

THE BIRD WHO COULDN'T FLY

By Karl Milde

"Please, please. Tell us a story, Grandma." Ten-year-old Jason pleaded.

His eight-year-old sister, Caroline, also looked up at her and chimed in. "Yes, tell us a story, PLEASE."

Grandma Betsy peered at them through her metal framed glasses and thought a moment. "Okay, you two. Have a seat. I have just the story for you."

Jason and Caroline climbed up on the couch, turned and sat facing forward while Grandma eased herself into a comfortable chair across from them and adjusted her spectacles. "I have a story from my childhood about a bird who couldn't fly."

"Couldn't fly, Grandma?" Jason asked. "Why not?"

Caroline looked at her grandmother and tried to imagine a poor bird who tried and tried, but just couldn't get off the ground.

"I found this bird in our backyard," Grandma began. "It was a kiwi." Grandma took a breath. "You know I was born in New Zealand, right? My family came to this country when I was a young girl like you, Caroline, and I've lived here ever since. But I'll never forget the time I saw that fuzzy little thing. She was brown, about the size of a chicken, except she walked with her head down. She was hobbling about, pecking for food with her long beak. I thought she was lame."

"Did you take her inside?" Jason wanted to know.

"Yes, I did. I picked her up and brought her into the house. I was going to put her leg in a splint and keep her as a pet, but my mother then told me she was okay. Hobbling was just the way kiwis walked about."

"Did you feed her?" little Carolyn asked, wide eyed.

"No. My father made me take her back outside. He said kiwis loved to eat earthworms. They used their long beaks to grab and pull them out of the ground."

Jason was curious. "How did they find them? Just poke with their beaks and hope they get lucky?"

"I'm glad you asked that," Grandmother replied. "Did you ever notice how the robins you see here search for earthworms?"

"No, but I always wondered," replied Jason. Caroline was curious too and looked at Grandma expectantly.

“They listen for sounds and vibrations. They have a keen sense of hearing. They hop from spot to spot and listen quietly. They do that over and over again until they hear a worm crawling underground.”

“Jeepers,” Jason said. “I didn’t know.”

“Do kiwi’s do that too?” Caroline asked. “Hopping and listening?”

“No. Kiwis use their amazing sense of smell. They have two tiny holes at the ends of their beaks where they breathe air. They can smell wiggly worms in the ground, so they know where to poke and grab them.”

“Why can’t a kiwi fly?” young Jason asked Grandma Betsy.

“I was wondering that too,” added Caroline. Although two years younger than Jason, she was his equal when it came to nature.

“There are two reasons,” Grandma explained. “First of all, their wings are tiny compared to their bodies. They’re too small to raise them up no matter how fast they flap. And second, their feathers aren’t stiff like those of a bird that flies. They are soft and loose, so the air flows right through them.”

“I feel sorry for them then,” Caroline commented. “Almost all other bird friends can fly, but they’re stuck on the ground.”

“I don’t think they have any bird friends,” Grandma replied. “Except maybe chickens, but chickens are always busy eating corn and drinking water so they can produce eggs. A chicken lays an egg almost every day.”

“Do kiwis lay eggs?” Jason asked.

“Yes, they do. Usually one a year.”

“Only one egg?”

“Yes, but it’s huge. It’s about six times larger than a chicken egg. So large, in fact, that its weight is almost a quarter the weight of the kiwi hen before she lays it. She’s so exhausted after creating and laying the egg that the father takes over, at least at first, to sit on it. The two parents sometimes take turns, but that’s mainly the father’s job. He has to incubate the egg, keeping it warm, for almost three months before it hatches.”

“Three months? After one week he’ll be *starving*,” Jason exclaimed. “He needs to eat.”

“You’re right, Jason, but the mother hen helps out. She takes a turn on the nest.”

“Gee. How do you know so much, Grandma?” Caroline asked.

“When I found the kiwi, I started reading about them. They’re such interesting birds!”

“What happened to your kiwi,” Jason wanted to know.

“Well, like I’ve said, my father told me to take her back outside. But that’s not the end of the story.” Grandma leaned closer to Jason and Caroline. Her voice turned to almost a whisper as she said, “You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

Both Jason and Caroline shook their heads vigorously. “No, we won’t,” they said together.

“Okay then. Here’s what happened. I took my kiwi outside and put her down on the ground. As soon as I did, she ran to the back fence and crept under it. Some animal had dug the dirt underneath it, leaving an opening. I ran over to the gate on the side and took out after her. She ran–hopped really–toward the woods and kept on going through the underbrush. I was able to follow where I saw the brush moving until that motion stopped suddenly. I stepped carefully, pushing the brush out of the way as I went, and I saw it. A hole in the ground. An indentation, really, like a burrow. And there they both were: my hen and her mate. He was sitting on a nest, looking up at me, as if he were pleading with me not to harm him. I’m almost certain I saw a large egg there, underneath him.”

“What did you do, Grandma?” Caroline blurted out, breaking the spell of the story.

“I went home, of course,” Grandmother said smiling. She stood up from her comfortable chair and added, “Now it’s time for you both to go to bed.”

