



Source: Hassan M. Fattah and Souad Mekhennet, 'Bulldog investigator in Hariri killing', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 17/09/05.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [death](#), [storytelling](#), [animals](#)

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It's 4.00 a.m. Josh can't sleep again. Nor can we for that matter. Ever since the crash. He cries out every time he wakes. His friend Tom was killed on holiday in the Pyrenees. An articulated lorry pulled out without looking and that was that.

An old and proud merchant had a beautiful young wife, forty years his junior, whom he guarded so jealously that he could scarcely let her out of his sight. One day, having to travel abroad on urgent business, he came to a place where all sorts of birds were sold, and there he bought a parrot, which not only spoke very well, but could also give a good account of everything that was done before it.

The car was a right-off. His parents are alright, but Tom was crushed to death against the crash barrier. He was unrecognisable, they say. Josh says it isn't fair. Tom wasn't ready to die. Be quiet, I say, let me tell you a story.

The merchant took the parrot, in a cage, to his house, and prayed his wife to keep it in the bedchamber, under the window. He told her to take care of it during his absence, and above all never to cover up its cage, and then departed on his travels.

Unless I read to him he can't sleep and calls out all night long. If I read to him, when I get it right, as long as the story isn't too frightening, or too exciting, though it needs to be exciting enough to keep his attention, he'll drop off, sooner or later. I started reading to him from Grimm's Fairy Tales, but many of the stories are too scary. Then, to mix things up a bit, I hit upon the idea of sometimes telling him stories of my own devising.

At his return the merchant took care to ask the parrot what had passed in his absence, and the bird told him things that gave him occasion to upbraid his wife.

To get me going I often take a phrase I've heard during the day, something from the news say, a phrase that leaps out from a piece on 9/11, the latest suicide bombing, the disaster in New Orleans. 'Ruined and desperate', 'If nobody came', '20,000 bodybags'. Then I play with it a little, taking it out of context and putting it somewhere else, building out of it a new world, one where people can live together in peace. And get a good night's sleep.

Upon this, the wife bethought herself of how she might revenge herself on the parrot, which she did as follows.

When her husband next left on a journey, she commanded a slave, in the night time, to turn a hand mill under the parrot's cage; she ordered another to throw water over the cage; and a third to take a mirror, and turn it to the right and to the left before the parrot, so as the reflections of the candle might shine in its face. Then she slipped out.

Other nights, if I'm not inspired, like tonight, I fall back on the canon. *The Arabian Nights* is good. There's plenty of scary stuff here, for sure, so you have to choose carefully, and sometimes if you make a bad choice you have to edit a bit, even freely improvise from time to time. Ali Baba is a good bet, Aladdin too, and Sindbad, of course, perhaps my favourite, since his journeys, whatever their perils, always seem to work out right. Islands that turn out to be whales, giant man-eating birds, getting buried alive—like Batman, you can always rely on Sindbad to get himself out of a tight scrape.

Next night the husband returned, and examined the parrot again about what had taken place during his absence. The bird answered, Good master, the lightning, thunder, and rain, did so disturb me all night, that I cannot tell how much I suffered by it.

This summer is one we'll always remember as the summer Tom died. We have tried going out for the day, even gone to the beach once, but it's no good. We can't just carry on as normal. Tom's death is part of our lives wherever we go, part of the air we breathe, part of the picture, and to carry on regardless seems indecent. All our confidence in summer broke down when Tom was killed. We yearn to turn the clocks back but to no purpose.

The husband, who knew that that there had been neither thunder, nor lightning, nor rain that night, fancied that the parrot, not having told him the truth in this, might also have lied to him in the other. Upon which he took it out of its cage, and threw it with such force from the window, that it...

There, he's off again. Hit the light, and back to bed to get a bit more sleep myself. Night Josh.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Philip Terry.*