

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF WILD BIRDS

A Ten-Minute Play

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

CHARACTERS

Grandma
Grandson

SETTING

Grandma's apartment in a care facility

*GRANDSON enters wearing a dark suit. He is carrying a book, *The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds*.*

GRANDSON

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds. *(he opens the book and reads)* "When caring for a wild bird, take precautions not to impair its ability to fly. You may safely assist it in its recovery from injury, but do not prolong its dependence beyond what is necessary. Birds that are grounded find their wings weaken and their feathers grow heavy. In caring for wild birds, it is best to do everything you can to rehabilitate them swiftly and send them on their way."

GRANDSON exits. Baby birds are cooing. An elderly GRANDMA enters. She mixes a batter of crop milk in a small bowl. She takes the bowl and, with a great deal of effort, climbs out her window onto a rooftop where there is a small nest of pigeon hatchlings.

GRANDMA

Here I am. Mama's here. Feeding time for babies.

GRANDMA takes an eye dropper from her apron pocket and extracts some crop milk from the bowl. She feeds a dropperful to the cooing hatchlings.

Don't fight now. There's enough for everyone. Here you go. Good boy. Empty your crop. There you go. Alright, now it's your sister's turn. Oh, you're so hungry today.

GRANDSON (O.S.)

Grandma! Grandma? I'm here to do your pills.

No longer wearing his jacket, GRANDSON enters the apartment.

GRANDSON (cont.)

Grandma, are you home?

He looks around for GRANDMA before finding her on the roof.

What are you – Grandma, what are you doing out there on the roof?

GRANDMA

What? I can't hear you! The birds.

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

GRANDSON

Out there – what are you doing?

GRANDMA

Shh! You'll disturb them. Stay inside.

GRANDSON

I don't think it's safe out there. You should come in.

GRANDMA ignores him.

Isn't that against the rules?

GRANDMA ignores him.

I don't see any other residents out on their –

GRANDMA climbs in.

GRANDMA

All that shouting – you're scaring them.

GRANDSON

Who?

GRANDMA

It was feeding time. Listen. You hear them cooing happily now? They're content now that their bellies are full.

GRANDSON

Birds?

GRANDMA

Pigeons. They were born last month – one of those days when it rained so hard – and then their mother abandoned them.

GRANDSON

Is that safe? Pigeons carry germs.

GRANDMA

They're such cute little hatchlings. Do you know that both the male and the female pigeons sit on their eggs? They take turns, you know, so neither of them gets bored. They seemed so devoted to those eggs, I can't imagine why they both left when the hatchlings – well, nevermind, I've got that under control now.

GRANDSON

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

How often do they – I mean, how often are you climbing on the roof?

GRANDMA

Several times a day, I suppose. Whenever they call me.

GRANDSON

It might not be such a good idea to feed them. How will they learn to hunt, or peck, or whatever it is that pigeons do?

GRANDMA

They're afraid to fly. That's why I have to take care of them.

GRANDSON

It's in their nature to fly. They couldn't be afraid.

GRANDMA

Well, they are. I can see it in their eyes.

GRANDSON sorts through pill bottles on the counter.

GRANDSON

Have you been back to the doctor? This prescription is almost up.

GRANDMA

Oh, what do those fellows know? They're nice young men, but they don't know what they're doing.

GRANDSON

You need to take your meds.

GRANDMA

I'm taking them. I'd just rather not spend what time I have left at the clinic. There are so many sick people there.

GRANDSON

You need to go. For your heart.

GRANDMA

If you were married, you wouldn't spend so much time worrying.

GRANDSON

How about I take you to out? I'll call the nurse. Make an early afternoon appointment. We can have lunch first. Make a day out of it.

GRANDMA

I can't be away that long. ... My babies.

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

GRANDSON
Isn't it slippery out there?

GRANDMA
Not that I've noticed.

GRANDSON
Maybe we could get maintenance to –

GRANDMA
Don't be silly – those coarse hands on those fragile creatures?

GRANDSON
You can't hand-feed them forever. They've got to learn to fend for themselves.

GRANDMA
I know, I know. But I told you, they're not ready.

GRANDSON
How do you know when they'll be ready?

GRANDMA
How do any of us know? Instinct, I suppose.

GRANDSON
Are you ready? Remember – I said I'd drive you to get your hair done.

GRANDMA
I'd rather not go today.

GRANDSON
But Rose is waiting for you.

GRANDMA
Rose's retired. There's a new girl.

GRANDSON
Don't you like her?

GRANDMA
I liked the way Rose did it.

GRANDSON
You could try someplace else.

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

GRANDMA

I don't know.

GRANDSON

Is there something else you'd rather do? I've got a little more time. Anything need fixing? I could make you a sandwich.

GRANDMA

Could you go to the library? I'd like a book about birds.

GRANDSON

Why don't you come? Pick one yourself.

GRANDMA

You're a smart boy. You'll find the right one.

GRANDSON

I could, I guess. If you would like that.

GRANDMA

Here, let me give you my library card. You can check it out under my name.

GRANDSON

Don't worry about it, Grandma. I've got a card.

GRANDMA

I insist. Here, here it is. Take it. That way, if I'm late to return it, you won't be burdened with a fine.

GRANDSON

Alright. Is there anything else you need while I'm out?

GRANDMA

I'm fine.

GRANDSON

OK, I'll see you tomorrow. It's going to be warm. Maybe we'll take a little walk.

GRANDMA

That would be nice.

GRANDSON exits. GRANDMA peeks on her birds, who are cooing.

GRANDMA

Oh, you're awake.

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

GRANDMA takes the bowl and the eye dropper and, with effort, climbs out her window onto a rooftop. She dips the eyedropper into the bowl and extracts some crop milk. She tries to feed the birds.

GRANDMA (cont.)

Not hungry? Well, maybe later. Did you hear my grandson? He speaks rather loudly, don't you think? I'm sure you didn't see, but he's a nice-looking man. Stops by every day – can you imagine? To tell you the truth, it's a bit much, but what am I going to do? He needs to feel needed. I tried to fix him up with the granddaughter of my upstairs neighbor but he wasn't interested. Maybe he's gay. But what am I telling you – your father sat on your nest!

So, here we are – you at the start of your life, me at the end of mine. I remember what it felt like to be your age, your whole life ahead of you. I wasn't afraid of heights like you are. Oh, no, it was all my mother could do to keep me on the ground. I was a tree-climber. Especially in summer when the branches were heavy with leaves and I could ascend unnoticed. With six brothers and sisters, it was about the only place I could be alone. The best climbing trees were on the far side of town by the railroad. Their bark was smooth and their limbs were wide and grew parallel to the ground so I could sit for hours and not get wedged in. I'd take an apple or an orange and sometimes a thermos of milk in my bag. And pencil and paper, or a book, and a pocket knife that I'd use to mark my favorite spots. Mostly, though, I'd just sit and listen for the train and imagine I was in one and where I'd be going.

You shouldn't be afraid. Come here. There you go.

She places her arm alongside the nest and helps the baby birds climb on.

Come on little guy, follow your sister. You can do it. It's alright. I can hold all of you. Just pretend my arm is a big, strong tree branch. I'll help you. Good. Good. You're all on now. Alright, don't be afraid. I'm just going to stand up and walk a little ways down here. I'll go slowly. You won't fall. It's a beautiful sunny day. Don't you want to see what's out there?

She holds up her arms as if ready to fly.

Look. See – isn't it beautiful? What a view. See the little people down there, the cars. Oh, and look up. That's a plane taking people on vacation to Hawaii. You can fly to Hawaii. You can go anywhere you want. You know how to fly. All you have to do is stop being afraid.

The birds fly away. She remains, with her arms open.

Ahh. You did it. I knew you could. You're free now.

The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds

She stretches out both of her arms as if she too is going to take off. She closes her eyes, and we can see her imagine that she is in the sky. Lights fade on GRANDMA. GRANDSON enters wearing a dark suit. He is holding a book.

GRANDSON

When the office called and told me my grandmother had died, I was holding this book. The Care and Feeding of Wild Birds. And it made me wonder if perhaps we all had misunderstood. Maybe Grandma hadn't fallen. Maybe she had been sufficiently rehabilitated and her time had come to fly. I wish I knew. But when I look out her apartment window, there is only emptiness, the singing of birds, and the words. "When caring for a wild bird, take precautions not to impair its ability to fly...."

Lights fade to blackout as birds coo melodically.

END