

Bobby Bo Has Gone to God

BY JACK COULEHAN, MD

Bobby Bo has gone to God!" The bird's squawk was clear the second time around.

"God bless Bobby Bo," said Grace O'Leary to the parakeet perched on a small plastic ladder. She had explained to me that Sean's talons were sore this morning, so he couldn't stretch them sufficiently to perch on her finger.

"Bobby Bo has gone to God!" replied the parakeet.

Her sister Catherine touched my hand. "You see the way Sean keeps us company. I don't know what we'd do without him. He's 12 years old, you

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know. And he loved Bo so much. Yes, he did. Sean misses Bo as much as we do."

Reclining in a nest of tissues and photographs, her left leg propped on an ottoman, Catherine wore a pleated blue housecoat and a frizzy halo of red hair. She had an unwrinkled, almost shiny face. I sat on a stool facing her, while Grace and the parakeet loomed above us. Grace was a few years younger than Catherine, but her hair was thinner, her face considerably more worn. Once toward the end of Bo's illness, the "O'Leary girls"—as they called themselves—had invited me for a lunch of

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hot dogs and cheese in their small kitchen. Catherine had spent the hour explaining the photographs taped to the side of their refrigerator and the O'Leary Theory of Looks. Since Grace had spent her life "out in the world," working first as a secretary, then as a telephone operator, to support the two of them—and their mother, too, until 1974 when she died a beautiful Christian death, God rest her soul—Grace had aged much more than Catherine, who stayed home and kept house for the two of them.

This time I was visiting the O'Leary girls on a bleak morning in January, a week or so after Catherine had slipped on the ice as she was going to get the mail. Their neighbors, of course, insisted on calling 911. The girls protested all the hoopla, but eventually they agreed to go to the emergency room, not wanting to disappoint the earnest young paramedics. The upshot was a bad sprain of the ankle and a number of ugly bruises.

Their living room was perfect in its own way. Green plush furniture, white walls, and deep carpeting. Spotless. Except for the mantel where Sean lived. Every morning one of the girls opened his cage—"the first one up, whoever that is!"—and he fluttered out, but Sean mostly confined himself to sitting with his plastic toys on the mantel. He spent hours looking at himself in the mirror, periodically twitching his feathers.

"Silly bird, he thinks he's looking at another Sean!"

I had gotten to know the O'Leary girls during Bobby Bo Kenney's last illness. One or both of them would always come with him to my office to help explain how Bo was feeling, or to ask me why he wasn't getting any better. Bo was pretty quiet when the girls were around, but he'd open up in the examining room. Sometimes he'd tell me the funniest stories about his youth in County Galway, stories that usually had a lot to do with drink, a demon from which Grace, with the grace of God, had saved him. He'd also apologize for the girls' talking too much about his illness. "You know, it's in their blood," he'd say. "They can't help loving the likes of me, nor I them."

Grace and Bo had been engaged to be married for almost 30 years. They met when she was teaching Sunday school at St. Wendlan's Church and he was the rakish janitor, just over from the Old Sod. Bo was always the perfect gentleman. He brought Grace flowers, took her to family reunions, and opened her car door for her. Since the O'Leary sisters were inseparable, Bo often brought a bouquet for Catherine as well, and took her along. And then, of course, their mother. When Bo and Grace were first courting, Mother O'Leary would also, soon as not, preside over their Sunday excursions. He must have been a handsome, strapping man in

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those days, but by the time Bo started seeing me, his flesh was wasting away, a sod fire smoldering in his belly.

Shortly after Bo developed pancreatic cancer, Grace finally set the wedding date. She wanted it done right—white dress, bridesmaids, all the frills—so there wasn't to be a rush. Grace had recently retired from her job with the telephone company, giving them plenty of free time to plan. One day Catherine made a fuss in the office over bringing me my invitation, but when Bo got me alone in the examining room, he asked if I thought he would make it to the wedding day. A course of chemotherapy had made him very ill and we agreed their would be no benefit in proceeding further. His symptoms were well controlled on a cocktail of narcotic pain relievers and medication for his nausea. The only problem was, he couldn't eat. That was Bo's biggest burden because he so much loved his food.

I told him that I didn't know how long he'd live, but wondered if it might not be wise to advance the wedding date. Perhaps they could have a small ceremony in the parish house. "Ah," he said. "But I hate to disappoint the girls."

A couple of weeks later they rushed Bo to the hospital for shortness of breath. Fever. Chills. Oxygen. Grace and Catherine arrived, and when I explained the situation, Grace called the parish priest. Three hours later they were married in Bo's hospital room, she wearing street clothes and he a hospital gown, with as many of the staff in attendance as could squeeze themselves around the bed.

I hadn't seen the girls for over a year after Bo's funeral, until they called about the ankle. It was a week now and Catherine wasn't any better, her ankle was swollen like a melon. Would I come?

Squaaak! "Bobby Bo has gone to God!"

"Your ankle's coming down nicely," I told Catherine. "The two of you are doing a good job. Just keep it up, keep the weight off."

Catherine moved a little in her chair and smiled. Sean flapped across to the mantel.

"Oh, Sean! He's such a silly bird," said Grace, putting down the plastic ladder. "Can you stay for some tea, Doctor?"

I begged off, considering the time and last night's layer of ice on the road.

"Give me a call in a couple of days."

"When I'm on my feet," Catherine said. "I'll bake you muffins. We'll have tea and muffins."

"That's right," Grace pouted. "I'm no cook. All we have now is store-bought. But you're welcome to one for the road."

"No thanks," I said and put on my coat.

Squaaak!

"Sean is a pretty boy. Pretty boy. Pretty boy." □