

Oertle

by Marguerite Floyd
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Little Oertle was with me for a long time, 12 years in fact, which I understand is a long time for a zebra finch. Today I miss two things the most about Oertle: I miss telling him good night after telling the parrots good night. And I miss hearing his little finch song.

When I fell in love with parrots, I only had Oertle and his father, Alex, left from several years of breeding finches. Alex and Oertle fought a lot, so much so that both of them went around with bald heads. Sometimes I would put a metal divider in the cage to keep them separated but still in view of each other. That always resulted in such crying and fussing that you'd think I'd ripped their hearts out. In the end, I always gave in and let them fuss and fight it out. I kept two of everything in the cage - nests, millet holders, bath tubs, food and water dishes but they always squabbled, taking turns over which was better.

Alex, who was probably 9 or so, died a few years before Oertle. I found him one morning, face down in his seed cup. I let Oertle see the body as long as it held his interest, which wasn't very long, because I didn't want him to think I'd stolen Alex from him.

I'd always heard that finches should not be alone, that some finches die without another finch around, so every day I expected to find him dead from loneliness. But every day he continued to sing his little finch song. I often thought he continued to live so long because he wanted to see what the parrots were going to do next; they fascinated him.

Oertle was born in his cage, lived his life in his cage, and died in his cage. To my knowledge, he only had one great adventure. When I still had several finches, I refilled their dishes one morning and left for the day and night. When I returned the next morning, I just glanced at the cage, then went into my study to check my e-mail. After a few minutes, I heard the smallest of peeps, which I thought I'd imagined. A few minutes later, there came another peep, barely louder than before. I got up and turned around - and there was little Oertle up on the bookcase. He had somehow gotten out of the cage and didn't know how to find his way back.

He was starving, of course, but like most finches, was terrified of being caught. But I finally rescued him and place him back with his parents and siblings. He never tried to leave the cage again; in fact, it seemed to frighten him when I opened the cage door.

I didn't know anything about birds, much less finches. It wasn't until I got parrots that I realized what a bad finch mommy I was. Oertle lived on a seed diet with only occasional treats of scrambled eggs or toast. As far as I could tell he was never sick, so I never took him to the veterinarian.

He died about two years ago, during a weekday. I came home to find him cold on the floor of the cage, and I cried a little for all the years he sang to me and watched the parrots and splashed in his bathtub and fussed if I stayed up too late at night.

I don't know if there is a heaven or not, but I sometimes like to think there is. A place where all the people I love and who love me are gathered, as well as all the animals who've come and gone from my life. And gentle little Oertle, singing his little finch song.

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