

The illustration depicts a vibrant yellow bird with its wings spread wide, perched on a vertical purple bar of a cage. Its beak is open as if it is calling or singing. In the background, several other birds of various colors, including light blue and white, are visible, some appearing to be in flight or looking towards the yellow bird. The overall scene is set against a dark blue background, with the purple bars of the cage creating a sense of confinement.

The Great Cage Escape

LOUISE VAN DER MERWE

Illustrations by Pandora Alberts

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FOREWORD

I was deeply moved by this story. Louise van der Merwe sees the world from the animals' perspective. And it is a much richer perspective than most people think. Science is now revealing what we should have known all along – that animals have rich inner lives, emotions and passions, wants and needs, fears and desires. In just the past decade, careful scientific studies have demonstrated that male mice sing courtship songs to their mates, and that rats laugh joyously when tickled. Other studies reveal that parrots fall head-over-tail in love and have names for their young, and that fish recognise each other and choose favourites to cooperate with. We now also know that caged birds become pessimistic, and free ones optimistic, and that captive mink so value the opportunity to swim that they will forego a meal for a swimming pool.

The upshot is that animals' lives matter to them. As pleasure-seekers and pain-avoiders like us, all sentient creatures deserve to be treated fairly and justly. Their most precious possession – that which allows “the spark of life” to glow brightly – is their freedom. The Great Cage Escape captures poignantly the importance of freedom, and shows that heaven waits on the other side of the cage bars.



Jonathan Balcombe PhD, biologist and author of:
Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals
The Exultant Ark: A Pictorial Tour of Animal Pleasure



For Ivan, Danie, Johan, Ivanka.



*“...I sang a song of praise,
giving thanks for the spark of life
that is me.”*

CHAPTER ONE



Song Bird

“Not for Sale!” That's what the label on my cage said. My job was to stay right there on my perch and attract people into the shop, like ants to sugar.

And in they came, all sorts of people, their eyes wide with expectation. “Show me the bird that sings like that!” they said. “I must have that bird!”

“Sorry, Ma'am,” Mr O said every time. “He's not for sale. I could never part with him.”

“But just show him to me!” they implored, and Mr O brought them to where I sat swinging on my perch, in the top row of cages, just at eye level if you were a human adult of average height. Fathers and mothers lifted their children to peer through the wire bars and stare in awe as I sang a song of praise, giving thanks for the spark of life that is me.

Some customers didn't want to take ‘no’ for an answer. They tried to persuade Mr O to change his mind. “His song reaches into my very heart! I must have him!” they pleaded. “I'm prepared to pay double for him!”

But Mr O just shook his head firmly. “Sorry, Ma'am. Sorry, Sir. He's not for sale.” Then he smiled broadly. “But he's not the only canary. Have a look at all the others. I've got budgies too, and Waxbills and Lovebirds and all sorts. I'm certain you'll find one that is just perfect for you!”

The customers gazed into each of the cages, marvelling at the colours and varieties of birds that twittered and chirped and hopped from perch to perch. Once they made their choice Mr O led them to his display of shiny new cages; round ones, tall ones, green ones, gold ones. And from there he took them to look at accessories to go with the cages, like perches, bird baths, honey-sticks, rope toys, bells, mirrors, cuttlefish, grit, and the right box of seed for the right bird.

After that came the fluttering and flapping that put us all in a tizz, as Mr O took the round fishing net on its pole and stuck it into one of the cages to catch the bird who was to go home with the customer in the brand-new cage with accessories.

“No, no, you've got the wrong one. It's that one. Yes! You've got him!” the customers squealed in glee. And finally the automatic doorbell jangled as they left the shop with their new bird in its new cage, back to their busy lives, happy as can be.

The fluttering and fear of being caught and tangled in the fishing net subsided and, after a while, I threw my head back and my throat warbled with song once more.

CHAPTER TWO



A feather-duster and night-time noises

When the sun was low and its rays more golden, showing up all the hand prints and nose smudges that children left behind on the big glass window during the day, Mr O pulled down the blinds. He went to the shop door and turned the cardboard sign around so it said “Closed.” Then he locked the door and tried the handle to make sure it was locked properly.

Safe from prying eyes, he opened the cash register to count the money he'd made during the day, first the notes and then the coins, making neat piles on the counter top. He counted it once, and then again to make sure he added correctly the first time. He made a note of the amount in his accounting book, then pinned the notes together with a paper clip and tucked them into the back pocket of his trousers. Then he returned the piles of coins to the compartments in the till, turned off the light, walked to the door at the rear of the shop and locked it behind him.

Our twittering faded. When all was still we could hear the sound of tiny bubbles oxygenating the water in the goldfish tanks. If we stayed awake long enough, we heard the hamsters' treadmills start squeaking as they began their race to nowhere.

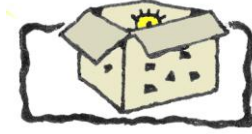
We heard Mrs Rat scraping up the wood-shavings in her cage and moulding them into the cosiest nest, just right for her little ones, soon to be born. We heard the mice burrowing and scratching amongst their shavings for lost sunflower seeds.

The day-old chicks used to keep us awake with their sad cheep-cheep-cheeping until Mr O had the bright idea of hanging an ostrich-feather duster upside down in their cage so the feathers rested on the cage floor. Second nature sent the chicks scurrying into the grey plumes to snuggle inside, with only their small pinkish beaks peeping out here and there.

Finally, I tucked my head under my wing and slept.

And that's how my life was, pretty much, until someone placed a cardboard box on the shop's front doorstep one night.

CHAPTER THREE



Weirdo

We were used to unusual creatures coming into our shop. Like lizards with blue tongues, for instance, who came from far-off places. Or hairy spiders, the size of a human's hand. But we were quite unprepared for what was in the box.

As usual, Mr O arrived early that morning to sweep and clean the shop before opening the door for customers. Finally he turned the “Closed” sign to “Open,” the doorbell jangled, and a waft of fresh morning air blew in.

Then Mr O saw the box.

It was a brown box sealed with wide brown tape. Air holes had been punched into it, all over the top and sides. Frowning, Mr O stretched out his foot to nudge the box with the toe of his shoe. He waited expectantly but there was no sound from within.

He squatted down and tapped the box with his finger. Still there was no sound. Then he picked up the box and held it to his ear. Nothing. We held our breath. Finally he gave it a sharp shake and that was when we all heard the scratching of claws against the cardboard.

Mr O brought the box into the shop and placed it on the

counter next to the till. He peeled back the tape until a corner was unsealed. Then he reached inside a drawer for his torch and, shining the light from a safe distance into the small opening, he peered in.

“What's in there?” asked a young voice next to his elbow. Mr O hadn't noticed that Rebecca was standing beside him.

“What can I do for you today, young lady?”

Becca was dressed neatly in her school uniform with a bag of books on her back. Her hair, as always, was expertly patterned in zig-zags across her head, each little braid ending in a knot of coloured beads.

“Nothing in particular,” she replied.

“Well, off to school with you then,” said Mr O.

“But what's in there?”

Mr O reached into the drawer once again and brought out his padded oven mitt. He tore open the corner of the box a little more.

“What if it's a snake?” asked Becca. “What if it suddenly escapes through that hole?”

“Yes, exactly,” replied Mr O. “You'd better run off to school before you get bitten.”

Becca laughed. She often came into the shop, usually after school closed for the day, and waited for her mother to fetch her. Blueboy the budgie was especially fond of her.

Mr O had clipped one of his wings so he couldn't fly. Customers enjoyed having Blueboy sit on their shoulders but it was when Becca appeared that he chirped and chattered and showed off.

“Hello Becca, hello Becca,” he said in his high-pitched budgie voice. Then, just like Mr O, he added “What can I do for you today, young lady?” That always made Becca laugh.

“Hello, you pretty thing,” she said, holding out her finger so Blueboy could climb onto it. He clambered all the way up her arm, onto her shoulder, and then onto her head, trying his best to crack open the beads in Becca's braids using his fat grey tongue and hooked beak.

“Hello, you pretty thing,” he said.

Today, though, all eyes were on the brown box.

Satisfied at last with what he had seen in the torchlight, Mr O slipped his hand into the mitt, reached inside the box and pulled out a creature like nothing we had seen before. He placed it quickly into a big bird cage and shut the door.

“What is it?” asked Becca.

“Well, it's got a big beak and two big bird-like feet,” observed Mr O.

“But no feathers,” mused the girl. “Just a wrinkly crinkly pink skin with little spikes sticking out, like a hedgehog or a porcupine.”



We all stared at the newcomer, baffled as to what kind of bird he could possibly be. I wondered if he might be a song bird who could sing beautifully – even better than me, perhaps, despite his ugliness. We watched, entranced, as he used his big grey hooked beak to climb up the wire bars of the cage and settle on a perch.

Mr O put water and sunflower seeds into his cage then moved it to the back of the shop, behind the new glass snake tanks, so that customers wouldn't have to look at him. He clapped his hands. “Okay, back to work, guys,” he commanded. “Stop staring. Where's the bird song? Come on! Why do you think I keep you?”

And so we got back to the business of doing business for Mr O.

But that night, I heard a whisper: “I'm scared.”

No-one said a thing.

“I'm scared,” came the whisper again. “What if the strange new creature squeezes through the bars of his cage and comes to stare at me in the dark?”

“Nonsense,” someone replied crossly. “Don't be such a drama queen!”

Then others started whispering too.

“We don't want ugly creatures in our shop!”

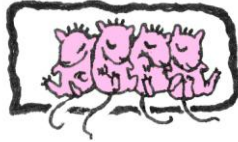
“That's right! They're not good for business!”

“It's no wonder it was abandoned on our doorstep!”

So it went, on and on, but never once did the creature open its beak to protest about what was being said. Not a cheep, not a peep, not a squeak, not a squawk.

He was obviously quite harmless, though, because after a day or two Mr O took him out of the cage, put him on a small open platform at the top of a pole, and stuck bits of apple and banana there for him to eat.

CHAPTER FOUR



The pups go missing

Later that week Mrs Rat gave birth to four beautiful babies. I couldn't see them, tucked away safely inside her cosy nest of wood shavings but, as soon as the word was out that she was now a proud mother, we set about whistling and whooping and flapping to congratulate her. That night we heard her little motherly squeaks as she bustled about, keeping house as best she could in her tiny cage, nursing and licking and cleaning and caring for her infants as only a good mother knows how.

It wasn't the first time Mrs Rat had given birth. Usually she produced ten or more babies. She always started off as a proud-as-punch mother but, by the time Mr O transferred them to another cage in readiness for selling, Mrs Rat was quite worn out and almost relieved to see them go.

This time, though, things were different. It was only after the light was turned off at the end of the day, and Mr O had gone out the back door, that we heard her shrieks of anguish.

“What's wrong,” we chirped in consternation. “What's happened?”

In between sobs and shrieks, Mrs Rat told how Mr O had changed the litter of wood shavings in her cage and, when he had finished, she discovered two of her babies were missing!

“Have you looked under the new litter?” someone asked. “They must be somewhere there.”

“Yes,” consoled another. “Mr O wouldn't have thrown them out with the old litter. He was so pleased you had given birth at last, Mrs Rat. Remember, he even came over to your nest and counted your pups.”

“Are you sure they've gone?” asked another.

Mrs Rat's squeaks and shrieks and sobs only grew louder.

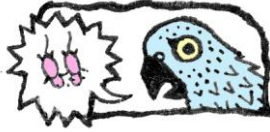
By the next morning Mrs Rat resolved that she had to put on the best face for her two remaining little ones. So, bereft as she was, we heard her singing to them and soothing them, caressing and cleaning them, and being the best of mothers.

But four days later, in broad daylight, when the shop was at its busiest, her shrieks reached a crescendo that could be heard even through the hubbub of customers' chatter. We fell silent and stared as Mrs Rat ran from one corner of her cage to the other, in and out of the layer of fresh wood shavings that Mr O had just put in, but she couldn't find even one of her pups.

I felt Mrs Rat's sorrow in my own heart. I couldn't sing.

And when Mr O turned off the light that evening the darkness seemed thick with her terrible loss. By this time she was quite hoarse and made only little croaking noises occasionally as she sat, hunched over in the middle of her cage, her eyes shut tight, her body rocking back and forth.

CHAPTER FIVE



Piet Parakeet reveals the truth

I wanted to say something comforting to Mrs Rat but was at a loss for words. Finally, a solemn voice from somewhere in the top row of cages made an announcement. I recognised it as the voice of Piet, the Parakeet with the yellow top-knot on his head.

“I know what happened to Mrs Rat's babies,” he said. “All four of them.”

Everyone held their breath, waiting for what he'd say next.

Mrs Rat could manage only a whisper. “Tell me,” she murmured. “Tell me, tell me.”

“I don't know if I should,” said Piet gravely. “After all you are very emotional and you might become even more emotional.”

His comment enraged Mrs Rat. “What are you talking about?” Her voice was hoarse. “Don't tell me I'm emotional, you bird brain.”

“Yes, tell us,” we chorused. “Don't keep a secret like that to yourself. Don't keep Mrs Rat in suspense. That's being cruel.”

“Well, if she's going to call me names, I don't see why I should bother to tell her anything,” said Piet.

“Oh, don't make it worse for her,” chirped the Lovebirds. “You know she didn't mean to call you that.”

“Alright, you asked for it. Don't say I didn't warn you. Are you sure you want me to tell you?”

“Yes!” we twittered. “Get on with it!”

“Well, I saw Mr O feeding Mrs Rat's pups to the snakes in the glass tanks.”

We were speechless.

“That's a lie! How dare you tell such lies!” croaked Mrs Rat. Then her anger gave way to a terrible, ghastly sobbing.

I wished I could block my ears until the whole awful thing was over.

The big green Ringneck parrot, whose ancestors hailed from India, tried to comfort the distraught mother. Don't take it so badly, Mrs Rat. They're in heaven now. Heaven is a better place than here.”

“How would you know,” sobbed Mrs Rat. “You'd have to be dead to know that!”

Then a strange new voice came from the darkest corner at the back of the shop. “I've been to heaven,” it said gravely.

“Who said that?” whispered the Waxbill.

We all waited for the voice to answer. Even Mrs Rat was quiet.

“I've lived in heaven,” said the voice.

By now, we all knew who was speaking. It was the weird creature who had landed on our door step in a square box punched full of air holes.

“Then tell us what it's like,” we chorused. “Tell us, tell us, tell us.”

The creature began in a voice as sad as the song of the winter wind:

“There are trees in heaven. The breeze whispers wonderful secrets in amongst the branches, and the leaves dance at the slightest chance;

“There is fruit of all tastes and all shapes in heaven, with sweet juice dripping to the ferns on the forest floor;

“There are a thousand birds, with plumage that shines and shimmers in colours too radiant to describe;

“There are voices in heaven that sing songs of praise all day...”

His voice trailed off.

“Tell us more,” we whispered urgently, and after a moment he spoke again:



“The birds are free in heaven, to fly with strong strokes from mountain tops to sea shores;

“To rise before dawn and welcome the first rays of the new day;

“To perch on the highest branches and watch the setting of the sun;

“To bring the miracle of life from a nest of eggs;

“To nurture the young with food and warmth;

“To swoop and to soar and fly amidst the rain drops...”

“Tell us more,” we pleaded.

But this time he remained silent and, with glorious pictures of heaven in my mind, I tucked my head under my wing and fell soundly asleep.

CHAPTER SIX



Skins of many colours

Next morning, before preening, I fluttered to the uppermost part of my small cage, clung to the bars with my feet and tried to catch a glimpse of the snake tanks.

I knew Egg-eater. She was a vegetarian and ate only eggs. Mr O collected the eggs that were laid sometimes on the floors of our cages because, after all, we had no nests in which to put them. He kept them in a bowl on the counter and the customers found them quite fascinating, holding them carefully in the palms of their hands. They seemed to especially love the tiny speckled blue eggs laid by the canary hens.

Sometimes Egg-eater gave a special performance for the customers. Mr O placed one of the bigger eggs from the bowl, like a white pigeon egg for example, inside her tank. Never in a hurry, Egg-eater took her time to slither towards it, unlatch her jaws, manoeuvre her lips around the egg and, millimetre by millimetre, swallow it whole until nothing was left except a bulge in her body behind her head.

Recently two more snakes came to live in the rectangular

glass tanks at the back of the shop, near the goldfish who swam around all day waiting for Mr O to sprinkle fish flakes for them to eat. The new snakes were clothed by nature in a tapestry of exquisite shapes and colours, each scale a perfect stitch of gleaming yellow, orange or red. They must be the culprits, I thought. The ones who ate Mrs Rat's pups.

And then I saw something that made me even more sure the new snakes were guilty. One of them had grown too big for its skin! It had simply slithered out of its tight old skin, like squeezing out of a long glove, leaving behind a perfect, hollow, transparent shape of itself, like the ghost of a snake.

In the middle of the morning, while customers were peering into cages and making their choices, Mr O started his rounds, going from cage to cage, changing litter, pouring fresh water into water dispensers and blowing husks out of seed dispensers before filling them with fresh seed.

“Oh wow!” he exclaimed suddenly, as he went past the glass snake tanks. “Look at this! One of the snakes has shed its skin.” Instantly he was surrounded by inquisitive eyes.

“Wow, what a perfect skin.” He lifted the lid of the snake tank and carefully removed the skin, placing it on the counter next to the till for everyone to see.

“Go on!” he encouraged the children. “Touch it. It won't bite!” and eventually one of them plucked up enough courage.

She stretched out her finger so that just the very tip touched the snake skin. Then she squealed with delighted terror and ran to the back of the shop as if the skin might be after her.

CHAPTER SEVEN



A savage attack

As he came towards my cage Mr O was still chuckling about his customers being scared of a snake skin. I hopped onto the swinging perch, threw back my head, opened my beak and sang a song of praise for the spark of life that is me. His face came right up close and he whistled a song of his own to me.

He finished replenishing the bird cages and started on the cages of the rodents; the rats and mice, guinea pigs and hamsters, and the little white dwarf rabbits. Mrs Rat had stopped her sobbing, thank goodness, but she sat hunched in a corner of her cage, her eyes closed. Mr O placed a small square of cheese right in front of her nose. She didn't budge. She didn't even twitch a whisker. Mr O peered at her more closely. Then he reached into his sack of wood shavings, took a fistful and put his hand into her cage to scatter the shavings around.

That's when it happened. The moment that changed everything. Forever.

Mr O let out an excruciating yowl – a sound so loud that some customers started screaming too. Mr O clutched his right hand to his chest.



Blood ran down his arm and dripped off his elbow, making big splotches on the wood shavings in Mrs Rat's cage and daubing her white fur with red. His face was contorted in pain and he was momentarily paralysed by fright. Then he regained his wits, asked his customers to leave, and turned the 'Open' sign on the door to 'Closed'. With blood dripping onto the floor he ran to the back door, slamming it shut behind him.

We fluttered and flapped and beat our wings against the bars of our cages, unable to escape the awful danger that seemed to have entered the shop. After a while we settled nervously on our perches, our hearts still pulsating loudly in our chests, and started preening our feathers back into place.

It was then that we heard Mrs Rat's titter of laughter.

“I bit him,” she squeaked. “I bit him so hard I think I nearly bit his finger off!” She gave another titter but it turned into a sob and she bunched herself up into a huddle again.

We didn't see Mr O for the rest of that day. In the evening we asked Mr Bald, for that was the name we had given the stranger with no feathers, if he could tell us more about heaven.

His grave, low voice gave us solace:

“There are nests in heaven, masterfully woven from grasses and twigs and lined with moss and hair;

“There are families in heaven that fly in flocks across the sky in perfect formation and call, one to the other, in jubilation;

“There are birds who catch each other's feet in mid-air and swing round and round in celebration of being alive;

“There are flocks that settle in the highest branches of trees to fill gardens and woodlands with their chatter and song;

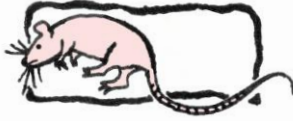
“There are no cages in heaven, no metal bars to tatter our feathers and keep us from flitting and flying, soaring and swooping;

“We can take great journeys in heaven, navigating high across the plains and mountains with strong strokes of our wings, to far-off places where the sun rises and radiates its warmth in greeting...”

His voice trailed off. We grew dreamy.

“I want to go to heaven,” whispered Blueboy.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Revenge

It was a pale and grim Mr O who opened the shop the next morning. We couldn't see the wound Mrs Rat had inflicted because his hand was wrapped in white bandages that made it look twice its normal size. Usually he would whistle a tune to himself as he prepared the till for the day's takings. Today the air was thick with his silence and reproach.

Our voices were still.

Customers were already standing on the doorstep waiting for him to open up. Children pushed their faces against the window, to peer into the shop, and knocked on the glass with their knuckles. But Mr O didn't seem to care that he was late. He walked to Mrs Rat's cage and looked down at her.

“Two stitches you cost me, you savage little beast,” he snarled, “and a tetanus injection to boot.” Then he marched to the drawer beneath the till where he kept his oven mitt. He had to do everything with his left hand now because his right was incapacitated by the big wad of bandages. He wriggled his good hand into the mitt and returned to Mrs Rat's cage.

There was not a tweet to be heard. Our hearts palpitated with foreboding as Mr O opened Mrs Rat's cage door with his mitted hand, grabbed her by the tail and roughly hauled her out. Dangling upside down she squirmed and squeaked in mid-air. He held her at arm's length. "You ungrateful wretch!" he said. "You vicious little vermin!"

We sensed Mrs Rat's fright, watching her writhing as she hung by her tail.

Then, still holding her at arm's length, Mr O strode towards the back door.

When he returned, he took off the mitt and placed it back in the drawer beneath the till. His eyebrows were scrunched into a deep frown.

There was no sign of Mrs Rat. Her small cage seemed enormous in its emptiness.

Later, I threw back my head so my song could bring inquisitive footsteps into the shop for Mr O. But the magic wasn't there, and most people walked right past the open door.

CHAPTER NINE



Mrs Rat's legacy

Becca visited us as usual after school. Mr O had set up a chair and table near the budgie cages, so she could study her school books until her mother arrived to fetch her. Mr O explained about his bandage; how Mrs Rat had bitten his finger to the bone, and about the painful tetanus injection.

Becca shook her head in sympathy. "I wonder what made her do such a thing," she said, perplexed.

Mr O shrugged his shoulders. "Heaven alone knows," he said crossly. "She should have known better than to bite the hand that feeds her."

Blueboy climbed down to where Becca sat. "Hello, you pretty thing," he said.

"Ouch" she squealed with laughter. "That's my hair, Blueboy! I don't need you to preen me, thank you!" She looked at Mr O, expecting him to be laughing too, but her face dropped. "I'm sure your finger will get better very soon Mr O," she murmured.

Mr O just shrugged, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

That evening, after he had gone for the day, a whisper from one of the red-cheeked Zebra finches broke the silence. “I loved Mrs Rat. She was the best mother.”

That started us off. We all started talking together, trying to make sense of it all.

“The way she chuckled and sang to her pups, it was wonderful to behold,” said the Fantailed pigeon.

“Do you think she's gone to heaven?” mused Blueboy.

“Did you hear what he called her?” asked the cockatiel.

“Well, you can't blame him,” chirped the Gloster canary, with her dappled fringed crest. “She just about bit his finger off!”

“Because he stole her pups, that's why!” said the orange Red Factor canary, with a voice full of indignation.

“And he didn't even own up to Becca about that!” the Lovebirds chorused together.

“Yes, I'd peck him to pieces if he stole my nestlings!” said Fantail.

“I wish I had nestlings,” murmured a Zebra finch.

“What if he decides to reach into our cages with that great big mitt?” asked the yellow and green budgie.

“And yanks us out and dangles us by our legs! What then?” said Waxbill.

“I'm frightened. I don't like it here anymore,” said a tiny voice.

“I hate that huge ugly mitt!” said another.

“And the fishing net too. We hate the fishing net!” chorused the Lovebirds.

We worked ourselves up into a state of misery and fear, and the next day I couldn't sing at all.

Mr O put his face right up close to my cage. “What's wrong with you, boy?” he muttered crossly.

My heart pounded in my chest.

CHAPTER TEN



A plan for freedom

The next evening was no better. The loss of Mrs Rat had a profound effect on all of us. We examined our situation from every angle.

“Can we blame Mr O?” asked the Turtle dove. “After all the snakes must have food, and they don't eat seeds like we do.”

“Well they don't have to eat so much,” squawked the Ringneck parrot. “One ate so much he burst out of his own skin!”

“They don't even have to look for their food. It's just given to them. There's no justice in it,” commented a Zebra finch.

“How can they look for their food when they're trapped in a tank?” asked the Laughing dove.

There was a long pause.

“We're all trapped. Every one of us,” murmured a small voice.

We mulled over our predicament. Only the bubbles in the fish tank intruded.

Then Mr Bald spoke, in his sad voice. “A cage is like a discarded snake skin. Hollow and empty,” he said.

We took time to consider his words. I wondered if the other birds understood Mr Bald's mysterious comment any better than I did.

After a long while the little red-beaked Waxbill spoke up. “I want to be free,” she said.

“Me too... I want to be free.”

“Me too,” we chorused. “We want to be free!”

Then solemn, sad Mr Bald spoke again. “You can't ever be free,” he said. “Where do you think you would go in your 'freedom'?”

“We'd fly out the front door and soar into the sky and fly, fly, fly in search of heaven,” said a finch.

“But your wings are weak because they haven't ever had to fly. The hawks would swoop down and snatch you in a flash.”

“Bald, it's not for you to tell us whether we can or cannot be free,” said Piet Parakeet. “Don't you want to be free? Don't you want to find heaven again?”

“But I can't,” said Mr Bald. “You can see that I have no feathers. We need feathers to fly. All I can do is walk.”

“I can't fly either,” chirped Blueboy.

“Well at least that's not your fault, Blueboy,” said a pigeon. “Mr O clipped your wing feathers. Not like Bald who keeps plucking out his own feathers.”

“I do not,” retorted Mr Bald.

“Yes you do! I've watched you. We've all watched you. Every time a little feather shaft grows out of your skin, you pluck it out with your beak.”

“It's not normal,” muttered someone.

“I think it's a behavioural disorder,” volunteered a Lovebird.

Once more we fell silent.

Then I spoke. “Why did you leave heaven, Mr Bald?”

Mr Bald sat on his platform, his eyes closed. Was he asleep, I wondered? After a long pause he opened his eyes. “I flew into a trap, like a moth into a spider's web,” he said. His voice was as sad as the song of the winter wind. His eyes were glazed, as if a curtain had been drawn across them to extinguish the light from within.

We waited with baited breath for him to continue.

“And then?” whispered Blueboy at last.

“And then, I was sold into captivity,” said Mr Bald.

We waited to hear more. “What's that?” whispered Blueboy, but Mr Bald did not reply.

Only the air bubbles in the fish tanks intruded into our thoughts.

Then I had a brain-wave. “Never mind your feathers – you've got a beak, Mr Bald! You've got a beak so strong it can crack open nuts! I've seen you do it when Mr O holds one out for you. You could open our cages with your beak and set us free, so we can all get to heaven. Couldn't you?”

We were stunned at the prospect, wide-eyed with a mixture of terror and hope all at once.

Then, like the birds who sit at the top of trees and fill the gardens and woodlands with chatter and song, everyone chorused together “Yes! Yes! Yes! We're going to be free. We're going to be free!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Secrets in the night

Our plan was set. The next evening, as soon as Mr O retired for the day, Mr Bald set the wheels in motion. He climbed off his platform, plopped onto the floor and waddled over to where the bird cages were stacked on top of each other.

Our plan was that Mr Bald would work out how to open the doors of the bird cages, and then practice until he could open all of them in one night. We would stay in our cages until Mr O came in the next morning. He wouldn't notice the cage doors were open, because we would be singing and chirping and hopping from perch to perch as usual. Then, when he opened the front door to start the new day, we would fly out of our cages in one big flock, swooping through the open door and soaring into the sky in search of heaven. We'd be gone before Mr O had time to reach for his fishing net.

Opening the cage doors was easier said than done. Using his beak and his feet to scale the slippery, smooth bars of the cages, Mr Bald climbed to the top row and began examining the doors.

“Say something!” I whispered. “Can you do it?”

“It's getting too dark for me to see properly,” said Mr Bald.

“Oh no! Please keep trying. Don't give up. You're the only one who can set us free,” I pleaded.

“Well,” cautioned Mr Bald. “Don't get too excited. I'm not promising anything.”

We held our breath as we listened to the bubbles in the fish tank and Mr Bald picking at a cage door with his beak.

Hamster climbed onto his exercise wheel. “Shh! Be quiet!” we implored, straining to hear the click of a cage door opening.

Hamster stopped running. “I'll stop if you promise to take me too,” he said.

“Yes!” chorused the furry mammals all together.

“We want to come too,” said the rabbit.

“And what about us? asked the mice.

Even the chameleon, who almost always sat perfectly still on his stick, said in a croaky voice “Yes. Open our cages too, Mr Bald. Please do.”

But before anyone could say another word, Piet Parakeet spoke sternly.

“Don't be ridiculous,” he said. “You haven't got wings. Where would you all run to? You'd run out the door,

tripping up pedestrians on the pavement, running onto the street, cars screeching to avoid you, causing pandemonium! Tell me, does this sound intelligent?”

No one spoke.

“Exactly,” said Piet Parakeet. “This is a bird thing. Now let's get on with it!”

Hamster went back to his wheel and the squeaking grew very loud.

At last Mr Bald said something. “The doors that clip open and shut are quite easy,” he said. “But the doors that slide up and down are tricky. They don't stay open on their own. I can't see clearly. That's the trouble. It's too dark.”

We waited anxiously for Mr Bald to say something more; to reassure us that our plan would work. I wondered what kind of door was on my cage. I had never taken any notice before.

“Where are you, Mr Bald?” I whispered.

He didn't answer but soon he was at my cage, picking at the door with his strong, clever beak. “I'm afraid yours is one of the doors that slide up and down,” he said solemnly.

“We've got to find a way to keep it open,” I said. “There must be a way.”

We were all tired the next day. More than once, Mr O walked over to Mr Bald's platform and looked closely at

him, adjusting his glasses as if to see better. “What's wrong with you, old boy?” he muttered. “It's not like you to sleep all day.” He fetched a honey-stick, tapped Mr Bald's bare body with it to startle him awake, and then fixed it with a thin piece of wire to his platform. Mr O gave us honey-sticks, all covered in sticky seeds, when he thought we needed a tonic.

Even my song was off-key from lack of sleep.

But that evening, we exploded into excitement the moment Mr O was out the door.

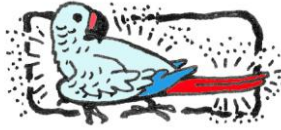
Mr Bald climbed off his platform and plopped onto the floor. He waddled over to our cages with the honey-stick in his beak.

I'd never seen him look happy before.

“It's just the thing!” he said. “This stick is the perfect tool for keeping the sliding doors open.” Mr Bald climbed up to my cage and deftly lifted the door. Then he propped it open with the honey-stick so that it didn't close by itself. “See! How's that?” He gave a loud whistle.

“Mr Bald!” I exclaimed. “That's a parrot whistle! You're a parrot!” To my complete surprise a song of joy burst from me. I had never sung in darkness before. Now I sang a song of thanks for the spark of life that was Mr Bald, the parrot.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Miracles do happen

Our excitement grew with every passing day. As soon as Mr O left the shop, Mr Bald got to work. He became so adept at opening and closing our cage doors that, after several weeks, he could do every one of them within an hour and return the honey-sticks to their shelf so that the next morning Mr O would not suspect a thing.

We nearly burst with excitement when Mr Bald finally declared “We're almost ready.”

“What about me?” whispered Blueboy. “You can't leave me behind.” In all this time none of us had given Blueboy, with his clipped wing, a single thought. He sat on his perch, puffed and huddled and miserable.

We stopped to think.

“We'll come back for you, we promise.”

“Yes, of course we will.”

“As soon as your wing feathers have grown again.”

“You can keep me company,” said Mr Bald. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Many days and nights had passed since we'd thought about leaving Mr Bald behind. What could we say to him? What comfort could we give? But as we glanced his way, we drew in our breath in astonishment. It seemed as if a magic wand had touched him. In the weeks he had practiced opening and shutting our cage doors, with ever-greater speed and skill, he hadn't noticed – none of us had noticed – that new feathers had sprouted all over his pink body, like flower buds uncurling, dressing him in a beautiful soft grey hue. At his tail was a splash of magnificent red feathers.

My heart filled with song and I burst into praise for his magnificence and beauty.

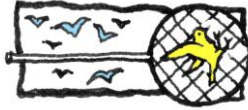
All the other birds started singing with me, although some were way off key. At the top of our voices we praised Mr Bald's brilliance, we praised his beauty, we told him he was the best, and the bravest, and the most beloved bird in the world.

Mr Bald looked very pleased. He ruffled his feathers and shook his head. He was about to start preening himself but Piet Parakeet stopped him.

“Now, Bald, don't start preening and plucking,” he cautioned with his usual air of authority. “You just leave those feathers alone.”

That night Mr Bald opened our cage doors again. This time he didn't close them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Escape

Mr O entered the shop from the back door as usual. He didn't notice the tension in the air, or that our voices were pitched higher than usual.

We perched on the edge of our doorways, all – except Mr Bald and Blueboy – poised to fly with sweeping strokes of our wings away from all we had ever known and into the great openness of the world outside. Poised to fly in search of heaven.

Mr O fumbled at the till. His hand was out of bandages and now only his finger wore a plaster.

My heart thumped like a bouncing ball in my chest. How long would he take to open the shop door and let the fresh air blow in? Through the glass we saw the rays of morning sunlight on the faces of people passing by.

I would fly to the sky. I would sing for a mate, the finest song I had ever sung. I would call her from the branches where the wind whispered among the leaves. I would sing a song of praise for the spark of life that was me. We would soar with our flock, in perfect formation. We would swoop and glide, and be birds on the wing.



We didn't want to listen to the fear that knock-knocked in our hearts like an unwelcome visitor: what if we dropped to the floor like stones?

Then it happened. So fast. As Mr O opened the shop door, I flapped my wings with all my might, with all my courage. I could fly. There was no effort. There was no fear. I was light and swift. I chirped with joy. I flit this way and that way, and understood Mr Bald's poetry at last. I could fly! The others were all around me. We breathed the fresh dawn air of our freedom. We were a flock. We were birds on the wing.

We flew towards the open door, where the world outside waited. The doorway was narrow and our wing tips clashed, throwing us off-balance.

Then, in a flash, it was gone. The net swooped down and snatched me like a hawk from the sky. Tangled in its mesh I beat my wings until my feathers came loose and I felt my heart might explode. Mr O reached his big hand into the net and closed his fingers around me. He put me back in my cage and closed the door. I beat my wings against the bars, flapping back and forth in that tiny space until I fell to the floor of the cage and sat there, dishevelled and beaten, like a ball of lost hope.

As night fell, I whispered “Mr Bald? Can you hear me? Blueboy?”

There was only the sound of bubbles in the fish tank.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Hope

Nothing in the shop was ever the same again. The cages stood empty. Mr O's whistle went away, just like my song.

Later on that fateful morning Mr O found Mr Bald lying upside down on his platform with his legs in the air. He carried the parrot's lifeless body, with his beautiful new downy feathers and the flash of red at his tail, out the back door, his face creased in worry.

Two policemen arrived and walked around the shop with Mr O, examining the locks on the front and back doors, and scrutinising each of the cage doors in turn, dusting here and there for fingerprints.

“No sign of a break in, sir. Very perplexing,” said a policeman solemnly. “You say nothing was taken from the till?”

The days passed and Mr O's shoulders drooped even further. He seemed old and hunched and grey. He was no longer friendly to his customers. “Don't touch!” he snapped at the children, and mothers dragged them out of the shop without buying a thing.

“I can't understand it,” he confided in Becca.

“I loved my birds. I even loved that rat; the one that savaged me. I've loved animals ever since I was a kid like you.” His chin wobbled. He lifted his glasses and dabbed his eyes with a white hanky from his pocket.

“No worries Mr O,” said Becca brightly. “It's a sign of the times. The birds were trying to tell you something. Pet shops are old-fashioned. Cages are out! Nowadays animals have rights too. When I leave school I'm going to study animal cognition.”

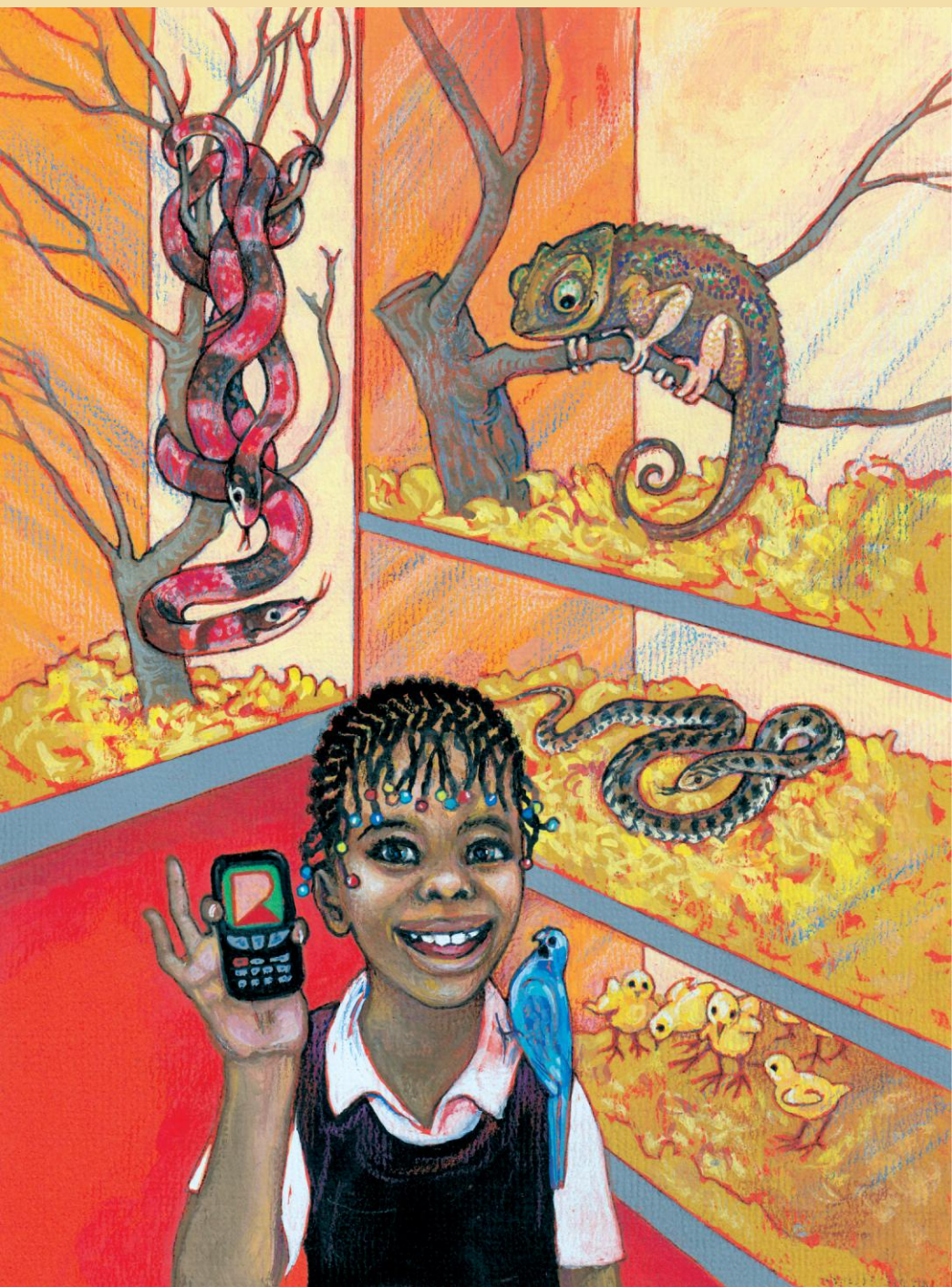
“Animal what?” asked Mr O perplexed.

“Animal cognition,” said Becca. “It's all about what animals think. People used to believe animals were dumb, but not anymore. Lots of my friends want to rehabilitate animals when they leave school, and help them to be free again. It's called rehabbing. Look! Let me show you.”

She tapped the keys of the cell phone she kept in her pocket and held up the screen for Mr O to see. “See – Rehabbers Unlimited. The rehabbers send chameleons back to Madagascar, and snakes back to Spain. The chicks go to a free range farm where they grow up to live normal lives, dust-bathing and sun-bathing and doing all the things chickens like to do.”

“What about guinea pigs and rabbits?” asked Mr O.

“Them too,” said Becca. She tapped the keys on her cell phone. “They go to a sanctuary where they live out their days exploring and nibbling fresh green grass, and doing the things they like to do.”



A glimmer of a smile lit Mr O's face.

It wasn't long before Mr O was wearing a cap with the word 'Rehabber' on its peak.

Then came the boxes all stamped in bold red writing:
'Handle with Extreme Care – Life on Board'.

Then came the rehabbers, a whole group, all of them jolly and all wearing 'Rehabber' caps. One by one they carefully loaded the animals and carried the boxes out.

Last of all came the sign on the pet shop door.

'Sold'.

POSTSCRIPT: Blueboy lives with Becca now.

And me? I live in a much bigger cage. Mr O chose the biggest, shiniest, most beautiful cage for me. His whistle is back – good and strong.

When the weather is good Mr O hangs my cage from a branch of an old fig tree that has lived for nearly a hundred years. A thousand feathered visitors come to relish the sweetness of its big purple fruit and to sample the honey-stick fastened to the bars of my cage.

Would you believe, Mrs Rat lives here too!

“It’s me, it’s me,” I heard one day. It was a familiar voice. I cocked my head to one side. Bewildered, I looked all around. “Look down, I’m here,” she said, “it’s me!”

That's when I saw her, down on the ground, her face wearing the pride of motherhood once again, collecting seeds I'd spilled from my feeder before scurrying back to her hidey-hole amid the big bulging roots of the fig tree. I trilled with joy.

Sometimes I catch a glimpse of scarlet in amongst the leaves. My heart thumps in my chest like a bouncing ball. "Is that you Mr Bald?" I chirp in excitement.

He never was one for a lot of conversation, but I know he's there because I can see heaven all around me and I can hear the echo of his voice, as sad as the song of the winter wind:

"There are trees in heaven. The breeze whispers wonderful secrets in amongst the branches, and the leaves dance at the slightest chance;

"There is fruit of all tastes and all shapes in heaven, with sweet juice dripping to the ferns on the forest floor;

"There are a thousand birds, with plumage that shines and shimmers in colours too radiant to describe;

"There are voices in heaven that sing songs of praise all day..."

Then I throw back my head, open my beak, and give thanks for the spark of life that is me.

THE END



“There are voices in heaven
that sing songs of praise all day...”

*To have a pet is a privilege we take for ourselves.
Pets can become wonderful, devoted and
fascinating companions, but only if we do our part
and give them lives worth living.*

[SEE ACTIVITY HERE](#)

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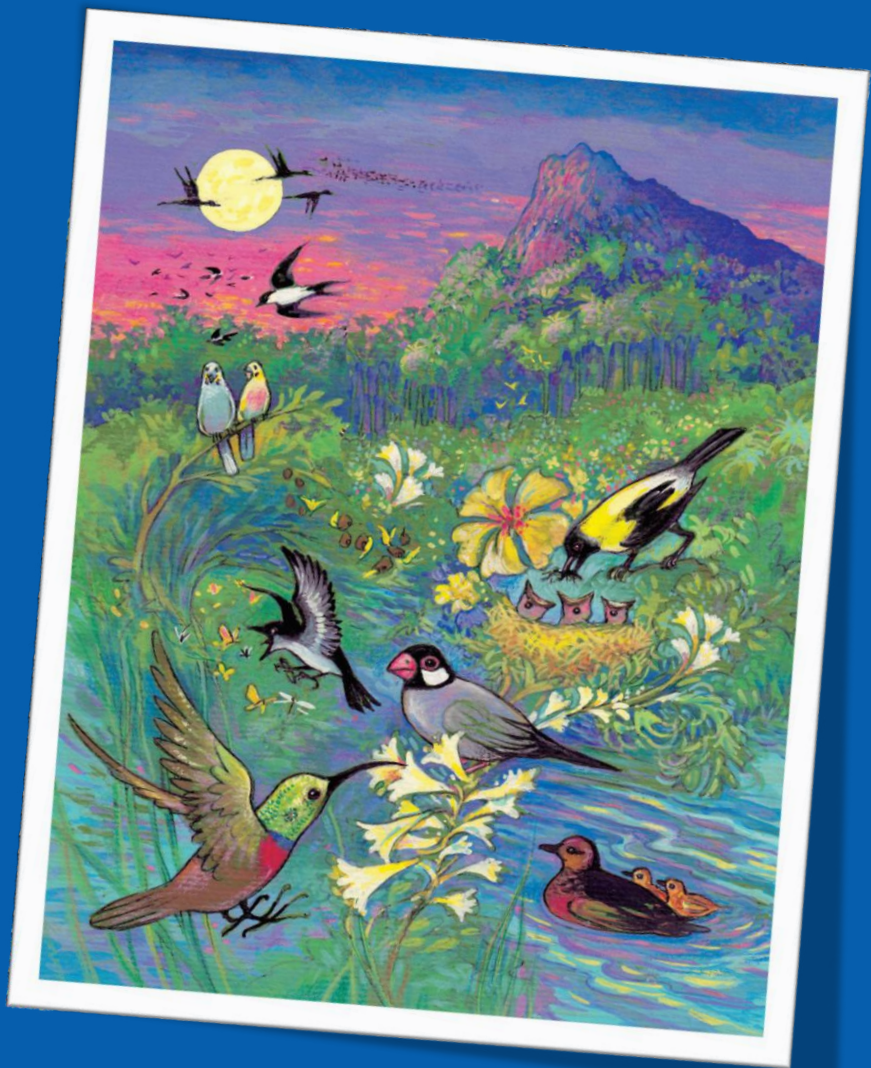
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*"Animals' lives matter, to them.
Their most precious possession
is their freedom."*

JONATHAN BALCOMBE