

A Difficult Parrot

By Kathy Childs

My name is Suni. I was smuggled into Australia inside a cardboard tube with small holes poked in the side. When they opened up the tube I was too groggy to put up much of a fight. They locked me up. Took away my freedom. I am a prisoner.

I can see this strange land through the wire that separates me from it. I see wide open spaces when I am used to dense forest. A harsh dry glare replaces the dappled sunlight of my home. The trees outside emit a strange heady smell and seem to be home to small bear-like animals that look permanently dazed. The insect life is loud, clicking and chirping and the snakes curl up on the warm earth instead of draping themselves over the limbs of trees.

I nip at the bars that restrict me. I am relentless, desperate. My beak is chipped and sore from the effort but there is not even a dent. I watch the tiny local birds flit in and out, flaunting freedom that is afforded them because of their size. They dart in, grab the seed, and swoop around the cage taunting, teasing, then dash out through the diagonal webbing that confines me. They torment me. They strut around the branches of the gum tree then swoop around the roof of my cage. Do they revel in my captivity? There are others with me here, refugees from different lands; Tara and Tizzy the colourful toucans, Bob the blue pigeon, and Mac the scarlet macaw. Me, I'm a sun conure parrot from Brazil. I was blown out to sea and hitched a ride aboard a ship. They treated me well, fed me, made sure I had shelter in the storms, and then betrayed me. Each of my new friends has a similar story, of escape, flight or fear, of loss. When we arrived in this foreign land they did not welcome us, they

imprisoned us. We do not look like the locals so we are caged, locked away, and seldom visited. Why are we not celebrated for our difference, our diversity?

Days turn into weeks; weeks into months. A man arrives. He grins. Points. A net swings. A sweaty hand. A laugh. Tara calls out, Bob claws at the net to try and free me and Mac watches quietly staying up high, away from trouble. I am separated, isolated.

My new cell is two-foot square with a perch that swings dangerously as I am carried away. Water splashes and mixes with the spilt grains on the floor of the cage. I cling to the bars, screech, claw, and nip. I can no longer see them, my new colourful friends. I scream. They are all I have. All I had.

My small cage hangs next to a window. I can see the sun but the room is cold. He wants me to “talk”. It doesn’t take me long to learn that if I am to eat I must respond. I learn to read his signals, recognise the actions that separate reward from punishment. Today he is pleased. He opens the cage door. I am being granted my freedom. I spread my wings, lift effortlessly into the air. I swoop, dive, flit. There is sunlight to my left, clouds, and trees. I let out a loud trill and dart towards the light, to freedom. A thud. Pain. White light, then blackness.

I am back in my cage; my wing is fractured. I sit on my perch and watch the sun rise and set without me. I may be broken but I am not cowed. I will find a way out.

I have made a new friend in this place. Percival. A piranha. He swims endlessly on the bookshelf next to my cage. Round and round and round and round. They say fish have short memories and don’t remember the last circuit, but I am sure he does.

We do not share a language, but we understand one another's need for freedom. I watch day by day as his desperation increases. He swims, and then sprints, faster and faster around the bowl, creating a maelstrom and finally with one mighty leap he is outwinded and breathless on the floor. Did he know that to leave his bowl meant death? He flops and gasps on the dusty floor, his movements becoming slower, his breathing shallow, then his sleek body relaxes and he is gone. I am alone again.

The man merely grunted when he found Percival, then unceremoniously flushed him. Is this to be my end too?

I have been a prisoner here for 264 days. Over the weeks my plumage has lost its gloss, my feathers collect on the bottom of the cage as I peck and pull. My beak has lost its shimmer and is dull; my eyes have become lifeless. I no longer bother to peck at the small mirror that hangs in my cage. I wonder why he keeps me here, locked away in this dark dank room. He no longer speaks with me, feeds me erratically and waters me less. Freedom was only a dream.

I am curled up in the corner of the cage lying on empty grain husks and mouldy newspaper. The cage door creaks as it is opened. I am too despondent to attempt an escape. I am lifted from my perch, cradled in her palm. It is warm, comforting. I utter a faint cry.

"Poor little caged darling." She strokes my head. "What has my brother done to you?" She reaches over, draws the curtains back and opens the window. An opportunity to escape, a chance for freedom - but it comes too late. I am frail, beaten.

“Fly little bird. Fly.” She throws me up and out. I fall, tumble, the ground looms up. I have been caged too long. But there is muscle memory and years of flying in my blood, and now there is hope. My wings unfurl. I halt my descent. Flap furiously. I fly upwards, outwards, away.

Freedom isn't quite what I expected. The natives chase me from their trees, fight me for the available food and bully me. I am welcome to my freedom but not in their neighbourhood. The winters here are wet and cold and being an aficionado of the tropics I'm finding it hard to adjust. Food is scarce. I seek out others like me, those who share a common bond. We are ostracised but we are resilient. We appreciate our liberation and will take what opportunities we have. We will not complain.

We adapt. We pose for pictures and we are fed. I know I'm a good looking guy but there's only so many photo shoots a bird can do before he gets over it. They just kept coming, a tidal wave of humanity flashing and clicking. Celebrate the difference my new friends say but I just want to blend in.

I move on. I find a new home. Mrs Callahan is good to me. An old wrinkly human with kind eyes and a soft voice. She feeds me and has set up a nesting box on her porch out of the rain. No doors, no bars, no cage. I'm free to come and go as I please. I try to act like the local birds so that I don't run afoul of the natural order of things. My lacklustre peers, the doves, the miners, kookaburras and the sparrows look at me with envy. And so they should. I mean how many shades of brown are there? Is it their uniformity, their sameness that bands them together?

They need me and mine. We add diversity, colour and interest to a landscape that could so easily be monotone. Many of those who envy me, who wish me gone, are foreigners themselves – they, or their parents before them, were imported over the

years. They have chosen to ignore their past, or to forget what it was like to be the new guy on the block. All they perceive is that I am different and I come to take what is theirs. Me, I only want the chance to settle into my new life, to make friends, and to enjoy what they take for granted – their liberty.

This is my home now too. But in the deep of the night I ponder my new freedom, and I ask myself - if a newcomer arrives and attempts to insinuate itself into Mrs Callahan's affection - how will I react? Will I become territorial and callous? Will I become like them? I am not a difficult parrot but I can see how easily I could become one.