

Excerpt from “Fledged,” by Diana Renn

Originally published in Pangyrus Literary Magazine, March 15, 2022

The handoff took place at noon, inside our dim garage. Our neighbors, tense and talking fast, were in a hurry to get out of town.

They thrust the case of supplies at me. A syringe. A rubber heating pad. A bag of dog kibble. A container of crumbled hard-boiled egg and moist kibble. And then, to my son Gabe, they handed over the stainless steel bowl containing the baby bird.

It sat in a tangle of dried sphagnum moss commonly used for orchid-growing. It lifted its black head and blinked sleepily, as the family, talking over one another, rattled off instructions for caring for the wild bird they’d rescued. Feed the bird every ninety minutes, sunup to sundown but not overnight. Remove poop from the nest by hand; the bird defecates as soon as it eats. Mash the dog kibble and egg very small. Place bits into the gaping beak until the bird stops chirping. Tweezers or a syringe could work; otherwise, fingers would do. No water, though — the bird could drown.

I stared warily at our new houseguest. A few days ago it had been almost covered in white downy fluff, and much smaller. It had looked helpless in its makeshift nest. Now, with more dark, mottled feathers sprouted, and a white tufted Mohawk, it looked less like a fuzzy alien and more like an actual bird. What kind of bird, none of us knew. What I did know was that caring for this bird for a week would be harder than we thought.

The bird had not had a great start in the world. It had fallen twenty feet from a nest on a floodlight outside our neighbors’ house. They went up a ladder and replaced the bird. It tumbled out again the next day. Assuming it was injured or rejected, or both, the neighbors’ teenage daughter had brought it inside their house, safe from predators. She’d been hand-feeding it diligently, her dad pitching in as needed. But then their family had the opportunity for a beach house rental on Cape Cod, a rare treat in a pandemic summer. That’s why they had thought of the next best people to take over on short notice: my animal-loving son, and me, to supervise. Besides, we were already babysitting their chickens in their absence.

“So, um . . . what’s the long-term plan?” I faltered, while my son made cooing noises at the bird. “I was reading online, you can’t keep a wild bird in your house without a license. Maybe this should go to a wildlife rehabber.”

My neighbors agreed. They’d tried hard to find one. But it turns out, wildlife rehabbers are a bit like unicorns, especially approaching the Fourth of July weekend. Especially during a pandemic when lots of places are closed. Even in normal times, there are not many rehabbers listed on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife website who will take in songbirds. Most of those listed have specialties like raptors or bats. Almost all rehabbers are at capacity and only take in clearly injured birds.

This bird looked pretty vigorous, shifting around in the moss. The slight upturn of its beak seemed like a smirk.

“Do you think it might want to fly soon?” I asked.

“If it does, you could just build it a little outdoor structure for it to move around in,” my neighbor suggested. “With some wood and mesh.”

I blinked. *Ah. Sure. Let me just gather some wood and mesh and build something. In between the hourly feedings from sunup to sundown. No problem. I'll just stay tethered to this bird all week. You guys go have fun at the beach.*

Gushing thank-yous, backing hurriedly out of our driveway, the neighbors headed off for vacation. Their car zoomed away.

Gabe and I brought the bird and supplies upstairs to the guest room. I closed the door firmly to keep out the cat. How had I let myself get strong-armed into this complicated caregiving situation? Why did people think that just because I worked from home — even before Covid days — I was endlessly available to look after their plants, their chickens, their children, their dogs, their wild birds that have fallen from nests?

Gabe set up a card table in a dim corner. Grown birds flitted in the treetop outside the window, freely making their way to and from our feeders. Our little guest cocked its head. I closed the window and lowered the shade so it wouldn't be jealous.

The bird closed first one eye, then the other, settling in for a nap.

As I watched Gabe fuss with the bird's guest accommodations, I marveled at his lengthening limbs, the new angles in his face. He'd reached the edge of adolescence, having recently turned thirteen, and suddenly seemed so capable. He plugged in the heating pad and placed the bird bowl on top. He arranged the food and feeding supplies, including tweezers and toothpicks if the syringe didn't work. Maybe this was a good project for him. Covid had canceled his normal summer plans. Maybe it was a good project for me, too. Saving one small thing, after so much loss in the world, had a distinct appeal.

We watched the bird breathe.

My breath caught in my throat. Suddenly this creature seemed so very fragile. Our caregiving efforts could fail. Or nature could take its course, and the bird would die on our watch. I didn't think I could handle one more sad outcome. Tears burned. But I blinked them away. *Don't bond with the bird*, I instructed myself. *We have to get it into more capable hands.*

Speaking softly while the bird snoozed, I showed Gabe the Massachusetts Department of Wildlife website. “Rehabbing birds is a delicate thing,” I explained. “We're not trained. And this site says not

to feed baby birds or bring them into your house. Our neighbors meant well, but this is like kidnapping. It's against the law."

His eyes widened. "Will we be arrested?"

"Well, probably not," I admitted. It was hard to picture U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents showing up at our door. Still, I like to think of myself as a law-abiding citizen.

Gabe nodded, taking this in. "We should keep trying to find a rehabber," he said quietly. "I mean, I want to keep it, but I know we should do whatever's best for the bird."

I hugged him. "Great. I'll keep calling around."

We didn't have time to discuss it further. The bird gaped its yellow beak and chirped urgently.

"Oh my God! It's hungry! Get the food!" I cried, helplessly waving my hands around.

Gabe calmly took tiny crumbles of moistened dog food and egg and dropped them into the yellow beak. The bird ate several drops of food, then wiggled and pooped. Gabe unflinchingly scooped the poop out and threw it away. He tenderly fluffed the moss around the bird.

The bird closed its eyes and went back to sleep. The soft breeze from the air-conditioning stirred its feathers and down.

My son's chest puffed a little. "See? This is easy."

"Ten feedings a day until we can turn it over to a rehabber," I reminded him. "I might not be able to get anyone until Monday. That's two whole days away. That's twenty feedings."

"*Mom*. I can do this."

"Okay," I said. "But I still think we need advice or help sooner." And suddenly, I knew just whom to call.

*

Somewhere deep in the woods not far from our house lives renowned bird artist and expert David Sibley. His field guides to birds are among the most revered books for birders. His illustrations are scientifically detailed works of art; we have identified all of our regular backyard visitors thanks to Sibley's work. Gabe and I looked through one of his most recent guides, and guessed that we might have a robin.

If I stumbled down enough side roads I might have found David Sibley eventually. He's an almost-neighbor who I know is out there: not visible but in calling distance, like a red-tailed hawk, or an eagle. He swoops in and leaves autographed copies of his books in our local bookstore, but I've never heard of local friends boasting they had a Sibley sighting at the local market. He's a low-profile celebrity, well-known to serious birders and probably amateur birdwatchers like us. Anyway, I was briefly tempted to track him down and leave our baby bird at his front door, like a foundling. To ring the bell and run. Much like I wanted to leave my infant son with the renowned sleep expert Richard Ferber in a nearby town, when attempting to sleep train and the effort felt overwhelming.

But finding David Sibley and begging him to take over was not a practical plan. Instead, I sought out the next best expert I could think of: Greg, a young man in our neighborhood who had studied ornithology. He was now in graduate school. Covid had closed down his campus last spring. So he was living — like many twentysomethings — back in the nest, quarantining with parents.

His mother gave me his phone number. Greg was actually back in the lab for his graduate program this week, but would happily be on call for our project.

I texted Greg the photos of the makeshift nest on the heating pad, and told him about the feeding schedule. Greg confirmed the setup was perfect, though we might need to feed a bit more often — maybe more like every forty-five minutes. Twice as often as our neighbors had instructed us.

Oh. Okay. We'll just feed it every forty-five minutes. No problem. An image flashed into my mind: our unencumbered neighbors frolicking in the waves on a Chatham beach.

Greg also confirmed our suspicion from the Sibley guide, and identified the bird as an American robin. He texted a link to an infographic with a two-week growth model. The proportion of feathers to down suggested that the robin was eleven or twelve days old.

They leave the nest at day thirteen or fourteen.

This was welcome news. We'd simply open the window and let it go! Assuming the bird was uninjured, our problem would soon be solved.

But Greg's next text message caused a fresh surge of anxiety.

So what is the plan, post-fledging?

Plan? I texted back. *What do you mean?*

A fledgling bird, it turns out, is an avian adolescent. And just as we don't send thirteen-year-olds into the world to fend for themselves, robin parents continue to feed the baby for a couple of weeks after fledging. Not only that, fledglings do not return to the nest once they leave it. They move to a new, nearby roost with the parents. They hop around and gradually learn to use their wings and fly,

which can take up to a week. In a month, they become proficient flyers with full-grown wings. Meanwhile, the parents — usually the dads — feed them and teach them valuable social skills, including how to identify bird calls that are critical to their survival.

I felt the floor fall away. Suddenly feeding by hand twenty times a day sounded relatively easy. *Fledgling* care was a whole different level of hard. I spent the next hour frantically googling. I read some rare accounts of people who'd raised fledglings and released them, with limited success after days of devoted care.

Just feed it some mealworms if you can't find real ones, but cutting up some real earthworms is better. Be sure to crush the mealworm heads. Just put out some bugs in dishes and teach it to feed itself. Just teach it to forage. Just continue to make sure it's eating a couple of times an hour since it's spending a lot of energy growing its wings and muscles.

The bird shifted in its bowl, startling me out of my research. It half-stood for a moment, then settled back down. It gaped for food and chirped. We were not yet at the forty-five minute mark, but it was clearly hungry. This job was definitely outside our pay grade. Fingers fumbling, I texted my on-call ornithologist once more.

So what are the signs it's getting ready to fledge?

Hopping, Greg texted back. Moving its wings a lot. Getting in and out of the bowl. I take it you're keeping it outside?

No. Inside. Guest room.

Pause.

Oh OK. Good, he wrote. That way when it starts to fly, you'll be able to find it.

I should have been relieved he wasn't reporting us to the authorities for keeping it inside. But I was now more anxious. This bird was going to have a whole different set of needs very soon. And this realization reminded me of times when I'd suddenly noticed my baby boy was more toddler than baby, outgrowing the car seat or the bouncy chair, and I hadn't yet bought the next wave of gear or finished childproofing the house. Or that sudden shock of clothes not fitting. A beloved toy no longer serving its purpose. That feeling of *wait, wait — I'm not ready!* — followed by rapid preparations, and settling into the next phase, adapting to new needs, providing for my child in a whole new way.

The bird's track record for leaping wasn't great, so Gabe and I laid blankets and towels on the floor in case the bird should try to launch from the card table. But my heart felt heavy. I knew full well we could not possibly provide for a fledgling, filling in for what its parents would be doing in the wild. There was even a danger the bird would imprint on us and no longer recognize its own kind.

We hadn't just taken in a baby bird. We'd taken in a teen bird.

And a problem.