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A Very Cultured Bird

Every day Fudge brought home paintings from his kindergarten class. Mom hung them on the wall in the kitchen. One night she said, "Fudgie, you're doing so well in school, I'm going to get you a special treat. What would you like?"

"A bird," Fudge said, as if he'd been thinking about it for years.

"A bird?" Mom repeated.

"Yes. My very own bird."

"A bird," Dad said, scratching his new beard.

"I was thinking more in terms of a yo-yo," Mom said.

"I have a yo-yo," Fudge told her. "But I don't have a bird."

"I don't see why we can't get Fudge a bird," Dad said. "It might be nice for him to have his own pet."

"But, Warren," Mom said. "Do you really think he's ready for his own pet?"

"Yes," Dad said. "I do."

"Well . . ." Mom said, and I could see her thinking it over, "if it's all right with Daddy, then it's all right with me."

"And he can sleep in my room, right?" Fudge asked.

"Yes," Dad said.

"On my bed?"

"No," Dad said. "Birds sleep in cages, not beds."

"But I would be very careful," Fudge said. "I would keep him under the covers with me."

"Birds can't sleep in beds," Mom said.

"Why not?" Fudge asked.

"Because they like to sleep standing up," Mom said.

"They do?" Fudge asked.

"Yes."

"I think I'll try that tonight," Fudge said.

"People lie down to go to sleep," Dad explained. "Birds stand up. That's just one difference between people and birds."

"Another is that birds can fly . . . right?" Fudge asked.

"That's right," Dad said.

"Someday I might be able to fly . . . just like a bird!"

"Don't count on it," I said.

But he wasn't listening. He was dancing around Tootsie's high chair singing, "My very own bird, bird, bird . . ."

"Da ba," Tootsie said, tossing her rattle to the floor. That's her latest game. She throws down her toys, then screams until one of us picks them up for her. As soon as she has them back, she throws them down again. Some game!

Also, she's teething, so her gums are sore, so she screams a lot. She has this plastic teething ring that we keep in the freezer for her. She likes to bite on it. The cold numbs her gums.

The truth is, she'll bite on anything she can get into her mouth, including her toes. I keep telling my mother that it's not a good idea to let Tootsie grow up with her feet in her mouth. But Mom says it's just a phase and that she'll get over it. She even took out the family photo album to show me a picture of myself when I was about Tootsie's age. I had my toes in my mouth, too.

I've asked Mom to get rid of that picture, along with the one of me naked, holding a broom. If *that*

one ever got out, I'd never hear the end of it.

Fudge asked Mom if he could bring Tootsie to school for Show and Tell. He wanted to repeat his lecture on *How Babies Are Made* for his kindergarten class. Mom phoned Ms. Ziff, who thought it was a wonderful idea, but before they went ahead with it, Ms. Ziff had to check it out with Mr. Green. Mr. Green said *absolutely not*, so that was the end of that. Fudge was disappointed, but Mom and Dad convinced him that once he got his bird, he'd have something even more exciting for Show and Tell.

Grandma came to visit for a few days.

"I'm getting a bird," Fudge told her.

"What kind of bird are you going to get?" Grandma asked.

"I don't know. What kind of bird am I going to get?" he asked the rest of us.

We all spoke at once.

"A canary," Mom said.

"A parakeet," Dad said.

"A myna bird," I said.

Fudge looked confused.

Grandma said, "I see you haven't decided yet."

"Myna birds can talk," I said.

"A talking bird?" Fudge asked.

"Yes. You can teach a myna bird to say anything," I added.

"Anything?" Fudge asked, and I could tell what he was thinking.

"Well, almost anything," I told him.

"A talking bird," Fudge said, smiling. "Fudgie's going to get a talking bird."

"Now, wait a minute," Dad said. "We haven't decided on what kind of bird we're getting. I was thinking in terms of a nice blue parakeet. You can train a parakeet to fly around the room and land on a stick."

"And I was thinking in terms of a pretty yellow canary," Mom said. "Canaries can sing. They make everyone feel happy."

"That's nice," Fudge said. "Mommy can get a canary and Daddy can get a parakeet and Fudgie can get his myna bird."

"We're only getting one bird," Mom told him.

"Oh," Fudge said. "Then I guess Mommy won't get her canary and Daddy won't get his parakeet, because Fudgie's getting his myna bird. Pee-tah says they can talk and he knows everything."

Mom and Dad looked at me.

"Well, how was I supposed to know you wanted a canary?" I asked Mom. "And that you wanted a

parakeet?" I asked Dad. "You never mentioned it before."

"It should be very educational for Fudgie to have a myna bird," Grandma said.

"If I teach him to talk, he might teach me to fly," Fudge said, flapping his arms.

Tootsie hiccuped, then started crying.

"Who wants some home-baked cookies?" Grandma asked as she lifted Tootsie out of her high chair and patted her on the back.

Grandma is very good at changing the subject.

The next afternoon when I got home from school, the car was gone and the house was quiet. I went upstairs and was on my way to my room when I heard something funny coming from Tootsie's room. Her door was opened just a crack and I peeked in. There was Grandma, barefooted, dancing in circles, with Tootsie in her arms. She was singing:

Toot, Toot, Tootsie, good-bye!

Toot, Toot, Tootsie, don't cry.

The choo choo train that takes me,

La da da dee dum doo dah dee dah

oh bah shoo dah,

Kiss me, Tootsie, and then . . .

"Hi, Grandma," I said, opening the door all the way.

"Oh, Peter!" She stopped and her face turned red.

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"Dancing," she said. "Tootsie likes to dance, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

Tootsie grabbed a handful of Grandma's hair and screeched with delight.

"What was that song you were singing?" I asked.

"'Toot, Toot, Tootsie! Good-bye'," Grandma said.

"You mean there really is such a song? You weren't making it up?"

"Certainly not! It was very popular back in . . . let's see . . . oh, I can't remember the year . . . but it was very popular."

Tootsie bounced up and down in Grandma's arms, wanting more. Grandma passed her to me. "Here, you try it now."

"Me?" I said. "You want *me* to dance with Tootsie?"

"Why not?"

"Grandma! I'm in sixth grade. I don't go around dancing with babies in my arms."

"Why not?"

"Well, because . . ."

"Come on," Grandma said. "I'll sing . . . you dance." And she began her song again.

Toot, Toot, Tootsie, good-bye!

Toot, Toot, Tootsie, don't cry. . . .

I twirled around and around with Tootsie in my arms, and Grandma was right, she loved it. She screamed and laughed and threw her head back, and pretty soon I was laughing too, and all three of us were having a fine old time when Fudge appeared at the door and said, "What are you doing, Pee-tah?"

I looked over, and Mom and Dad were standing there too.

"Oh, I uh . . . that is . . . I was . . ."

"Dancing," Grandma said. "Tootsie likes to dance, so we were dancing with her." She found her shoes under Tootsie's crib and stepped into them.

I put Tootsie down in her infant seat and smoothed my hair with my hands, ready to explain that it was Grandma's idea, that I was just going along with her. But it turned out that I didn't need to explain anything. Because nobody seemed to think it was strange that I was dancing with Tootsie or that Grandma was singing her "Toot, Toot, Tootsie! Good-bye" song.

"Guess what?" Fudge said.

"What?" Grandma asked.

"I saw him. . . . I saw my myna bird!"

"Where?" I asked.

"At the pet store," Fudge said. "We're going to bring him home tomorrow. They had to order a cage. He's all black, with yellow legs and a yellow nose."

"Yellow bill," I said.

"Nose, bill . . . who cares?" Fudge said. "And he can talk!"

"What can he say?"

"He can say *hello*, in French."

"In French?" I asked.

"That's right, in French," Mom said. "He's very cultured."

"And I've already named him," Fudge said.

"What did you name him?" Grandma asked.

I expected him to say Pierre or Jacques, since he speaks French.

"Uncle Feather," Fudge said.

"Uncle Feather?" I said.

"Yes, Uncle Feather," Fudge said again. "Isn't that a good name for a bird?"

"It's uh . . . unusual," I said.

"And interesting, right?" Fudge asked.

"Oh, yes . . . definitely interesting," I told him.

"It's a real privilege," Fudge said, "isn't it?"

"No, it's not a privilege," I told him. "It has nothing to do with privilege." I never should have used that word with such a little kid. He still didn't know how to use it. He probably never would.

"So it's not a privilege," Fudge said. "So who cares?" And he began to sing:

*Uncle Feather came to town,
Flying in the blue sky.
Yellow nose and yellow legs
And he belongs to me oh my . . .*

"Come on, Grandma," Fudge said, "dance with me, now." He and Grandma held hands and danced around the room while Fudge sang his latest, to the tune of "Yankee Doodle."

My family and their musical numbers were getting to be too much, so I took off for Alex's house and some peace and quiet.

The next day, Mom, Dad and Fudge went down to the pet store and returned with Uncle Feather, complete with cage, cover, a box of food and a book called *Getting To Know Your Myna Bird*.

"Bonjour . . . bonjour . . ." Uncle Feather said, over and over again.

"That means *hello* in French," Fudge told me, as if I didn't already know.

Dad carried the cage up to Fudge's room, which happened to be next to my room, and all afternoon all I heard was *bonjour . . . bonjour*, in bird-voice. I banged on the wall between my room and Fudge's. "Can't you teach him to say something else?"

"I'm trying . . . I'm trying . . ." Fudge hollered.

"I'm trying . . . I'm trying . . ." Uncle Feather repeated.

Swell, I thought. We just got Fudge out of the habit of repeating everything I said, and now we've got a bird who does the same thing. Why didn't I keep my big mouth shut at the dinner table that night? Why didn't I convince Fudge to listen to Mom and get a canary, or to Dad, and get a parakeet?

The next morning, when I went to have a look at Uncle Feather, he greeted me with, "Bonjour, stupid. . . ."

"Isn't he smart?" Fudge asked. "Doesn't he learn fast?"

"Yeah . . . he's terrific!" I said.

As I left the room, Uncle Feather called out, "Good-bye, stupid . . . good-bye. . . ."

"Good-bye, yourself," I said.

"Yourself . . . yourself . . ." he repeated.

"And he likes to eat worms and insects and plants," Fudge said at breakfast. "So I'll have to go find him some worms."

"Oh, no!" Mom said. "He'll be very happy eating the food we bought for him at the pet store."

"But Mommy . . ." Fudge said. "You wouldn't feed Tootsie just one kind of food, would you?"

"That's different," Mom said. "Tootsie is a baby. Uncle Feather is a bird."

"I know that!" Fudge said. "But Uncle Feather needs worms to be happy. You want him to be happy, don't you?"

"I'm sure he can be happy without worms!" Mom said, pushing her plate aside.

"Let's talk about this later," Dad said. "It's not the best breakfast conversation."

"Worms, worms, worms, worms . . ." Fudge sang.

"That's enough, Fudge!" Dad said, but Mom was already in the bathroom and she didn't come back to the table.

Grandma came to visit the following weekend and was surprised to find that Fudge no longer slept in the hallway outside my parents' bedroom.

"I have to sleep in my own room now," Fudge told her. "Uncle Feather needs me."

"Of course he does," Grandma said, standing in front of Uncle Feather's cage. "And you're a lovely birdie, aren't you?"

"Lovely birdie . . . lovely birdie . . ." Uncle Feather said.

Grandma laughed. "Oh my, and so smart!"

"So smart . . . so smart . . . oh my . . . so smart," Uncle Feather said.

That night, Mom and Dad went out, and Grandma stayed at home with us. We all watched TV together. Tootsie was on Grandma's lap, having her late night bottle.

"So how's kindergarten going?" Grandma asked Fudge.

"I have a nice teacher," he said. "She says I'm as sweet as my name."

"Well, you are, aren't you?" Grandma said.

I snorted.

"Do you think I am?" Fudge asked Grandma.

"I certainly do," Grandma told him.

I snorted again.

"All the time?" Fudge asked.

"Maybe not all the time," Grandma said, "but most of the time."

"Then why do you come here just to play with Tootsie and not me?"

"I come to see all of you," Grandma said, burping Tootsie.

"But you're always holding *her*," Fudge said. "And singing dumb songs to *her*. . . ."

"They're not dumb," I said. "They're from when Grandma was a girl."

"You were a girl?" Fudge asked, trying to get up on Grandma's lap.

"Certainly," Grandma said, shifting Tootsie into her other arm to make room for Fudge.

"You were little . . . like me?"

"Yes," Grandma said. "And I went to school, just like you."

Fudge shoved Tootsie out of the way, so Grandma passed her to me.

"What did you do there?" Fudge asked.

"Oh . . . I sang songs and painted pictures and played games and learned to read."

"You learned to read in kindergarten?"

"Maybe it was first grade," Grandma said, patting Fudge's head. "It was a long time ago. It's hard for me to remember."

"You know what, Grandma?" Fudge said.

"No, what?"

"I'm the middle child now . . . so I need lots of attention."

"Who told you that?" Grandma asked.

"I heard Mommy talking on the phone. It's more important for you to play games with me than with Tootsie. And you should try to remember that."

"What about me?" I asked. "Where do I fit in?"

"You don't need attention," Fudge said. "You're in sixth grade."

I was beginning to get annoyed. "That doesn't mean I don't need attention."

"Everybody needs attention," Grandma said.

"Even you?" Fudge asked.

"Yes, even me," Grandma told him.

"Who gives you attention?" Fudge asked Grandma.

"My family and my friends," Grandma said.

"You should get a bird," Fudge said. "A bird would give you lots of attention. A bird wouldn't care if you were the middle child or not."

"Neither would a dog," I said. "You should get a dog, like Turtle."

As soon as he heard his name, Turtle looked up and barked.

Tootsie opened her eyes and said, "Ga ga goo ga."

"That's right," I told her. "Now go back to sleep."

Grandma went upstairs to tuck Fudge into bed. And I went up to put Tootsie into her crib.

"Good night, sleep tight," Grandma said to Fudge.

"Good night, sleep tight . . . sleep tight, good night," Uncle Feather called.

Grandma dropped the cover over his cage. It's the only way to shut him up. And even then he kept on calling, "Good night, good night . . ." until I kicked the base of his cage.

After we'd had Uncle Feather for two weeks, Fudge was ready to bring him to school for Show and Tell. Ms. Ziff invited the other kindergarten class to come and see him, and I got special permission from Mr. Green to skip half of English and go down to Fudge's room in case of an emergency.

Mrs. Hildebrandt's kindergarten class marched in and sat in a circle on the floor, right behind Fudge's class. Uncle Feather's cage stood in the middle of the circle. When everyone was settled, Fudge pulled the cover off the cage and said, "Presenting . . . Uncle Feather!"

"Ooohhh . . ." all the little kids said.

"What a beautiful bird Farley has," Mrs. Hildebrandt said. "Isn't he a beautiful bird, class?"

"Yes," Mrs. Hildebrandt's class answered, sounding like robots.

"Yes, what?" Mrs. Hildebrandt asked.

"Yes, Farley has a beautiful bird," her class said together.

"He speaks French," Fudge said.

"Does he really?" Mrs. Hildebrandt asked.

"Yes," Fudge told her.

"Well, what a coincidence," Mrs. Hildebrandt said.

"So do I!" She went right up to Uncle Feather's cage, bent way over, and said, "Parlez-vous français?"

Uncle Feather cocked his head, looked straight at her and said, "Bonjour, stupid!"