

# The Pleasure of Reading Doubled

Jacob Ford

Sixty-seven-year-old Helen Barkley owned a parakeet which she kept in a large wire cage in her kitchen, next to a white, corded, plastic, landline telephone attached to the wall. The parakeet, small enough to hold in a gently curled fist and light enough so you wouldn't notice you were holding it, is colored a light blue, the same color as the "Robin's Egg Blue" crayon, as Helen's daughter once noted. The parakeet's underbelly contrasts its back and wings, instead colored a soft white. Its wings were clipped to keep the parakeet safe inside of its birdcage, and its black eyes and orange beak with dark needle-point nostrils appear smaller than it seems they should be. The parakeet's greatest sense and ability, however, come from the invisible ears buried beneath the thin feathers on the side of its head. With these ears, the parakeet hears everything—every sound made in the kitchen and every word spoken by Helen and her daughter. The parakeet memorizes these sounds to reproduce in nearly identical pitch and tone. The perfect exactness of the sounds this parakeet imitates can be startling, particularly when it recreated the sound of the kitchen smoke alarm whenever Helen fried bacon. The first time Helen cooked bacon after the parakeet moved in, she happened to burn the bacon, setting off the piercing sound of the alarm. The second time Helen cooked bacon, the parakeet recognized the smell and began to screech the same sound of the smoke alarm. Helen waved her towel at the kitchen ceiling for three full minutes before realizing she had been the victim of a fledgling prank. From then on, Helen ate less bacon.

The parakeet was named by Helen's adopted daughter. At fifty-two and unmarried, Helen adopted a six-year-old girl named Elizabeth, or Liz for short. Liz never knew her birth parents' identity and was initially grateful to be taken into Helen's home. Gratitude soon felt inadequate, however, as Helen loved Liz with more intensity than either one of them anticipated. Liz soon loved Helen like a mother and before long began to refer to Helen as her mother. Helen, an introvert and a passionate lover of literature, had previously only had her books to care for. With a daughter who now cared for her as much as she cared for her new daughter, Helen's life was revitalized.

Rather than replacing her love for books with her love for her daughter, Helen quickly learned that her two passions loved each other as well. When Liz was seven, Helen read *Pride and Prejudice* aloud to her and Liz immediately fell in love with the novel, thanks in part to Liz's favor for the protagonist's name. This instance created a tradition between the two, where every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday night, they would spend hours reading aloud to one another.

On her tenth birthday, Liz requested she and her mother adopt a puppy or kitten that she could care for and play with. Heartbroken, Helen was forced to tell her daughter no, as she was unfortunately allergic to both types of hair. This news saddened Liz, who forgave her mother, but did so unable to remove a telling look from her face. Desperate to cheer her child, Helen instead gifted her daughter a small, light blue parakeet. Liz was overjoyed by the arrival of her new pet and immediately began to deliberate on a name for the bird.

At the time, Liz's readings had recently ventured into the cold. In their weekly trips to the library, Liz began checking out book after book about Arctic and Antarctic expeditions. She had formed

a fascination with dog mushing and proudly told the story of Leonhard Seppela and his brave dog, Togo, whenever her school friends barked about how much they liked the cartoon *Balto*. Liz would have named the parakeet Togo had she not decided that the bird's light blue coloring deemed it female. Instead, she turned to the south pole, to the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton who led an expedition to Antarctica between 1914 and 1917. While the rest of the world was at war, twenty-eight British men aboard the ship *Endurance* sailed to the coldest corner of the earth. Keeping these men company and comforted in the most dangerous part of a dangerous world was a gray tabby cat named Mrs. Chippy. While the story of the *Endurance* is ultimately a tragic one, the story of Mrs. Chippy is one which, for Liz, represented a sort of hope and playfulness in a lonely world. So she named her new blue parakeet Mrs. Chippy, noting the irony that Mrs. Chippy the Antarctic cat was actually a boy while her Mrs. Chippy was a girl. It wasn't until a vet visit two months later that Liz and her mother learned that Mrs. Chippy the parakeet was indeed male. By then, however, the name had stuck.

At the age of twenty-two, Liz was a senior at her university, one semester away from graduating with a bachelor's degree in English Literature. Throughout her time away from home, Liz and her mother maintained their now condensed tradition of reading together every Tuesday evening. Living over an hour's drive away, Liz and her mother conducted reading nights over the telephone—Liz on her iPhone 8 and Helen on the white, corded, plastic, landline telephone nailed to the kitchen wall next to Mrs. Chippy's birdcage. Helen owned a smartphone, but insisted upon using the old landline, claiming she liked the dual-pitched hum

of the dial tone. At the start of each call, Liz read aloud into the phone while sprawled out on her dorm bed, or during study-breaks before the next morning's test, or in her boyfriend's apartment, or walking home from a breakup, or on a porch outside a house party she didn't want to be at anyway. Then Helen read, seated in a wooden chair and leaning against the kitchen wall while Mrs. Chippy listened intently and bounced around his birdcage.

After mother and daughter finished reading their selected passage for the week, they would recall their favorite quotes from the passage or from other books or poetry they'd read that week. Whenever Helen read her quotes, Mrs. Chippy would repeat the words he had heard. After the first time Mrs. Chippy echoed one of Helen's Oscar Wilde quotes, reciting, "the truth is rarely pure, and never simple," Liz and her mother began a competition for who could come up with the most complex literary quote for Mrs. Chippy to repeat. During Liz's sophomore year, she won the award over Thanksgiving break when she taught Mrs. Chippy to say, "the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places" from Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

While quotes would change from week to week, there was one phrase which Mrs. Chippy would repeat after every phone call. After the second or third phone call to Liz at college, Helen ended the conversation in typical fashion, telling her daughter she loved her, saying goodbye, and hanging the white plastic phone on the wall, at which point Mrs. Chippy repeated his favorite reading night quote: "I love you. Buh-bye." Helen giggled at the parakeet, and replied, "I love you too, Mrs. Chippy." This exchange became routine for Helen and her bird at the end of every reading

night phone call. The plastic of the white phone would click as Helen hung it on the wall, cueing Mrs. Chippy to echo, "I love you. Buh-bye."

In the spring semester of Liz's junior, her mother began to develop early-onset dementia. The first signs came casually – forgetting about upcoming tests Liz told her about or drama between Liz and her friends. Liz began to suspect a more serious problem, however, when Helen failed to call for reading night one Tuesday evening. Liz called home frantically. She knew Helen had no one else to check on her and was worried that her aging mother had injured herself or had been in an accident, only to find that she was busy watching *Wheel of Fortune* and had merely forgotten. Liz's feelings were not hurt, she was merely concerned. But her mother's feelings were hurt. Hurt by herself, that she had been so careless and inconsiderate as to forget to call her daughter for their longest held tradition. She wept and wrote eight different notes to hang around her home, reminding herself to call her daughter on Tuesday evenings. Despite the notes, she still sometimes forgot to call.

When Helen did remember to call for reading night, Liz could hardly notice a difference in her mother's disposition and behavior. She was just as engaged in what she was reading and in what Liz read aloud as ever before. And when they began to exchange quotes, she remembered every phrase she had picked out from her week's readings, as well as every line that Liz brought up. She also remembered to repeat each of the quotes aloud so Mrs. Chippy could participate in reading night. And after hanging up each evening, Helen never forgot to tell Mrs. Chippy that she loved him too.

Liz was patient with her mother, never becoming frustrated by anything she forgot. But Liz did

become angry when she learned that her mother had forgotten to say goodbye. She received the news two nights after their final reading night. The last correspondence between them had been a text message Liz sent early Thursday morning. The message didn't include any words, composed of a mere thumbs-up emoji. Whenever Liz sent it, Helen knew there was no need to reply, and Liz always knew that she wouldn't. A new conversation would always begin eventually. This time was the one exception.

In the five days between her mother's death and the funeral, Liz guilted herself over the lack of meaningful conversation that prefaced her mother's death. She had anticipated her mother's passing ever since the initial diagnosis, and though she imagined it wouldn't occur for several more years, she had still rehearsed the final words she would say to her mother, and predicted the final words her mother might say to her. In their final conversation, they would recite to each other their life-long favorite literary passages, say they loved each other, and have a full and complete goodbye. Something more than a meager and regrettable thumbs-up.

After the funeral, Liz abandoned the memorial party at her mother's church and retreated to her mother's home alone. She opened the front door with her eyes already wet and entered the gray living room. She didn't bother to turn the lights on, as the Tuesday afternoon sun gloomily illuminated the living room. She saw her mother's chair and beside it was a stack of books higher than the armrest. On the top of the stack sat *Jane Eyre*, her mother's favorite novel. She remembered how her mother always kept a copy of *Jane Eyre* at the top of the stack, routinely switching out the books that sat underneath. Stuck to the cover of *Jane Eyre* was

an orange post-it note with the words "Call Liz on Tuesday" written in her mother's handwriting.

Liz sat down in the chair and picked up her mother's copy of *Jane Eyre*, removing a half-full mug of lukewarm coffee that crowned the stack of books. She opened the book and began to flip through the pages which smelled like her mother. She remembered realizing as a teenager that most people would say that books did not smell like her mother, but rather that her mother smelled like books. Nevertheless, Liz still held to the former conclusion.

She turned through the pages of the novel. Nearly every sentence had been underlined in pencil or black pen so that the lines which stood out the most were the unextraordinary sentences filled with Charlotte Brontë's weakest verbs and most pragmatic comparisons. As she turned through the pages, Liz's eyes locked onto a yellow hue. She never knew her mother to use highlighter. Why was this quote so important? Liz cleared the mourning from her throat, inhaled deeply, and read aloud: "I can live alone, in self-respect, and circumstances require me to do so." The exhale that followed wavered with sadness.

"I need not sell my soul to buy bliss," spoke a voice from the kitchen, finishing the quote.

Liz leapt to her feet. She panicked, fearing herself to not be alone in a house she thought empty. Then she remembered Mrs. Chippy and matched the nasality in the quoter's voice to the tiny blue bird. With book in hand, Liz crossed to the kitchen to find Mrs. Chippy in his cage, staring back at her in the doorway. "Hey Mrs. Chippy," she said. Mrs. Chippy turned and hopped to a swinging perch.

Liz had an idea. She reopened the book and began to flip through the pages again, scouring the novel for yellow highlighter. She found

another entry. She read it to herself, then looked at Mrs. Chippy. "Life appears to be too short to be spent —"

"Registering wrongs," Mrs. Chippy cut in. "Registering wrongs," he repeated.

"Almost," Liz said, crossing the kitchen and hoisting herself to sit atop the kitchen counter, "it's 'nursing animosity and registering wrongs.'" She paused. "How much *Jane Eyre* did she teach you?" Liz thought for a moment, then a smile appeared on her face. "You would, wouldn't you, Mom?" She quickly turned to chapter twenty-three and found the highlighted passage. "Hey Mrs. Chippy. 'I am a free human being with an independent will —'"

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me," Mrs. Chippy proclaimed. A laugh escaped from Liz's mouth and her silence-piercing chuckle bounced against the kitchen walls and back, catching her off-guard. She closed the novel and set it on the counter beside her. She stared at Mrs. Chippy in his birdcage. Next to the cage, Liz noticed the plastic telephone hanging on the wall. She dropped down from the counter and stepped toward the phone. Next to Mrs. Chippy's cage, Liz bent over to stick her finger through the painted white wires and Mrs. Chippy bounded over to nibble on her finger.

Liz stood up straight and stared at the phone. It hung on the wall, its white plastic collecting gray dust since the last time Liz and her mother spoke a week before. Part of Liz didn't want to disturb the dust, while another part wanted to cast the dust onto the kitchen floor and press the phone to her ear. The latter instinct took over and Liz's fingers grasped the bulky device and pulled it from its mount on the wall. As it released, the plastic mount snapped upward into place, sending a clacking

sound that echoed across the kitchen and into Mrs. Chippy's invisible ears. "Hi Liz how are you the hermit sits alone," he screeched as he leapt to a stable perch.

Liz stared at the bird. She opened her mouth, "There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine," she muttered as if a question.

"A sensible man ought to find sufficient company in himself," Mrs. Chippy replied.

"If you do not understand what words say," Liz asked, noting her own irony, "how can you expect to pass judgement on what words conceal?"

"O my soul sink not into despair virtue is near thee," said the bird.

"You cannot find peace by avoiding life," Liz countered.

"We must all obey the great law of change," Mrs. Chippy spoke.

"To do the useful thing, to say the courageous thing, to contemplate the beautiful thing: that is enough for one man's life."

"Honeysuckles embracing the thorn."

"A woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it."

"To know ourselves is the most graceful learning."

"Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others," Liz's eyes began to well.

"Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure."

Liz paused and contemplated what to say next. "The pleasure of all reading is doubled when one lives with another who shares the same books," she said and began to cry.

"Better to forgive and remember, than to forgive and forget," Mrs. Chippy said. Liz smiled.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," she said. She waited. But Mrs. Chippy didn't reply.

Liz sighed. Only now did she notice the tone of the ringer humming from the phone against her ear, two constants dancing in unison. She pulled the phone away and stared into it. She glanced at the bird. "Thanks Mrs. Chippy," she said, then hung the phone back on the receiver, the sound of plastic against plastic again clacking across the room.

"I love you," said the bird. "Buh-bye."