

**Yellow Bird**  
**By Gary Campanella**

The wife and kids were off on a ski trip, and so my only job that wasn't my actual job was to keep the pets alive. After two days all hearts were still beating and I was quietly confident. And so on Saturday I decided to do some deep cleaning as well. I opened up the back door and sent the dogs out to the yard. I cleaned the aquarium filter and the rabbit cage. I moved the bird to her perch in the living room and carried her cage out back and scrubbed it thoroughly. I left it out back to dry and came back in and started on the laundry. It was a beautiful February day in suburban Los Angeles. The temperature was in the 70s. I opened windows and fresh air streamed into the house. I cleaned the floors while the washer and dryer hummed along. I cleaned the stove and the oven and the fridge. When the dryer buzzed and the first load was done I loaded the warm clothes into a basket and moved them to the table by the back door and began folding them. From there I could watch the dogs hunt the green space for lizards and the fish roam the rectangular boundaries of their Plexiglas universe. I listened to the bird chirp from her wooden perch by the front window in the other room, and I had seen the rabbit begin to gnaw on timothy hay inside her now clean enclosure in its corner of the garage, near the washer. I had music playing and with no one home I sang along. The universe was at work. The earth spun freely on its axis.

Soon I heard the bird flapping her wings and flying clockwise around the house. I heard her travel through the front hallway and the kitchen and out to the back room where the first load of clothes was almost folded. The bird, a hand-trained yellow cockatiel, lived in and on her cage at her leisure and discretion. We never caged her in, and after an unfortunate incident

when one of our dogs was a puppy, we never clipped her wings either. Once or twice a week she flew around the house. Whether it was for exercise, or companionship, or for some other bird reason, we never knew. She always returned to her cage, though, and never made a mess anywhere else. And so I was glad to see her and I greeted her as she flew in. I admired the ease with which she had finally learned the house, a two story colonial on a cul-de-sac, almost never smashing into windows or clumsily landing on an insecure perch. She flew passed me, choosing not to land on my shoulder or head as she often did. Both of us, the bird and I, realized my mistake in the same instant. The back door was still open. I quickly moved around the table towards it, probably accelerating her rate of escape, and it was too late. She seized her opportunity and flew straight out the door, with me stomping right behind. The dogs looked up at the noise but quickly returned to their business. The bird circled the pool once, then flew gracefully up and up, like a wild bird, out of the yard, towards the trees on the county land behind our house. Free now, she flew even higher, passed them, and soared out towards the neighborhood that was up the hill to the right.

And that was it. I stood by the pool, in awe of her flight and my folly. The dogs paused and stared at me, waiting for my next move. The bird was gone. There was no calling it, of course. That would be silly. I thought that maybe she would come back, but then I remembered that she was the same bird who took two years to figure out there was a window in the living room of our new house. Besides, she wasn't a dog. I couldn't see her circling back to her seed bowl when she got hungry. And I also knew there were flocks of wild parrots in my neighborhood, multiple generations removed

from the first parrot that flew out its back door while its owner folded laundry and waited for his family to return from skiing.

And so I went back inside, again leaving the back door open, thinking that maybe, just maybe, she would get tired and fly back on her own.

A few minutes later I went back outside and looked around. There was of course no sign of her. I carried the cage, now clean and dry, back into the house, but I didn't bother replacing the seed cup and water bowl. What would be the point?

I looked at the empty cage in the living room, shrugged my shoulders and went back to the laundry. The bird was gone. I had failed. And my family wouldn't even have the memory of its glorious flight to oblivion.

I finished folding the laundry and called the dogs back in and shut the door. I went back to the living room and looked again at the empty cage. This was clearly a problem. The universe was no longer at ease. The bird's persistent chirp was absent, would be absent, and the house would be different than when my wife and kids had left it.

And so, troubled by the empty cage, and with a hint of resignation, I put on my shoes and, like the beleaguered suburban husband and dad that I sometimes am, I went out the front door and walked down the street. I took a left up the hill to the area where the bird had disappeared. I went to the front door of the house that seemed about the right distance away, and rang the bell. An elderly woman answered and I said, "I'm sorry to bother you but my bird just flew away and my kids will be heartbroken. And so I was wondering if you would mind if I looked around your backyard to see if it might be in one of your trees." It was a proud moment.

She replied that she wouldn't mind at all and so I went to her back yard and stared into the branches of her fruit trees and live oaks, but saw no yellow bird. I went back in through her spotless house, as she was also cleaning on this beautiful Saturday, and I thanked her for indulging me. I asked if I could leave my name and address and phone number in case she saw a yellow cockatiel in her trees later. She got me a pen and paper and I wrote down my info and again thanked her. As I left through her front door an old man, her old man I supposed, drove a tiny little scooter into her driveway. He wore an oversized helmet for such a small scooter, and he had a long grey beard with no mustache. I thought how I had never seen him before, despite such a distinctive appearance. I thought how much I was a stranger in my own neighborhood. He eyed me warily, like maybe I was selling his wife life insurance, or something worse, and so I waved as cheerily and harmlessly as I could and kept on going, like whatever I was doing was the most normal thing in the world.

Flustered but determined to make an honest effort, I soldiered up to the next house and repeated the process. This time a teenage girl answered the door and there were no cars in the driveway, so I adjusted my plan to a slightly less creepy request for her to check her backyard for the bird while I waited outside. She offered to let me look myself, but I politely declined, and so she went off and returned in less time than a decent search should have taken. She said that she had seen no yellow bird. I thanked her and went on to the next house, choosing not to leave my phone number.

This time a 40-ish woman answered the door and I thought I recognized her as a parent from the elementary school that my kids attend, but I wasn't sure. Her kids were

home but her husband wasn't, and so I repeated my earnest request and they let me into the backyard where I saw their cat, but no yellow bird. Again I chose not to leave my information.

And then I had had enough. My search had been honest. It didn't include putting posters on telephone poles, but it had been pretty immediate, and every minute that passed meant the bird could have flown off somewhere else, or been eaten by that cat I saw, or the hawks I often saw. My pet was a yellow needle in a yellow haystack.

And so I walked back home and resumed with the laundry. I heartlessly started to vacuum under the couch cushions but soon lost my will and just plopped onto the cushions and turned on the television. After a little while I called my wife, who was on the slopes with the kids. I said, "Well, the bird is gone."

And she said, "Ella?"

"Yes. The back door was open and she went for a trip around the house and flew out the backyard and went up and away."

"Really?"

"Really. She never even looked back."

"Did you look for her?"

I recounted my story of helplessly watching her fly away and my subsequent tromp through neighbors' yards. I was brief and nonchalant, but she knew I was upset. "Oh well," she said, "I guess it's kind of funny really."

And then we went on to talk about skiing and all the fun they were having, and then I hung up and returned to the laundry in the house with one less pet now. I thought of the bird and accepted our fates. At least she'll die with her bird boots on.

A fast hour passed and I was back to cleaning and the doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anyone or anything and so I ignored it, but the dogs kept barking and they annoyed me. I put down the mop and got to the front door in time to see a guy on a mini scooter wearing an oversized helmet rolling down the driveway. It took a second or two for me to put it together, but then I did and I ran down the driveway, and then another hundred yards or so down the street, yelling for him to stop. It was another proud and dignified moment.

I finally did get his attention and he stopped in the middle of the road and said, "Were you at my house looking for a bird?"

I paused for a moment, caught between pondering his choice to grow a long grey beard without a mustache, and the realization that the guy who made that choice would forever identify me as the guy who was looking for a bird. Finally, I said, "Yes."

"Well, it's in my tree. Do you want to come and get it?"

He sounded and looked kind of grouchy about the whole thing, like the bird was trespassing or something, and so I said, "Let's go get her."

He rode slowly away and I walked fast without shoes on up to his house. He parked his scooter where I had seen him park it earlier, and I followed him to his backyard.

He pointed to the top of a medium-sized liquid amber tree and said, "It's up there."

I looked and looked, but couldn't see it. "Maybe it flew away."

"No," he said, "It's still there. See it? It's way at the top."

I looked and looked and still didn't see it. I said, "I didn't think yellow was a camouflage color."

He said, "Oh. It can be. We used all kinds of colors for camouflage back in the military."

I still couldn't see it though and he seemed annoyed again, like I was too dumb to see a bird in a tree. "Right there," he pointed. "It's right there."

Finally I saw it, perched peacefully about 25 feet off the ground, on a small branch, enjoying a view of the beautiful valley we lived in.

The old guy left and then returned a moment later with a long pole with a small basket at the end that looked like one of those things they screw in high-up light bulbs with. "Try this," he said.

"What is it?"

He sighed with exasperation. "It's used to pick avocados from trees. That's an avocado tree right next to you."

"So it is." I took the pole from him and reached it way up into the tree. I wasn't sure what my strategy was. I didn't think my little bird would voluntarily sacrifice her new found freedom by jumping into the avocado basket and letting me lower her gently to the earth.

Further, I quickly found out that the pole wasn't long enough to reach her.

The old man seemed satisfied that I was in charge now, and reasonably competent enough to handle the task at hand, and so he began talking about other things while I went tree fishing for a yellow bird. He told me how long he had lived in the neighborhood and how few houses there were when he first moved in, right after he got married, right after he got back from the Korean War. He told me he loved that there were so many Koreans in the

neighborhood now, like he had been fighting for something, but that he didn't like all the traffic now.

As he talked, I continued trying to catch a cockatiel in an avocado basket. Eventually I tried just smacking the branch she was on in hopes that she would fly to a lower branch and I could then knock her down with the pole or something. As I tried this, she simply stepped over to another branch. She did this time and again, also seeming annoyed with my lack of competence.

The conversation took an unexpected turn when the old man said, "You know, you're lucky I was here at all today. I usually spend every Saturday morning at the Y, but they just told me that I couldn't go back there anymore because they said I was staring at women too much."

"What?"

"I know. They accused me of being a pervert."

"Really. Do you think someone complained or something?"

As the conversation got more awkward, my attempts at batting my pet bird out of the tree grew more exaggerated, but equally useless. It was clear that she wasn't coming down as long as there was a big avocado basket trying to brain her, and it was clear that it took her about zero effort to evade it.

I was ready to give up. I took one final swipe, knowing this would be the last time I saw the yellow bird that my wife and I bought soon after we were married, before we had kids, or a house, or the other pets. She effortlessly stepped aside. I turned and thanked the old man and was leaning the pole against the back of his house when I saw

his garden hose coiled neatly in a basket. I don't know what made me think of it, but I said, "Can I use your hose?"

He looked at me suspiciously, but he said I could.

I said, "I think if I get her wet she'll freak out and fly, but she's not a duck and so she won't be able to fly with wet wings."

He looked up at the tree, tugged at the bottom of his beard, and said, "Why, that just might work."

And so I grabbed the hose and turned on the water and aimed at the bird. I hit it with a stream of water on my first try, and it tried to fly away, but its feathers were wet and it fluttered to the ground like a duck that was shot. I ran over to it and dove on it, grabbing it with both hands while it tried to peck and fly its way free.

The old man said, "You got him!"

Back at the house I placed the wet yellow bird carefully in the cage and closed it. She was unhurt except for her dignity, and she seemed pretty angry at me.

I left the room and let her alone to reflect on her few hours of being a wild bird, while I reflected proudly on my successful capture of the little yellow bird that dared to be free. I called up my wife.

"I got the bird."

"You did? How did that happen?"

"It was pretty crazy. This old guy who's backyard I had searched earlier saw him in a tree and came and got me. I squirted the bird with water from a hose and she fell out of the tree and I grabbed her."

"You squirted her with a hose? What made you think of that?"

"I have no idea. I probably saw it on a nature special or something."

"I'm so happy. You know, I had a feeling you would find her. I don't know why, but I did. I hadn't even told the kids yet."

"Really? I didn't think I would. I was more upset about it than I wanted to admit to myself, which is why I went looking, but I didn't think I would find her."

"Well I knew you would. So whose house was he at?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him around before. He was an old guy rocking this long grey beard with no mustache, driving this little tiny scooter."

"Oh, that guy," she said. "I know him. I've seen him at the Y."