

THE LIFE OF A PAMPERED
Written for Hearts United for Animals
by Allison Hunter-Frederick © 2009

Cast of Characters:

Grandma Greta: a retired female classroom guinea pig who is frail and almost blind

Hopper: a female rabbit whose feet got injured by a wire cage as a pet

Midnight: a female Black Labrador retriever pup

Angela: an angelfish

Iggy: a male iguana

Val: a female alley cat

Cracker: an Amazon parrot whose girlfriend Polly lives in the rainforest

Belcher: a male red-legged California frog

Sprinter: a male hamster

Hatch: a male duck sold at Easter in a department store

Act I

GRANDMA: I have an announcement to make.

(All animals gather around to listen.)

GRANDMA: The shelter keepers plan to visit the local schools.

HOPPER (clumsily jumping up and down): I want to go! I want to go! I want to go!

MIDNIGHT (bounding around and knocking others around with her size): Me too!

ANGELA: Shhh! Let's all listen and be still to hear.

GRANDMA (nodding thanks to Angela): The keepers plan to talk about the neutering of pets.

IGGY: I love field trips! Can I go?

VAL (yawning): This isn't a field trip. It's an educational trip. Snooze!

IGGY: We're going on a campaign trip?

ANGELA (laughing): Kind of.

IGGY: Then Belcher should go!

VAL (jumping outside of the group): Who even said we get to decide who goes? Or even that any of us are going with the keepers? (Walks away and flicks her tail.) At any rate, count me out!

GRANDMA: The keepers will take representatives of each type of animal kept as a pet. Whoever goes will represent *their* group. The keepers will share *your* stories.

VAL (sitting apart from group): Like I said, count me out! So far, you have babies and petitioners wanting to go. Who wants to be part of that crowd? Not me!

HOPPER (waving paws): Let me go too! Please! I'll speak for the rabbits! Please!

VAL (springing to side of stage and pawing walls): Hey, now you have a baby turned petitioner, all-in-one package. Grandma, you're done. You've got your speaker!

IGGY (hanging head): Belcher can't go?

CRACKER (flying overhead): Val wants to pick! Val wants her choice! Val wants to go!

(Val leaps backwards and swipes at the air, trying to reach Cracker. He somersaults above her and around her.)

CRACKER (lands next to Grandma): I'd still like to go. Parrots are good talkers. We also like go places.

HATCH: But we don't have anything to say. We're birds. We shouldn't get neutered. Our small size makes it difficult for a veterinarian to know how much medicine to give us before they operate. Surgery for us is a long and stressful procedure with too many risks involved.

CRACKER: All the more reason one of us should go! People own birds. We don't want kids thinking they should neuter *all* their pets.

GRANDMA: I like your reasoning Cracker, but I'd like Val to answer a question for us before we do our nominations. Val, would you remind us what neutering is?

VAL: What? (Yawns and stretches.) You'll need to repeat yourself, Grandma. Hatch put me to sleep with his speech.

GRANDMA Shame on you, Val! (Teases softly) Old creatures get mocked enough about repeating themselves, without you asking me to repeat my questions.

VAL (sticking her face into Grandma's face): Shame on you, Grandma! If I answer your question, everyone will start calling me a walking encyclopedia.

IGGY: Val got smart? How'd that happen?

HATCH: She didn't. She just doesn't want to admit that she doesn't know the word.

(Val hisses at Hatch. He scurries to sit beside Grandma.)

BELCHER (clearing throat): Can we still nominate speakers even though Val didn't explain what neutering is? If Angela agrees, I'd like Iggy to speak for us cold-blooded animals.

VAL (tilting head): And what exactly would iguanas know about getting neutered?

(Iggy puts wraps his front paws around his head to think.)

ANGELA: If Iggy can find out anything about cold-blooded animals and neutering, I'd feel proud for him to represent our group. And just so we're all clear, neutering is usually done so that animals can't have babies.

IGGY: I'll get back to you. (Hurries off stage)

VAL: You do that while I wait in breathless anticipation. (Val stretches and rolls tummy up on the floor.) Midnight, would you like to play? (Midnight barks in response. The two run around the stage, while the other animals proceed with decisions.)

SPRINTER (stepping forward): I can speak for the rodents. (Shuffles feet) I'd rather speak about food and exercise, but neutering is a health issue too. Rodents are so small that just like with birds, surgery would be complicated and could risk our lives. For us, there also isn't a need for it. Sometimes pets are neutered to help the same gender get along, but even after surgery our males still fight. If owners want to prevent mass litters of rodents, they should just cage us by gender. (Voice rises.) Of course, they need to remember to give us big enough cages to roam and play and have private spots to rest.

HATCH (also stepping forward): I nominate Cracker. He can speak for the birds.

GRANDMA: Hopper, if you can find out anything about rabbits and neutering, you can go too.

HOPPER: I'll find out for you, Grandma! I'll get lots and lots of info! (Grabs Grandma's paw and shakes it.) Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! (Exits)

Act II

GRANDMA: So far, we have these animal representatives: Iggy will speak for the cold-blooded animals. Sprinter will speak for the rodents. Cracker will speak for the birds.

HOPPER (darting on stage to group, speaking breathlessly): Am I too late? Can I still go?

VAL (clasping paws together in mock plea): We need you! Without you, there would just be petitioners and sleepers. There would be no babies.

SPRINTER: And, without you, Val, there would be no one to make us feel bad.

(Val knocks Sprinter over with her tail.)

HOPPER (bubbles with information): Rabbits SHOULD get neutered. It reduces the risk of our biting when we get upset. It minimizes the chance of cancer. It helps reduce fighting amongst males. And it helps prevents mass litters.

VAL (springing to the side of the stage and pawing walls): Wow, the baby has learned big words.

GRANDMA: Hopper, you may represent the rabbits.

GRANDMA: (standing upright and putting paws on hips) Now Val what about you? We couldn't turn you into a walking encyclopaedia, but you do have a story that needs to be heard. *You* should represent the cats.

VAL (mumbling): No comment. (Starts to exit)

CRACKER: Grandma, why would you want to take Val? She's argumentative, cranky, and rude.

VAL (springing backwards and swiping at the Cracker): Don't forget violent and vindictive!

BELCHER (shaking head): Grandma, why don't you give up on her?

GRANDMA: Did I give up on my tough boys?

VAL: But I'm a tough *feline*. That beats out macho boys.

GRANDMA (scolding): You might be a tough feline, but you also have a story to tell.

IGGY (joining group): Val has a story? I love stories!

ANGELA: Iggy, welcome back! What did you find out about neutering and iguanas?

IGGY: Cold-blooded animals reproduce differently than warm-blooded animals. They shouldn't get neutered. The surgery is an invasive one. We could die. Even if we lived, we might still have babies. We're very different. (Tilts head to face Val.) Val, please tell us your story!

CRACKER (preening and then flicking feather at Val): Pampered princess has a snooze story. Valerie Extraordinaire has a California tale.

BELCHER: Sun in the eyes. Sand in the toes. Oh my! What a tale of woe the queen will have!

VAL (pouncing in front of Belcher and sending him flopping backwards): Yes, I have a tale of California! Exactly! (Val saunters back and forth like a queen.) A long time ago, my family ruled California. Now they don't. The end!

GRANDMA (batting Val's head): Val!

VAL: Oh, all right, there's no need to get violent. Once upon a time, *not* so long ago, my family lived in California. They slept all the time like royalty (glancing at Grandma), er, like cats and iguanas do.

SPRINTER (flopping to floor): That explains the flabby tummies. Animals should run, run, run!

VAL: We were indoor cats. We ran after our owners. We ran over sofas. I could jump over a sofa in single bound. My mom called me Valerie Extraordinaire. We performed for our owners. We delighted in our feats.

HOPPER: Cracker likes to do tricks too! Hey, you have something in common!

VAL (speaking loftily): We did feats like superstars, not tricks like measly magicians.

CRACKER (ruffling feathers): I'm leaving! You do nothing but insult! Stories should be fun.

VAL (waving good-bye): Who asked you to listen? Besides, I'm doing this for Grandma.

HATCH: Shouldn't you consider us your audience? Doesn't she already know your story?

VAL: Exactly! She's already heard my story. (Grins) So hearing it again will help her sleep.

MIDNIGHT (backing and racing around group): I like stories! I like being entertained!

VAL (snapping): Then you all better clear out. This isn't a pretty tale. This is a tale about owners who foremost wanted to experience the fun of kittens. The first time my mom went into heat, they declawed her so she wouldn't scratch furniture. The second time they decided they couldn't stand the noise of her squalling and they let her loose. Mom ran about in a mood for a long time. I almost couldn't keep up with her. The male cats had no trouble. They even fought over her. She got tired of them and ran away to rest. Two dogs found her and ganged up on her.

BELCHER (speaking quietly): Val, I'm sorry.

VAL: Later that year, the townspeople started rounding up cats. I heard by word-of-mouth that there was a campaign to kill off all the stray cats. Such is the life of a Pampered Pet.

(Midnight and Hopper try to hug Val. She shoves them away.)

VAL: Our life was all about sunshine and sand. We got sun in our eyes as we ate at the back of fine restaurants and slept in boxes with blankets gotten from clotheslines. We got sand in our toes as we ate sandwich corners at the beach and slept on strewn clothes during the day. Such was our pampered life, until the townspeople started rounding up strays. The ones who eventually caught me weren't part of the campaign. They weren't the destroyers. They were the keepers.

SPRINTER: How did you get caught?

VAL (scooping up Sprinter): Like this!

GRANDMA: Val was one of our most agreeable cats while she got neutered.

BELCHER: Val's mom should have been neutered. And her owners should have kept her indoors. Then Val might have really lived a lazy and luxurious life, the type we all want.

VAL (punching Belcher's face): Take a star for being so smart.

ANGELA: We need your story, Val.

VAL: You know what? I want to be needed like rocks want sunlight, but sure I'll share my story. And then (stretches paws) I'll scare all the kids into neutering their pets!

Act III

(Just these animals remain: Midnight, Angela, Belcher, and Hatch. They are scattered about stage. Midnight is chasing his tail. The rest of the animals have gone with the shelter keepers to the schools to talk about neutering animals.)

ANGELA (swishing her tail): Grandma and the others should have gotten back by now from their school presentations.

BELCHER (hopping beside her): Are you worried?

(Angela doesn't answer.)

BELCHER: I know I am. Imagine Val and her insults in public.

ANGELA (chides gently): Val has a story to share that she really cares about. She wanted to be neutered. She wants other cats to be neutered. Should owners decide not to neuter their cats, she wants them to care about the families that are born. She wants all families to be safe, off the streets, and in homes.

HATCH (joining the group): Are we all worrying about how Val will do?

(Belcher nods.)

HATCH: Even when visitors request to see her, Val just doesn't know how to act. She doesn't like to play with store toys, which is what visitors usually bring with them, perhaps because she and her friends made their own toys.

BELCHER: She doesn't like to be touched, I suppose because she doesn't trust people. Who would when your owners let your mother get in heat but then kick her out for how she acts? Yet imagine a defensive cat at school.

ANGELA: She's not so different from Pedro. When he first came he used to get mad at most everyone, but then he learned how to interact with us and visitors. Val still seems as callous as the day she arrived.

MIDNIGHT (jumping into the middle of them): Val plays with me. (The group stares at her. She stands over them, tongue hanging out.) Come on, she knows when to act nice. She's going to be great! (Hesitates) Isn't she?

(Suddenly there are voices in the distance. Midnight races to the stage door. The others follow.)

MIDNIGHT (running around stage): They're back! They're back! They're back!

CRACKER (flying overhead): She's extraordinary!

BELCHER (bounding high): Let's hear it for our cat!

HOPPER (darts ahead and chatters): You should have heard her. She didn't act mean to them even once, but every student there was ready to promise to neuter their cat by the time Val had finished telling her tale. Everybody wanted to adopt her too. They were making her toys and running around with her and they just loved her, loved her, and loved her SO MUCH! (Hopper suddenly stops and bawls.) I'm jealous! I wish I could have gotten all that attention.

GRANDMA (nodding): Val did all of us proud. And so did everyone else.

SPRINTER: But Val stole the show. Her passion and her energy were spectacular. (Flops to the floor) I'm exhausted just from watching her.

ANGELA (looking around): Where is Val?

GRANDMA: Sleeping with the shelter keepers. (Chuckles) I don't think she was ready yet to come back and start acting all tough again.

VAL (leaping over Grandma): I'm always ready to be a tough feline! (Val arches her back and glowers at the group.) I am Valerie Extraordinaire and don't any of you forget it!

CURRICULUM IDEAS:

1. Pick an animal you would like to be or know more about it. Imagine you were that animal. What would you tell Grandma Greta if she asked you to define neutering to her?
2. What issue is most important to you? How would you pick representatives to help you present this issue?
3. Think of an incident in your life where you got hurt. Imagine if your class were talking about the topic. How would you react to them if they asked for your input?
4. Pick a town where you would like to live. Imagine you owned a pet in that town. What rules does that town have about owning a pet? How does that town deal with strays?
5. Imagine your pet were to speak on an important issue. What do you think your pet would say? How do you think your pet would act?

(PLAY EXTENSIONS)

1. Research the need to neuter cats. Rewrite the third act to show Val at school.
2. Read the HUA descriptions of the personalities of the six animals who visited school. Rewrite the third act to show the presentation of a different character.
3. Read the HUA descriptions of the personalities of the four animals who stayed behind and didn't go to school. Rewrite the third act as if they were jealous of not getting to attend.
4. Read the HUA descriptions of Val. Research the need to neuter cats. Create a new feline character. Then rewrite the entire play to show how Val would convince this character the necessity of getting neutered.