

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF BABY BIRDS

by ANN WUEHLER

CHARACTERS

CONNIE

SETTING

A living room

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THE CARE AND FEEDING OF BABY BIRDS

[A living room, a little table with a bowl of bread and milk, a syringe, another bigger glass bowl full of cotton batting, a heating pad beneath it. Light shines down directly from above, the only light, rest of stage should be dark.]

[Connie stands by the table. She peers down into the bowl, touches something in bowl with a single finger. She speaks naturally, conversationally.]

CONNIE

The care and feeding of baby birds. It's rather like trying to keep hope alive. That sounds so pretentious, doesn't it, God. Are you there, God? It's me, Connie.

[Looks upward with a smile, then looks at the floor, without losing that smile.]

And you can listen in, too, Satan. Why not. No one ever said the Devil wasn't a good listener.

[Head comes back up.]

You know, you know I had to try and save them. It's foolish and stupid and pointless, rather like everything I've done to this point. Start over, my friends keep saying, pray about your choices, about why you keep coming back to this same place, this same damn place. Sorry, I think there'll be more cussing, so sorry, God. But why you should care so much about our language ... I mean, I would think you would care more about if we're killing old people for fun and profit, or if we slap our dogs or if we laugh at the suffering and pain of others. Maybe you do.

But—here I am, trying to care for baby birds. Blackbirds or robins, I'm not sure, you can't tell without the feathers on. I have a syringe, they seem to be eating and pooping. And I keep them warm. I was at such a bad point yesterday. I was bleeding, I felt like I was bleeding inside, and well, wondering what was the purpose of this life I've had. Silly. It's to care for baby birds.

[Pause.]

Oh I promise I won't get all maudlin. I love that word. Maudlin! I've had enough of maudlin. I promise to be all strong and heroic. After all, I've decided not to kill myself. I have babies to look after. At least ...

[Faces front.]

At least until they die. I am pinning my life on fragile hearts in transparent bodies. One has already died, it died last night, was just a cold little curled up thing as the other two peeped for their food.

[Pause.]

I've been saying, for a while now, if this happens I won't cut my wrists. If that happens, I won't swallow a gallon of Tylenol. I'm trying to declare bankruptcy. I can't afford it— isn't it ... IRONIC? Can there be a higher, more cut and clearer IRONY than that? I can't afford my own bankruptcy. Eleven hundred dollars. And it's ... it's so embarrassing. I just want this all to be over, to rest, to have some sort of numbness. To float. And float.

I'm out of resilience. Plum out. Nada resilience. I sit down to rewrite my resume to apply for jobs, jobs that already have a thousand applicants apiece, and wonder, why am I doing this again? Why am I bothering? Maybe I should have become a nurse, they always need nurses, they don't need failed poets. Nobody ever needs a poet. I should probably write this all down in some masturbatory rhyming couplet. They can read it at my funeral. I'll be cremated, it's cheaper than a real burial. My mother was cremated because it was cheaper. She would have been fine with the cremation, I'm not being nasty. Poor people have to be practical about costs above all else, cause a single penny can fuck you three ways of sideways nowadays. See? I told you there'd be more cussing. But uh ... what's holding me back—is this picture of my dad finding me. But not so much anymore. Not so much since yesterday.

[Strokes baby birds with a finger.]

Oh sure, the dying, it would be easy. It's always pictured so easy in movies and on TV. But. Real life. They don't show the clean up, the what to wear to the funeral decisions, the coffin versus burning the remains. And ... and finding the body itself. It would be my dad or my brother who found me. And ... I don't want that. So maybe I should go for a long drive, a one way drive, maybe to Nevada where they have millions of hotels. And just check in, not check out, like in those roach motel commercials. If these two remaining birds die. Maybe I should consider a road trip.

[To God.]

But life is precious, right?

[To Satan.]

But we know better, huh, Big Boy? And why are you a guy, Satan? Why not a woman? Women are very rebellious and have to be trained like vicious Dobermans to behave. I could see a woman totally starting a fight with the Boss Up There—getting all cranky and snotty and riling up the other angels. Okay, that's probably why I don't have a husband and three snot-smearred rugrats, huh? I'm pretty bitchy myself. Obedience to God—a big zero. I haven't been to Church in ... what? Years? Not even a Christmas service. I love singing the carols. Those old beautiful carols. I wonder if that's what birds sing all day long, the birds who sing, not the ones who scream and scold, the warblers and ... and uh ... those other birds that sing. I wonder if they sing "happy to be alive and here" carols. Right before the cat kills them.

[Stops. Sighs.]

No. No cat today. No killing. No claws. Just ... birds singing hymns or carols. Happy thoughts! Trying to have some happy thoughts here, be all positive and brave and have that can-do fucking fucking fucking spirit!!!

[Stops again. Blows out air.]

Wow. I'm angry. I'm just so angry.

[Takes up syringe, places it down into bowl as if feeding birds.]

That's it, gulp it down, oh that's a good big poop. Gulp it down, good little bird. What a good little bird. You see, God, I'm trying to work on my karma. I know, that's like a Pagan thing, I think, from India or China, I'm not sure, I've been to school and everything, and don't know that! But—the Golden Rule, right? That's karma, right? Do unto others. I try and try to be a good person, not be mean, work, pay my bills, take care of myself, not spit on children or kick dogs or run over bicyclists, though it's so tempting, right, when they ride right down the middle of the road in their silly, too-tight outfits, I mean, come on, don't you just want to smash them with your car and laugh at them, then back up and run over them again?? Maybe that's just me.

Karma, I was talking about karma. What would my karma be if I took a gallon of Tylenol? Connie, I can hear you saying in your Sean Connery voice, I imagine you, God, have a voice like Sean Connery and that the Devil has a voice like Cary Grant ... don't ask why, that's just what I hear. In my head. "Connie," says God—"it was going to get better the very next day. You were going to get a job interview, you were going to be published in some vastly important New York poet magazine, and you were going to win the lottery, many millions, and be able to pay your bankruptcy lawyer. If you had just waited a day. Only a day."

[Stops feeding birds, puts syringe down.]

But I've been waiting for the good things to happen for years now. I've been patient. I send out resumes, I act nice, I go out of my way for my friends when I can. Is that why I never get anywhere? Cause I wait? Cause I try to be as small as possible, not make any noise? I even write polite poems. About nature and waterfalls. Nothing profound. I'm not profound. At all. I never let myself be. I write pretty, shallow poems to please everyone and they please no one. So I drown in debt, I take jobs that eat my soul, and I ... I, oh let's be honest, it's just us three—I wish I had died at birth. Cause this is far far harder to get up every day and not face things than ... than being a soccer mom with a Down's Syndrome baby. And so I take care of baby birds my dad knocked out of their nest. Yeah. I'm too old to care about this, I should be all grown by now, and be all indifferent to everything but my credit report.

[Smiles, moves away from table.]

I'll never be a mom. Or a wife. I've spent my life in school, working crappy jobs, waiting for the mail, or lately, the emails that don't get sent. Or the emails that say, sorry, we don't want your shallow crap, good luck not being a writer, ever. Don't you wish ... rejection letters were honest? That the editors would just say,

plainly, once and for all—you can't write. Try marine biology. Or dead animal removal, I hear they're always hiring. I would so love to get that rejection letter! I could finally stop wishing, hoping, waiting, dreaming! I could stop all that crap. It would be so nice. I could finally give up and move on, whether it's nursing school or a razor blade. This being in limbo all the time, waiting for dreams to come true ... it's cruel. Believe in your dreams!! "Hang in there, someday it will happen," my friends keep saying. They have houses and lives. They have money in the bank and go on vacations. They have children. A couple even have grandchildren by now. I have ... nothing. I have nothing to show. No awards. No college teaching position, just until my book gets published crappola. I didn't mean to get on this, God. I didn't mean to get all ... maudlin.

[Silence. Sits on floor.]

I'd be homeless right now if my dad hadn't let me come home.

[Silence.]

Birds can make new homes every year. And get new babies every year. What a relief. Everything new every year. The memory of their dead not even a blip in their tiny heads. No memory of that magpie attack that destroyed all but one egg. No memory of that cat that ate that one baby that fell out of the nest and hopped about the lawn so comically ... comically until that neighbor cat came along and killed it while the mother bird squawked and wept and dove at that cat's head. No memory of that at all. I wish I had that sort of memory. Where nothing sticks and nothing makes me so unhappy and angry I want to pound nails through my heart. You get tired of groping in the dark. Unless, of course, you're an owl, but they don't grope in the dark, they see very well. I watch Animal Planet! I watch a lot of TV now. I don't have a job.

[Silence. She gathers herself, gives herself a shake.]

If these birds die. If they die, I'll write a poem. I'll call it "Death of the Birds and the Death of the Bad Poet." Or maybe just "Dead Birds, Dead Broad." Yeah. And when I print it out, I'll glue glitter along the edges. And draw stars on the white spaces to make it look extra special. And hang it on my wall, where I can read it every day to remind myself why I'm in nursing school instead of living in some castle writing a life and times of Lord Byron, sipping tea and eating cucumber sandwiches and hot Cheetos, even a great, fabulous poet like me would still like those hot Cheetos. I mean, damn, thank you, God, for giving that idea to someone, hot Cheetos. They make my bad tooth hurt and I have to take Aleve every time I eat them ... but life is pain and in the end it's all worth it, right? Is that the lesson I take away for today? I honestly want to know. What lesson am I not learning that I have to keep failing over and over ... what lesson is that?

[Quiet. Matter of fact.]

I'm lost here, God. I'm just ... lost. I couldn't let those stupid, ugly, needy ugly babies die, not like that, kicking and peeping on the barn floor, growing cold and starving, abandoned as if they didn't matter. They mattered to their mother. They matter, surely, to you. I think even Satan likes the birds, they do poop all over

everything and piss people off. They wake you up at five and that pisses people off. That must be pleasing to you, Satan, right? The ability of birds to piss off lazy, clean people? But. I'm trying to be funny, to make light of ... of looking down the barrel of a bottle of pills. Of facing I will never be ... anything terrific. That people are making fun of me and my dreams, that people are calling me a failure and worse, that my own father ... to my face, just yesterday ... just yesterday ...

[Clears her throat.]

There are words that clang about in your heart. Like your own father calling you a waste of skin. And he said it under his breath so I almost didn't hear it, but like ... but like he wanted me to hear it. Waste of skin. Waste of time. Waste. And since he's a farmer ... that's a giant sin. Everything has to have a use, a purpose, a function. He lets the dogs, his dogs, kill rabbits and fox babies, he encourages it, cause rabbits and foxes can plug up pipes and damage things, I get it, I totally get it, but ... he sees me in the same light as an unwanted, useless rabbit. Except he can't sic the dogs on me. And ... and I try and fight that belief, cause it's in me, it's in my very bones, that I should have been ordinary, should have been a cheerleader and a mother at twenty. That I should have never ever tried to write or draw or reach, that I should ... I should have been sensible and dull and not care so much when baby birds get knocked out of their nests.

[Head down.]

Is it peaceful when you die? I think it is. I think ... I think it's when you finally stop waiting. When you can stop being so tired. When you stop trying to save dying baby birds. When you stop sending off submissions and stop expecting great things. When you can just ... just let all that shit go at last. Amen. Yet. Yet I don't want to give up. I'm stronger than this. I'm stronger than this push in my head to kill myself. I'm stronger than this stupid, awful, crippling depression that has lived in me since I was thirteen. I am stronger than this! But not if they die. When they die! I'm still here. That has got to count for something. Baby birds die. Some of them live. And they learn to fly. They don't care about pleasing anyone or being well thought of by their own dad.

Maybe ... maybe that's it. To not care. To look into that sky and not care at all how big it is. Every moment could be your last so why not fly and eat worms and build that nest year after year? I can start over. It's just having to rebuild, right? And laughing. Seeing how funny this all is, this mopey, dopey moment, all the mopey, dopey, humiliating, crappy moments. That life is a string of uncooked macaroni on a double strand of sewing thread. Not even spray painted gold. Some people have strings of expensive pearls for lives, but not me ... I have macaroni and sewing thread. And I hate it. I hate it. I want the pearls, I want the pearls and the awards and I want my dad crushed beneath his own fucking tractor the way he crushed me, the way he crushed me.

[Stops. Looks down into bowl of birds.]

Only one left now. Only one.

[Reaches into bowl.]

Do I hope it lives, the last little bird, or that it dies? I'm so tired of hoping. I'm so tired. Even the thought of waiting for this last one to die is too much. And if it lives. If. If if if if if!

[Kills last baby bird. Draws back from table.]

Goodbye. Goodbye. Time for a one way drive to Nevada! I wonder if I'll go to heaven, God? Or will it be all pitchforks and little demon baby birds pecking at my feet, huh, Satan?

[Pause, then shakes her head.]

Waste of skin. Waste of skin ... I guess it got maudlin after all.

[Slow fade to black. End of play.]

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