

A Wing and a Prayer, Or How I Found My Nesting Instinct

BYLINE: Noelle Hancock

On my last birthday, I decided to buy a parakeet. I'd been out of college for a year and was living in a pet-friendly building in Murray Hill, in an alcove studio also known as "Fort Me." For the first time in my life, I was living alone, with no boyfriend and no one to take care of other than myself and the occasional bartender. But after a year of reveling in a state of "me-osis," this existence had become increasingly remote and unfulfilling. I wanted something to love that demanded my time and attention.

A garden was out of the question, thanks to a phobia that began at age 6, when I watched Steve Martin get eaten alive by a plant named Audrey. No, I needed a pet. I decided against a cat because if I wanted to be ignored, I'd get married. And I refused to get a dog because if I wanted something constantly going for my crotch, I could go to any bar in the greater tri-state area. So I settled on a bird. It doesn't smell, it comes with its own carrying case, and I really wanted to put it on my shoulder and pretend I was a pirate. There were other mitigating factors, of course, like the low maintenance and low cost -- but the pirate thing was huge.

The first step in "nesting": I purchased two parakeets and named one bird Jesus (for the sake of whimsy) and the other Blue (because he was and I was feeling unironic). But as soon as I set up their cage, the problems began. Gazing at them in the pet store, I'd imagined feeding them Cheerios and teaching them trendy locution while they reclined on my pointer finger. No dice. These 'keets, clearly, wanted no part of me. Every time I tried to get closer, they scuttled sideways and moved away. I gave them food, love and attention and got nothing in return. They were, essentially, my ex-boyfriend with wings.

I'd gotten hardened New York birds, raised in the mean aisles of Petco. They weren't about to talk, play or perform some cane-and-top-hat triple-time step to entertain me. Not only did they not like me, they didn't even like each other: They immediately began knocking each other off their wooden perch like that carnival game with the balance beam and those giant foam jousting poles. For a while this was massively entertaining, my own 24-hour live steel-cage match. But a week of careful observation -- and the occasional off-cage betting -- revealed that there was no "match" about it: Jesus was a hater. Time and again, he pounced on Blue from behind, biting his neck and causing him to thrash about and squawk indignantly. The more Blue retaliated, the worse the beatdown. Clearly, the guy from *The Big Lebowski* was right: Nobody fucks with the Jesus.

There was only one recourse. I went back to Petco and traded Jesus in under

the disapproving gaze of Peaches, the transvestite (wo)manager. When the prisoner exchange was complete, I emerged with my little feathered Barrabas, and on the way home decided that He would also be called Jesus.

And it was so.

Now, according to First Thessalonians 5:2, Jesus is supposed to return "like a thief in the night." Well, He did not kick in my back door and make off with my Sony flat-screen, but He did rob me of sleep. Every morning, as soon as the sun rose -- "Caw! Caw!" -- the apartment was filled with incessant squawking, and not just from Him. They operated in tandem, like a nuclear launch device that requires two keys to fire the missile. I tried covering the cage with a blanket or -- in what was not my finest hour -- putting it in the shower with the curtain drawn. But Jesus would not be silenced.

Looking for answers, I turned to the Internet. However, it soon became clear that while Jeeves knows why the caged bird sings, he has no idea why it squawks. A bit more e-browsing unearthed a Web page boasting "little known facts about birds," the most disturbing of which was the fact that Winston Churchill's parrot is still alive and well: Charlie celebrated his 104th birthday this past January. According to the site, the average parakeet life span is 20 years. I balked. What had I gotten myself into? Hell, I'd be 40 and they'd still be there in their cage, squawking, ignoring me and playing bridge! I certainly couldn't trade them in again.

It was time for firm discipline, effective immediately. I was the sheriff of the apartment, dammit! Searching for supplies with which to exercise my authority, I settled on a plastic spray bottle. My plan was to mist them with water when they acted up, although why I thought this would deter their misconduct, I have no idea. It didn't work, of course, but I did discover that if you spritz them enough times, their wings get too heavy and they thunk to the floor of the cage, which is unbelievably amusing, especially after you've had a few drinks. Anyway, this went on for a matter of months -- me trying to get the birds to play with me and stop misbehaving and them, well, not.

Then I awoke one Saturday to a wicked stomach flu. My life flashed before my eyes, along with everything I'd eaten over the previous 24 hours. All I could do was lie on the couch and stare at the cage, the only thing in my line of vision. If I'd been able to move, I would have administered myself last rites and passed on into the next world.

Yet, as if blessed with a sudden omniscience, Blue and Jesus seemed to know that now was not the time for ca-cawing, enthusiastic seed-scattering and extruding their poo so that it landed on my floor. Instead, they twittered, sang little ditties and were basically cutting footloose. Fulfilling their original purpose in my time of need, they gave me something to focus on besides myself.

Just as I'd been about to wash my hands of them -- not to mention asphyxiate on my own vomit -- those parakeets made my life worth living. When I felt like a human being again, I purchased \$60 worth of their favorite seed treats in the flavors of various fruits of the woods. Peaches approved.

It's only been a short while, but I think it's safe to say that we've emerged renewed from our experience, our sins forgiven if not forgotten. They've stopped all the shenanigans and have even kept up the song-and-dance numbers. We're not quite on the Cheerios level yet -- perhaps by the time they're Charlie's age. In the meantime, I'll just be happy that they no longer squawk me out of bed at dawn.

Thanks be to Jesus.