

The Company of Mirrors

by Amy Slack

When I was a small child, my grandmother kept my brother in a cage in the corner of her sitting room. I would visit them both on Thursdays and Fridays, inasmuch a four-year-old can be said to 'visit' anyone. More accurately, my father would drop me off on the way to his job at the local butcher's, where he sliced deli meats with a motorized blade so sharp that it had been known to snatch stray fingers clean away, or so my grandmother told me. She had a tendency to say things like that. When I washed my hands, I learned that it was possible for a child to drown in six inches of water; as we ate, she described how a swallowed apple seed could take root in one's stomach and send branches bursting out of one's chest – that is, if the seed did not choke the swallower first. These warnings, spoken with a tight certainty, were tinted with something close to anger and close to love, and through my days spent with her I learned how adults found it so easy to knot the two feelings up together, until they could hardly tell them apart without finding themselves frayed.

Now a grown-up myself, I know that my grandmother had intended to shock me into good behaviour, the way a sharp slap on the back of an exposed leg warns a toddler not to run into oncoming traffic. I can't say that her warnings did me much good, partly since I was not a terribly disobedient child in the first place, but mostly because I grew so used to her comments that they became blunted with overuse, a soft hum in the background of my early years.

In the same way, I did not find my grandmother's cage, and its contents, all that remarkable. It was a handsome cage with a sloping roof, and it stood taller than me even while on tiptoes. If it were not for the wire walls and the slight ammoniac odour, it might have been mistaken for a doll's house. Like a doll's house, it had miniature items of furniture, including a short ladder and a hanging mirror only slightly larger than my the compact my grandmother kept in her handbag. The mirror, she said, was to prevent my brother from feeling lonely whenever she or I were not around to keep him company.

'Every time he looks in the mirror, he sees another friendly face looking back at him. It makes him feel a little less alone,' she explained, her voice unexpectedly soft.

Although a mirror was better than nothing for Marcus, I knew he preferred spending time with me. I would read to him, practising my letters and sounding out hard words that tangled up on my tongue while he encouraged me with his song. We performed dance routines together: me in my vest and knickers doing ballerina twirls across the green and brown damask carpet, him fluttering from perch to perch with the beating blue of his wings.

My brother wasn't always a budgie. Before I was born, he was a little boy, with sandy hair and freckles on his nose like me. This I knew from the photos that hung from the walls of my grandmother's house in their many mismatched frames. He was also naughty. The photos told me this too. He had a look to him that unsettled me, that made me want to turn away before I got myself in trouble, just like he did.

There were no pictures of Marcus at our house. My father had gotten rid of them all, putting them into bin bags along with his words and memories of him. When my grandmother found the photos left out for the binmen to find, she stole them away and added them to her own collection.

'You stole them?'

'No, I stole them away. That's not the same as stealing, because stealing is bad, my chick. Stealing away means you rescue something, and that is a very kind thing to do.'

Marcus came back not long after I was born, she told me. He came back in the form of a small blue bird our grandmother bought from a local pet shop, the kind of shop that only sold creatures one could safely stow away in a shoebox should the need arise. She looked into his eyes and knew it was my brother. Knowing my father would disapprove, she told him that the budgie's name was Poppet, but privately called him Marcus.

'It's him,' she would say whenever she told me the story. 'Marcus. I feel it in my marrow, my chick. Do you know what I mean?' At this I nodded solemnly, because it was not a question that anticipated disagreement. She would go quiet then, quiet and still, until her head nodded to her chest with the grace of a woman in prayer and she began to snore softly to herself. Once,

during one of these naps, I watched as a thread of drool stitched itself into the fabric of her blouse. I looked to Marcus for help, and he softly sang a tune I could not translate.

My father didn't like it when I mentioned Marcus. What little I learned about him, the brother who existed before I did and who was therefore not a brother at all, I pocketed and polished smooth with retellings. He liked music. He had a skateboard. He always ate all his vegetables. My father told me that last fact at teatime, when he caught me mashing my broccoli into the dregs of gravy on my plate in a bid to make them more palatable.

'Christ,' he said, 'your brother would never play with his food. He always ate his vegetables – especially broccoli.'

Having apparently discovered the secret of getting to the truth about Marcus, I brought him up at every mealtime. Did Marcus like sausages? Could Marcus ride a bike? Did Marcus like birds? My father ignored me, the way fathers do in such circumstances, by choosing my questioning as the ideal time to clear away the plates and send me off to wash my hands. I took his reluctance as a challenge, a game to be won. If only I could stop him from tidying away the plates, then I would learn more about my brother, who now existed in three forms in my mind: as photograph, as budgie, and as a faceless boy on a skateboard with pockets full of softened broccoli waiting to be snacked upon. If I could learn a little more about him, perhaps those different fraternal fragments would stitch themselves into something whole.

I chose my moment as well as a four-year-old might, having just polished off the last of my toad-in-the-hole but with plenty of carrots left blinking orange on my plate.

'Do you miss him?' I asked, laying my fork down.

My father grew quiet, laying down his own cutlery with the softest clink. That clink taught me something about what silence sounds like: not crying, not yelling, but the gentle letting go of things too heavy to hold. He stared at a pea that had escaped onto our table, shedding a drop of gravy on the formica.

'Yes,' he said. 'Every day.'

'Why don't you go visit him, then?'

He looked up at me, then. 'I can't. You know that.' He pushed back his chair and left the room. I picked up a coin of carrot and placed it heavy on my tongue, and wondered what would happen if my father did not return to clear the plates away.

Spending time in my grandmother's house was a remarkable experience. Everything was almost familiar, and yet not: her couch cushions felt rougher, her toilet a fraction taller than the one we had at home. Even the air tasted peculiar; with hindsight, I imagine it came down to her use of a different brand of laundry detergent, but at that age, having spent little time in the houses of others, I was unaccustomed to the slight, uncanny quirks of difference that distinguish one home from the next.

My brother's presence, curiously, did not figure into the low-level disorientation I felt while in my grandmother's home. Neither the sound of Marcus pecking at a seed block nor his dozen pairs of framed, sun-bleached eyes disconcerted me, because in this one respect, at least, I could draw a clear line of difference between my father's house and my grandmother's.

Looking back, I don't think I ever saw my father step inside his mother's house. He dropped me off at the door, then he and my grandmother would make light conversation for a few moments about the latest goings-on in the village. In the afternoons, when he came to collect me, they would chat again briefly, this time focusing their attention on me: what I had eaten, how I had behaved. Once, as we were leaving, I saw my grandmother rise to kiss him on the cheek before we left. As we walked to the car, he brushed the spot lightly with a fingertip, a gentle retracing of steps upon his skin.

To be quite honest, I cannot recall the details of their conversations, nor what my grandmother might have said that would have sunk itself into my father as deeply as it did. Perhaps he had asked one afternoon how my grandmother and I had gotten on, and she replied in the plural instead of the singular: 'Oh, they've been good as gold, haven't they?' Perhaps he remarked upon a newly bought bag of bird seed sitting in the hallway behind her feet, yet to be packed away, and she forgot that she was supposed to call the budgie Poppet in my father's presence. Sometimes, on those lonely nights when I sink fitfully into a sleep that begs me to dwell upon the blunt fragments of my worst memories, I imagine that I was the one who let the

secret slip; even in my waking moments, I cannot entirely dispel the possibility that I might have been somehow to blame.

I wish I could recall with absolute certainty how my grandmother and I spent our final day together, but the human memory is an ungenerous thing, particularly when it comes to our early years. I know my father made no fuss about ending my weekday visits since, in any case, I was about to start school and would no longer have need of grandparental supervision.

But then there was that one particular afternoon towards the end, one I can still picture so clearly: me at the coffee table, hunched over a colouring-book with a felt-tip squeaking ink from my fist; my grandmother in her seat by the window, her magazine of women's troubles and glossy adverts spread wide over her knee; Marcus, his cage just out of sight, trilling the same short notes over and over. Without provocation, the warnings came. Always hold closed scissors by the blades, never the handle. Beware untied shoelaces. Always, always, always look both ways before crossing a road. Never catch a falling knife. If a kind stranger offers you sweets, scream like hell. Remember, chick, remember: look both ways. I turned to my grandmother but the sunlight streamed through the window, casting her face in shadow, so that all I could see were the dust motes moving soft in the air, quivering from our breaths and the beating of my brother's wings.

Sometime soon after that day the visits stopped, and while I cannot believe my father cut my grandmother off from seeing me entirely, neither can I remember seeing her again. He didn't acknowledge it all that much. If I brought up my grandmother, he would swiftly mention my school, my friends, my teachers. Always something new to replace the old, something now to replace the then. That was his way.

But then, one day, I must have asked about my brother, about Marcus the budgie in his doll-house cage.

'I miss him,' I said, the threat of tears stinging sharp at the back of my throat. 'Every day.'

My father grew loud then. 'You do not miss him!' he snapped. 'You never met the boy. You didn't know him. That bird, that— that stupid, flaming bird. What was she thinking? And the photos, did she show you those too? Christ almighty. Sick. It's sick. She's sick. I should have never sent you there.' A man who kept his emotions knotted tight inside, I had never before heard my father raise his voice. For as long as he lived, I never heard him do it again.

And that was it, for a while – for the time it took for my grandmother to become truly sick, the kind of sickness that could be prescribed by doctors rather than her own son. She must have been moved to a hospice, or a nursing home, or some other such facility; we never visited her, so I have no way of knowing. I still wonder if they let her bring a photo of Marcus, wherever it was they took her. ‘That’s my grandson,’ she would tell them. I wonder if they asked her what happened to him. I wonder if she told them he had a sister who loved him: as bird, as image, as fragments of a boy on a skateboard with broccoli in his pocket.

My father sold her house, had a cheap wooden sign posted outside her door inviting strangers to claim her home for themselves, but not before hiring contractors to empty out its contents that he could not bear to handle himself. We drove past once, on the way to somewhere unimportant, and I saw the skip loaded with it all: the couch, the toilet, the photograph frames, all poured out and broken. Not long after that, a workman came to our door, unloaded a few boxes of papers and ephemera of the kind that only grown-ups value. While my father began to sort through the documents, the workman retreated to his van, and returned with apologies and an empty cage not too unlike a doll house. ‘We had to clean it out, you understand.’

My father said nothing, only paid him and sent him on his way.

The cage door hung open, and as the workman set it down on our kitchen table it cried out with a shifting creak. Marcus had flown away. I knew this, and I know this still, just as I know that there are things that children should be told and things they should not. Still, when I caught sight of a fragment of myself in the small mirror that kept my brother company, I wondered, when he looked into it, if it was the face of a boy that looked back at him, or if it was a bird.

About the Author

Amy Slack is a writer and editor from the North-East of England. A graduate of Queen's University, Belfast, she now lives in London, where she is currently studying part-time for a Creative Writing MA at Birkbeck. Amy's work has been published by MIRONline, FlashBack Fiction, Honey and Lime, and Milk Candy Review, among others, and she was recently shortlisted for The Cambridge Flash Fiction Prize. She can be found on Twitter @amyizyylou.