

THE BRAVE LITTLE PARROT

Long ago, a little grey parrot lived in a green forest. She was a happy bird, and loved to fly. One day a dark storm hovered over the forest. Lightning flashed and the forest began to burn.

The parrot, smelling smoke, flapped her wings and rose up. After all he was a bird and could fly away. As she flew, she cried out, “Fire! Fire! Run! Run to the river!” Her hope was that others might escape too. But as she flew over the now vastly burning forest, she saw that many animals were already trapped by the flames. She saw, too, that the great trees among whose branches she had often taken shelter, trees she loved, were wreathed with flame. “How can a tree escape fire?” she thought. Then a desperate thought came to her. She saw the one thing she could do that might save her burning world.

She flew to the river, but didn’t fly across it to safety. Instead she called to the animals huddled miserably there, “Let us carry water to the fire with paw and beak and mouth and leaf cup. Let us douse the flames and save our forest.”

But the animals answered hopelessly, “It’s too late. We must stay here where it’s safe. There is nothing anyone can do now.” But the little parrot said, “I will do what I can.” She flew to the river and dipped her body and wings in the cool water. Then she flew back over the raging fire.

The flames were intense. The fire was leaping high. The heat was terrible. Twisting and turning through that mad maze of fire, on she flew. When she was above the heart of the blaze, she shook her body and wings. And the few drops of water that still clung to her feathers tumbled like jewels down into flames and *phhhttt!* They evaporated and were gone.

Then the little parrot flew back to river and did it again. And again. And again. Her feathers became charred, her claws cracked, her eyes danced red as coals. But still the little parrot flew bravely on.

Some of the gods were drifting by high overhead in their cloud palaces. One of them happening to look down, saw the fire – and the brave little parrot. “Look,” he exclaimed. Now other gods and goddesses looked. And they laughed. “Look at that ridiculous little bird! Trying to put out a raging forest fire with a few drops of water. Can you imagine? How absurd!”

But that first god was moved. Transforming himself into a golden eagle he flew down to where the little parrot was making her way with a few drops of water through the flames. The heat was intense. The great eagle could hardly stand it. In a commanding voice he called out, “Stop, little parrot! Turn back now before it’s too late. Turn back and save yourself, lest you fall into the flames!”

But the little parrot only panted, “I don’t need such advice. All I need is help!” And on she flew.



The eagle who was a god, beat his great wings and rose higher, away from the searing heat and choking smoke and fire. Looking down he saw the brave little parrot flying bravely on. Looking up his saw his fellow gods and goddesses laughing and talking, eating and drinking while so many animals and trees suffered in the flames below.

“We are gods, after all,” he exclaimed. “We should do something!!”

Then, deeply moved, tears fell from his eyes, fell like rain upon the fire, the forest, the plants, and animals.

And upon the brave little parrot.

And because those were the tears of a god, wherever they touched the flames were doused. Instantly green grass began to grow. New buds and leaves appeared. Any animals injured by the fire were made whole and well. And the brave little parrot washed by those tears saw new feathers grow—feathers red as sunset, blue as the river, yellow as sunlight, orange as flame, green as the forest. She had become a beautiful bird!

“Hooray!” cried the animals. “Hooray for the brave little parrot, and this miraculous rain!”

Looping and soaring in delight the little parrot flew over the green forest. She had done all she could and somehow, it had saved them. ♦

This is a retelling of a traditional Buddhist Jataka tale—or past life story of the Buddha. In the original, found in the Pali collection of 547 such tales, the god squeezes a cloud to make it rain. But in my adaptation, first told by me to Buddhist practitioners in the early 1970s, I condensed and internalized the image. Hence—tears. Some time later I felt the Jataka tradition needed an update and allowed the little parrot to become female. Lastly I let the parrot start out grey as ashes and become beautiful through her beautiful deed.

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