

Papa's Parrot

by Adam Sifre

He wasn't there for the beginning or the end. In the beginning, he was still a wild thing. Nothing more than a voice in the chorus of the Dark Continent, back when it was a thing of terrible beauty and attracted people like the old man; people who breathed adventure the way mortals breathe air. In the beginning, he was still part of the place that would twice try to kill the old man, and fail both times.

By then, however, the African Grey had become a Cuban national, and had forgotten all about the jungle. On the small island, its beak and feathers were tempered with rivers of dark rum, fired by a thousand tropical sunsets, and stained with cheap smoke and Royal Deluxe ink.

All these gifts the old man gave the bird. All these and one more. The words. The old man's words. Spoken most often in the small hours, after the bottle was finally shelved and before daybreak would come and ruin everything. The old man spoke, sometimes sober, often not. Concise. Perfect. Slurred. It did not matter. The bird drank them all in equally, soaking them up over ten thousand nights.

The old man spoke through nights that were never exactly quiet. His words were often accompanied by faint strains of the richest music known to man, played in a local bar known to only a few.

After the first year, the bird's cage was always open. During the day it had free reign of the small home. There was a window, and that was always open as well. The bird never left. By then the old man's words had tethered the bird as if they were steel links of chain. At night, though, the bird always returned to his cage, where it waited for the old man to speak.

Sometimes the words were spoken in code, clacked out on a typewriter which was old even then, when such things were often new. The click-clack code reminded the parrot of rain, and sometimes this would lull it to sleep and into bird dreams of ghost jungles; places long forgotten in the bird's waking hours.

He was not there for the beginning. But he was there for much. "The Old Man and The Sea" feathered the cage. The words spoken aloud, repeated in click-clack, edited, repeated again. The bird remembered. Not all of it, not everything. But enough. The old man — and he *was* old, even to parrots who are in the habit of outliving us all — had a way of writing words that stuck. He had no use for the others.

It was only a matter of time and words, before Papa's parrot began to change. How could it not? If it had been a dog or a cat, or anything else, things might have been different. A dog is a dog. A cat is a cat. But a parrot? A parrot is always something more than a parrot.

Papa's parrot listened to the Old Man and the Sea. It learned of the fish that was not a fish and was all fish. It bore witness as the old man conjured up the perfect, eternal struggle. The fisherman's simple heartbreak settled on the bird's small, delicate bones, like a piece of fantastical scrimshaw.

Later, much closer to the end, the parrot learned 'For Whom the Bell Tolls,' first delivered in a rainstorm of click-clacks, and later by Papa's own deep, sawdust voice. The old man spoke and the parrot's eyes would pin in and out in excitement. The words stuck, as they always did, and the parrot remembered and changed again.

One day Papa left. He did not come back. Ketchum, Idaho, is not the sort of ending the Old Man would have chosen to write. It does not stick the way Cuba sticks. But terrible endings were a genetic defect in Papa's family and he could not be faulted for this one.

One day a brown man came and took the bird. He kept the cage door closed, but he was a nice man. The bird did not talk, and the brown man did not seem to mind. He gave the bird crackers and nuts and water. The bird enjoyed the crackers and nuts, but it felt alone.

The new room had no typewriter. There were no bottles of rum, either full or empty. The brown man did not smoke and there were no stacks of paper or rain patter of words. Not even the rich strains

of music were part of the bird's world anymore. There was only a radio that sometimes played music already robbed of life.

A long time passed.

One night the brown man sat at his desk, listening to the radio. The bird, Papa's bird, pulled a loose tail feather free with its sharp beak. The feather was sunset red and orange. The bird held it in one claw. The brown man looked at the bird with curiosity. The bird did not drop the feather.

"Eighty-four days now without taking a fish."

The words startled the brown man. He had never heard the bird speak. He did not understand what they meant. He was a nice man, but somehow the words did not stick to him.

The claw held the feather and for a while the bird made strange motions in the air. Then the bird hopped a little to its right and waited.

The man stared and the bird imagined that the brown man's own eyes were pinging.

"Ink."

The word came out small, almost forlorn. It was the last word Papa's bird ever said. Years later, when the brown man had become an old man himself, but not *the* old man, he would sometimes wonder about that night and the bird's last spoken word. At such times, the old, brown man almost convinced himself that the word had come out as a request.

But it was a fleeting thought, and it did not stick.

THE END

