

## For the Love of Birds

By Eva-Lynne Carlson

*In memory of Sweetie. She was a gentle, brave and long suffering spirit who taught me of love and of parrots.*



I was always what you might call a ‘cat’ person. As a kid, I always had my eye on some stray cat that I’d bring home and try to hide in the basement so my mom wouldn’t know I had a new member of my family. Then, one way or another, the cat, as it were, would be let out of the bag and upon getting home from school one day I would be greeted with the same pair of updates: The cat in the basement ‘went west’ and any hopes I had about not spending the rest of the week grounded went with it. For thirty-some years I never had a pet dog, fish, or bird—just cats. When I was 17, both my parents died and I had to figure out what to do and where to go. I left my home in Philadelphia and chose the only direction that mattered—I went west.

So, after a childhood of a child’s attempts to save each and every cat she found, dead or alive, it’s understandable that my response to a friend’s grief after a neighborhood cat made lunch of her lovebird, Buddy, was somewhat lacking. I could not for the life of me understand how anyone could be as emotionally attached to a bird as one could a cat or dog, or other warm, furry creatures. I mean, c’mom, birds are kind of creepy looking with their buggy eyes that look like they’re looking at everything at the same time and those pointy beaks and funny looking feet. It just didn’t make sense. Cats are supposed to snack on birds, aren’t they? It was just a bird, *right?*

Not too long after my good friend stopped calling me for some reason or another, I was settling into a new life post-divorce with shared custody of my two elementary-school-age daughters. It was then that Sweetie came into my life.

Sweetie was a frail, sickly little pale yellow cockatiel with a bright orange circle on each cheek that my ex-husband, had decided to buy our 8-year-old one weekend to take back to mommy’s house. It was less than a day before I became responsible for this creature. Unfortunately, I probably knew even less about how to keep this bird alive than my 8-year-old. I had no idea what this funny looking thing was supposed to eat or not eat, what kind of bed it slept in (it couldn’t possibly be comfortable standing on that perch all the time—I mean, look, it has to stand on one foot probably because the other one hurts so bad) or what it wanted with all that screech screech screeching it did. So, like I did with anything else that I needed to do but wasn’t familiar with, I studied it. I studied everything about that bird, including the bird. I read until the wee, eerie hours of the morning each night. I made appointments with every avian

veterinarian within a 30-mile radius of Walnut Creek and made them explain to me what I needed to know to keep this bird from dying on me.

As I mentioned, Sweetie came to us in a fragile health. She was purchased at a pet bird store that was stocked by a breeder that was in business to make a profit. She made sure she always had plenty of baby birds on hand to meet demand and make up in numbers those that succumbed to disease and sickness before they were successfully sold to some mother or father who thought it was a great idea to buy for their kid a pet cockatiel that they knew almost nothing about - and the part they did know was almost completely wrong.

Sweetie's condition was chronic. In addition to her fairly constant sneezing and wheezing, she also had the misfortune of being host to an invisible killer that wasn't identified until it was too late—aspergillosis—a respiratory disease of birds caused by a pervasive species of fungus that thrives in warm, moist environments. When the spores of this fungus become airborne, compromised birds living closely confined together, as Sweetie had been as a baby, in poorly ventilated, unclean and dusty areas inhale them in large numbers. Combined with the stress and poor quality of care they suffer, parrots like Sweetie are susceptible to rampages of the disease throughout their bodies, infecting multiple organs (kidneys, skin, eyes, brain, liver, and others) as the spores travel unabated.

All we knew was that our new little bird was always very sleepy and always had a runny nose. My interrogations of the local veterinarians I cornered led to my being responsible for Sweetie's medical treatment at home. For two years that were both painfully too short and interminably too long, I began, relished in and lost a love like no other, one that shaped and changed my life forever. Every day that weak little bird, just a little weaker than she had been the day before, would conserve what had to be every bit of energy she had for that moment each afternoon when it was allowed to burst forth as she ran as fast as her tiny toes take her, flying up across my chest and to my neck where she would collapse, panting from exhaustion under my chin and against my throat. There, she would begin her soft, breathy song—a melody she whistled just for the two of us each and every day as she slowly and painfully suffered the violence inside that was killing her.

One afternoon, Sweetie did not run up to snuggle in her place under my chin. She could no longer run anywhere, ever again. She was laying prone in seizure, her body paralyzed, her breath all but a whispered memory. She looked at me, and then closed her eyes and died.

When she died something new was born in me. This something was fire hot, molten rage, anguish, fierce and unforgiving. I returned to the store where Sweetie had come from those three years before. I took note of what I saw there and I said what had to be said out loud, in public, without compromise or capitulation, without the same mercy that was cruelly refused to my Sweetie and every other little being in that place called a store.

I used to be a 'cat' person. Today, I'm just a person. Sweetie taught me humility. She taught me grace. She showed me strength and courage and a dignity that was superhuman, superior and so pure.

Today, I understand why I will never buy a parrot, whether from a breeder or one of the stores they supply. I know I will always speak for those that were not allowed their voice. They need to be heard.

These are the birds that will come to Mickaboo and to the other rescues and rescuers of them around the world. My commitment is to support the organizations that support the best in all of us having a voice to share. Organizations that know how hard it is, how much it hurts, how large the problem is, and do what needs to be done anyway.

Thank you for listening.