

"Mr. Green"

from Robert Olen Butler's 1993 Pulitzer Prize Winning Book

A GOOD SCENT FROM A STRANGE MOUNTAIN

I am a Catholic, the daughter of a Catholic mother and father, and I do not believe in the worship of my ancestors, especially in the form of a parrot. My father's parents died when he was very young and he became a Catholic in an orphanage run by nuns in Hanoi. My mother's mother was a Catholic but her father was not and like many Vietnamese, he was a believer in what Confucius taught about ancestors. I remember him taking me by the hand while my parents and my grandmother were sitting under a banana tree in the yard and he said, "Let's go talk with Mr. Green." He led me into the house and he touched his lips with his forefinger to tell me that this was a secret. Mr. Green was my grandfather's parrot and I loved talking to him, but we passed Mr. Green's roost in the front room. Mr. Green said, "Hello, kind sir," but we didn't even answer him.

My grandfather took me to the back of his house, to a room that my mother had said was private, that she had yanked me away from when I once had tried to look. It had a bead curtain at the door and we passed through it and the beads rustled like tall grass. The room was dim, lit by candle, and it smelled of incense, and my grandfather stood me before a little shrine with flowers and a smoking incense bowl and two brass candlesticks and between them a photo of a man in a Chinese mandarin hat. "That's my father," he said, nodding toward the photo. "He lives here." Then he let go of my hand and touched my shoulder. "Say a prayer for my father." The face in the photo was tilted a little to the side and was smiling faintly, like he'd asked me a question and he was waiting for an answer that he expected to like. I knelt before the shrine as I did at Mass and I said the only prayer I knew by heart, the Lord's Prayer.

But as I prayed, I was conscious of my grandfather. Even peeked at him as he stepped to the door and parted the beads and looked toward the front of the house. Then he returned and stood beside me and I finished my prayer as I listened to the beads rustling into silence behind us. When I said "Amen" aloud, my grandfather knelt beside me and leaned near and whispered, "Your father is doing a terrible thing. If he must be a Catholic, that's one thing. But he has left the spirits of his ancestors to wander for eternity in loneliness." It was hard for me to believe that my father was doing something as terrible as this, but it was harder for me to believe that my grandfather, who was even older than my father, could be wrong.

My grandfather explained about the spirit world, how the souls of our ancestors continue to need love and attention and devotion. Given these things, they will share in our lives and they will bless us and even warn us about disasters in our dreams. But if we neglect the souls of our ancestors, they will become lost and lonely and will wander around in the kingdom of the dead no better off than a warrior killed by his enemy and left unburied in a rice paddy to be eaten by black birds of prey.

When my grandfather told me about the birds plucking out the eyes of the dead and about the possibility of our own ancestors, our own family, suffering just like that if we ignore them, I said,

"Don't worry, Grandfather, I will always say prayers for you and make offerings for you, even if I'm a Catholic."

I thought this would please my grandfather, but he just shook his head sharply, like he was mad at me, and he said, "Not possible."

"I can," I said.

Then he looked at me and I guess he realized that he'd spoken harshly. He tilted his head slightly and smiled a little smile—just like his father in the picture—but what he said wasn't something to smile about. "You are a girl," he said. "So it's not possible for you to do it alone. Only a son can oversee the worship of his ancestors."

I felt a strange thing inside me, a recoiling, like I'd stepped barefoot on a slug, but how can you recoil from your own body? And so I began to cry. My grandfather patted me and kissed me and said it was all right, but it wasn't all right for me. I wanted to protect my grandfather's soul, but it wasn't in my power. I was a girl. We waited together before the shrine and when I'd stopped crying, we went back to the front room and my grandfather bowed to his parrot and said, "Hello, kind sir," and Mr. Green said, "Hello, kind sir," and even though I loved the parrot, I would not speak to him that day because he was a boy and I wasn't.

This was in our town, which was on the bank of the Red River just south of Hanoi. We left that town not long after. I was seven years old and I remember hearing my grandfather arguing with my parents. I was sleeping on a mat at the back of our house and I woke up and I heard voices and my grandfather said, "Not possible." The words chilled me, but then I listened more closely and I knew they were discussing the trip we were about to go on. Everyone was very frightened and excited. There were many families in our little town who were planning to leave. They had even taken the bell out of the church tower to carry with them. We were all Catholics. But Grandfather did not have the concerns of the Catholics. He was concerned about the spirits of his ancestors. This was the place where they were born and died and were buried. He was afraid that they would not make the trip. "What then?" he cried. And later he spoke of the people of the South and how they would hate us, being from the North. "What then?" he said.

Mr. Green says that, too. "What then?" he has cried to me a thousand times, ten thousand times, in the past sixteen years. Parrots can live for a hundred years. And though I could not protect my dead grandfather's soul, I could take care of his parrot. When my grandfather died in Saigon in 1972, he made sure that Mr. Green came to me. I was twenty-four then and newly married and I still loved Mr. Green. He would sit on my shoulder and take the top of my ear in his beak, a beak that could crush the hardest shell, and he would hold my ear with the greatest gentleness and touch me with his tongue.

I have brought Mr. Green with me to the United States of American, and in the long summers here in New Orleans and in the warm springs and falls and even in many days of our mild winters, he sits on my screened-in back porch, near the door, and he speaks in the voice of my grandfather. When he wants to get onto my shoulder and go with me into the community garden, he says, "What then?" And when I first come to him in the morning, he says, "Hello, kind sir."

He loves me. That is I am the only person who can go near him without his attempting to draw blood. But he loved my grandfather before me, and there are times when he seems to hold the spirit of my grandfather and all his knowledge. Mr. Green sits on my shoulder and presses close to my head and he repeats the words that he has heard from my husband and my children. My children even teach him English words. He say all these things, but without any feeling. The Vietnamese words of my grandfather, however, come out powerfully, like someone very strong is inside him. And whenever he speaks with my grandfather's voice, Mr. Green's eyes dilate and contract over and over, which is a parrot's display of happiness. Yesterday I tried to give him some drops that the veterinarian prescribed for him and Mr. Green said, "Not possible," and even though he is sick, his eyes showed how pleased he was to defy me.

When we all lived in Saigon at last, my grandfather discovered the bird market on Ham Nghi Street and he would take me there. Actually, in the street market of Ham Nghi there were animals of all kinds-dogs and monkeys and rabbits and turtles and even wildcats. But when my grandfather took my hand and said to me, "Come, little one," and we walked down Tran Hung Dao, where our house was, and we came to Ham Nghi, he always took me to the place with the birds.

The canaries were the most loved by everyone who came to the market, and my grandfather sang with them. They all hopped to the side of there cages that was closest to my grandfather and he whistled and hummed and even sang words, songs from the North that he sang quite low, so that only the birds could hear. He did not want the people of Saigon to realize he was from the North. And the canaries all opened their mouths and the air filled with their sounds, their throats ruffling and puffing, and I looked at my grandfather's throat to see if it moves the way the throats of these birds move. It did not move at all. His skin was slack there, and in all the times I saw him charm the birds, I never saw his throat move, like he didn't really mean the sounds he made. The people all laughed when they saw what he could do and they said that my grandfather was a wizard, but he would just ignore them.

The canaries seemed to be his favorite birds on Ham Nghi, though he spent time with them all. The dark-plumed ones-the magpies and the blackbirds-were always singing on their own, especially the blackbirds with their orange beaks. My grandfather came near the blackbirds and they were babbling among themselves and he frowned at them, like they were fools to be content only with their own company. They did not need him to prompt their songs. He growled at them, "You're are just a bunch of old women," and we move on to the doves that were big-eyed and quiet and he cooed at them and he told them how pretty they were and we looked at the moorhens, pecking at the bottoms of their cages like chickens, and the cranes with their wonderful necks curling and stretching.

We visited all the birds and my grandfather loved them, and the first time we went to Ham Nghi, we ended up at the cages crowded with sparrows. He bent near their chattering and I liked these birds very much. They were small and their eyes were bright, and even though the birds were crowded, they were always in motion, hopping and fluffing up and shaking themselves like my vain friends. I was a quiet little girl, but I, too, would sometimes look at myself in a mirror and primp and puff myself up, even as in public I tried to hold myself apart a little bit from the other girls.

I was surprised and delighted that first day when my grandfather motioned to the bird-seller and began to point at sparrows and the merchant reached into the cage and caught one bird after another and he put them all into a cardboard box. My grandfather bought twelve birds and they did not fly as they sat in the box. "Why aren't they flying?" I asked.

"Their wings are clipped," my grandfather said.

This was all right with me. They clearly weren't in any pain and they could still hop and they would never fly away from me. Wouldn't even need a cage for my vain little friends.

I'm sure that my grandfather knew what I was thinking. But he said nothing. When we got home, he gave me the box and told me to take the birds to show my mother. I found her on the back stoop slicing vegetables. I showed her the box and she said that grandfather was wonderful. She set the box down and told me to stay with her, I could help her. I crouched beside her and waited and I could hear the chattering of the sparrows from the box.

We had always kept chickens, ducks and geese. Some of them were pecking around near us even as I crouched there with my mother. I knew that we ate those animals, but for some reason Ham Nghi seemed like a different place altogether and the sparrows could only be for song and friendship. But finally my mother finished cutting the vegetables and she reached into the box and drew out a sparrow, its feet dangling from the bottom of her fist and its head poking out of the top. I looked at its face and I knew it was a girl and my mother said, "This is the way it's done," and she fisted her other hand around the sparrow's head and she twisted.

I don't remember how long it took me to get used to this, but I would always drift away when my grandfather went to the sparrow cages on Ham Nghi. I did not like his face when he bought them. It seemed the same as when he cooed at the doves or sang with the canaries. But I must have decided that it was all part of growing up, of becoming a woman like my mother, for it was she who killed them, after all. And she taught me to do this thing and I wanted be just like her and I twisted the necks of the sparrows and I plucked their feathers and we roasted them and ate them and my grandfather would take a deep breath after the meal and his eyes would close in pleasure.

There were parrots, too, on Ham Nghi. They all looked very much like Mr. Green. They were the color of breadfruit leaves with a little yellow on the throat. My grandfather chose one bird each time and cocked his head at it, copying the angle of the bird's head, and my grandfather said, "Hello," or "What's your name?"-things he never said to Mr. Green. The parrots on Ham Nghi did not talk to my grandfather, though once one of them made a sound like the horns of the little cream and blue taxis that rushed past in the streets. But they never spoke any words, and my grandfather took care to explain to me that these parrots were too recently captured to have learned anything. He said that they were probably not as smart as Mr. Green either, but once day they would speak. Once after explaining this, he leaned near me and motioned to a parrot that was digging for mites under his wing and said, "That bird will still be alive and speaking to someone when you have grown to be an old woman and have died and are buried in the ground."

I am forty-one years old now. I go each day to the garden on the bank of the bayou that runs through this place they call Versailles. It is part of New Orleans, but it is far from the center of the

town and it is full of Vietnamese who once came from the North. My grandfather never saw the United States. I don't know what he would think. But I come to this garden each day and I crouch in the rich earth and I wear my straw hat and my black pantaloons and I grow lettuce and collards and turnip greens and mint, and my feet, which were once quite beautiful, grow coarse. My family likes the things I bring to the table.

Sometimes Mr. Green comes with me to this garden. He rides on my shoulder and he stays there for a long time, often imitating the cardinals, the sharp ricochet sound they make. Then finally Mr. Green climbs down my arm and drops to the ground and he waddles about in the garden, and when he starts to bite off the stalk of a plant, I cry, "Not possible" to him and he looks at me like he is angry, like I've dared to use his own words, his and his first master's against him. I always bring twigs with me and I throw him one to chew on so that neither of us has to back down. I have always tried to preserve his dignity. He is at least fifty years older than me. My grandfather was eighteen when he himself caught Mr. Green on a trip to the highlands with his father.

So Mr. Green is quite old and old people sometimes lose their understanding of the things around them. It is not strange, then, that a few weeks ago Mr. Green began to pluck his feathers out. I went to the veterinarian when it became clear what was happening. A great bare spot had appeared on Mr. Green's chest and I had been finding his feathers at the foot of his perch, so I watched him one afternoon through the kitchen window. He sat there on his perch beside the door of the back porch and he pulled twelve feathers from his chest, one at a time, and felt each with his tongue and then dropped it to the floor. I came out onto the porch and he squawked at me, as if he was doing something private and I should have known better than to intrude. I sat down on the porch and he stopped.

I took Mr. Green to the veterinarian and he said that when parrots do this, it may be because they lack a certain vitamin or mineral. But more often the reason is that the bird is bored. I tried to convince myself that this is what it meant when Mr. Green stopped plucking his feathers as soon as I appeared on the porch. Keep him busy, the doctor said. So I got Mr. Green a new climbing tree with lots of fresh bark to peel and I spent more time with him. I took him to the garden even when he didn't ask to go and I brought my sewing and even some of my cooking—the preparation of the foods—out onto the porch, and while I did these household things, I talked to him, it was just idle chatter but there were plenty of words, and often Mr. Green looked at me sharply as I spoke and I could hear how I sounded, chattering away like a blackbird.

But I felt driven to do something for him. He was old and he was sick and I felt I had to do something. My grandfather took six months to die and he lay in a bed on the top floor of our house and Mr. Green was always on a perch beside him. I remember a wind chime at the window. It was made of brass and I've never had a wind chime in my home because when I hear one, another sound always comes with it, the deep rattling cough of my grandfather. I would visit him in his room with my mother and once he called me back as we were about to leave. I came to him and my mother had gone on out the door and I could hear her talking rapidly with my grandmother. My grandfather motioned me to come very near and he twisted his body in the bed. His face crumpled in pain as he did it, but he forced himself because he wanted to tell me a secret. I leaned close to him. "Do you hear them talking?" he said. He nodded toward the door and he obviously meant my mother and grandmother.

"Yes," I said.

He frowned. "How foolish they sound. Chattering and yammering. All the women sound like that. You don't want to grow up sounding like all these foolish women, do you?"

I did not know how to answer his question. I wanted very much to be like my mother, and when my grandfather said this, I felt the recoiling begin inside me and the tears begin to rise. But my mother called my name at that moment and I did not have to find an answer to my grandfather's question. I turned my back on him and ran across the room without saying a word. As I got to the door, however, Mr. Green cried, "What then?" and it sounded as if he had actually finished my grandfather's thought. You will grow up to be a woman --what then?

And maybe he did finish the thought. Parrots are very smart. Mr. Green in particular. And he knows more than just my grandfather's words. The Buddhists believe in the transmigration of souls, though I suppose it's impossible to transmigrate into some creature that's already alive. But after a few days of angry looks from Mr. Green when I filled the porch with talk that was intended to save his life, he began to cry, "Not possible" over and over until I stopped speaking. Perhaps a male voice would have been acceptable to him, but mine was not, and then Mr. Green began to pluck himself once more, even with me sitting there in the room. I went to him when he began to do this and I said, "Not possible," but he ignored me. He did not even raise his head to look at me but tore away at his feather, each one making a faint popping sound as it came out. Then the next day he began to cough.

I know the cough well. But I took Mr. Green to the veterinarian and he told me what I expected, that the cough was not the bird's. This was a sound he was imitating. "Did someone in your household recently have a cold or the flu?" the doctor said.

"It is my grandfather," I said.

One the last visit to my grandfather's room he began to cough. My mother went to him and he waved her away. She backed off and I came forward, wanting to help him. He was sitting up now and hunched over and the cough rattled deep inside his chest and then there was a sudden silence and I drew nearer, thinking that my step forward had actually helped, but my grandfather lifted his face and his eyes were very sad, and I know he was disappointed. My brothers were not yet born and I held my breath so that this silence would go on, but the sound raked up from his chest and filled the room again.

This morning I went to the back porch and Mr. Green was pulling out a feather and he did not acknowledge me, even to taunt me by calling me "sir." He dropped the feather and began to pluck another from beneath his left wing. His chest was naked now and the skin looked as slack as my grandfather's throat. I stood before him and I offered my arm for him to come and sit on my shoulder. Yesterday he had said, "Not possible," but today he said nothing. He dropped a feather and leaned over and bit me hard on my arm. I bled. But I did not move my arm and he looked at me. His eyes were steady in their sadness, fully dilated, as if he was considering all of this. I pushed my arm to him again and he knew that he had no choice, so he climbed on, but he did not go to my shoulder.

I held my arm aloft and carried Mr. Green outside. The sun had still not burned the fog off the bayou and I went straight into the garden. My feet were bare, like a child's and the earth was soft and wet and I crouched there and I quickly reached to Mr. Green and grasped him at his chest, lifted him and caught him with my other hand before he could struggle. His wings were pinned and he was bigger in my hand than I had ever imagined. But a Vietnamese woman is experienced in these things and Mr. Green did not have a chance even to make a sound as I laid him on his side, pinned him with my knee, slid my hands up and wrung his neck.

I pray for the soul of my grandfather. I do not bear him any anger. Sometimes I go to Mass during the week. Versailles has a Catholic Church just for the Vietnamese and the Mass is celebrated in our language. I sit near the back and I look at the section where all the old women go. They take the Eucharist every day of their lives and they sit together wearing their traditional dresses and with their hair in scarves rolled up on their heads and I wonder if that is where I will finally end up, in the old women's section at Mass each day. No one in my church will likely live as long as a parrot. But our savior lived only thirty-three years, so maybe it's not important. There were women around Jesus when He died, the two Marys. They couldn't do anything for Him. But neither could the men, who had all run away.