

Sympathy

Emma Woodward

I KNOW WHY the caged bird sings; although there is nothing poetic about this poor budgie. Caged in a tiny space, made tinier by the colourful toys and cooing smiles that crowd it. And when the old dears have finished their clucking and finger-wagging and “Who’s a pretty boy thens”, and have shuffled away, there are only the old spotless couches and hospital smells, and the ever ticking clock. Not much for a creature painted sky blue; that however small was made to live and roam the wide skies. *Why is it that just because this creature is small we believe we can submit it to this?*

Ben leaves his perch on the green couch and goes over to the budgie’s cage. He feels like he shouldn’t; he’s just one more giant person crowding the bird but he can’t help it, and there’s nothing else to do here. Sitting on the green couch—looking down at his black school shoes—feels exactly like waiting outside the principal’s office. Ben doesn’t know which he hates more: the corridor outside the principal’s office, or the common room at the nursing home. At least the nursing home has a budgie. But they shouldn’t, not in Ben’s opinion.

The bird blinks at him blankly. He probably wants to know where his friends are. In the wild budgies, budgerigars, nest in colonies of hundreds. They’re nomadic, not stuck in one place like this poor thing. Ben would like to take the budgie outside and release him. But he can’t. This bird was bred in captivity, and budgies aren’t even native to

this part of Australia. *How would he survive? He wasn't even the right colour; budgies in the wild are green.*

Eventually Ben's dad returns with Grandpa. It has taken Grandpa John a long time to shuffle from his room to here, and it seems to take forever again as Ben watches him shuffle down the corridor toward the couches. Ben's dad always says that, "Grandpa's body has let him down, but his mind's still sharp as a tack."

The three generations sit on the green vinyl couches. Ben's dad and Grandpa John drink tea and talk about the roadworks that delayed them on their way here, and how the area was all paddocks when Ben's grandpa was a boy. Ben decides the nursing home is worse than the corridor at school. There you know why you are in trouble—you'll get told off and be given detention or yard duty. But then you're free to go play with your friends. Here it's like you're forever waiting to be called into the principal's office. *Poor Grandpa—old people don't have much of a life—what is there to talk to them about? "Today we had sandwiches for lunch"?*

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John looks around the reception area—at the floral curtains, and the budgie in its cage, and his grandson Ben swinging his legs against the green vinyl couch. Poor kid—young people really haven't lived much. John asks Ben about school, about girls, about what he wants to be, but he has no stories to tell. He hasn't had a girlfriend or a job, been married or raised children, or lived through depression or war. *What is there to talk about?*

John sits in his room after Dave and Ben have left. Looking at the sepia photograph of Margaret surrounded by a few of her watercolours. Bunches of perfectly drawn kangaroo paws and sky blue fairy wrens. He thinks of the budgie that sits in its cage near the desk at the reception, and of Margaret saying she would never keep a bird as a pet, because it wasn't natural for them to be cooped up like that.

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Silence in the car. Dave looks out through the rain as they again stop for the roadworks catering to an ever expanding suburb. He can't imagine paddocks here.

Dave had tried to get closer to his father. Hating the silences. Hating the way memories of war were ever present, never spoken of. Dave's

dad wasn't a silent man. But mostly he would talk about when Dave and his siblings were young. Or about his own childhood in Ballarat. As long as these were the topics Dave felt that he was being kept at arm's length. The war was the major event of his dad's life. The thing which defined him. If they could only talk about it then they could have a deeper relationship. They would understand one another. He yearned for that closeness.

Dave had done a lot of research concerning the war—it had become his hobby. He thought of the movie he had watched that weekend. All about the Australian troops—the classic actors of his dad's generation. Dave was saddened to think his own generation was so weak, so passive—that's what his dad must think. *His children couldn't understand, so why talk about it?* Dave wished his generation had some great purpose, like his father's generation had.

Dave did not know that the war was not often on his father's mind. War was a memory that couldn't be ignored of course, but he didn't choose to think about it; didn't like to dwell. John had been watching TV the other day, and everything seemed to be war movies; real or imagined. There was a hunger for it. Like John and his mates before they enlisted—thinking war would be an adventure. Young people always thought war would be an adventure.

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Well John had lived through war, and he much preferred peace. He had had a wonderful life with Margaret and the kids. John liked thinking back to the old days when he was growing up. The scrapes he and his mates used to get into. Falling in love. Making a home and raising a family. These were the stories he liked to share and re-live; but his children thought they were boring.

He woke to the sounds of a nursing home half asleep, and as he drifted again, somewhere between dreams and waking, he heard the budgie's cries. Creaking and stumbling out of his bed, John crept out of his room and down the muffled hallways. There was electric light night and day here, and as he neared the common room the shrill, harsh yelps of his mind were replaced by the budgie's real cries—small and confused, neither song nor chatter. The sounds stopped as he gently lifted the sheet which made her small world night. The creature stared, startled and blinking as giant hands opened her cage. With long

forgotten deftness, he plucked the budgie from her perch, and carried her back to his room.

There he opened the brown hinged window, worried that he had clutched her too hard. He looked down at the still, small bird as he held her out into the night. Perhaps it was only the prospect of that enormous unknown freedom that stilled the bird, for she turned her head and hopped inquisitively on his hand. Then, a warm breeze began to ruffle her musty feathers and—with an experimental flap and a shiver, she gathered herself and lurched forward, soon disappearing, a small blue shadow in that huge blue night.

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That time of the morning; earthy smells and butter warm light. John lies with eyes closed. The smell of toast in the air, and soon a rooster somewhere will crow.

But the smells are wrong. He opens his eyes. Fluorescent light streams from the passage even on this perfect morning. Dry-cleaned carpets and sterile benches. Weak cordial in sturdy plastic cups. The smells of infancy and age. The whole place reminds John of the hallway outside the principal's office at his old school—a place John was very familiar with. He wonders if his son Dave thinks of this as he looks around the nursing home saying: *“This is the set-up. Got everything you need here Dad.”*

John knows his son doesn't mean it—he's only being cheerful for his sake—for the sake of finding something to say.

It must be Friday—*Dave will be here with Ben after school today.* At 4:00pm they arrive. Ben swamped in his long socks and baggy uniform. Dave with a suit and a briefcase full of hassles. They sit on the couches and drink tea.

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The nurses are talking about the budgie—they've looked everywhere. They say it won't survive in the wild, poor thing. Ben isn't so sure it will either, but his grandpa looks so sad when they say it that Ben feels the need to say something encouraging.

“I bet he's loving life out there,” Ben says. “I think he'll make it.”

Grandpa John looks startled, and frowns deeper. Maybe Ben has said the wrong thing? Then Grandpa's face relaxes, and he winks.

“That’s the spirit Ben. I think he’ll be Ok too. What do you think he’s up to right now?” And they talk for a while, imagining, before it is time to go.

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Then the starlings died.

Ben had been nursing a brood that had fallen out of their nest. His dad had told him the wildlife shelter wouldn’t take the starlings because they weren’t natives. He told Ben he should research how to look after them himself. *The birds would probably die, Dave thought, but whether they did or not it would be a good responsibility for the boy; a good life lesson.*

So Ben put the half-naked chicks in a shoebox and tried to keep them warm. Fed them with an eye dropper and took them to school. But two days later the starlings were dead.

The kids at school thought Ben was stupid—carrying a shoebox of starlings around wherever he went. The teachers felt sorry for Ben and let him. Maybe they shouldn’t have, but instead said, “You can’t bring pets to school.” Something like that. Because the boy had only prolonged their never-to-be existences a few days. He had killed them with kindness, *and what sort of a life lesson was that?*

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John doesn’t know about the starlings, so he doesn’t know this is the reason Ben is so quiet when he visits today. Not that John notices; his hearing isn’t so good today. John keeps having to ask Dave to repeat what he has just said, and he hates that. So in the end John just smiles and responds to the question he thinks has been asked. This makes Dave worry. He has always said that it is his dad’s body, not his brain that is failing him, but today Dad seems distracted and confused. Dave turns to his son.

“Ben. Ben, Grandpa asked you a question.”

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So Ben draws himself back, pulling the string attached to a balloon that has floated out the window, ‘til his mind returns to the fluoros overhead and the green couches. To the smell of cordial and carpets. To Grandpa and Dad. But Ben doesn’t stay for long—outside the

window something has just caught his eye, and now it is on the move again. Ignoring Dad and Grandpa he goes to get a closer look, and there . . . there in the garden outside the window is the nursing home budgie.

“Grandpa!” Ben shouts with urgency that startles the silent bricks. The framed embroidery and sturdy tea mugs all shuffle a little uncomfortably—though they do not deign to turn and look.

But Grandpa does. He stands at the window by Ben. It is a moment before he sees the budgie. By then Dave is there too, but Dave, who doesn’t know much about birds and somehow missed the upset over the budgie, doesn’t understand what he is seeing.

John and Ben do understand. What they see is both a miracle, and something very ordinary. What they see is nature both failing and succeeding in taking its course. What they see is a battler, a little sky blue battler.

It’s been two weeks, and the budgie is alive.