



## Feeding Phoebe

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My daughter moved in with me after her college campus shut down. I was surprised she hadn't chosen her mom. It was the first time I could remember when she hadn't.

"I don't like her new boyfriend," she told me, by way of explanation. "And I didn't want you to be alone."

She spent most of that first week cutting up my old shirts and sheets and pillowcases to make masks that she sold on Etsy for five dollars apiece. A few days later, when I was furloughed from the music school where I teach, I became her assistant. I measured and tied off the elastic for the ear loops, while she sewed the fabric together.

"You know, we could probably charge a little more for these," I pointed out.

But Michelle just shrugged. "That's not the point, though, is it?"

The rest of our days were mostly filled with binge-watching television shows, rationing what toilet paper we had left, and obsessing over the number of infections—and the number of deaths—as they climbed each day across the country and around the globe.

It's wrong to say so, but, in spite of the tedium, I immensely enjoyed those first few weeks of the pandemic. I loved spending time with Michelle. And while she assuredly would have preferred the company of others her age, I soaked up every minute of the time I got to spend with her. I felt like the luckiest man in the world, that she had chosen to spend her "lock-down" with me.

And then my mother moved in with us. When she heard that Michelle was staying with me, she packed her bags and drove out from Arizona. If she was going to have to be locked indoors, she wanted to be locked in with her son and her granddaughter. Only, within a few hours of her arriving, she and Michelle had a blow-up over their differing opinions on our president: my mother adored him while my daughter found him revolting.

"When you get a little older," my mother said to her, "you'll appreciate him more."

To which Michelle responded, "How can you respect someone who has no respect for anything other than himself?!"

"This is the problem with colleges becoming so *liberal*," my mother said.

"Colleges are only liberal," Michelle replied, now seething in the way that only a nineteen-year-old can, "because it's where they teach you to think!"

So began a period of about eight weeks where I lived with a daughter and a grandmother who made every possible effort to avoid each other. Michelle's classes had resumed online by now. As had mine. We all occupied ourselves with our own separate priorities. While Michelle spent more time in her bedroom studying, my mother restricted her orbit primarily to the kitchen, where she had taken up baking sourdough and canning beans, and the bedroom (my bedroom) where she watched Hallmark films and cable news. Camped out in the living room, I set up a makeshift music studio, where I taught lessons to my students online. The apartment felt a lot smaller and a lot less cheerful. For the most part, Michelle and I ate our meals separately from my mother. At dinner, we ate on the couch while watching one of our shows, or a movie, while my mom ate alone at the table.

"You love her more than me," my mother complained one evening.

I wanted to laugh. "You'd have it otherwise?"

What finally brought an end to our general malaise and cramped discontent was a small sparrow-like bird called a Black Phoebe. It flew in from the patio and smacked straight into the window in the living room. Then, desperate to escape, it crashed into the kitchen window and fell to the floor by the stove.

"Michelle!" I called. "Michelle!"

She came running, as did my mother.

I was too stunned to react. But Michelle hurried to find a small box that she lined with cotton balls.

"It's still alive," my mom said.

"But it's hurt," said Michelle.

My mother emptied my wicker laundry basket. She laid newspaper on the table and placed the basket upside down.

"Put it in here," she said. "It might keep it from getting too stressed."

Michelle carried the bird on the bed of cotton and slipped it underneath the basket. Meanwhile, I called the Humane Society and several local veterinary clinics. Most were closed due to the pandemic, and those that were open didn't have the personnel to attend to it. The only useful advice I received was from a technician who—very reluctantly—advised we keep it in a dark, quiet place and give it time to heal.

Within a few hours, the phoebe was moving around again. But it couldn't fly. And not for a lack of trying. My mother poked a branch through the wicker to give it a perch to rest on.

"We can't feed it birdseed," Michelle said, looking up from the computer.

If we were going to keep the phoebe, with the hope that it might heal on its own, we were going to need insects. And we got good at finding them. Especially my mom and Michelle. Twice a day, in the morning and evening, they went around outside on their hands and knees turning over rocks to corral pincher bugs, beetles, pill bugs. They hunted crickets, together. And ladybugs. And caterpillars. They were going to save this bird. There was no convincing them otherwise.

When it came to the virus, and the pandemic, even politics, there was little any of us could do for each other except keep our distance. But here was something they could actually do something about. Knocking spiders from their webs and picking flowers

loaded with aphids. Something they could do together, without having to keep their distance.

