

Even Pigeons Can Sing

A Short Story by

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A stooped, ancient priest stands at the altar of St. Timothy's Church in New Jersey, delivering a eulogy for my late Uncle Mo. Which makes absolutely no sense, because he was my father's brother, and I'm Jewish on my father's side of the family. That's not to say that anyone in my family ever set foot in a temple, or anything as radical as that. Still, I can't help thinking they'd be more likely to go there than here.

But that's only the beginning of the revisionism in my family history.

"Morris Adelman was a good man," the priest says, "a kind man..."

I lean over to Tim and say, in the tiniest breath of voice possible, "A flatulent man."

Tim jabs his elbow into my ribs, hard enough to hurt.

It's actually good that he does, because it stops me from laughing, which would have been disastrous but hard to stifle.

I'm not taking it lightly that my Uncle Mo is dead, and I don't mean to be cruel. Or even flippant. It's just one of those moments when the tension is so

palpable you'll do almost anything to release a piece of it. I can't honestly say I deeply loved the man, or even that I liked him all that much. But if I'd been given a vote, I definitely would have been a fan of continued life for the guy. I may not miss him in that genuine way you do with someone you loved to see, but I don't like the idea of a world with no Uncle Mo anywhere.

Which, I have to say—now that I'm face to face with it—is more than a little incomprehensible. How can anyone who was here a minute ago be nowhere? It defies explanation.

I think the reason I said what I did is because I wanted to hear something true. Even if I had to say it myself.

Uncle Mo was not an especially kind man. He wasn't a mean or evil man, but I never saw him go out of his way to be kind. He was a grumpy, chronically aggravated guy who could hold a grudge longer than most people hold a mortgage. And he was famous—I mean singularly famous—for his gastrointestinal troubles.

I hope his gastroenterologist hadn't just financed a new car or anything. He'll never find another cash cow like that in his lifetime.

Of course, while I'm thinking all this, I'm missing a whole string of additional lies. It's okay. I can get by just fine without more fiction.

Did I mention that my Uncle Mo was a large man? I'm not making fun of him over his weight, I swear. I also swear this is more apologizing for my own words and attitudes than I usually do in a month. An unusually bad month.

He was overweight. Most definitely. But he was also six foot five and had big

bones. I know people always say that, but seriously. He could have been stuck on a desert island with nothing to eat but grass, and if he'd stayed alive to be rescued, he'd still have been half again the size and weight of anybody else on the ship.

Oh. And did I mention that I'm one of the pallbearers?

It's hot today in New Jersey. Bizarrely, unseasonably hot. My father is holding the handle of the coffin, right in front of me, and as we step out through the doors of the church, I can see sweat rolling down his neck and under the collar of his new white dress shirt. He's not a small man himself. I glance around at the other pallbearers, three of whom I've never seen before in my life. I realize I have at least thirty years on all of them. Fifty in some cases. And I feel like I'm dangerously close to passing out. I keep looking up at the hearse, and I swear it's only getting farther away as we walk toward it. Which I know is impossible. But that's how it seems.

I want to loosen my tie, but some unwritten law says I'm not allowed. The old guys aren't doing it. And if anybody knows about unwritten laws, it's old guys.

It occurs to me that we may be about to witness other untimely passings.

When we step under a canopy of huge trees, their shade is an enormous blessing.

Suddenly I'm aware of a righteous chorus of singing birds. I swear there must be fifty of them, all going at once. I look up into the trees to see if I can spot them. I see a few of those little brown jobbers that no one can ever really identify. Well. No one I know. Maybe sparrows or swallows or something like that, but I'm guessing.

Then I trip over a crack in the cement walkway, and just barely catch my balance again, averting what I'm sure would have been an enormous catastrophe.

The kind you never really live down in family lore.

I glance over my shoulder at Tim, who's walking behind the coffin with my mother. He gives me a look at that says, with great respect and love, "Get your head back in the game, Brian."

I do as I'm silently told.

But I can't stop thinking about the birds. Because all of a sudden I was aware of them. But I don't think they just suddenly started singing. I think they were there all the time, and I wasn't listening. Probably even in the church, during the service, I could have heard them if I'd tried. At least, when that damn organ music wasn't going.

So that makes me wonder, are there always birds singing all around me? How long have I been tuning them out?

Then I start to wonder again what it means not to exist anywhere in the world, and that stops me from thinking of birds for a suitable length of time.

My dad is driving. I'm looking at the back of my mother's distressingly red hair. It's really not a color of red that appears anywhere in nature, and for good reason. Last time I saw her she was distressingly blonde, so I thought we'd begun to move in something like a good direction. But there has been backsliding.

We're in one of those ghastly funeral processions that I thought had gone completely out of vogue decades ago. A bunch of cars in a somber line, headlights on in broad daylight, reflecting the morbidity of the moment, as if cars could be visibly depressed.

I briefly think cremation would have been a good choice. We could have had a nice, upbeat memorial, celebrating his life. Danced on the beach or something. Told funny stories about him.

Except, it strikes me suddenly, there was nothing even remotely funny about my Uncle Mo's life.

Tim reaches across the back seat of my dad's Crown Victoria and gives my hand a squeeze, and I smile at him.

"Did you hear that incredible chorus of singing birds?" I ask him, still holding his hand.

I see my dad glance at us in the rearview mirror and then quickly look away.

"When?" Tim asks. A little distracted.

It's only the third time he's met my parents. He's doing amazingly well under the circumstances. Anybody who survives them would be.

"When we left the church. There were dozens of them. Singing up a storm. It was amazing."

"I didn't notice."

"I didn't, either, at first. And then suddenly I heard them. And then I started wondering if there are always birds singing like that."

"Huh," Tim says. He's somewhere else. I envy him the location.

"Think they're always there and we just don't hear them?"

"You're asking the wrong person," he says. "Since I've lived in Manhattan all my life."

I see my mom's head turn in our direction.

“Where were you born, Tim?” she asks.

Which is.... So. Incredibly. Bizarre. Since he just said.

“Manhattan.”

“Oh,” she says. “Interesting.”

As with both other times Tim met my parents, I enter into a silent mantra of
Please don't break up with me, please don't break up with me.

So far so good. I mean, so far he hasn't. Which I take to mean our relationship
is one solid mother.

Oh. Sorry. Poor choice of phrasing.

Tim says, “What if your Aunt Tressa wants you to go up in the attic and look
at his art?”

“Oh, God,” I say. “I'll get out of it. I won't go.”

I look up to see my father staring at me in the rearview mirror again. This
time his expression is a hybrid of cast iron and concrete.

“I can't believe what I'm hearing,” he says.

“That could be an incredibly awkward situation,” I say. “If it's not good.”

“Brian. The woman just lost her husband. If she asks you to go look at Mo's
art, you go look at Mo's art. And remind yourself that you're not having the worst
day of anyone on the premises. If it's not good, lie and say it is. The whole thing'll
take...what? A few minutes?”

I sigh deeply. And feel my mood plummet further. Not because I have to do
what he tells me. Because he's absolutely right.

“Maybe I'll get lucky and she won't ask,” I say quietly to Tim.

Not quietly enough, though. I guess it's hard to keep secrets in the interior of a slow-moving vehicle.

"You're the big artist of the family," my mom says. "She'll ask."

"I'm not a big artist."

"You're a bigger artist than anyone else in this family."

I look out the window for a long, glum moment.

Then I say, "Tell me the truth. It'll help prepare me. Was he any good?"

"I wouldn't know," my mother says. "I never once saw the stuff."

"*You* must have, Dad."

"When we were teenagers, maybe. Hard to remember. I guess I thought it was good. It looked like what it was supposed to be a painting of."

I exchange a look with Tim, then begin mentally rehearsing my polite art lies.

"It had to be the hottest day of the year," my mother whispers, graveside, fanning herself with her purse.

But I'm listening to the cooing of doves in the trees.

I look up, and see them. Looking down at us. Gunmetal grey, with dark rings around their necks. All making that same hollow, sober, one-note sound.

What's with the birds all of a sudden? I swear this came out of nowhere. Then it hits me that maybe I'm more in the moment than usual because if Uncle Mo isn't anywhere in the world, then I feel like *I* should be. Because it turns out one's chances to do so are not what you might call unlimited.

There are maybe ten people here, Tim and myself included. That doesn't

seem like much to show for a life. It makes me feel bad for Mo.

Tim whispers in my ear. "More singing birds," he says. "Now you've got me paying attention, too."

"That's not singing," I whisper back.

"Well, of course it's singing. If it's not singing, what is it?"

I look up and see my nephew, Chucky, staring at me with searing resentment. He still hasn't forgiven me for Thanksgiving. And he's a little afraid of me now. Which, considering how he acts when he's not afraid of someone, is a triumph.

"It's all one note," I whisper to Tim.

"A one-note song is better than no song at all," he says.

We're at my Aunt Tressa's house, still in New Jersey. Unfortunately. With the same ten people. Also unfortunately.

At least there's air conditioning.

The underarms and back of my shirt still haven't dried out, and now that my temperature is coming down it makes me feel surprisingly chilled.

I'm staring at a table full of food. Well. Debatable, really. I'm sure most of the family would call it food. There's stuff like sandwiches made on white bread with the crusts cut off and cut into little triangles. The filling is unidentifiable, but it's all a homogenous white. And there's that weird fruit salad with the white dressing and the little marshmallows. And a ham, but Tim is a vegetarian, so I've been mostly off meat since I met him. A little fish now and again, in restaurants, but that's it.

I'm just giving up on eating when I hear my Aunt Tressa slide up behind me.

“I wanted to show you something,” she says.

I squeeze my eyes closed, and a flurry of thoughts all come through at once. They're all sentences one can recite regarding someone else's art. All are polite. All are lies.

“Do you mind if I go get Tim and bring him along?” I ask.

“Not at all. I want him to see this, too.”

It's hot in the attic. Oppressively so. It feels as though there's almost literally nothing up here to breathe.

My late Uncle Mo's paintings are in thick, opaque plastic bags with zippers. Body bags for art, I think. There are so many paintings that the attic can't possibly be used to store anything else. I'm guessing there are maybe two hundred.

Aunt Tressa is talking. Too much and too fast. She must be nervous. God knows I am.

“This was always my favorite one,” she says, unzipping the body bag on a painting at the front of a long aisle of bagged art. “Which I always thought was odd in a way, because most of his paintings are of the outdoors. You know. Mountains and trees and the ocean. And I love the outdoors. So I'm not sure why I like this one best. I just do. I can never say why I like art when I like it. I just like it. Is that just me, or is everybody like that?”

Truthfully, it's the case for the people who know the least about art.

But I say, “Everybody's like that.”

The plastic falls away.

I suck in my breath so hard and so fast that both Tim and Tressa hear it, and turn to look at me. But I can't pay attention to that now. The painting slices through my chest and gut like a laser, opening me up, but not in a painful way. Nothing I'd undo if I could. I can actually feel my reaction to it. A physical, visceral feeling. It touches me, and I can say where, and how it feels.

It's a painting of a lit candle in a library, shedding its soft light onto the spines of books. It's the light that's so moving. Turns out my Uncle Mo understood light the way the Dutch masters did. He had a relationship with light that turned a painting from a canvas, to art, to magic. He loved light, and coaxed it to love him in return. It shows. It's right there on the canvas. Love.

I've been staring for a long time. I can feel sweat dripping down my neck and back. I still can't speak.

"Wow," Tim says.

That seems to unstick my aunt. "You didn't think it would be good. I could tell. You didn't think it would turn out he was good, did you?"

I open my mouth, fail to make a sound, then try again.

"I didn't think he was *that* good," I say. "I didn't think anybody was."

Tim and I are sitting cross-legged on the rug in one of the upstairs bedrooms. We've hauled about ten of the paintings down from the oppressively hot attic, and unzipped them. Just ones we chose at random.

We're staring at them.

I say, "I've been to gallery showings of art that was so much easier to look

away from than this.”

He says, “Almost all of them.”

We stare in silence for another two or three minutes. I can hear people talking in half-hushed voices downstairs, but I can’t hear what they’re saying. Which may be just as well.

“It’s incredibly sad,” I say at last.

“It is. Why do you suppose he gave it up?”

“Oh. When their daughter was born—my cousin—she had all kinds of health problems. She died in her late teens.”

“Right. I remember that from Thanksgiving, now that you say it. But why didn’t he go back to it after that?”

“I have no idea. I can’t imagine.”

Another long staring match. I’m looking at a painting of ducks flying over a lake at dawn. I know, it sounds kitsch. It sounds trite. It’s not. It’s electrifying. I could look at it for a solid week and every day of the week would be happier and better than the day before it.

“It makes me want to give up on my own art,” I say.

Tim hits himself in the head with the heel of one hand. “That’s incomprehensible,” he says.

“I’ll never be this good.”

“These are just different. Your work is just entirely different. You can’t compare modern abstract with this highly representational stuff.”

“They’re better. This is better. My stuff should be more like this. And it never

will be.”

“It’s different. You can’t give up.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Because after your funeral, when people haul your art out of the attic, it’ll just be too entirely sad.”

Aunt Tressa sticks her head in through the open doorway. “Don’t you boys even want something to eat?”

“No, thanks, Aunt Tressa.”

She comes in and stares at the paintings with us. As though she’s never seen them before, but has always wanted to. She doesn’t speak.

“Why didn’t he ever go back to painting?” I ask.

I hear her pained, amplified sigh. “Not for lack of trying on my part, that’s all I can say. I think he had to really shut himself down to art to give it up in the first place. I think he had to convince himself the whole thing was utter foolishness. And then, you know your uncle. Once he got an idea in his head, there wasn’t much you could do to knock it loose again. I couldn’t even get him to talk about it.”

“How would you feel about my seeing if I could organize a gallery exhibit for some of these?”

“Oh, my. Do you think you could?”

“I don’t think it would be very hard. You’d have to think what you want for it. You know. Put prices on things.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to sell it.”

“Any of it? You have, like, two hundred pieces. Wouldn’t you be open to

selling ten or twenty?"

"Oh. Well. I don't know. I'd have to think about that."

She disappears before I can say more.

A few minutes later my father appears in the doorway, blocking the light from the hall with his bulk. He has a mixed cocktail in his hand. At first I think he's over his mom-imposed limit and he's just come up here to drink where she's not around to count cocktails. But I'm wrong.

"So, whatever you said to your aunt, that was a good job. She's very happy now. I mean...as happy as you can be when you just got back from burying your husband."

"I didn't lie to her. This stuff is incredible."

"Really?" he asks. He lines up with the library painting and stares at it with his eyes narrowed, as if that will help him see it with new eyes. "I guess it is nice," he says.

Which is a little something like saying Michelangelo's Pieta is cute.

Tim says, "We're going to see if we can get it into a gallery showing. If we can talk her into selling any of it."

"You do that," my father says. "Talk hard. He didn't leave her much in the way of insurance. She'll need the money."

Then he goes back downstairs.

"I could talk to Jongé," Tim says.

"He'd never handle anything as classical as this."

"But he knows everybody. He knows the New York art world like he knows

his favorite part of his own anatomy.”

“Oh. That’s true. Yeah, Thank you. That would be good. I don’t want to let her down on this. Or him. Or me. I want to get this stuff out to be seen. Whether he’s here to see it be seen or not. Even though that’s not nearly good enough. But it’s better than this crap with the body bags in the attic.”

“See, that’s why you can’t give up,” Tim says. “Because everybody should be around for their own exhibits. Posthumous exhibits should be discouraged whenever possible. Especially posthumous first exhibits.”

“I’ve already had my first exhibit.”

“Posthumous second exhibits would be a close second in tragedy. As if that didn’t go without saying.”

My dad drops us at the PATH train. Tim and I sit on a bench and wait. I’m watching a small flock of pigeons rooting around on the concrete, pecking at something dropped between us and the edge of the platform.

“I’m not really going to give up on my art,” I say.

“You think I don’t know that by now? Do you have any idea how often you threaten to give up on your art? In a weird way, it’s a good sign. People who are terrible always think they’re doing fine. That’s what makes them terrible. They don’t improve because they see no need for improvement. Talented people always think they’re not good enough. That’s what makes them talented. Whatever they achieve, they think they have to do better. So they do.”

“Hmm,” I say.

The pigeons are making more noise now, and we watch them in silence. Well, we're in silence. They're not. It's hard to describe the noise pigeons make, assuming there's anyone on the planet who's never heard it. It's not exactly cooing, like a dove, but it's much closer to that than singing. It's definitely not singing.

Before I can open my mouth, Tim, who is spooky about being on the same page with me, says, "Yes. Absolutely. That's a song."

I snort laughter, startling an old woman who is also waiting for the train. "Not compared to those songbirds at the church, it's not."

"But why would you compare it to anything, Brian? That's just the thing. They sing that song because it's *their* song. It's what they have to sing. You think if a flock of songbirds were to come by, they'd shut up immediately, out of intimidation? They just sing the song they have. And they never bother to worry about what anybody else is doing. They keep their eyes on their own paper."

"So you're suggesting I keep my eyes on my own paper."

"I am."

I go silent for a minute. And, in that minute, I realize that my mood is plummeting fast. Full-on crash mode.

"I'm really depressed about my Uncle Mo dying," I say. "And I was only mildly depressed when he died. And at the funeral, I don't know what I felt. I couldn't tell. But then when I saw what he could have been...what he *was* at some level, but nobody even knew it...now the whole thing just feels incredibly devastating."

"I know."

"So how do I feel better about this?"

“You don’t.”

“There’s nothing at all I can do?”

“You can get a showing for his art. Get a little extra money for your aunt.”

“That’s it?”

“You can not make the same mistake he did.”

We sit watching the pigeons for a couple of minutes, and then I reach over and take his hand. The old woman glares at us over her shoulder and then moves farther away to wait for the train.

I don’t let go. I don’t care.