

Denise Emanuel Clemen

Feathers

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul —Emily Dickinson*

Perched on the back of a dining room chair, the parrot's tail feathers trailed almost to the floor.

Addie had just awakened from her afternoon nap, but she wondered if, perhaps, she might only be dreaming that she was awake. She wanted to know more about this borderland between sleep and waking, where she seemed to spend so much time lately, but the sight of the parrot in her dining room was something to savor, not waste while she went off on some tangent. She said hello to the bird and it said hello back. "Hello," Addie said again, testing to see if it was simply parroting her. "I'm Addie." The parrot cocked its head and blinked.

"I didn't die," the parrot said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Addie said, "but what do I call you? What's your name?"

"Nathan," the parrot said.

"Where's home, Nathan?"

"Washington Avenue," the parrot said, bursting into tears. Well, not tears exactly—but crying. The parrot began to sob. It was one of the saddest things Addie had ever heard. She went to the kitchen to find the bag of walnuts that she used when she baked cookies for her grandchildren. Maybe the poor bird was hungry. When she came back, the dining room was empty.

The next morning, Addie awoke exhausted. The evening before, she spent hours poring over the telephone book, looking at the names of all the people who lived on Washington Avenue. She made a list of names and numbers, but it was complicated. Every city in the area had a Washington Avenue or Washington Street or Washington Place

or Court or Terrace, and at first Addie wasn't exact in her research and had to start all over again, eliminating at least half her list. By lunchtime she was so tired that chewing seemed like exercise.

"Are you having a tired day, Mom?" Barbara leaned across the table, stretching her neck in a way that reminded Addie of the parrot.

"Dreams," Addie said.

"If you're going to tell me that Dad was standing at the foot of your bed talking to you again all night, I might have to have a drink to go with this sandwich."

"That's nothing new," Addie said. "He talks to me in my dreams every night—whether he has your okay or not." Addie took a sip of her iced tea. "Would you like a nice gin and tonic?" she asked, even though she knew her daughter would say no. Barbara came by for lunch every day, but she had to get back to work.

"I don't drink and drive," Barbara said. Addie nodded, wondering how her daughter's generation ever managed to go out in the evening for a good time.

"After my nap yesterday, there was a parrot in the dining room," Addie said. "I knew I was only dreaming because I don't have a parrot, but he wanted to go home, and I was trying to help him. Do you know every community around here has a Washington Avenue?"

"At least he knew his address," Barbara said.

"His street. He didn't seem to know his house number."

Barbara shook her head and looked at her mother.

She's hoping I still remember my address, Addie thought. It was a source of wonderment to Addie how clearly she could read her daughter's mind when there were so many other things that seemed to slip away from her. At lunch the day before, she'd asked Barbara about Cynthia's children, confusing them with Barbara's own. It wasn't that she'd forgotten whose children were whose. It was just the names that gave her trouble. Barbara had gotten that uh-oh look, but Addie corrected herself just in time. Straighten up and fly right, she said to herself when these moments occurred, and it usually helped her. Fly right. Maybe that's what the parrot had come to tell her.

Barbara got up from the table and brushed the crumbs from her placemat onto her plate. She gathered up her silverware and her glass and took them to the sink, then did the same with her mother's dishes. "Gotta go," Barbara said. "When you talk to Cynthia tonight, tell her I said hello."

Changing of the guard, Addie thought—but for a few glorious hours, she'd be on her own.

Addie was lucky to live in her own place at eighty-seven, and she knew it. She did her own cooking, her own laundry, and most of her housework. It was easy, really. Much easier than standing at the foot of someone's bed all night and making conversation, which was apparently what you had to do after you were dead. Along with her dead husband,

her dead sisters and brothers came to talk to her while she slept. Not all at once—maybe they took turns, like Barbara and Cynthia—but almost every night one or two of them appeared in her dreams with something to say. Small talk mostly. It wasn't as if they were divulging timeless wisdom or the answer to some riddle known only to those beyond the grave. Sometimes there were old friends, too. It was like a party, except no one had to cook anything.

After Addie swept the kitchen floor, she went out to her patio with her bird book and binoculars. Ten minutes of sunlight every day, her doctor had told her. She had tried

She did her own cooking, her own laundry, and most of her housework. It was easy, really. Much easier than standing at the foot of someone's bed all night and making conversation, which was apparently what you had to do after you were dead.

at first to just sit with the sun on her face and arms, but it was boring. The light wasn't right for mending or needlework, and reading after lunch made her sleepy, so she'd taken up bird watching. Woodpeckers, finches, four different kinds of sparrows, blue jays, wrens, mockingbirds. Western warblers had started coming by, too, ever since her Mother's Day present had been installed. The burbling of the pre-fab waterfall was attracting birds that had ignored her before. Tufted titmouse was the latest. If Addie could be a bird, she'd choose to be one of those just for the pleasure of introducing herself. There were wild parrots in her neighborhood, too, but they were the size of a blue jay—nothing like the magnificent Nathan—and they flew around screeching their lungs out, never bothering with the feeders or the waterfall.

A glint of scarlet made Addie raise her binoculars and scan the stand of eucalyptus trees across the street. Nathan! She stood up so quickly that she nearly lost her balance. Her plastic patio chair tipped, and when she took a step to regain her equilibrium, she stumbled over it. If it hadn't been for the sturdy iron end table, she would have gone down. She righted herself just as Nathan fluttered deeper into the leaves. Addie's heart sank. A flash of red, those amazing blue tail feathers, then nothing. As she replayed the moment, it seemed that she'd even heard the beating of his immense wings. Addie set the chair back on its feet, dragged it into the shade of the awning, and rested there until the adrenaline from her near tumble went back to wherever it hid itself between crises.

It wasn't unusual for Addie to get into trouble in the afternoon. The spilling of bleach, the breaking of glass, faucet handles that came off and wouldn't screw back on. She'd had to push her ridiculous emergency button for the faucet incident. She tried to telephone for help, but the plumber put her on hold, and both her daughters' phones went to voicemail. When the paramedics jimmied open her door, she was standing at the sink

with a stack of towels and a bathmat and a throw rug. The Med-Alert system contacted her daughters, too, and just minutes after the paramedics, they arrived panting with panic. "I'm drowning," Addie had said, trying to infuse a little humor into the situation. Barbara looked so pale and stricken that Addie insisted the paramedics check her blood pressure. Though she was careful to loop the button on its lanyard around her neck when Barbara came for lunch, Addie resolved she wouldn't push the button again no matter what.

After dinner that night, after her phone call with Cynthia, Addie read the newspaper and went to bed. While she slept, some sliver of consciousness kept watch for Nathan. But he didn't come to see her—crowded out, most likely, by her other visitors, who jabbered and jostled at the foot of her bed, noisy as a flock of wild parrots.

The next morning Addie had her coffee and toast on the patio and sat for a bit, but the parrot didn't appear. Back inside, she started up Barbara's old laptop, reminding herself that when she was finished, she was not to push the power button without shutting down first. Clicking on the "Start" menu to turn something off was just plain ridiculous, but she made herself do exactly as her daughter instructed. The pictures of parrots on the Internet were astounding. Nathan was actually a Red-fronted Macaw—which was, indeed, a type of parrot. He came from Bolivia.

All during lunch, Addie wrestled with whether to bring up the bird to Barbara again. My parrot is real. Not a dream. These lines welled up behind Addie's lips, but each time she thought better of it. When Barbara presented her with the piece of cheesecake that she'd picked up as a surprise, Addie decided to tell her. Barbara interrupted just as she began to speak:

"Mother, where is your button?"

"I'm not going to wear it anymore." Having already shifted into confessional mode, Addie could not turn back. "Look how scared you were the day I used it."

"You need to wear it. It could save your life."

"I'm not going to live forever, you know. It's a button, not a magic wand. I'm not going to wear it."

"You're not going to wear it because I got scared when you pushed it?" Barbara got up from the table and scraped the last of her cheesecake into the trash.

Addie shrugged and savored another bite. From sweet to bitter in less than a second—that was Barbara, and there was nothing Addie could do about it.

When Addie woke up from her nap, Nathan was perched again on a chair in the dining room. The tray she had set on the table was half empty, and bits and pieces of sun-

flower seeds were everywhere. “You’re a messy eater, Nathan.”

“You mean a lot to me,” Nathan said.

“Sweet-talking your way out of a problem,” Addie said. “I wish more people would use that technique.” She wanted to touch Nathan’s head—the cap of small red feathers, the way they lay so perfectly, curving into the green of his neck and shoulders. But the large beak was a thing to be reckoned with. She didn’t want another troublesome afternoon with a finger bleeding onto the carpet or an eye pecked out. She gathered up some of the stray seeds from the floor and baby-stepped toward the bird with her hand stretched out flat.

The ringing phone startled both of them. Addie patted her chest for her glasses, straightened out the chain, and slid them into position as she walked to her desk. “Paradise Vacations,” the caller I.D. read. “I’ll be in paradise soon enough,” Addie said, laughing at her own joke.

“Yup. Uh-huh. We’ll be right there,” Nathan said. He was agitated now, shifting his weight from foot to foot and bobbing his head. “Five to ten minutes. Be out front,” he said. Nathan was on a roll. “Got it,” he said. “Yup. Right away.” Good to his word, he flew out the patio door into the trees. Addie sat down and brushed the seeds back onto the tray.

She scanned the eucalyptus for Nathan several times that afternoon, but he didn’t reappear. When the sun dipped behind the roof of the neighboring apartment complex, the air grew cool, and Addie closed her patio door. Maybe Nathan had belonged to a taxi-cab company or a limousine service. The telephone had certainly set him off.

When the phone rang at 8 p.m. it was Cynthia. Right on time. Addie struggled into a sweater while they made small talk. She thought maybe Nathan had heard the phone ring, so she opened her patio door and stood talking into the dark. Cynthia had to repeat nearly everything she said, and Addie could hear her daughter’s patience running out. In a minute they were going to have the conversation about hearing aids again or that special phone for the hearing impaired. Fly right, Addie thought, and in an effort to make more engaging conversation, she told Cynthia about Nathan. “No, no, he’s not a wild parrot. He’s a Bolivian Macaw. I researched it,” Addie said. “He talks. He must have been someone’s pet.”

“We should put an ad on Craigslist,” Cynthia said.

Addie told Cynthia her taxi dispatcher theory. Cynthia didn’t seem convinced.

“And he cries,” Addie said, “like his heart is breaking.”

“Okay, Mom.” Addie imagined Cynthia rolling her eyes. “I’ve got an early day tomorrow, and it sounds like you should get some sleep, too.”

Addie’s heart felt strange as she brushed her teeth. Fluttery—like it had its own set

of wings. She wondered if she should get a cage and keep Nathan as her pet, but it would have to be a very large cage, and where would she put it, and would Nathan be happy? He looked so majestic way up high in the trees. And parrots like him lived a very long time, the Internet said. Sometimes eighty or a hundred years. Addie had no idea how old Nathan was. What if his owner had died? What if Nathan was only twenty or forty or fifty? The bird should be adopted by someone more likely to be around for the remainder of his life. The parrot glided in and out of Addie’s dreams that night. At one point he sat perched on the shoulder of her dead husband. “Uh-huh,” the bird said. “Got it. East or west of the river? Be right there,” he said.

“I heard your parrot turned out to be real,” Barbara said as soon as they’d settled into their lunch the next day. Addie knew from the expression on Barbara’s face that this was some kind of a trap.

“He is,” Addie said.

Barbara chewed a bit of her sandwich and nodded. “Cynthia told me,” Barbara said. “We Googled it and found a discussion on a local birder site. Some people say it’s just a peacock from the arboretum.”

Addie shook her head. “He’s a parrot. A Bolivian Macaw,” she said.

“The main point is that he’s real. Not a dream. That means you left your patio door open, Mom. If the bird was in the dining room when you woke up from your nap the other day, that means you left the door, screen and all, wide open for over an hour.” Barbara folded her paper napkin neatly next to her plate, even though she had half of her avocado sandwich left. Addie wondered if Nathan might like to have it if Barbara wasn’t going to eat it.

“Maybe I dreamed him first,” Addie said. “A prediction.” She knew a comment like this wouldn’t help her case. Barbara was so unwilling to throw her arms around the invisible. She had a logical explanation for everything—blamed the sleeping pills for Addie’s nighttime visitations from dead relatives, and the heart medication for the fading of her short-term memory. What did it matter if Addie visited with the dead or couldn’t remember whether or not she’d had an egg for breakfast? Her life was passing before her eyes, but it was happening in slow motion, not in a flash at the moment of death like people said it did. The unimportant stuff was edited out—like in a movie. There was a reason the names of childhood playmates rose up present and true. When you met them in the hereafter, you could immediately greet them by name. They weren’t going to ask you if you’d had an egg for breakfast.

Barbara put the dishes in the sink, wrapped the sandwich in a piece of plastic wrap, and slid it into her purse. She said nothing further about the button, but made a show of

Feathers

closing and locking both the screen and the sliding door before she left.

Later that afternoon Addie could barely remember saying good-bye to Barbara. She sat in her chair on the patio with the door open behind her. Her binoculars were strung around her neck along with her glasses. As she studied the hillside, Nathan swooped out of the eucalyptus and sailed toward her. Her heart gave a little jump, and by the time the parrot landed on the end table beside her, Addie's heart felt all ablaze, like a heart in one of those religious pictures.

"Don't call Barbara or Cynthia," Addie said, as if dialing the phone might be one of Nathan's talents.

"Crossing into another country," Nathan said. Addie felt she was already at the border, ankle-deep in a river, and she hoped the water would put out the fire in her heart. She squinted, trying to bring Nathan into focus, but she couldn't see him even though she was certain he was next to her.

"Feathers," Addie said as she put her hand out to touch him. The bird sat perfectly still while Addie caressed him, her eyes blind—but her fingers alive to all his colors. How soft his feathers were, Addie thought. Just like the hair of her little girls.