cage. I sang with him, taking on a rolling duet that stoked my neighbor's fury. Lost in the thralls of passion, I could not have cared any less what they thought. That was until my wife returned home.

She had better luck with the door than I, and when she said hello to pretty bird the parakeet chirruped in response. I soured at once, frustrated because she had trampled upon my good mood. Yet, this was routine. I swallowed my reservations and exchanged a pleasant word with her.

She was a pretty woman. A shining example of youth in form, and when I had met her all those years prior I had counted myself among the luckiest men in the world. But luck no longer. Her hair was cut and orderly, yet left messy enough to be seen as playful, and her clothes were black and sleek. I took a drag on my cigarette—it was no Raleigh, but it was good enough—then let loose a fog that strangled the already stillborn air. “Where have you been,” I asked her, always dreading her answer for fear that she might one day be honest with me.

On that wintry Thursday, she lied again, telling me she was out with her friends.

“That’s nice,” I said, wondering what it was like to go-out and have friends. All I had were my cigarettes. And pretty bird, though the parakeet was perched on rotten ice after having greeted my wife, but not me. I was the worker of the house. Who did the bird think provided him his feed and water? I sucked the last bit of sin from that cigarette before starting on my third.

My wife danced away, humming little tunes to herself like she was innocent. For all the banes of smoking, there is one good that comes of it, and that good is the clarity of mind. Clarity no psychologist can provide. I watched her walk and smelled her scent: both wrought with expensive liquor. Worse, however, was the necklace she wore. White pearls set one after another around her slender neck like a curling snake. A gift from a friend, she had said when I asked.

Just the thought of it made my blood burn.

With my wife out of the room, I settled onto that beaten couch of ours and looked over to pretty bird, quietly cursing him for treating me so illy. Yet, the charm of an animal derives from its supposed innocence, and I couldn't stay mad at pretty bird for long. Sitting here now, stained by that ill-tool called hindsight, I can only curse human folly.

Pretty bird was an okay conversationalist when he chose to be. As I wrote earlier, I do not consider myself a speaker, but a listener. Yet, with pretty bird I am often forced to speak on account of me being a man and him being a bird. On certain days, I would practice sale's pitches. Other days, I might regale him with stories of my youth, all the while treating him to generous clouds of sweet smoke—if women loved the smell, certainly birds did too.

“Pretty bird,” I said, feeling sadder than usual, “what’s it like living in that cage?”

“You live in a cage,” pretty bird said, his voice a shrill parody of human speech.

I leapt from the couch, my heart thundering. My eyes wandered between the cage and my shaking hands, but it wasn't possible. I reached for rationalizations as all men do after witnessing the bizarre. No doubt, the bird's speech was only a coincidence. Still fearful, I asked pretty bird to repeat himself. "A cage," the bird croaked and fluttered its wings.

So terrible was my surprise, I feared I might faint. After enough time passed, my terror waned, and I brought my breathing under control. My wife's steps echoed through the small flat as she moved between our bedroom and the bathroom—no doubt, preparing to go back out. I leaned close and spoke to pretty bird in a low whisper, all the while stealing glances over my shoulder. "A cage? How do you mean?"

For a time, pretty birds only bobbed his head and rustled his feathers, and I thought myself crazed. A talking bird? *Bah!* Then the bird did the most damned thing. He crooked his head to the side and looked to me with the eyes of a man and not of a bird. Beady white eyes and dark brown irises. "Your wife," he said. Thirsting for clarity, I lit up another cigarette, thinking for a moment to offer it to pretty bird, but stopping myself at the last moment. "Your wife," he said again.

"What about my wife?"

"Your cage."

Discovery hit me like a ton of bricks. "She's cheating, isn't she?" I had to fight to keep my voice under control. "Speak, bird, tell me the truth of it, or I swear I'll throw you out."

"Cage," was all he said.

So great was my rage that those words were all I needed to justify my next action. Writing now, I realize I abandoned reason—not because I trusted pretty bird, but because I trusted him for the wrong reason. I sought my wife, finding her in the bedroom readdressing her makeup. I was furious, and had it not been for my cigarettes, I might've acted the fool. "Honey, I forgot to say, I'll be going out of town for work in a few and won't be back till Sunday."

She looked at me curiously and frowned, asking why I had to leave. But I was too sharp and saw through her feigned words. She was glad to see me go; I hold that truth now as I held it then.

With the seeds of treachery set, and my plan in place, I packed a suitcase and immediately departed the flat, but stopped near the apartment's broken lift so that I might spy when she left. I watched for what might have been hours. My nails dug into the alabaster walls and sweat trickled down my spine. But my patience paid in dividends when she finally left the apartment, dressed in a slimming dress that was as lovely as it was maddening. But I was not mad then, and I am not mad now.

Riding a wave of vengeance, I returned to our apartment and made for the bedroom, but not without first visiting pretty bird. His eyes looked like a bird's. Resuming my scheming, I set about laying my snare. Hiding in the bedroom closet, I submerged myself in darkness, unable to see the closet door's paneling though it were upon my nose. I waited. And waited. All the while trembling in violent anticipation.

The apartment door creaked open, bringing with it the whisper of conversation. Anger might have propelled me from that closet, had I not tasted that sweet anticipation--waiting for that perfect time to reveal myself. The conversation drew close, then entered the bedroom. Footsteps rose and fell. My wife's voice sang, calling the man with her handsome. The springs of our mattress creaked and groaned, and my legs buckled. Should there have been a light in the closet, I might still have been unable to see given how furious I was.

Then my wife told the man that she loved him, and I couldn't hear it anymore.

I leapt from the closet, throwing the door against the wall with a vicious cry. My wife screamed, but I paid her no mind. Where was the man? The room was empty, save for her. I looked under the bed and down the hall, but everywhere was empty. "Where is he?" I barked. In her panic, she couldn't muster anything beyond a whimper. Like the kettle atop a stove, I steamed with fury.

Writing this now when I am no longer cursed with wrath, I cringe. I struck her many times. Bruises as red as apples swelled atop my fists, but that couldn't stop me. Man's savagery knows no cage. I struck till she was silenced, leaving her nothing more than a gory mess atop my mattress. Reeling, I fell onto a nearby wall for support, and wished for nothing more than the taste of a Raleigh on my tongue. As I settled, a cry was taken up, one that was utterly monstrous and inhuman. Bestial and foreign, a cry that reverberated through my head like the wailing sounds of a hungry babe. A cry of part terror and part triumph. When I looked at my wife's corpse, I witnessed the source of the cry: pretty bird, with eyes like a man and not like a bird, white and brown and filled with a man's treachery.

"I love you," pretty bird croaked. "You're handsome."