

HELEN GILDFIND

Adrian

*Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of God...
For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die...*

Oscar Wilde

Everybody knows that if you meet your doppelganger, that “shadow self” who goes about the world clothed in your image, then either one or the both of you will die. As the second born son, Adrian must have had a lesser claim on the world than his elder brother (my father), for it was he who died first.

“Dad, why didn’t you tell me you had a pet cockatoo?” My father stared at me and then jerked the photo out of my hands. Looming above me, he gazed stupidly at the picture and said nothing. “Well? Why didn’t you tell me you had a pet cockatoo!” At eight years of age, animals were my sole preoccupation. All of my time was spent caring for bottled insects, caged guinea pigs and tanked goldfish. I can’t remember how I found that photograph but I do remember the sense of betrayal that surged through me as I studied it: Why hadn’t my father told me he’d had a parrot, a talking bird? In response to my question (which had become a demand) my father just leveled his disconcerted gaze at me and again said nothing. Unable to interpret his mixed-up look, or his muteness, and sensing trouble, I scuttled away. I left him there on the cool cork tiles, stunned and silent with that glassed-in, mirror-image of himself held tightly in his hands.

Here is the photo from that day. It shows a man with a cockatoo perched on his tanned forearm. You can tell that the man loves the bird: his body is turned in to it, excluding everything else. There is a smile around his eyes and the bird looks up at him, fearlessly. They look as if they are in deep conversation. This man in the photo is identical to my father. He has the same big nose (with the bump in the middle), the same brown skin, the same chin and jaw and cheeks and even the same black hair, parted and brushed to one side in just the same style. This man in the photo is identical to my father, but he is not my father. He is Adrian, my father's younger brother, a man I never knew.

By the time I was thirteen I had “proven” to my parents that I was “a responsible young woman.” For years, I had carefully looked after Rex and Archibald (my two guinea pigs), Hermie (the hermit crab), and Goldie and Silvie (my two invincible goldfish). I was ready for something more challenging, something with which I could have a more intimate relationship. Whilst a boyfriend would have been the most obvious and natural choice, my parents were no doubt relieved when I instead channeled my energies into a fixation on parrots. I spent hours reading about their different types, about how to feed and house them and, most importantly, about how to make them talk. I terrified myself with stories of macaws and other exotic species that had gouged out their owners' eyes and ripped noses off unsuspecting faces. Everything I read about these birds frightened me, but I pushed this fear aside with a growing determination that a parrot would be – must be – mine.

Adrian's story always begins with its end, his death. “Leukemia,” that long, prickly word that I am learning to write though still cannot say. The word that killed Annie, their sister, when she was seven years old. The word that (like his nose and chin and jaw) links Adrian to my father for my father's blood has just begun its battle against that word's too concrete implications.

“How did you find out Adrian was sick?”

We are sitting together in a café. It is today. Fool enough to think that the past is passed, I have begun to ask my father questions about his brother.

“I don’t know.” My father fidgets. His fingers keep going up to his ear, flicking it roughly. “I can’t remember. There were four of you kids by then. And there was work.” He flicks his ear. He shakes his head. “I can’t remember.”

“Does it make you feel guilty?”

“What?”

“That you will be okay?” (Unlike Adrian, my father has been lucky: time and science has found a way to convince his blood and bone that it is well.)

“No.” Again, he shakes his head. “I don’t feel guilty.”

Sensing his embarrassment, I try to divert our talking down another path of the story. “Did he meet Grace before or after he was diagnosed?”

“After.”

“So she married him knowing what was going to happen?”

My father nods.

In the end, I decided that a cockatoo was the right bird to get. My too-solemn “Nature Diary” from that time shows how my intensive study of the science of taming parrots ultimately forced my choice. Notes and sketches are scrawled all over the diary’s pink pages, each of them copied carefully from library books and my imagination. These notes conclude with a list of the pros and cons attached to my two favoured birds: “Macaw beautiful and smart, Cocky plainer and dumber”; “Macaw will rip off my face, Cocky probably won’t”; “Macaw very expensive, Cocky cheap (and Aussie icon).” In this diary I can find no evidence that Adrian’s photo influenced my choice. My thirteen year old memory seems to have completely forgotten my encounter with the photograph some five years before. No where on the diary’s pages have I written, “Dad had a cockatoo too.”

This woman, Grace. Without her, I think Adrian’s image would disappear under the weight of that too-encompassing word, “tragedy.” Just another tragedy. Grace and Adrian’s love (if that is what they called it) must have been such a mess of ambivalence, yet when I think of her I see her pulling that mess down around the two of them like a blanket,

tucking them both into a world of intimacies, of privacies that she allowed no one to spectate or judge or intrude upon.

The one picture that I found of Grace is disappointing. She wears her wedding dress. She looks plain. Utterly ordinary. She does not look like the kind of woman who is marrying a man knowing that he will die and that he will die badly.

“He was diagnosed, but he seemed so well.” Again, my father flicks at his ear and I want to grab his hand and place it firmly under mine on the table. Instead, my silence forces him to struggle on. “He looked normal. Healthy. They must have hoped he’d recover. Then it all happened at once, as it does. And that was it.”

I watch as my father pushes sugar granules around the laminate table-top, his blunt and bitten finger tanned from cycling and gardening and walking the dog. I follow his tracings, avoid his face.

My father stops fidgeting and looks up at me. “I feel guilty when I think of his life. Of how he saw his life. Of how my father saw him... or didn’t see him. How we never talked about anything that mattered.” My father begins retracing the table-top. “Adrian never ‘said’ anything about all that. But somehow we both knew that I was the golden boy. I could do no wrong; Adrian could do nothing right. He thought I had everything: the education, the job, the wife, the children... Everything he didn’t have, until the end, when he had Grace.”

“When it was too late,” I say, immediately regretting the stupid obviousness of my words. I quickly ask another question. “Do you remember the wedding?”

My father shakes his head and looks at the smudge of his tracings. “I told you, I don’t remember anything. I never knew anything to remember.” He shakes his head again and looks at me, “That’s the worst thing, not the forgetting, but the never knowing.”

When I had decided upon a cockatoo, my father and I set about converting our old tree-house into an aviary. We thought the bird would appreciate being up there in the apple tree, gazing out the windows into the leaves and branches and the endless blue sky. We spent days sawing and sanding and painting, both of us certain that our cockatoo would be as impressed with its airborne, pastel-painted home as we were.

Once the aviary was finished, my father and I drove out to the edge of the suburbs to a big pet shop that stocked parrots. When we walked into the store, the first bird we spotted was a macaw. It sat, proud and huge in its blue and yellow plumage, at the very centre of the room. A price-tag for thousands was tied to its stand. Recalling stories of bloody eye-sockets and torn flesh, my father and I tried to ignore the bird's haughty gaze as we nervously looked for "our" cockatoo. Soon enough, we found one that was young ("easier to tame") and energetic ("not diseased"). As we left the store, carrying the bird in a shoe-box, the owner assured us that we'd have no trouble.

"No trouble at all!" the macaw screeched at us, "No trouble at all!"

The owner turned to it and, with furious exasperation, yelled at the bird to "Shut up!"

"Shut up!" the macaw repeated, in perfect imitation and then laughed, its cackle following us as we left the shop and echoing between us on our silent, nervous drive home.

I realize that I am not asking my father about Adrian. I am asking, instead, for a story. But a person is not a story. A person is a half-known chaos of impressions and that is all that my father can give me.

"Who was there in the end?" *In the end*. How hard it is to find the right words with which to ask these questions.

My father sighs and sits back in his chair. He looks tired. "We were all there, in and out, though I can only remember the times I spent with him, alone, in his room. I remember how, for the last time, he asked me to sit him up. He knew there wasn't long, and he wanted to be sat up."

Suddenly, I don't want to know anymore. I can sense the crudeness of this conversation, my voyeurism, my intrusion into an old privacy where I do not belong.

My father pushes his empty coffee cup away from him. "Do you know what Adrian asked me, near the end?"

I shake my head and feel like saying, "Don't tell me! It's not for me or anyone else to know!" but because I am silent, my father continues.

"He asked me, 'Has my life been a complete waste?'"

My father looks at me. "And do you know what I said?"

I shake my head.

“I said nothing. I said *nothing*.”

For weeks I spent hours each day, before and after school, sitting in the tree-house aviary trying to tame Sergeant Pepper. Each day I sat there utterly terrified as the tormented creature spread his wings to their full, three-foot span, lifted his lemon-yellow crest and lunged at me, and again lunged at me. He would only stop this when I brought him almonds. Then, he would shift from foot to foot, sizing me up against my offer of sweets till he grabbed the nut from my fingers and hopped it over to the other side of his perch. There, he would hold the nut in his clawed foot and chew it whilst appraising me with a cool, cocked eye. I knew that too many nuts were bad for him, but I brought them anyway in the vain and hardly admitted hope that I could buy his affection.

It quickly became clear that my almond bribes were not working. Sergeant Pepper still raised his crest, lifted his wings, and lunged at me. My thirteen-year-old feelings were crushed by his behaviour. I became withdrawn, muted with shame and embarrassment and a pride that refused to admit to my smirking brothers or my worried parents that I had been wrong. I realised what a sick form of torture my father and I had made for that bird, casting its home high up in a sky that it could not fly in. I realised that the problem was not that Sergeant Pepper was “going” wild but that he had always been wild, that he was meant to be wild.

“So you were there when he died?”

My father nods. The waitress comes and takes our cups, asks us if we’d like another. My father smiles at her, shakes his head.

“And Granny was there?”

Again, he nods. “When it finally happened, your Granny was there. She was there with us.”

“Did she say anything? Did he say anything to her?”

“No. He just died. And it was quiet. Your Granny just stood at the end of the bed. She didn’t move, had no expression. She’d always said that after Annie she’d never cry again.”

One morning, going out to “do my time” with the hated and hating bird, I found that he had disappeared. Excited and afraid, I ran around the apple tree and spotted him sitting in its branches, looking slyly down at me. I ran back into the house. “Mum! Dad! Sergeant Pepper’s in the garden!” My father mumbled something about how earlier that morning he had cut a hole in the aviary’s wire so that Sergeant Pepper could “hop in and out as he pleased.” My parents assured me that “of course” everything would be alright (despite the bird’s clipped and flightless wings), and that “of course” Sergeant Pepper would still be our pet and would still become tame and would still join us, one day, in the house.

Later, home from school, I raced to the tree-house to see if Sergeant Pepper was okay. But he wasn’t there. He wasn’t in the branches of the apple tree or the gum tree or the almond tree, the one tree that I was sure would keep him near us forever. As I turned back to the house, a high-pitched squawking suddenly sounded over the back fence. I ran towards it and listened, seeing with my ears everything that was happening in our neighbour’s fenced-off yard. A snarling replied to the squawking. The neighbour’s door creaked opened and slammed shut. A high-pitched, squealing yelp. A person shouting, “Hell! A bloody *bird’s* bitten off his *nose!*” A low whining grumbling (a nightmare sound, a sound heavy with pain and warning). Silence, and I remember seeing, in my mind, the bloody-faced dog circling my Sergeant Pepper, circling the silence and then tensing itself low to the ground. A shrieked and piercing squawk. Then nothing. I knew that Sergeant Pepper was dead, and that I had killed him.

“What happened to his bird?”

“What bird?”

“Adrian’s cockatoo, the one in the photo.”

My father smiles, remembering the photograph. When I rediscovered it last year I presented it to him just as I had twenty years before. He remembered and recognized the repetition of my gesture, remembered my angry, eight-year-old face demanding answers about his mysterious past as an owner of exotic pets. He told me of his surprise (he called it surprise) at my childish certainty that the photo was of him.

My father's smile does not last and when he looks at me it is almost with anger that he says, "He loved that bird! He'd had it forever. He'd found it when it was a chick, tamed it... I think he thought that bird was his great success. He didn't trust any of us to understand. He didn't think we would care for her as he had."

My father's hands open and close, open and close on the table-top. I remember his excitement as he and I spent days in the apple tree, building that aviary. I remember his sadness as he watched it all fall apart around me, how he too was fighting back tears when he followed me into the house as I fled from Sergeant Pepper's mauling.

As I stare at his hands, opening and closing, I listen to him end his brother's story. "When Adrian found out he was dying, that he wasn't going to get better, he took the bird out into his garden, and wrung her neck."

I stare at my father's hands, closed now, on the tabletop. How strange, it seems, that Adrian's life ended with leukemia (that word again) whilst his story ends — and can only end — with the death of his bird. I ask, "How do you know he did that?"

With a sad smile, my father shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know." He shakes his head, "I don't know how I know that. I wasn't there, but everytime I think of Adrian that is what I see. I don't see him dying, or asking me about his wasted life. I don't see any of the things I actually saw. I just see him taking that bird, talking to her for the last time, as if everything was normal, and then wringing her neck."

I don't ask my father about Sergeant Pepper. We just sit here, quietly. Again I see us up in an apple tree trying to make real two linked, but different, day dreams. I see my father creeping out, one morning, to cut a hole in the cage that he had built. He was fixing the one thing that he could (my distress), but in doing so, he was accepting the immutability of what had long ago passed: Adrian, over twenty years dead, the second born son, the identical other for whom the world was too small.