

The Complete Companion

by Linda Leatherbarrow

Roland Sims, who has died aged sixty-nine, was a familiar figure in —

Roland presses BACKSPACE and types again.

*Roland Sims, who has died aged sixty-nine, was well known and respected
in newspaper —*

Nowadays Roland works entirely from home. That is, he's no longer employed but carries on anyway. Behind permanently closed Venetian blinds, he searches the Internet for those about to die. It's gratifying how easily a dull life can be made enviable; how easily an enviable life can be made dull. Other people's lives are a doddle; his own, well, let's just say the beginning is especially hard, key areas of information being missing.

*Roland Sims who has died aged sixty-nine, was well known and respected
in the offices of many of our national broadsheets —*

Shivering, he abandons his computer, drags himself over to the window and lifts a slat in the blind. Possible phrases keep on suggesting themselves. *He lurked elegantly and discretely in the shadow of royalty. Maybe not. His mastery of diplomacy was never called into question.* Better. Stock phrases, but useful. The street is a whirl of needle rain but, otherwise, everything is as it always is: overgrown privet, windblown plastic, tortured skeletal trees. Everything as it always is. Everything, that is, but the large bedraggled parrot looking up at him from a leaf-free branch.

Born above a pet shop in Stockwell, an only child, Sims never knew —

Deep breath, he tells himself, calm down. Blue-rumped? Great-billed? On the crown of its head is a distinctive ruffle of lilac grey. *Amazona autumnalis lilacina*. From Ecuador. Just like the illustration in his mother's book; such beautiful coloured plates, not that he's looked at them in years. He's not interested in parrots now, or any other kind of bird for that matter. Why should he be? Only it's as if the deluge outside, beating against the glass, is beating inside his skull. There is a stir of wings, a chorus of scratchy voices: the mynah bird is back on top of the till; the canaries are in their cages.

Born above a pet shop in Stockwell, Sims was an only child whose father's identity was never — The right ingredients in the wrong order. Only an amateur starts with the mundane. *An autodidact, summarizing the lives of the famous and infamous for posthumous re-appraisal, Sims was born above a pet shop in Stockwell, an only child —* He has his beginning. Almost. A shuffle, a tweak, and it will do, more than do. It's brilliant. Tears prickle his eyes and he's suddenly afraid. At any moment the parrot could fly away and be lost.

The wind takes him by surprise, rampaging through what's left of his hair, prizing it off his scalp and throwing it sideways. Then the parrot turns and looks at him and Roland plunges across the pavement. He stands under the tree, water soaking through the worn soles of his slippers, while the parrot shuffles along the branch towards him. 'That's it. You can do it,' he mutters. Let it be hand-reared so it won't spook. Let there be no screaming kids, slamming doors, barking dogs, or dustbin lorries.

Lifting a scaly claw, the parrot stretches it out, lowers it onto Roland's cupped hands. It places its other claw next to the first then swings its head forward, dips its beak, rubs its lilac crown against Roland's cheek. 'You poor old thing,' says Roland. He's got it now, holds it tight. The bird chirrup in his ear, then coughs, a deep stagy rasp. Roland waits for it to speak. It blinks. Blinks again. Perhaps he should take it to the police station. Good idea. As if they've got time. Or the inclination. It escaped because it was unhappy. That much is obvious. No collar. No name tag.

Roland always enjoyed his own name, sitting up straight at school when the teacher called the register, the double sibilant of his surname snaking him into the future, the gentle thump of his first name pegging him safely to the present. *Was held in deep affection by all who knew him* —

It's cold in the house, but at least it's dry. Carrying the parrot, he nudges the sitting room door shut with his left foot, walks towards the sofa, then the parrot gives a screech, flings itself forward and he's taken off guard. Wet feathers sweep across his face. He stumbles back. The parrot flaps dementedly round the room. Roland puts his arms over his head. 'Christ, my shepherdess!' He throws himself towards the mantelpiece — a goal keeper fending off a penalty. The china statue teeters on the edge, but it's a dead African violet that crashes to the floor, the dry root ball skidding under the table. The bird spirals towards the ceiling, lands on the cornice, then scrabbles along the dusty moulding.

'You dirty bugger!' it shouts. 'Blow your nose.'

A shower of dead flies and chipped-off plaster falls to the carpet. Maybe he could teach it something new. Amazons are the best mimics. You can teach an Amazon anything: the alphabet backwards; a train going through a tunnel. Maybe he should put on the heating. Usually he sits out the cold in layers of wool, but the bird is soaked; it could catch a chill, it could die. It's probably starving and all he has in the house are five packets of frozen chicken tikka.

'Won't be long,' he tells it.

Normally he goes out on Monday and today is Thursday. He can't remember when he last went out twice in one week. He's like a leaf in the rain, blown along, sloshing through puddle after puddle, still in his slippers but, by the time he reaches the end of the street, he's singing. Out of tune, tone deaf, only who cares? He runs on past the market stalls and the traders gearing up for Christmas. Everything has a red bow or a tinsel streamer. The splendid concision of the old Christmas, that's what he prefers; no leaking into the weeks before or the weeks that follow.

And now his mother is coming into the top room carrying a lighted taper. She lights the candles on the tree — red striped candles like miniature barber's poles — then turns off the main light and they eat a slice of cake and open their presents, one for him, one for her. The candles burn for an hour then drown in pools of molten wax and that's Christmas, enough magic in one afternoon to last a whole year, then it's business as usual; downstairs to feed the animals and muck out the cages.

And that reminds him. He runs on, right to the very last stall. Studded collars, combs, squeaky rubber steaks, Formula 1 racing cars for hamsters, treasure chests, wind-up divers, cuttle-bone, bells. Food? Yes they do have food.

Returning home with a spray of millet and a pomegranate, he finds his front door wide open. How long has he been gone? Five minutes, that's all. How could he have been so stupid? He smooths down his dripping hair, hums his tune again, (if there is someone inside, he wants them to hear him coming, wants them to exit, fast, by the back door) then enters the house. No sign of anyone, no sign of the parrot. The tune dies in his throat. He kicks off his wet slippers then lays out the food on the sitting room table — parrots can't resist pomegranate — looks under the table, behind the sofa.

There was a bird, he didn't imagine one. And there's the proof, a dollop of bird lime clinging to the top of his shepherdess like a white mop cap. If anything it improves her, an impulse buy he can only explain by imagining she's the sort of thing he might have given his mother in different circumstances. *Roland Sims left his collection of early Etruscan sculptures to the nation* — Behind him, there's a sudden noise. His heart lurches against his ribs. This is what happens to old codgers like him, idiots who leave their doors open. Bracing himself, he turns his head. *The distinguished obituarist met his death at the hands of an unknown assailant, last night in a humble corner of Clapham* —

But there is nobody there and he collapses onto the sofa. He's exhausted, as if he's been running all afternoon, all morning, all his life for that matter, and again he is back in the shop, the python on the top shelf, the monkey in the window. Nothing could be cosier, except that his mother lies upstairs in bed, sick and won't get up, won't talk, won't eat, won't drink. He serves the customers, looks after the animals for five days before anyone thinks to check. The birds keep him company. He comes down from his mother's silent bedroom, the soles of his lace-ups clunking on the bare boards like spades against frosty earth, goes back into the shop. 'Who's a pretty boy?' 'Wipe your feet!' 'Close the door!' A rain of throaty voices, chirping, reassuring.

You can still die of flu. Every winter people die of flu — thousands of them. His trousers are soaked, his coat is soaked, he ought to take them off, but he stays where he is, looks at the bookcase. Years ago, he gave up on books after discovering that books which were meant to be funny made him cry and books which were meant to be sad made him laugh. The only books he owns are the *The Oxford Dictionary* in twenty volumes, presented to him on his retirement, and the deep green illustrated guide with gold lettering which once belonged to his mother — *Parrots: The Complete Companion*.

He wipes his wet face with his hands. How old they look. *In the final years of his life, Sims took up residence in the tropical rain forest. He is survived by an unknown number of parrots —*

The noise, there it is again: scrabbling, sliding, a crash, a squawk, then the room fills with soot, great swirling clouds of soot. And feathers. In the middle

of the cold hearth is his Amazonian parrot. It puts its blackened head on one side and blinks at him.

‘Bugger off.’

‘How can I?’ frowns Roland, ‘now that I’ve got you to look after?’

He walks over to his computer, sits down, switches on, then types.

Roland Sims, who has died aged 69, was an exceptional obituarist, a man of letters who will be sadly missed. Born above a pet shop in Stockwell, he was an only child who never learned the identity of his father. His mother died when he was six. After a distinguished career, he took up residence in the tropical rain forest, returning to Britain, to set up a foundation for the preservation of endangered parrots. Meeting his death at the hands of an unknown assailant, he bequeathed to the nation a priceless collection of early Etruscan sculpture —

Maybe if he’d left out the pet shop. And his father. And his mother.

Without saving his copy, he exits the program then, for the first time in years, goes over to the window and draws up the blind.

Light inches into the room like a young dancer making her first appearance on stage, slides over the dusty surfaces — the overturned plant, his sodden slippers — spins itself over the hearth and over the parrot. Taking off his wet clothes, he lets them fall to the floor then picks up the parrot. It sits quietly in his arms; its heart beats under its sooty feathers, against his hand. ‘Time you had a bath,’ he says. ‘Time I had a bath.’ Then, still carrying the parrot, he pads up the stairs.

‘Time for tea,’ says the parrot. ‘More tea, Vicar?’