

The Birds

by Jeff Goldberg

When I left my wife, I got the birds. Two parakeets, blue and yellow, male and female. They were loud, messy and, because my ex rarely cleaned their cage, smelly. So I got them.

At first, I called him Rod and her Tippy. Rod Taylor and Tippy Hedren? The Birds? Get it? But I'd changed their names to George and Gracie because something about them reminded me of a show biz couple perpetually down on their luck. Maybe it was because George had been hitting the water dish pretty heavy. Many mornings I'd find him sprawled like a fluffy blue blob across his perch with the water dish spilled or overturned on the bottom of the cage. You could hear him all day poking at the dish in obsessive blind need to drown his sorrows in spillage.

"Come on, fuck-face! WHAT?! Can't ya see how, WHAT?! As I was saying, WHAT?!"

Soon alfalfa and hemp sprouts were growing up out of the piney litter at the bottom of the cage, watered by George's little drinking problem and fertilized by his guano.

Gracie, in true codependent fashion put up with his sodden shenanigans, babying him by regurgitating mushed seed into his mouth.

"Eat, George, eat, eat, eat."

"WHAT?! Eat, eat?"

"Eat, eat, eat."

"WHAT?!"

Desperately hoping it would pull George out of his feathery funk, Gracie would do anything she could think of to be noticed whenever I was in the room, as if I had the power to put their names up in lights again.

One Sunday morning I was sitting in the living room.

"George, he's watching us, come on, pretend we're mating. That'll get his attention."

So began an odd series of actions and exchanges, love nips, squawks, giggly twitters and tweets that ended with George awkwardly splayed on her back.

"Me, me, me. Pay attention to me," she chirped.

"Can't you see I'm picking my toes?"

"Me, me, me—," she softly warbled.

"WHAT?!"

"Me, me. Come on kiss me. Maybe he'll notice."

"Okay. WHAT?!"

Kiss. Kiss. He chewed on her tongue. Her tongue was purple.

"Is he looking yet?"

"Can't you see I'm preening?"

"Come on groom me?"

"WHAT?!"

"Groooooooooom meeeeeee mee me."

"Okay. Okay."

"My pit, my breast, my back. More me. More me."

"Can't you see I'm on the cuttle bone?"

"Come on."

"WHAT?!"

"Ring my bell. Ring my bell."

"Pick my feet. Pick my feet."

"Is he looking yet?"

"WHAT?"

"Chase me, bite me, step on me. Now. Now. Now."

"WHAT?"

"That's better."

"WHAT?"

"Me, me, me."

"WHAT?"

It went on that way for about a year, until George got sick. A tumor in his lower abdomen, common in male parakeets once they reach the age of seven or so, the vet told me. There was nothing to be done.

The tumor grew until eventually it was the size of a golf-ball. George managed to waddle around the cage with the huge lump between his legs to the food dish, up the ladder, and onto his perch. He didn't seem in much pain, at least he didn't squawk about it. Gracie, meanwhile, was sweet to him, feeding him, grooming him, singing to him and keeping him company as he slowly faded away. Near the end, he'd sleep most of the day with his head tucked under his wing and his body wedged against the bars for support lest the weight of the tumor tip him over. He died on the first day of spring, and we buried him in the back yard.

At first, Gracie seemed bewildered and quiet, but after a day she started chirping, eating, and hopping around the cage again. It seemed like it might be okay to get her a new mate.

