

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/2

I'm So Pretty

They call me Reuben. But that's not my real name. Len and Eleanor, David's parents, named me Reuben when they adopted me 35 years ago. Short for Reuben Sandwich. Brilliant. How'd you like to be named after a sandwich?

My real name is my jungle name, but to tell you the truth, I don't know how to spell it and even if I did, you couldn't pronounce it. I'm a Double Yellow-Headed Amazon parrot, one of the smartest breeds of parrots, known for our ability to talk. But don't expect me to say what's really on my mind. I only repeat what I've been taught.

Like Yiddish, for example. Len and Eleanor taught me a whole schmeer of Yiddish words. They thought it was hilarious when I'd squawk "Oy gaval't," or "kish miren toches," which means kiss my ass, in case you didn't know. They laughed so hard they pished their pants, as if I were a comic on the Borsht Belt, a Hennie Youngman with tail feathers.

David's mother, may she rest in peace, used to tell everyone I was Jewish. I'm not. I'm an atheist, like every other creature in the jungle, and every other plant, animal, or microscopic organism you'd care to name. What, you think a virus believes in God? A bat gets a bar mitzvah? Please. When you've seen the violence that goes on between the animals, you realize the law of the jungle has nothing to do with the Ten Commandments. It's all about tooth and claw, fight or flee, eat or be eaten.

David's parents passed away a few years ago. They went within month of each other; heart attack for him, lung cancer for her. He ate like a horse, she smoked like a chimney, so

what should you expect, a miracle? Please. The miracle was they didn't go sooner. Poor David, though. An only child. All the grief, all the cockamamie relatives, all the arrangements he had to make, yet he still found time to feed and talk to me. Perhaps I helped him get through the whole sad magilah. Who can say? At least I was there for him. Family matters in times of troubles, don't kid yourself.

Now I live in David's condo with David and his wife Melissa. I've come to love Melissa as much as I love David. And the two of them together with me, what a lovely little family we are. You should see the photos. So sweet, you could make a Hallmark card. But lately, there's been more tsoris than nachas. They fight night and day. It's enough to turn a sober bird into a serious shikker.

When I was younger, I used to get this powerful urge to go back to the jungle. With all the yelling and screaming that's going on, I'm thinking maybe it's not such a bad idea. What, you think I couldn't make it all the way there? Please. It's 4500 miles between Pittsburgh and the Amazon, as the parrot flies. So? Just point me South and watch me go. I'm not like those tweetie birds that are born and bred in parrot mills and end up afraid of their shadows. I'm not afraid of anything. Except snakes. The slimy mamsers give me the shpilkes.

Not that I'm looking to take off any time soon, mind you. I'm David's meshpokha. He taught me a whole repertoire of standards, such as *I've Been Workin' on the Railroad*, *Jimmy Crack Corn and I Don't Care*, *God Bless America*, *Don't Believe the Hype* and *Old Man River*, although now I can't hit the low notes like I used to. Some songs I sing, some I whistle, whatever strikes my fancy. Music comes naturally to me. Some parrots, believe me, they couldn't carry a tune in a bucket.

David and Melissa keep me in their bedroom. This, my friend, has its advantages. For example, I like to watch them have sex. They remind a little me of howler monkeys, except

those crazy shmeggies scream their heads off while they're going at it, while David and Melissa make sweet talk. When they're not using their mouths for other things. I always say "Mazeltov" when David comes.

Melissa doesn't mind. She thinks it's funny, and to hear her laugh, it's like happy music. She took to me right away, and let me tell you, she is one cutie petooty. Legs up to her toches, and such a gorgeous ponem, she could be a movie star. She teaches school full time, keeps a clean house, and she makes love like a tigress, hard and hot, give and take. I would take a mate like her faster than you could say Hava Negilah, but I never had the chance to shtup a female Double Yellow Head or a parakeet, even, since I was plucked from the jungle when I was a just a chick.

It's spring now, mating season. David and Melissa should be going at it like rabbits in heat, but they haven't had sex for a week, not so as much as a hand-job. All they do is argue about having children. She wants them now, he wants to wait. Wait for what, I want to ask him, for the Messiah to come? Oy, you should hear them. Such screaming, it's like two jaybirds fighting over a peanut.

O.K., so all married couples fight. Show me one that says they don't and I'll show you a couple of liars. But things got out of hand today, during lunch. Such shouting, the walls of Jericho would come tumbling down. David says I thought we had a deal about this. Deal, Melissa says, don't talk to me like I'm some lawyer you're trying to cut a *deal* with, we're talking about a baby. You make it out like I don't want one, he says. Well you sure don't act like it in bed lately, she says. What's *that* supposed to mean, he says. Think about it, asshole, she says. I whistle *O Danny Boy*, to try to distract them, but all that does is pump up the volume.

Melissa slams the bedroom door. David bangs on it, gets no answer. His face turns as red as a cardinal, and I'm afraid he'll take a conniption fit like he did when his cousin Alan

poured chocolate milk into my water dish for a joke. Some joke, the little schtunker. David shouts, "I'm leaving. And I'm taking the bird!" He grabs my cage and stomps out like a maniac.

Better he should have packed a bag. It's all I can do to keep from banging my head on my mirror. I want to tell him, slow down bubeleh, think a minute, it wouldn't kill you, all couples have their fights, she is a swell girl and you are a swell guy and fate brought the two of you together for a reason, and acting like a meshugganuh wild man is what a nudnik would do, and you're no nudnik, boychick, and these disagreements, well, they are just little speed bumps on the highway to happiness. But, as I said, I can only speak what I've been taught. I bite my tongue in frustration.

We drive around the neighborhood, circling his building three times. I know he wants to go back, but his pride won't let him. Pride. It's another word for foolishness when it gets in the way of love. I whistle *Home On The Range*—he taught me that in fifth grade, it's one of my favorites—but he doesn't get the point.

He pulls into a drive-through burger place. Not a bad idea. All this cockamamie craziness, I could use a little nosh right now. As if on cue, he rips off a piece of the bun, opens the cage door and sticks it in my feeder. Well, when in Rome. It's not bad, kind of sweet, but there's no crunch to it, and where's the protein? If I ate this drek every day I'd put on 50 grams in a week, my hand to the God I don't believe in.

We drive toward Schenley Park, down Forbes Avenue. It's the same route David takes when he bicycles from the condo to the park. I perch on the handlebars like a living hood ornament while David peddles away. It's very refreshing, the breeze in my face; not flying, exactly, but it does the trick.

Today is a warm, windy end of March day. Colorful kites fly in wide arcs like turkey vultures. Children are playing on the

swing sets nearby. I watch David watching them with a smile on his face. "You know, Reuben," he says, "it's not as if I don't want children. I want them *eventually*. It's just that I'm not sure I'm ready for all the responsibility right now. Shit, we're only 28 years old. We said we would wait until we were 30."

Again with this ferkuktah deal of his. What can I tell him? That children are a blessing, the most precious thing anyone could ever want in this world and that you should take them when you get them? By now he should know this. Instead, I bob my head up and down a few times so he knows I'm listening.

"I thought we'd agreed on this."

If his father were here, he would tell him that a woman has the right to change her mind, especially when it comes to having kindella. I should tell him myself. But all I can manage is, "I'm so pretty."

"If she thinks I'm coming back on my hands and knees to apologize, she's crazy."

Enough with this hands and knees meshugass. Yet and still, the tone of voice, it's making me nervous. What if they really do break up, what about me? Will there be joint custody? What about visitation rights? What if David remarries? Oy, I can see it now, he'll be on the rebound, he'll run off with some blonde schikseh that hates parrots, and every night she'll drape a black drop cloth over my cage like it's funeral. And then on the weekends I'll get dropped off at poor Melissa's house, and she'll be missing David and their life together so terribly, blaming herself, and it will be like she's sitting shivah. Oy, I don't need this tsoris, not at my age. Divorce is no good for anyone, except the lawyers.

David rolls his window down. He takes bite of his burger. "More, Reuben?" He opens the cage door.

I have to do something to save myself. I pretend to be interested in the bun as I hop out on his hand and then, in two flaps, I'm out the window and airborne.

"Reuben! Reuben, come back here!"

I catch an updraft, and it practically knocks the wind out of me. They say flying is like riding a bicycle, that once you learn you never forget how, but *oy gevalt*, I get tossed around like a rag doll until I get my bearings. I look down and get a flash of vertigo—what else should I expect; I'm no spring chicken. I haven't flown more than ten feet in 35 years. David is running up the hillside, waving his arms, screaming his head off at me. I feel bad about leaving him like this, I really do, but I've crossed my Rubicon, as they say. I want to tell him, you should have thought about the consequences of your behavior before you ran off like a hothead, but I as I say, I only repeat what I'm taught.

I bank to the left. I bank to the right, past a kite with a mermaid. Slowly I'm getting the hang of it. The wind feels good in my face. I remember the wind in the jungle. It was like the Internet, told you everything you needed to know, instantly. Everything traveled on the wind—the scent of predators, animals in heat, the stench of humans, sounds of the living, sounds of the dying, the coming storm. It could be life or death, depending on which way the wind blew. It was a thrill to ride it, let me tell you.

I try a couple of wide circles. Whee! Not bad, not bad at all for an old kucker. My tail feathers are a little stiff, but it's all coming back to me. Down below, people pointing at me. *Oy*, now my stomach feels queasy. I'm making droppings faster than a rabbit with diarrhea. Must be that bun disagreeing with me. That's why I get for eating non-Kosher *haserei*. David's voice grows fainter.

I fly toward the sun and try to figure out which way to go,

but to tell you the truth, I'm a total klutz when it comes to directions. And yet, I feel as if something is guiding me as I fly along, like an automatic co-pilot. Instinct? Who can say?

Far below, I spot David's car. He's tracking me, staring up through the open sunroof. For a second I think I hear his horn, but no. It's a pack of Canadian Geese. What do you call it, a gaggle? These machers, now they can fly. I drop lower to let them pass, and their draft pulls me along for a few seconds. What a rush. Zei gezunt, my Canadian friends. When I was young, I could keep pace with them, but now? Please.

I wonder how far I've gone. It's 4500 miles to the jungle. If they're all as hard as this one, I'll plotz before I'm halfway there. I need to catch my breath for a minute, plus my left carpal joint is throbbing. I must have wrenched it on that lasts arc I made. The sun is behind the clouds now. Not good. I'm schvitzing like a steam pipe, and the drop in temperature sends a chill down my spine. I could catch my death of cold. That's all I need.

I land on the roof of an apartment building. There's pigeon shmutz all over the shingles, hardly a clean place to put a talon down. A pigeon is a dirty bird if there ever was one. I sense something coming up behind me. I turn my head around 180 degrees. Sure enough, it's a pigeon. Pretty soon a whole gang of them shows up. It's true what they say, birds of a feather flock together.

A fat one, solid gray with pink around the eyes bobs his head up and down like he's davvening. Which way is South, I ask him. He gawks at me as if I just asked him the meaning of life. Another one, scrawny with brown and white speckles walks a circle around me. He's greasy and filthy as the day is long. Hey, I say, when was the last time you preened yourself? He says, do those clown colors rinse off in the rain? Some kibbitzer, this one. I tell him, none of your business, faigelah.

Maybe I should have watched my language, but who knew the putz would understand Yiddish? The whole gang of them rushes towards me with blood in their eyes. It's too late to apologize, so I take off, shnell, aching carpal and all. Pretty soon, I'm back on the same trajectory that's been guiding me all along. I fly by a bank building. I've seen this bank before, on my bike rides with David. I know it from the big clock on the outside that says 5 p.m. It will be dark soon.

My stomach is rumbling. There's a pet store on the same block as the bank. Maybe I'll drop down for a quick nosh. They must have free samples. Anything would do at this point—dried corn, millet. Some day-old groats, even, I wouldn't say no. Just the thought of it makes my beak water.

I feel a drop of rain, then another. Uh oh. It's cold, too, not like warm jungle rain. It could turn into sleet. Just my luck. The water is beading up on my feathers, but I am getting chilled to the kishkehs. I flap harder to get the blood circulating. Would you believe it, David is still following me. He's driving with sunroof down, looking up at me through the raindrops.

Now it's coming down in sheets, and I can't see bupkis in front of me. David is somewhere down below, I can feel it. I hope he closed the sunroof. He'll be soaked to the bone. There's a flash of lightning, like an electric exclamation point. I need to find a place to get out of the weather before I get barbecued.

Thunder now, and the sky is greenish gray and black. I head for the first building I can make out through the rain and land on the railing of a balcony five stories up. There's a stationary bike with a Carnegie Mellon University sweatshirt over the handlebars. I can tell by the scent it's David's sweatshirt. So, the homing instinct brought me back here. Who knew? And there's Melissa. I can see her through the sliding glass door. She's lying on the bed, bawling. The poor

kid. I screech as loudly as I can, but she can't hear me, what with the rain and the thunder and the crying. It stabs me right in the heart to see her like this, and I'm thinking, the Amazon can wait. It's time to play my last card. This is for you, my children. With all the oomph I can muster, I fly headlong into the door.

Ah, parrot heaven. It floats, cloudlike, just above an azure jungle, at the treetops, where the light makes the colors of our feathers more brilliant than on Earth. And the climate. It's as if The Great Parrot has set the thermostat on 74 degrees, with no humidity. The air is sweet and clean—no greenhouse gases here. When you take flight, the warm currents make flying as simple as breathing. The tree grapes are plentiful and succulent, the cherries are as pink as a schoolgirl's blush, the mangoes are as big as melons, and the nuts are crisp and pop right out their shells and into your maw. There are no hawks, no eagles, no snakes, no goniff monkeys to kvetch about. And the females are to die for. A parrot has his pick of African Greys, Blue-backs, Red-cheeks, you name it, all virgins, all there at your service, eager to please. But wait, you say. Didn't Reuben claim to be an atheist? I did. But you don't think that would stop God, if there were one, from taking good care of us after we're gone? I like to think God's existence has nothing to do with our faith, or lack of it. What, you think this so-called God needs you to believe in Him to exist? Please. But don't listen to me. I'm just a dumb animal. I don't pretend to be as wise about these things as humans do.

The only drawback to parrot heaven is that you lose touch with the world below. I often wonder how David and Melissa made out. But like Bibi says—Bibi is a cute little Blue Rump female with a toches that won't quit—you can only do so much for them. Then they're on their own.