

The Parrot Man
by Stephen Jones

A knock at the door, and Jake rises slowly from his vigil on the balcony and moves to open it. It's Nancy.

"Yeah?" he says flatly, looking her in the eyes.

"Umm, did you get my message?" she asks.

"No. Sorry."

"Well," she says, pushing a brown paper bag towards him, "when I left, I somehow got away with a few of your things, and I think I also forgot my Mom's spoons over here..."

"Alright," Jake says, taking the bag, "I guess they're still wherever you left them."

"I'll just go.." she says while making her way into the kitchen.

Jake steps over to the couch and sits down. Nancy clangs around in the kitchen drawers. After a couple of minutes she enters the room and asks Jake if he has any bags she can put the spoons in. He looks up at her blankly and reaches over with his left hand, grabs the bag she gave him, and empties it beside him.

"I didn't mean *that* one, Jake," she says.

"It's no problem," he says, now looking at her silhouetted in the doorway. "You can take whatever."

"I don't want...Jake, it doesn't have to--"

"You're right. It doesn't," he says.

"Jake, let's not, okay? I don't want to go through it all again. Let's not..." she trails off, refolding the bag in her hands.

She returns to the kitchen then and Jake can hear her mother's silver spoons falling into the brown paper sack. When the noise ceases she comes back into the living room and places herself on the other end of the long couch, the end by the ashtray. The contents of the bag are spilled between them. She takes the largest item and holds it out to Jake, as if he isn't recognizing it.

"Your photo album, hu--Jake," she says.

Looking over at her, "Thanks."

"Hope you don't care, I looked at a couple of pictures."

"Whatever," he says.

"Y'know, I never had seen your family before, Jake. Why didn't you ever show me?"

"Forgot I even had that old thing. It was a gift, I think. Didn't really want it. If you'd like it--"

"No, it's yours. Everybody should have one of their own, helps 'em remember who they are," she

says, still holding it out to him.

He takes it passively then, and just to keep his hands occupied opens it to the first page. Nancy looks over his shoulder, carefully keeping enough distance between them that her presence doesn't mean anything.

"How old were you there?" she says, pointing to an old polaroid of a kid with some fat man.

Jake is quiet for a few moments, looking deep into the picture, trying to remember. Finally it comes back to him. "Must have been about eight or nine. That's my uncle. It was the Fourth of July."

A barbecue, the fireworks, all his cousins there, all the grown-ups too, drinking their beer and ignoring the kids. Jake's oldest cousin Marty has brought her boyfriend. Jake and the remaining kids are setting fireworks out on the basketball court. He is nine in this picture.

After a while, when the fireworks have all been used up, Jake and his cousins go and sit at the feet of their parents, still drinking their beer. Jake's aunt, the only one of the grown-ups without a bottle in her hand, takes him inside after a while and cleans up his hand, burnt from the bottle rockets he had insisted on holding. When he comes back out, Uncle Jimbo notices his bandaged hand and laughs.

"Whaddya expect, ya' little yardeg?" he asks, "Play with the fire and you're a gonna get burned." Jake tries to ignore Jimbo and walk past to his mother, but Jimbo catches him and unsteadily swings him up above his head. The stars streak past Jake's face suddenly, becoming silver streams of light, and he lets out an involuntary gasp when Jimbo almost drops him. He begins to whimper softly then, against his will. The aunt tries to take him away to get the scare out of him but Jimbo evades her and holds Jake on his shoulder roughly as he walks off into the dark pasture.

No one besides the aunt even notices the two leaving.

When Jake and his uncle finally escape the firelight, Jimbo bends over as far as his belly will let him and sets Jake down.

"Hey Jako, follow me kid," Jimbo says, weaving a circuitous path through the darkness. Jake follows hesitantly at first, but finally decides to play, if only for a moment, and tries to trail his uncle through the night by the tremendous noise he's making.

He catches him about twenty yards out.

"Where ya' been?" Jimbo asks, finally standing still but breathing hard for it.

"I was right behind you, like always," Jake says, trying not to smile.

Jimbo laughs and then turns around and his fingers begin the familiar process of trying to find the

buttons on his jeans so he can pee. Jake, deciding he won't let himself be a baby and cry anymore, does the same, although he doesn't really need to pee. Listening to his Uncle's urine splash through the tumbleweeds, Jake asks him then, "Why do you call us that anyway?"

"What? Call you what?"

"Y'know, yardeggs."

"Ohh," he says reflectively, "that's easy, Jako. You were all born from eggs. Hatched, y'know. Dontchya 'member?"

"No."

"Yeah, well I do. I 'member when all ya'll kids were just ten white eggs out in the barn," he says. "Hey, know what? Think I still got one of them shells ya'll came out of. Yessir, in fact I know I do. A big ol' piece. Come on over sometime and I'll show ya'."

With that Jimbo turns around and walks back to the firelight and another beer. Jake remains for a while out in the dark, alone, trying to imagine being born from an egg.

A short-haired man and a tallish woman now, in front of a cloth mountain landscape, holding each other and smiling. Obviously a strained pose.

Jake lies on his bed, scared. His parents are fighting like usual, his mother following his father around the house yelling at him, his father looking for something he can't seem to find. As the fight moves to the room below him, Jake can hear them;

"--hell have you been? Just tell me that, Gene Pratt, just tell me that!" The mother's voice is shrill, tired from too many cigarettes. It cuts right through the ceiling into Jake's floor.

"Leave me 'lone, I said, and I ain't a gonna say it no more." The father's voice is deep and just barely collected, with a defensive pitch to it, like something cornered, perhaps trapped.

"All I want is an answer, dammit. Just tell me the truth. You at least owe me that. I want to hear it from your lips, Gene."

Jake hears his father laugh at that, laugh deep like his voice. He also hears how the laughter is cut off by the distinct sound of his mother's hand. Glass breaks downstairs. Something solid falls. His mother screams. Jake tries not to hear. He tries hard.

"Alright, you wanna know," his father yells, not collected anymore, "I'll tell you. I was over at your brother Jimbo's...Yeah, a few of his heifers got loose and we spent all night trying to get 'em back in the pens. That satisfy you now? That enough?"

"Dammit, Gene Pratt, you aren't telling me one damn thing I haven't already heard. I know where

you were. Good and well. You can't say nothing to me that I haven't already heard. Not one single thing."

It was the same thing she always said to him too. Jake knew it well.

As Jake turns the page, something slips out and falls gently to the floor. Nancy reaches over across his knees without thinking and grabs the small item between her nicotine-stained fingers. It's a bright green feather.

"What's this, Jake?" she asks.

"Just an old feather," he says back. "Nothing really."

"Well, why's it in here then?"

"Don't know," Jake lies. "Told you I didn't make this. You can throw it away if you want. It's probably dirty."

The parrot wouldn't shut up, so Jake's father simply took the full ashtray and threw it violently towards its cage. It knocked the whole thing to the floor, and the ashes drifted down around it, a soft grey rain. Jake's father laughed. His mother got up and stormed out of the room for another drink. Jake took the bird up to his room and tried to make it better, but all it did was lay there, moving nothing but its eyes.

Suddenly Jake's father is there, filling the doorway with his presence, his voice. "I guess it's about time for you to do some growing up now, kid. About time, yep. Eight's old enough, sure. Can't be a baby all your life, can you? Now you listen. What I want you to do is take that bird, take it outside and do like I did to that old stray last week. You got it?"

"But--"

"No buts, kid. Just do what I said, and then come in and wash up for dinner. You gettin' this?"

"Yessir," Jake says into his shirt. After his father's footsteps are gone Jake collects the bird in his arms and makes his way downstairs and past his mother, who looks away quickly and continues cooking, splattering grease everywhere. Through his fingertips Jake can feel the bird's heart racing madly out of control. He can feel it in his temples too.

Once outside and standing just out of the lengthening shade of the porch, Jake resolutely decides he simply won't do what his father says this time, decides instead he'll just climb up on the barn and let the bird go free. It's the first time he's ever considered disobeying his father, and he hesitates a moment out of fear before making his way over to the hog pens and climbing up on their tin shed, getting onto the roof of

the barn easily. He stands there with the warm faded wood beneath his bare feet for a while then, silently holding the bird close to his chest, until he hears the front screen creak open and his father's boots scrape on the porch.

"Jake, you do what I told you, boy?" he demands.

Jake opens his eyes wide then, feeling it's time, and takes the bird and throws it up as high as he can, up into the sky where it can fly away, far away from all this. But it only falls onto the packed dirt below, kicking up a small cloud of dust that quickly settles back down on its green feathers, coating them, not caring that they were once beautiful.

The cats get to it first, but the dogs chase them away.

Jake sits up there on the barn all through dinner, softly crying, trying to understand why the bird didn't fly away, trying without any words to say he's sorry.

Between pages, an old neatly handwritten note with a grey- streaked happy face stuck up in the top right corner.

It's Jake's turn. He stands there shakily for a moment in front of his whole home-room class, and the teacher finally repeats the first few words for him; "Four score and..."

It's quiet for a moment and Jake doesn't follow her lead like everyone else has done, but instead looks down at his hands, feeling the tears welling in his eyes for some reason. A single strand of fear makes its way down his face, taking forever to fall, and then he suddenly remembers the bird from home, before his father and the barn. When it could talk.

Hoping no one will notice his glistening cheek, he starts from the beginning and flatly recites the assigned section of the Gettysburg Address with no help from the teacher, not even having to think to remember the lines, the words come so naturally to him. When he's through, the whole class, including his teacher, sits there, saying nothing. He folds his hands behind his back then, not even vaguely understanding all he just repeated, and turns away sharply.

Later that day, he brings home the special note the teacher wrote him about how good he did and shows it to his mom. She looks at it through her eye that isn't swollen shut and says "That's nice," dropping it on the table with the mail and her dark glasses.

"Over at Matt's, they put stuff like that on the refrigerator, y'know," Jake says.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, on the fridge," his Mom says, sticking it up under the shopping list and inadvertently smearing some ashes from her cigarette on it. "You happy now?"

"Yeah, happy" Jake says.

School picture. Some of the boys are playing football. The girls are sitting by the see-saws talking. Jake is on the bird nest monkey bars with a couple of the non-football boys.

"So what did they say, Jake, huh?" asks the first boy, cutting what Jake was saying right in half.

"Yeah, you gotta tell us," the second boy says, "'Member how I told you 'bout my sister? Now you gotta tell us 'bout Marty."

Marty is five years ahead of Jake and his classmates.

Jake relents. "Alright, alright," he says while hanging upside down, "it was like this. I was at my Uncle Rick's, just messing around out back getting cans and stuff, when Marty and her boyfriend drove up in his car. Marty was wearing that black skirt she always wears--"

"Yeah, we *all* know that one" the first boy says.

"Well, Rick wasn't there, did I say that? Well he wasn't. And I guess him and her didn't see me either, cause they went right inside and--"

"No, no," the second boy interrupts, "tell it like you usually do, with you saying what they said and all."

"Yeah, say all what they said," the first boy repeats. "Say it like you *remember* it."

Jake smiles, knowing that was what they wanted to hear in the first place, and then begins in his cousin's high voice; "Come on inside shyboy. Nobody's here."

"You sure 'bout this Marty?" he follows in a deeper voice. "Just get in here, Theodore, I want you, *now*," which draws embarrassed laughs from all three boys. Then Jake adds, "Then they went inside, and I went around to the front window. They never even saw me!"

"C'mon, c'mon, what did they say?" asks the first boy again.

Jake continues in his falsetto Marty voice; "Ooh, yeah. Right there. Wait, wait. Alright. *Yeah*," then slipping into his Theodore voice again, "Right here on the couch? You crazy?" Then back to Marty, "Just don't worry, do it now. C'mon, quick, I *want* you."

After the story is over, the two boys go off to play football. Jake remains there on the bird nest, trying to hang upside down from his feet, but falling every time. He gets to where he's not even afraid of it, finding that the fall doesn't really hurt at all. Eventually another boy comes over. Soon Jake repeats the whole story to him too, adding even more of Marty's voice this time, getting better and better, both with her voice and the hanging there.

An under-exposed polaroid, with distant flashes of what could be light tearing in vain at the

darkness.

Jake is watching the fireworks way off in the distance. He sits alone in the dry field behind his house. His car is parked over in the tall grass. There's no fireworks this year, as most of the cousins are scattered. After a while Jimbo wanders out to pee and notices Jake sitting there.

"Hey Jako, whatchya doin' there man?"

"Nothing really," Jake says, "just sitting."

"Hey, stay there for a minute," Jimbo says while walking away and buttoning his pants distractedly like he forgot something, "I'll be right back." A couple of quiet minutes pass and Jake forgets about his uncle, instead listening to an owl back in the trees somewhere.

"I'm back," Jimbo suddenly breaks in from the night surrounding Jake, "and look what I brought," he adds, proudly producing two longnecks. "You gotta start sometime, dontchya?"

"Yeah, guess so," Jake replies, taking one of the beers, holding the cold brown bottle loosely between his fingers.

"Listen, Jako," Jimbo starts after a long pull on his beer, "about your dad and all, man...I hate it. The whole situation. And I know you do too. Gotta. I mean, who'd a ever thought Gene would just up and *leave* like that? Hell, I told your momma though, from the first time I saw him, I told her to stay away from him. We all told her. He always was a somebitch. Don't know what she ever saw in him. Ah hell though Jako, who knows?" he asks to nobody in particular, "I guess there's just stuff going on we can't hope to get holt of, shit hap'nin we won't never ge--"

"I know," Jake says, standing and turning on him suddenly, fiercely, tears welling in his deep eyes, "I know. And it's not enough. Every damn person I know has said the same exact damn thing already. They all sound just the same. Every last one."

The owl begins his lonesome call again during the silence that follows.

"Maybe you should just have another beer, Jako," Jimbo finally says, offering the last of his. "Maybe that's all you need."

"Yeah, mebbe so," Jake replies, taking the bottle and then dropping it from his trembling fingers as Jimbo retreats back to the firelight.

Jake sets the album down between his knees.

Nancy asks, "Is that Jimbo again, there?"

"Yeah, he was around a lot after the old man left."

"Left, huh? I never even knew about your parents, Jake, not anything. Y'know, you never told me enough."

"Would it really have made any difference, Nan?" Jake says, looking her way.

"I don't know," she says, looking back somewhere, "but dammit, Jake, I just never felt, I don't know. I never felt like you were letting me all the way in. I'm not saying it's your fault or anything--"

"Doesn't matter."

"But it does matter, Jake Pratt, dammit. *We* used to matter too," Nancy says suddenly, through the smoky haze of cigarette smoke enshrouding her. "We could have made it, maybe."

"And it's too late now, I suppose?" Jake says, looking away.

She doesn't reply, and the silence that fills the distance between them becomes cumbersome.

"I think I'm gonna take off now, Jake. Maybe I'll call in a while, a few days, maybe not. You alright?"

"Sure."

"Well, I'll see y--"

"Don't forget the spoons," Jake says, holding the bag out to her.

"Oh yeah," Nancy replies, reaching for it.

As she grabs the bag, she goes too far and their hands touch. Jake's fingers instantly grasp her's softly, desperately, and hold on to them. She doesn't pull away at first.

"Nan..hun..I still..can love you," Jake whispers, his voice full.

Another, longer moment of silence follows.

"Jake. Don't. Please. We've said it all before. Everybody has." And she pulls her hand away then. Jake hears the door close but doesn't look back.

When her footsteps finally fade into nothing, Jake resolutely rises and carries the photo album to his shelf and hides it there among books he's never read. Then he makes himself a bowl of grain cereal and goes out on the balcony to stare at it until it becomes mush and the pigeons come to pick at it.

After a while he stands, slowly as if in a daze, unfolds his arms and spreads them wide, as if they're more, so much more than just arms. It feels good, the evening sun warming him. He goes over to the railing of the balcony then, and leans far over its cold restraining steel, looking, staring over the edge, concentrating until he can feel his heart racing through his fingertips, his temples.

Down, twenty-seven stories below, he doesn't see the cars and the people and the life, but instead sees the light brown dust of his front yard, the dust that will rise up suddenly and then settle back down

ever so gentle, not caring what it covers up. Not knowing. Looking slowly up into the fading sky, he feels the almost tangible chance of flight, waiting everywhere in the air above, all around him. He can feel the old wood beneath his feet, warm and dry. Nothing but his eyes are moving.