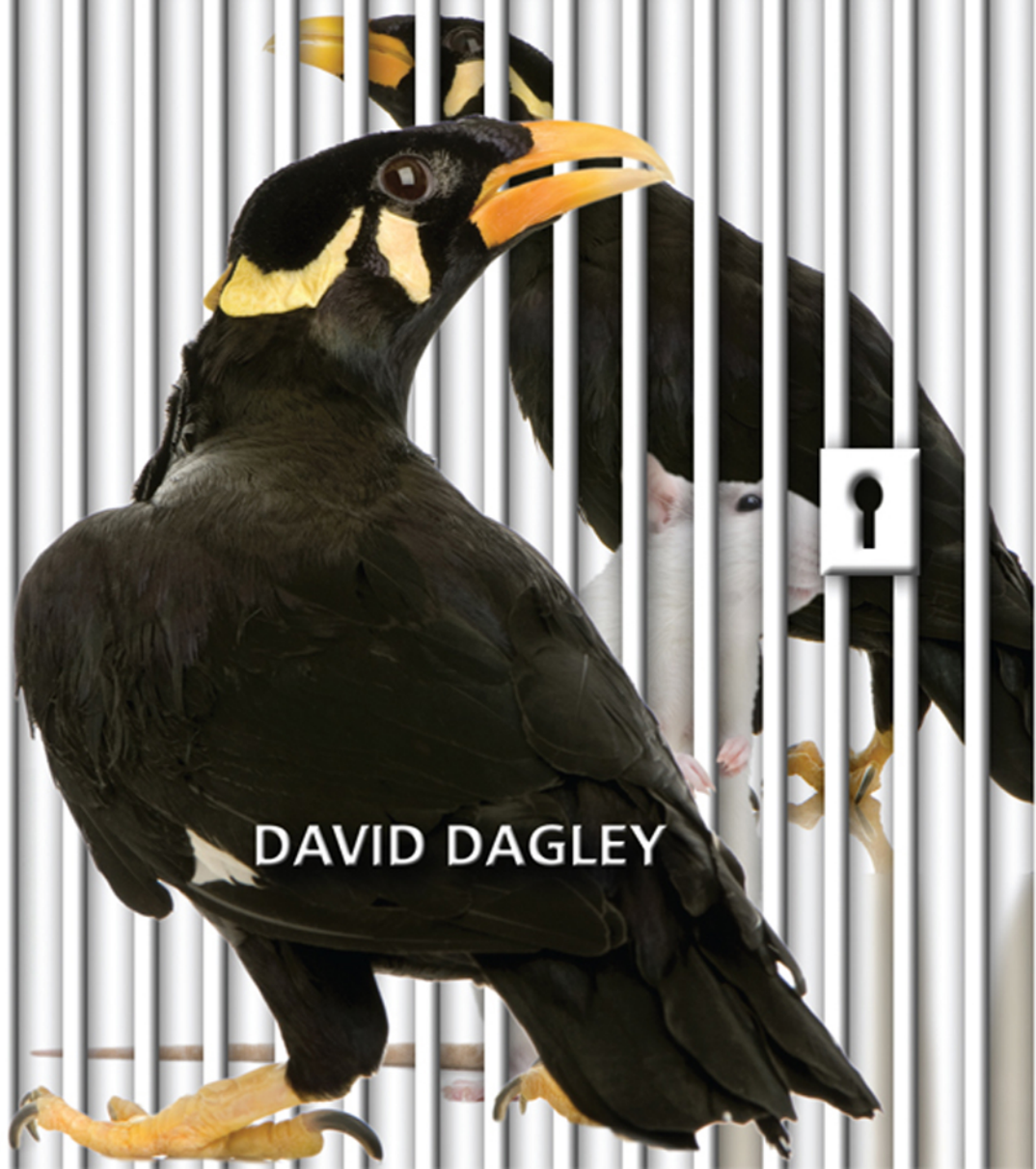


WHITE BARS



DAVID DAGLEY

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By
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Strategic Book Group
Durham, Connecticut

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P.O. Box 333
Durham CT 06422
www.StrategicBookClub.com

ISBN 978-1-61204-526-9

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to Mitchell and Courtney Moore

I

THE PET SHOP was about to close. Ms. Polly Roberts had finished cleaning the bird cages and was in the middle of feeding the fish, sprinkling fall-colored flakes across the surface water in the aquariums. At one tank, she laced the water with flakes and waited for them to soak through. She knelt down to watch the fish charge around in a domestic frenzy, gobbling up the sinking food. The temperature read eighty-two degrees.

The animals nearest the front windows stopped their chattering play, and froze in awe at the sight in front of the pet shop. The whole pet shop grew silent, not all knowing why. Out of the corner of her eye, Ms. Roberts noticed the front door open and close. She stood up expecting to see a customer but there was no one in the pet shop, so she moved on and crouched down by the next fish tank and again scattered food over the water.

A small bearded man peered around the corner of the display table in the middle of the pet shop. As he continued to lean, a myna bird

emerged on top of his baseball cap.

“Hello,” said the myna bird mimicking an English greeting.

The man just smiled.

Ms. Roberts was startled, and flashed a nervous smile back at the pair and greeted them, “Hi, there.” She became aware that she was at the same height as the little man, and chose not to stand up yet.

The man teetered around the corner on stiff knees and walked towards Ms. Roberts. Besides his baseball cap, he wore a cut-off brown Australian outback raincoat and brown-and-tan Extratuf rain boots. As he came forward, he retrieved the myna bird from his head and it perched on the edge of his hand. The man stroked the back of the bird’s neck just below a yellow-and-orange fold of skin which wrapped around the bird’s head. In a soft voice, the man spoke. “Hello, my name is Carleton. I live way up the ridge, beyond Kite Hill, amongst the Redwood groves. This bird sought refuge in my cabin. It’s a Hill myna bird from South East Asia, I believe.”

Ms. Roberts responded, “Yes, that’s right. You can tell it from other myna birds because the yellow fold of skin is continuous around the bird’s head.” She made an imaginary circle over her own head with her finger and asked, “Would you be interested in a book on myna birds and other birds in the starling family?”

“No, ma’am. Well, yes.” Carleton sighed and organized his thoughts then began again. “I am interested in a book on this type of bird, but that is not why I’ve come to see you. I noticed, the other day, that you had another Hill Myna bird on display, a young one.” The little man looked to the center table, but couldn’t see the young myna bird from where he stood.

“He’s still here. He’s right above you, on the table, in that white cage on the left.” She paused patiently, then asked politely, “How can I help you?”

Carleton took a step towards the display table but quickly realized that his viewpoint had gotten worse. He backed up against the aquariums, bracing himself against the shelves with one hand while he danced on his toes, wavering slowly back and forth, back and forth, to see the other bird. In a white domed cage sat a young myna bird looking down at him.

Carleton raised his free hand with the myna bird on it so the two birds could see each other. Carleton turned and faced Ms. Roberts, who wore a smile of amusement brought on by her late afternoon visitors. He said, "I know this might sound strange, but I think this bird is unhappy. For the last couple of weeks this bird has been flying around my house, and I've noticed other birds attacking it and fighting with it. Last week it began entering my cabin and spending the nights inside – and lots of the days as well. I've let it live there, but I don't really have any way of protecting it or fending for it if it gets wounded out in the field. I was hoping maybe you could tend to it for a week or two, or sell him to a good home after a while. I'd be willing to share some of the profits with you if we decide to sell him."

Ms. Roberts looked up to the empty cage right next to her young myna bird's cage. She pointed to it, "Actually, I have an empty cage next to the little myna bird right now. We could put him in there if you would like. They can keep each other company." She stood up, reached across to the empty cage and opened the door. "Let me get you a stepladder." Ms. Roberts walked off towards a back room and grabbed a short folded ladder.

Carleton climbed the two rungs of the stepladder and stood on the top. His eyes just cleared the metal edge of the countertop. He smiled at the young myna bird and said, "Hello."

The young myna bird answered the mimic back, "Hello."

Carleton reached out his hand to the open door of the empty cage and the myna bird hopped off his hand to a lower level perch pole. The two birds stared at each other. Carleton watched contently.

Ms. Roberts observed, "I don't think either of these birds has ever seen another bird of their own kind before."

Carleton nodded in agreement, continuing to watch the two birds. Then he quietly added, "His name is Fife."

"Fife is a beautiful bird." Ms. Roberts admired the bird from behind Carleton. She offered, "Why don't you plan on coming by sometime soon, in a few days or so, and visit with Fife and the young myna bird. We can talk about money then." She paused. "If we decide to sell him to a good home, I mean."

Carleton nodded again in agreement and said, "That sounds fine. Do you mind if I just watch the birds for awhile before you close?"

Ms. Roberts smiled and said, "Not at all. I'm just going to clean up for the day and take care of some things in the back." She walked off towards the back room.

Carleton watched her disappear before he whispered, "Fife, I'll see you as soon as you get out. And you, little bird, I'll see you later too, I hope." Carleton carefully climbed down off the stepladder and walked over to the book rack. His eyes wandered from title to title, searching for the book he wanted. The book was on the second level from the top. Carleton grabbed the stepladder, set it in front of the book rack and climbed up to grab the book. As he walked over to the cash register, Ms. Roberts came out of the back room with a handful of aquarium pieces.

After paying for the book, Carleton walked towards the front door and asked, "How much do you think that bird is worth, Ms. Roberts?"

Ms. Roberts thought about it for a minute and said, "Oh, I don't know, maybe two or three hundred dollars. It really depends on the

bird's health, mimic ability, and vocabulary retention.”

“Then I should tell you, that bird can speak a lot of English words, even sentences. It's a very special bird,” explained Carleton.

“Then we'll make more money,” responded Ms. Roberts. “I'll watch him for a couple days and work with him after awhile, and then we can consider a price tag. I'll see you again.” She waved good-bye. As Carleton wandered down the street, Ms. Roberts walked up to the front window to see where Carleton was going. Once Carleton disappeared, she turned her attention to the two myna birds and watched them in silence for a few minutes before moving on to the reptile section of the pet shop.

The two myna birds kept staring at each other through the white bars of their cages.

Fife eyeballed the young myna bird and said quietly, “Hello.”

The young myna returned the greeting. “Hello. You look like me.”

Fife replied in a whisper, “That's why I'm here.”

The young myna looked shocked, and questioned, “What do you mean, that's why you're here?”

Fife squawked and posed a question to the adolescent. “Well, answer this for me if you can: how many other myna birds have you seen lately?”

“You're the first,” answered the young myna.

“And what does that tell you, little one?”

Somewhat confused, the young myna said, “I don't know. I never thought about it.”

“Exactly! You just accepted your fate.” Fife looked the young myna bird up and down. “I'd say you were probably stolen from your parents' nest as an egg, incubated and born under a heat lamp. You were most likely sold the day you could eat solid food on your own.”

The young myna nodded. “There was a heat lamp. That's all I remem-

ber. I've been here ever since. And you?"

"Me? I was older," answered Fife. "I was taken out of my nest with my two sisters before we could fly. I remember everything. It's a bit longer story, and more involved than your beginnings, but with similar results except one. I did get the chance to learn how to fly. I thought you might want that same chance."

"Oh! I do! I want to learn how to fly, but my cage is too small and Ms. Roberts clips my wings sometimes," announced the young myna bird.

"I know, that's why I'm here," explained Fife.

A parakeet shrieked, "Don't forget your keys."

Ms. Roberts looked at the parakeet briefly then turned off the heat lamps and the hot rock switch.

"Yes-s-s-s, and don't forget your glasses," hissed a snake.

A hamster poked its head out of a thick bed of cedar shavings and yawned, "Good night, Ms. Roberts. Sleep well."

As Ms. Roberts finished her chores she flipped the 'Closed' sign around for people in the street to read. She rolled up her sleeves as she went to a sink in the back of the pet shop to wash her hands up to her elbows. After drying her hands she looked into a small mirror, gave a half turn and placed the towel on a side rack. She adjusted her hair with both hands and gave herself a little smile. When she was all done, she scooped her purse out of an open bottom drawer of her desk as she passed it on her way to the door. She said happily, "Good night all. Sweet dreams." Ms. Roberts closed the door behind her, locked the deadbolt and knob lock, checked the door, and walked away for the night.

A large blue Macaw parrot called out, "Hey, Dram, are you there? She's gone." The parrot looked around the pet shop and out the front windows into the street. "All's clear. You can come in now."

At the base of the back wall, two twinkling red eyes appeared wavering in the darkness of a crack between two wall boards. Two little hands and a nose with quivering whiskers emerged. “Quit pushing!” Dram’s command echoed down an old abandoned clay pipe leading from the pet shop down to a stone wall above a creek where it poured out. “Now push!” Dram’s brown furry face stretched through the crack, and his body followed slowly. He scratched at the floor with his front claws, trying to help pull him through. Dram launched into a soft bag of cedar shavings and rebounded. Ten more brown field mice scampered through the crack effortlessly and ran off in various directions.

One of the field mice, Tye, a brash and overconfident mouse, stretched out his arms as he balanced across a row of terrarium sills to get to his position. In passing, Tye greeted a big fat wart riddled green toad in the first terrarium. “Good evening, Paris. Play any cricket lately?” Tye smirked at the toad taking a mud bath.

With a grunt, Paris replied, “Very funny, Tye. How are you doing this evening?”

“Great! Have you noticed the new recruit? His name is Wayne. He’s going to shake out of his fur over there,” exclaimed Tye, pointing to a new mouse cowering between two snake cages. The snakes were on either side of Wayne, pushing against the glass of their cages with their tongues flickering, trying to smell the mouse they could only see.

Dram waddled near the edge of the first terrarium and stopped. He looked down at Paris and gave a lethargic wave from the hip. Dram then looked at Tye and responded, “Oh, Tye, I suppose you didn’t shake when you had to work the snake pit?” Dram’s head held high in exaggeration. “I admire any mouse that starts working at the Pet Shop Exchange and has to start with the Reptile Federation of Traders.” Dram winked at Paris and turned away to address the whole babbling pet shop.

In a loud voice he yelled, "Enough nonsense! Let's get settled. It's almost six bells. Get to your stations!"

The two myna birds watched and listened. Fife asked, "What's going on?"

The young myna answered, "It's almost time to trade. If you want something you don't have in your cage, then you can trade for it with what you do have."

All ears cued to a clock tower across the street.

Six bells rang.

A brown-and-white calico guinea pig squealed, "Selling sunflower seeds!"

White mice slammed against the bars of their cage, their arms reaching out with twitchy fingers. "Buy'em, Buy'em!" they shrieked together.

"Buy'em!" called the blue Macaw parrot, flapping his wings.

Dram stood up, looked at the white mice and asked, "How many do you want?"

In unison the eight mice replied, "Two-thirds." They nodded towards the Macaw parrot.

Dram scratched the information on a cedar chip. A clerk mouse picked up a cedar chip from the caged mice and another from the Macaw parrot and brought them to Dram, who then filed the chips in a large matchbox.

Two broker mice picked up the sunflower seeds from the guinea pig and walked them over to the white mice. The broker mice teased the caged mice by holding the sunflower seeds just out of reach.

Dram hollered at his workers, "Hey! Knock it off."

The two broker mice giggled, handed over the seeds and ran off to another trade.

Two other clerk mice brought over cedar chips, and together they

said, “Trading corn kernels; two to one with alfalfa rounds, guinea pigs to rabbits, twenty times. Filled.”

“Buying sand!” belted out the four cockatiels from the Conglomerate.

“S-s-s-sold,” wheezed a snake from the Reptile Federation of Traders. The snake coughed a buckshot load of sand in the direction of the new clerk mouse. Wayne defensively jumped back from the sill and landed on the screen roof of a neighboring snake. He froze in fear and slowly looked down between his feet. The snake below struck the screen with his snout, smacking Wayne into a shelf board above him. Wayne landed back on the screen roof and immediately began wobbling to the edge. The snake angled and punched the screen again, sending the mouse arcing through the pet shop. He crash landed in a small shallow turtle bath, with plastic palm trees and a pink flamingo on a black stick. The turtles quickly retracted their heads into their shells as the field mouse belly-flopped into the pool.

Another broker mouse stood in front of an aquarium, stroking his whiskers and watching one hundred flickering and flashing little red and blue fish called neon-tetras swim around their tank in a school. In front of the mouse they joined together and spelled out in flowing cursive, *Buying*.

Excited, the mouse turned and yelled towards Dram, “They’re buying!”

The neon tetras reorganized and again, in cursive, spelled out *Plants*.

The mouse screamed at Dram, “They’re buying plants!”

There was no response from the other animals – at first. Two aquariums down from the neon tetras, a shadow loomed behind a curtain of swaying green plants. The water splashed out of the tank and seemed to boil. A plant erupted out of the tank and sailed through the air, landing on the mouse in front of the neon tetras. A large black-and-

gold eye peeked out of the green wall of plants and rapidly looked around.

Dripping wet, the broker mouse yelled, "Sold! Ugh, this plant smells terrible." He grabbed the plant by the base of the stalk and flung it over his head and into the neon tetras' tank. The mouse lost his balance in the water left on the shelf and slipped over the edge, barely hanging on by his front claws. His feet and tail dangled just out of reach above the scorpion's terrarium, their pinchers open and held above their heads. On the tips of their twitchy curled tails, poison droplets formed.

Next to the scorpions were three individual tarantula cages. In the middle cage a spider tapped on his glass wall, trying to get a mouse to pay attention. The arachnid broker mouse flicked his tail back and forth, watching and listening. The tarantula tapped a message in Morse code on the glass.

The spider broker yelled at Dram, "One spider, buying!"

Dram looked over and nodded and waited for the usual.

The tarantula held up the empty shell of a cricket and tossed it up in the air and then between its other legs.

The mouse put his hands out to each side and asked, "How many today?"

The spider rolled onto his back, stuck all eight legs in the air and wiggled them.

The mouse looked at Dram, who was still waiting, and yelled, "Buying eight crickets!"

The other two tarantulas rolled over on their backs and stuck their legs up in the air, showing the mouse that they wanted some, too.

"Buying sixteen crickets, twenty-four total!" screamed the mouse.

A black rat named Grease darted to one side of his cage and yelled, "Hostile takeover!" He scurried through his cell mates to the other side

of his cage whispering, “Get out of my way. Major power struggle – inevitable sellout. Beware, insider trading is a socially contagious disease transmitted by listening. It’s reaching epidemic proportions!” The rat ran to the back of his cage and climbed up the side, screaming, “Buy! Buy! Sell! Sell! Buy! Sell! Sell short! You have until the end of the night to pay up!” Clinging to the wire mesh of his cage, Grease crawled upside down on the ceiling of his cage, centered himself over his cellmates and yelled, “Back Spread!” Grease let go of the wire and fell on his cellmates.

“Buying water! Hey, Tye!” blurted Paris the toad, nervously trying to break loose from his drying mud bath. “Tye! Help me!”

“Coming,” replied Tye while he ran to Dram with another trade.

Sitting on a hot rock, a lizard with a bright blue tail had a cricket on his silver head and two more on his black-and-white striped back. The skink lifted his head and bitterly rasped, “Selling these crispy crickets.”

Voices screamed all over the pet shop. “Buy’em! Buy’em!”

The tarantulas jumped to their glass walls and began tapping furiously, but the clerk mouse had his back to them and was busily shaking the base of a long slender bird feeder. Seeds spilled out of the cage and down to the floor, where three young mice carrying cocktail parasols for protection ran around collecting the seeds.

The crickets sitting on the skink lizard jumped to hide. The skink grinned and put his head back on his hot rock, closed his eyes and sighed, “Ah, cancel that.”

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