

YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST

By M. Kolbet

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author PETER J. STAVROS writes: I was enthralled by the depth of imagination in the writing, where, like the jigsaw puzzle in this story, things were not always as they were pictured on the outside; for example, behind the doors of an empty hallway “warriors were hiding in caves, or concealed in a jungle, and ready to attack,” and an “undersized apartment seemed replete with hidden chambers, each closet room enough for armies.” New neighbors burdened with unpacking their vast store of belongings and unable to locate their cell phones “were blind as prophets, neither ready to tell fortunes.” And then there was the tension created by this insufferable “pre-loaded” parrot, tenuous retribution for a long unresolved sibling rivalry, which, while courteous enough not to soil the furniture, was an otherwise most impertinent guest, exasperatingly speaking generally “with jabbing words, or quot[ing] television shows” and knowing no other tricks, at least none the bird was willing to share. For me, the parrot had it coming, whatever were to come for him, as I anxiously read to the end to find out. Quote: ‘Erica came to know the different characters of silence, for it was not always monastic. Some silence existed only in a chaotic conversation with itself. Another stayed cool for a long time after it began, lifted perhaps from a stone jar. And while a third kind almost seemed to demand payment, a fourth ruffled itself off for nothing. Some had to be navigated. Others felt like an office memorandum, requiring filing.*

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“Get your trousers on.”

Erica Becker stirred, but didn't do what she was told. That wasn't her style. She'd been listening to her new parrot for over a month, periodically showing off the animal to curious friends, though just as often suffering a mental lethargy in having to share her space with another being. In what she would come to consider a moral feint on both parts, she'd inherited the bird when her Aunt Irma died. Ulysses' arrival felt like the fulfillment of some atavistic contract. Though Erica's aunt was her only written correspondent, Erica had counted on nothing. Despite their letters, she thought of Irma as a shadow of someone she knew a long time ago.

Nor had anything suggested the companion Irma wrote about was a talking bird. Every time her aunt related conversations with Ulysses at breakfast, Erica assumed he was an old friend. And when the bird first came to her apartment, she thought perhaps he had been. In the final years of her life, Multiple sclerosis had confined Irma to her apartment, so Ulysses was at least a sounding board.

News of Irma's death arrived late, just two days before Ulysses came into Erica's life. A neighbor woman had written a short note to Erica, offering her condolences and commenting on what she called a mountain of correspondence. It cheered and saddened Erica to think her aunt had read and possibly re-read each letter; it also made her feel guilty. She kept Aunt Irma's letters a day at most and then threw them out. After the note from the neighbor, a lawyer telephoned to confirm the death and advise Erica a package would be arriving the next day. She'd been thinking what present she might buy herself that month, but such self-delivered gifts would never be a bird or anything that feeds. The lawyer couldn't tell Erica what the package was either; he simply asked if she would be home. She would be. She was. And so Ulysses came to be hers.

After a week together, Erica started to leave the radio on so the bird wouldn't be lonely while she was at work. It occurred to her how much easier their relationship would be if Ulysses would mimic what she offered him, if he were willing to discuss composers in some somnolent DJ's voice, for he seemed adept at accents. He might compare Haydn to Mozart, or the contrapuntalism of Bach. Even if he drawled out the words, like he was calling a ball game, it would be an improvement. It didn't take. The bird kept to his classless ways. As it was Ulysses either talked about what was immediately in front of him, often with jabbing words, or quoted television shows. His repertoire left Erica with little hope for the life Irma had led in the end.

“Do you have any other tricks?” Ulysses teased her with silence. “No, bird. He talks, which is great, but still just a bird.” She sighed. “Who can live a tremendously long time. I don’t even know how old you are. And apparently I’m not reaching you. What kind of parrot comes pre-loaded?” She spoke as though the parrot were Poirot, ready to reveal the intricacies behind a mysterious death.

“*Glad we could get together,*” squawked Ulysses. His tone wasn’t anything Erica recognized. He followed his incantation with a mock curtsy. His left eye coiled round, like that of a fish. Sometimes it seemed to Erica that even if it wasn’t Irma’s intent, Ulysses wanted to humiliate her.

“Thanks,” Erica told Ulysses.

“*Let’s be careful out there.*”

Erica scoffed. Though it was early, she carried herself to bed after double-checking that both the radio and television were off. It was a warm night, and she left the window open. Ulysses could collect the world as it flew up to him.

Saturday morning Erica spent an hour reading in bed, largely to avoid the bird. She revisited *The Odyssey*, something she hadn’t read since high school, and ventured from bed only to make coffee or use the bathroom. On both sojourns she ignored Ulysses’ noisy calls for attention—*Unless I’m wrong, which you know, I’m not*—and complaints about how careless she was.

When Erica finally dressed, it had started raining so heavily that her plan to take a walk was postponed. Captive, she made breakfast and fed Ulysses, who accepted a small pile of seeds in silence.

At the back of her closet Erica found an old jigsaw puzzle, something her mother had given her, noting it had kept them busy a full week. Erica was sure it would take her a month at least. Dedicating vast swaths of space in the small apartment to the endeavor, she cleared a table and began to pick through the pieces, shiny on one side and a moribund grey on the other. She'd managed to turn over and sort out a small patch of sea when someone knocked on the door.

Erica jumped, spilling cardboard water to the floor. Ulysses laughed. Erica swore. Usually her neighbors kept to themselves, offering little more than an obligatory greeting in the hallway. Knocking was reserved for noise violations, emergencies, or prologues to nothing. She opened the door, fearing the worst.

“Hi! Just wanted to introduce myself since you’ll be seeing me once in a while. Don’t want you to think there’s a thief or have to call the cops.” The newcomer spoke quickly, pausing only to point to an open door at the end of the corridor.

“Does that mean Mrs. Winston died?” Erica processed the information, thinking how much larger Mrs. Winston’s apartment was, one larger island in a sea of them floating over the avenues.

“No. That would be horrid. I don’t think I could live where someone had died. She moved in with her daughter or something.” Given the age of the building, Erica figured someone had probably died in every apartment. “I’m Herald. And that’s my boyfriend, Troy.” An arm extended from the door, supporting a waving hand. “Wow, is that a puzzle?” Herald pushed her head past Erica, who was considering she might have to invent a death in order to end the conversation.

“It was raining.” She shrugged. “And Ulysses and I aren’t talking.”

“Who? Is he your boyfriend?”

“He’s my parrot.” Herald gawked, as though she’d heard prisoner instead of pet.

“*Just the facts, ma’am,*” said Ulysses. He slurred his words as though Erica had ruined him, let him become moth-eaten.

Impossibly, Herald’s mouth widened.

“That is so cool!” She turned, probably to call to Troy. Erica stopped her.

“I’ll take him out walking later so you can have a proper talk.” It didn’t fit the facts, as they never walked in the hall, but it was enough to satisfy Herald. Troy was calling her name with unmistakable complaint.

“Okay, bye!” Herald ran down the hall and vanished. Erica closed the door, sighing deeply.

“*A walk?*” asked Ulysses, before turning it into a ridiculous chant: “*A walk, a walk, a walk. Or a boat ride to home. A walk, a walk, a walk...*”

“Maybe. And you’ll have to sit on my arm.” No matter what he asked, Ulysses had a way of making Erica feel horribly complicit in some liturgical formalism.

An hour later, the rain outside still falling as though to rope the world shut, Erica had enough of the puzzle. The sea beneath her was slow to form. She’d managed only the bottom edge of what, according to the picture on the box, would be an intrepid boat.

Occasionally Erica let Ulysses out of his cage *inside* the apartment. He was courteous enough not to shit on her second-hand couch or the kitchen table, and could usually be charmed back into his cage with a bit of corn. Besides his caged journey from Aunt Irma’s, this would be the first time she took him outside. Even the corridor risked the wrath of the super, open doors and other apartments, or the stairwell and wide world beyond, from Ithaca, New York to Jakarta.

“Let’s go entertain them,” Erica muttered. Ulysses was contemplative.

“Going to see Irma?” he asked. Erica had coaxed the bird onto her arm and was stepping gingerly toward the door, afraid Ulysses would fly into his usual routine, exploring the various corners of the apartment. Hiding long enough to be found.

“No, I’m afraid not. She died, remember?” Death seemed to mean nothing to the parrot. Erica was loath to foist the crisis of life on him. “Irma sent you to live with me. You just be strong enough to forget.” She didn’t know how long a parrot’s memory was anyway.

Ulysses said nothing. When Erica opened the door, he spoke Irma’s name again, as though playing a game. When there was no reply, he buried his beak in his feathers. Erica couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t crying.

He was, she thought, as ephemeral as a child.

The hallway, a narrow stretch past six other doors before terminating in a stairwell, was blessedly empty. Erica could hear noises from behind the doors, as if warriors were hiding in caves, or concealed in a jungle, and ready to attack.

She paraded Ulysses the length of the corridor twice, hoping her footsteps would be invitation enough for the new neighbors. She didn’t want to knock on their door. Even if he chanted and quoted and quibbled, Erica had begun to feel Ulysses was not a showpiece but an embarrassment. Besides, this was no ship with passengers desperate to leave their pestilential cabins for the open air of a deck. The corridor was dull, in need of a paint job. There were no other passing ships with flags that spoke of exotic destinations or danger. No sea monsters. No dead bodies floating by, victims of war who’d been unable to succeed in their escape. In all, nothing to mythologize.

But Herald heard Erica as she turned a second time to head home.

“You brought him out!” Ulysses raised his head, looking for a revelation. Herald turned her head to shout for Troy. He came dutifully and marveled at seeing the bird up close, lifting a hand to touch Ulysses’ dazzling feathers. He withdrew it, sensing touch would be a violation.

“Well, he’s bright enough,” said Troy. The flat light of the hallway, which gave the walls a prison tint, could not spoil the bird’s vigor. Troy addressed Ulysses directly. “Tell me a story.” Ulysses moved his head side to side impertinently, as though he were a repository of secrets he refused to share.

“Good night and good luck.”

“Hell, I’ve got to get my phone.” Troy bounded back into the apartment confidently. But the place was too new, undefined even, and he came back emptyhanded. He and Herald were blind as prophets, neither ready to tell fortunes. They had stacks of dishes and books, clothes still stuffed into suitcases, and unopened boxes that would surprise them later, as though they’d inherited unexpected treasure. They had it all, but couldn’t say what it meant. When neither could find their phones, Erica waved goodbye and retreated to her apartment.

“Just one more thing,” said Ulysses as Erica closed the door. She didn’t care for the way he said it and sat down again to confront the puzzle. Ulysses launched into mindless chatter, songs in the first person that made him sound like a champion who needed only his own wind. He didn’t heed her calls for quiet. She found she could only focus on the minute ridges of the puzzle when she capped her ears with wax earplugs.

Even in the relative calm, the journey was a labyrinth, its chronology confused. Erica had not grown up with jigsaw puzzles. This one was merely evidence of her mother’s attitude toward everything, that what she cast off might be useful to someone else. In the past the practice meant re-gifting candles and unflattering clothes, towels that were too thin. If you had to occupy

yourself with more than music, her mother considered crosswords the best option. She had tolerated and occasionally delighted in the word games Erica's father invented. But sitting for a jigsaw was too mundane, a timewaster she was happy to let the masses endure. This puzzle with its promised valiant sloop, may have been a gift from a new acquaintance, someone uninitiated in her mother's standards or aggressive jealousy.

As she fitted the pieces, Erica came to know the different characters of silence, for it was not always monastic. Some silence existed only in a chaotic conversation with itself. Another stayed cool for a long time after it began, lifted perhaps from a stone jar. And while a third kind almost seemed to demand payment, a fourth raffled itself off for nothing. Some had to be navigated. Others felt like an office memorandum, requiring filing. She understood that she could not know them all in one day, or for long if Ulysses chose to interrupt.

By late afternoon she had finished the puzzle only to discover that the picture did not match the image on the box. She supposed it might have the same number of pieces—if one were inclined to count—but instead of the noble ship she'd expected, she'd rendered an ancient scene. Deaf mariners ignored with their insistent captain, Odysseus, as he demanded they steer him to the Sirens. The hero was strapped to the mast like a piece of drying meat.

Erica scoffed. When she tried to direct the bird's attention to it, Ulysses said nothing. Even turning on the television during dinner did nothing to elicit more than "*Book 'em, Danno*", delivered in a sour squawk. She went to bed uneasy.

Sunday morning she slept until the new neighbors woke her with the sound of jazz roiling down the hallway. Probably this was a ritual, too, conjuring a false peace through routine. They would claim the music relaxed them, that it allowed breakfast to stretch. She could hear their simplistic refrains as clear as any of Ulysses' quotations: *Even God needs a day of rest.*

Crawling out of bed, Erica was startled when the telephone rang. No one ever called except her mother, who, in her old-fashioned way, insisted on talking instead of texting. Thankfully her mother didn't call often, disrupting whatever harmony Erica could grab between workweeks. They had no schedule for conversation, for her mother often noted that you shouldn't spend the time unless you had something important to say.

Erica wondered what it might be when she picked up her phone. She chose not to wait, launching instead into a description of Irma's death and Ulysses' unexpected arrival. How the bird was a novel joy less than half the time, and something ominous more often.

"Yes, I'd heard Irma died," her mother said. "When we were children, Irma feared me for a time. I always got more attention than her, At school or out in the city. Even from our parents, though they'd never cop to it. And when fear passed, it transformed into hatred, though Irma probably considered she'd be doing her young men a favor. Getting rid of me so they could be loved more completely by her." Her mother chuckled darkly. The sin of her youth was not stealing a beau, but casting him aside to soon after the theft. Erica's mother believed nothing was immoral if it prompted love, even the thin, drooling kind destined not to endure. The kind that burst forth on Friday and dried up by Sunday. "I suppose Irma figured you were rather like me. You know, apples and trees and all that."

Erica was loath to turn into her mother, so she changed the subject.

"What were you calling about, mom?"

"*Show you what you are,*" chimed Ulysses. Erica ignored him, sparing only a thought for her mother's inability to ethically manage anything.

"Oh, that," she said falsely, as if it were nothing. "I'm finally on the board at the country club. I thought you'd want to know."

“But Mrs. Menelaus—”

“She’s out. Sometimes someone has to lose for you to win, dear. But it’s hardly a war, is it? I simply convinced the other voting members that I was the better option. Besides, old Penelope is more of the bridge set. Let her keep that.”

“I suppose,” said Erica. She wondered how her mother had convinced the committee. What kind of decoys she’d employed, what sop. The threat of exposure perhaps, keeping their illicit affairs quiet. The rest of the committee wouldn’t need money, though they’d still take it. Or names to be used later. And Erica wished she had kept Irma’s letters, that she might hold them like a fortune teller. A cold read that hints at an abstracted future, a troubled one.

“Something to write in your diary, perhaps,” her mother was saying. “On this bloodless Sunday, my mother ascended her first step in the Athens Country Club.”

Erica hung up. Her mother wouldn’t ring back. Might not even remember the slight the next time they spoke. She would only call Erica when she had good news to share, details of how another back was exposed and stabbed.

The world crystallized. Clarified. Erica had always presumed Aunt Irma looked to the heavens for guardians, when in truth she knew a nocturnal hunter when she saw one. And Irma could be as cruel as her sister. Ulysses was a phantom revenge, Irma’s revolt against the ritual duplicity—common as a pink-fingered sunrise—practiced by Erica’s mother. And the mountains of correspondence from Erica were not poured over wistfully, but were fuel for her revulsion.

Erica had a moment of fright when she looked up at Ulysses’ empty cage. She called for the bird, assuming he’d flown to a dark corner of the apartment.

“Come on, Ulysses. Come on down.”

The undersized apartment suddenly seemed replete with hidden chambers, each closet room enough for armies. Every cupboard concealing a single assassin. Erica moved through the kitchen with a watchful gaze. Paced out the living room. Headed to the bathroom in an attempt to seem casual. After all, this was her apartment. Her private kingdom. She paid for it, and even those months when she was a bit late with the rent, she managed to make the super see it her way. She could always ask her mother for help, promise to repay the debt without meaning it.

Her new watch, last month's little gift to self, caught the midday sun. She considered sending the damn bird out the window, washing her hands of the whole thing. Erica smirked. No one could call it murder, not when she was freeing him. No detective in the world would make a storied case against her.

"Who loves ya, baby?" The squawking words erupted from behind her.

Irma had taught the bird to be a simple repeating machine, a blunt weapon ready to sow chaos wherever he went. Presently Ulysses was done speaking. He seemed eager to explore the value of sight. His head bobbed. His beak thrust toward Erica, who struggled to defend herself. Her arms flapped uselessly at Ulysses. Yet even as blood broke from her skin, she couldn't help thinking about how bothersome the new neighbors were likely to be. How dull the city had become. How insipid her aunt had been, even in seeking retribution. Poor, pitiful Irma, Erica thought, her pride never satisfied. Such blind fanaticism. What had the old newsmen said? Words that rang true whether discussing false heroes, wasted journeys, or mistaken gifts. That was just the way the world was.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *While stuck at home I'm listening to Love in the Time of Cholera and was caught by a parrot and a death in an early portion of the novel. Thematically, The Odyssey*

features a problematic hero who often seems selfish and troubles my students, particularly in the story's forced sense of justice.

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