

# Lucky Me

## Arianna didn't think keeping a bird as a pet was a good idea – until Ava came along

Story by Elaine Proctor

**T**hey belong in the wild – that's what I once would've said about having a bird as a pet. It isn't OK, not even post-divorce, in a new city, friendless and licking my wounds. It's cruel and selfish to cage a bird.

As part of my new life, I get a job as a teaching assistant in a primary school and move in with a flatmate named Jeremy.

A few months into our shared tenancy, Jeremy deposits a bag of seed and his Namibian lovebird, Ava, on the kitchen table, then says, "The winter is doing my head in, Arianna," and leaves for Morocco.

"But hang on a minute," I say to no one as he pounds down the stairs and away.

It isn't love at first sight between Ava and me. She bites me mercilessly until I get her food and water just right. Things only improve slightly when I install a new sisal climbing ladder and a chew toy.

After a few days, I leave the door of her cage open so she can march up my arm and sit on my shoulder. Instead of reading "interventions in the teaching of mathematics" for my master's degree, I devote my evenings to learning how to mimic Ava's birdsong until we

rock a pretty good duo.

The truth of the matter is that neither of us can bear to be alone. Ava takes to screeching blue murder whenever I reach for my backpack and coat. I can hear her all the way to the bus stop.

I get permission to bring her to school. Ava and I take the number 174 at 7.15 in the morning and then back home at 14.45, apart from Wednesdays when I teach a pottery class after school and Ava works the crowd. I counsel her not to let the fandom of a pack of screaming six year olds go

to her head, but she pays no attention and puffs herself up like a Christmas tree decoration.

When I've almost forgotten who he is, Jeremy writes to say he's fallen for someone in Marrakech and will I please adopt Ava.

She breaks the ice everywhere we go in a way I never could. Even the elegant, silver-haired lady who paid me no heed until I showed up with a birdcage under my arm takes to sitting next to me on the bus. Her name is Bridget and she's manager of the Oxfam shop on the high street. Ava mutilates Bridget's little finger but the old lady is undaunted.

"Lucky you, with those long legs," says Bridget when I stop by the charity shop to try on a pair of vintage trousers she's put aside for me.

I don't know about the legs, but I know I'm lucky to have Ava.

I couldn't tell you who left the window of the classroom open. I never want to know. But Ava is there one minute and then gone the next.

When my empty birdcage and I make it on to the 174

that afternoon, I can feel Bridget take in the absence of the bright green, red-headed, yellow-beaked lovebird who saved my broken heart.

She pats the seat beside her, takes my hand and says not a word. We both watch the world roll by as loss settles into my crevices like volcanic ash.

We approach Bridget's stop and she says, "Come home with me."

I shake my head, but she doesn't seem to see that.

"For a cup of tea – go on."

"Can't."

I watch Bridget make her way towards the double doors of the bus and I wish I'd said yes because how can I go home with an empty cage? Suddenly, Bridget crumples,



hitting her head on the sharp edge of the seat as she goes down. The driver stops the bus, finds her rattled but in one piece, and suggests I walk her home.

I help Bridget to her feet.

“What happened to your head, Mum?” asks the young man standing in the doorway of what I take to be Bridget’s flat.

“This is my friend, Arianna,” she says, ignoring his question.

I don’t pay him much heed – apart from noticing his great height, his red hair, his freckles, oh, and the sharp, dancing green of his eyes.

He looks at me. “What did she do this time?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Choke?”

“She fainted.”

“That’s a new one.”

“Arianna’s bird escaped,” says Bridget, looking at him meaningfully.

“Jesus, give it up, Mum.”

“I might if you got off your backside and did something about it yourself.” She turns to me.

“It’s been four years since his wife left him.”

“Mum!”

She reels round and hisses at him. “Her bird flew away today, Jonah.”

He looks at me as if he’s only just understood. “What kind of bird?”

“Her name is Ava.”

“Ava.”

“She’s a lovebird.”

“Did you call for her?” he asks.

“I read somewhere that they come if they’re hungry and they hear your voice.”

“No, I didn’t know that.” Do I know anything that matters, I wonder?

He goes inside and emerges with a backpack and a torch. We take our leave of Bridget and ride the 174 back to the school.

Jonah watches as I fill our hands with seed. We walk, looking up into the treetops. I whistle and I chirp.

First one street, then another, until the sun begins to set and clouds billow out of our mouths from the cold. Barely a single word passes between us.

When darkness falls, he turns on his torch and we carry on. He shines it up into the high branches. My jaw aches from all the calling.

We walk and walk, and then, just as my heart is about to slither out of my body in defeat, Jonah opens his mouth and chirps – pitch perfect – just like that. And somewhere close by... maybe? Wait. Yes. There is an answer. 📍

*Elaine Proctor’s latest novel, [The Love Factory \(Quercus, £18.99\)](#), is out now. See [Express Bookshop](#) on page 81.*



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