

# PRETTY BIRD

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About a year ago my phone rang and there was an agitated gentleman at the other end. He explained that he'd bought a baby parrot several months ago and lovingly hand-raised it with the intention of taking it back to his own country. But with Bird Flu still rampant, no airline would carry the parrot. His own ticket was confirmed and he had to leave in a week. There was a long, pregnant pause as I considered the implications of yet another creature in the compound.

"Bring it over," I said resignedly.

To this day I've never purchased a pet, they just seem to keep turning up. Chiko arrived the next day with a big cage, a travelling cage, a supply of toys and a permit. We examined each other with interest. Chiko is an Eclectus, an Eastern Indonesian parrot who'd been bred at the parrot ranch in Singapadu south of Ubud. He is a sleek, brilliant green with scarlet underwings piped in turquoise and a bright orange beak tapering to yellow at the tip. Chiko's a pretty bird, and he knows it.

At first I thought he was a perch potato, beautiful but somewhat lacking in personality. It turns out that he was just biding his time. Chiko is a thoughtful bird. When offered a peanut, it can take him a couple of minutes of deep deliberation before he accepts it. And for the first six months after he arrived I was out of Bali for long periods of time looking after my parents. My staff and house sitters tried to play with him but he remained silent and aloof. His only words were a very soft, polite "Hello" and what sounded like "Monk".

Only in November did we really begin to get to know one another. He'd been hand-raised from a chick and missed human company, so I began to include him in my activities. I brought my computer outside and worked at the table on the patio, and he would sit for hours on my shoulder like a statue, watching my fingers on the keyboard. After a few weeks of this he began to gently groom my hair and I understood that he'd accepted me as his Person. Chiko became more demanding. If he felt he wasn't getting enough attention he would pull out my earrings and take off my reading glasses. When I was drinking tea, he wanted to sip from my cup. If it happened to be arak, that was fine with him too. I had to banish him from walking on the table because he was obsessed with pecking the keys off my computer and nipping through all the interesting cables.

Wayan Manis and I learned to clip the long feathers from one of his wings so he could leave his cage. He became a resolute walker, strutting around the garden for considerable distances. We had to curtail this activity when he took to climbing trees; a gust of wind would easily blow him down the undercliff where he'd be impossible to find. Even when he's perched in the hibiscus bush, he is so perfectly camouflaged as to be invisible.

I place him on bushes close to where I'm working in the garden and he poses there for hours, pondering the ways of the universe and muttering to himself. If I move out of sight, he will often swoop down to the grass and chug around the garden until he finds me.

Rama the bald cockatoo resents my attention to the newcomer. "I love you!" he reminds me when I play with Chiko. If they happen to be placed on the same bush at the same time, the much smaller Rama menaces the Eclectus with bony outspread wings and threatening hisses. "Monk," responds Chiko peaceably.

He's become much more vocal recently. I live next to an elementary school, and in the mornings Chiko manages to sound like a whole classroom of screaming children. He joins in when the dogs bark. I hear him quietly practicing some complex monologue in which I think I recognize a few words. I'm waiting for him to surprise me with a perfectly articulated sentence some day.

Just a few weeks after Chiko arrived there was another agitated phone call. It seemed that another Eclectus needed a home. Unlike Chiko, this male was older, wilder and rather thin. I immediately applied for a permit, named him Darius to empower him, and set to fattening him up with nice things to eat. He'd never interacted with humans and nipped me hard with his sharp beak if he felt I was taking liberties. Only after months of patient interaction would he gently accept a peanut from my fingers and tickle my finger with his tongue. I was planning to slowly tame him so that he, too, could join us in the garden. After a year, the permit to keep him finally arrived. We all celebrated with roast chicken (parrots are very partial to chicken). The next morning Darius was dead in his cage.

Parrots can be most contrary birds. Full of beans one minute, dead the next. The evening before, Darius had been well and happy and had in fact polished off half a cob of corn and most of a passion fruit. Twelve hours later he was a sad splash of colour on the floor of his cage. The ants had already found him. I buried him in the orchard with every flower in the garden. At least he died legal. The next day I remembered that we were supposed to send the identifying ring around his ankle back to the parrot ranch for their records. When the staff arrived, we dug him up. The ring was too tight to slip over his foot, and none of us could bring ourselves to cut his foot off. Nyoman suggested we let nature take its course for a couple of weeks before trying again. We buried him once more.

The other birds don't seem to notice that Darius is gone. Rama continues to lord it over the household from his highest perch. Chiko is content as long as I'm in sight. Visitors tell him he's a pretty bird, and he placidly agrees.

Dragons in the Bath, a collection of Ibu Kat's stories, is available in Bali from Dijon in Kuta, Ganesha Books at Biku in Seminyak and Ganesha Books and Periplus Books in Ubud. It can be ordered nationally and internationally through [www.dragonsinthebath.com](http://www.dragonsinthebath.com) <<http://www.dragonsinthebath.com>>

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