

Arrival

We were all excited. Jenny was as high as a kite. It was her tenth birthday tomorrow.

She had been asking for her own parrot for months, reminding us that Tom, now fourteen, had been allowed a parrot when he was ten.

At my husband Alan's suggestion, I posted this request on our local social media blog.

Hi, we are offering a good home for an African Grey. We already have a seven year old Maccaw called Bella (Belladonna).

We are a parrot-friendly family and know parrots are highly intelligent and need lots of stimulation to thrive. We also know they need a carefully balanced diet and a chemical free environment with calcium and vitamin supplements to keep them healthy.

We have a north facing aviary room with good natural daylight and ventilation with quiet spaces and darkness at night for rest and sleep. Apart from tropical fish, we have no other pets.

Any offers?

Miriam Purcell

I got an immediate response from Ruth (who lived about ten miles away in Anstruther) and a follow up telephone call from Euan about an hour later. In a chatty email, Ruth, a retired GP, told me all about her only son Euan and her deceased father David, who had also been a GP.

Recently graduated with his doctorate in marine biology from St Andrews university, Euan Hutchins had inherited an African Grey called Benji from his grandfather six months previously. Two weeks earlier he had been selected for a two year contract to study the effects of climate change in Antarctica.

As my Estate Agency was located nearby, I had met Euan for a coffee chat at the University Common Room the previous week to confirm the arrangements and show him pictures of Bella and the huge new cage we had found for Benji on a pre-loved website.

The big day arrived.

Jenny was up and dressed in her yellow dungarees and red high heeled boots. This outfit was a present which had arrived the day before from my mother (Granny Jean) who lives in Copenhagen where she teaches ballet to retirees.

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Jenny was standing in the doorway trying hard to be 'cool' when the rental van drew into our driveway.

In our coffee chat, Euan had explained he was delivering scientific equipment to Prestwick Airport where it would begin its journey in a transit pod to be air freighted to Cape Town then onwards to the British Antarctic Survey station at Rothera. His own flight would take a different route flying out via Stanley in the Falklands Islands in a few days' time.

Euan got out carrying a smallish travel cage fully enclosed with a thick hessian cloth, design to create simulated darkness to keep Benji calm and reduce stress during the journey.

We moved into our specially created north facing aviary room built onto the rear wall of our three car garage. We had done our best to make sure this room was 'parrot-proofed' with unpainted hardwood branches attached to its walls at various heights to serve as perches and dangling hardwood toys. There were no soft furnishings to be pecked at.

At Euan's suggestion, the four of us sat quietly on the wooden bench beside the full height picture window which looked out onto a huge expanse of grass dotted with small trees and bushes and several busy bird feeding stations in the near foreground. It was a special window with interstitial blinds between the double glazing.

Alan (a Chartered Accountant) is a very enthusiastic gardener, claiming it is his 'release' from the demands of working for the St Andrews Links Trust. In the past he was an enthusiastic amateur golfer and squash player until he suffered a torn shoulder ligament and had to retire from playing.

Bella was in her cage with the door locked - we use a carabiner with a knurled screw. This cage is about half the size of the bigger cage we had found for Benji. Euan placed himself in the line of sight between Bella and the travel cage then undid the fastenings.

The hessian cover slipped away to the floor and Benji squawked:

Hallo! Hallo!

Who's a Pretty Boy then?

Bella responded.

Hallo! Hallo!

Bella is a Princess. Bella is a Princess.

Euan opened the travel cage and offered his finger to Benji, lifting him up and turning to allow the two parrots to see each other.

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Benji cocked his head and muttered something which sounded like a cat purring, deep throated and loud.

Euan said:

'He is imitating Vincent, Mum's neighbour's cat. We think Benji does this when he's thinking things over.'

'Hallo you. Whatsyername?'

Bella is a Princess. Bella is a Princess.

Benji is a Pretty Boy. Benji is a Pretty Boy.

Bella is a Princess. Benji is a Pretty Boy.

'Can I take Benji, please?', asked Jenny, standing up, moving forwards with her hand outstretched, offering a small piece of carrot.

Euan nodded and Benji hopped onto Jenny's hand.

Bella likes carrots! Bella likes carrots! Bella Likes Carrots!

Tom moved across, opened Bella's cage. She hopped out onto his finger, grabbed the piece of carrot in her beak and flew across to stand on Jenny's shoulder.

Bella is a Princess. Benji is a Pretty Boy.

Bella flew across the room and landed on Benji's cage. Benji followed, perching beside her, making his deep purring sound.

Almost at once Bella joined in, purring in a slightly higher register.

Benji hopped down and into his new home and Bella followed, perching close to him.

Both birds resumed their purring.

Alan said:

'Looks like we are off to a great start.'

Euan said:

'Right folks, I'd better make tracks. Please keep me posted on *WhatsApp*. Include Mum too, please.'

After waving Euan away to continue his trip to Prestwick, we returned to the aviary room. The parrots were still in Benji's cage, preening each other.

I said:

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'How about we close the blinds and give them a quiet time alone to get to know each other?'

Tom pressed the remote and the room dimmed.

'Jenny, put on an apron and change into your trainers. I need help making cakes and sandwiches for your disco party this afternoon, okay?'

'Sure Mum. And thanks. Benji is so, so cute.'

