

WHEN GRANDMA CAME TO THE SHELTER
Written for Hearts United for Animals
By Allison Hunter-Frederick © 2009

Cast of Characters:

Angela: an angelfish

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

Incognito: a male mouse born with a deformed leg

Val: an alley cat

Hatch: a duck sold at Easter in a department store

Sprinter: a male hamster

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

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

Belcher: a male red-legged California frog

Act I

(Angela is gliding around stage.)

GRETA (peeking from side entrance): Angela, is that you?

ANGELA (pausing and staring): Do I know you?

GRETA (hobbling on stage): I'm Greta. We met at a pet show.

ANGELA (waving fins): Yes, we did! Hi! How are you! What have you been up to?

GRANDMA (hugging Angela): Oh, I think I was two or three when we met and still able to popcorn and get around like a young guinea pig. Now look at me, I can barely walk or see. My owner said you'd be here. She became a teacher after we met. Now instead of taking me to shows on the road, she brings me to her classroom. What are you doing here? Are you visiting too?

ANGELA (sighing): I'm living here and waiting for someone to adopt me. My tank requires the right temperature and weekly cleaning, which became too much for my owner. Several of my friends died from neglect, before my owner finally decided to turn the rest of us over to this shelter. I've been here for months, but (shrugging) others have been here for years and so I'm actually one of the fortunate ones.

GRETA: Always an optimist! That's one reason I liked you. Well, my mistress came today to start as a volunteer. She might be awhile, so let's catch up.

KEEPER 1 (barging across stage and holding a mouse): This mouse is gentle. The fish are gentle. Let's put him in here for now, until we can place the others with more pressing needs. Too bad we don't have more mice. They're social animals.

KEEPER 2: What about the rats? There are a few of them. And there are some nice burrows and mazes where they are. Don't mice like those things too?

KEEPER 1 (hurriedly placing mouse near other animals): No, no, no, we can't put mice with rats. They're competitors. (Chuckles) I don't know if fish and mice will make the best of friends either, but at least they won't kill each other. (Runs towards exit) Okay, let's go!

(The two keepers leave.)

ANGELA: There must be a huge rescue happening today. Usually the keepers don't put new animals in this room. It's for animals that have been here for awhile and so they know who will get along with whom—even if left alone. They definitely don't like to add animals when there are fish here, because we're rather sensitive creatures. We don't like lots of noise and motion.

GRETA (looking at mouse): Poor thing! It looks terrified. Maybe we should befriend it?

ANGELA: I don't know. Some of the animals who come here are pretty mean. They come from pet mills where they've been abused or they come from the streets where they've been neglected. Their backgrounds usually make them defensive, tough, and rude.

GRETA (chiding gently): You still seem like the polite and friendly Angela I met at the pet show, despite your being dumped.

ANGELA: Okay, you have a point. (Calling out to mouse) Hi! I'm Angela.

GRETA: And I'm Greta!

INCOGNITO (stammering): I'm I'm I'm I'm In-in-in-cog-cog-nito.

(Keepers hurry onto stage again. The one holds a squirming cat in a blanket.)

KEEPER 1 (glancing about stage): We can't keep this one here. She's too wild. She's from the street. She'd shred all these animals to pieces.

KEEPER 2: We can't put her in the cat house either, for the same reason.

KEEPER 1: I know! I know! Let me think! (Struggles to hold) Too late, she's going to escape! (Cat jumps from her arms.)

KEEPER 1 (yelling orders): Keep her from the other animals!

VAL (charging towards other animals): MEOW! MEOW! MEEEEEOOOOW!

(The keepers block Val from them. She finally runs off stage. The keepers race after her.)

INCOGNITO: I'm I'm I'm sc-sc-sc-ared.

(Greta walks over to Incognito and hugs him and then gently strokes his head.)

GRETA (soothing): There, there, I know this must be a tough day for you.

INCOGNITO: Ye-yes, it-it has.

GRETA (gently prodding): Do you want to tell us about it?

INCOGNITO: I-I-I wa-was re-re-rescued fr-from a mo-mouse mill.

(Keeper 1 hurries on stage with a duck in arms. The keeper puts the duck with the other animals. The duck hides its head under its wings.)

KEEPER 1 (murmuring): You're tame enough you should get along with everyone here until I can get time to bring you out with the other ducks. There's nothing wrong with you, except you shouldn't have been sold in a store—and city people at that! (Jumps up and exits again.) I'll be back soon everyone. We all will!

GRETA (looking at duck): Poor thing! (Turns to Angela) Is the shelter always this busy and this full, Angela? Are keepers always placing animals in the first available spots? Are animals always coming without there being room?

HATCH (head snapping up): Did you know there are an estimated 6-8 million dogs and cats entering shelters every year? That's just dogs and cats. And did you know there are only an estimated 4000 shelters? There just aren't enough resources for all needy animals to all be rescued. We're doomed!

GRETA: My goodness, you are a chatty thing!

INCOGNITO (looking at Angela): Is-is th-that tr-true?

ANGELA: Yes, he IS chatty! Oh, you mean what the duck said? I don't know. Some days the animals do seem to just keep coming and coming.... But, this is a rescue organization. Our keepers get every animal checked out by a veterinarian, put on a healthy diet, groomed if needed, and give animals lots of toys and space for play. We have a good life here. And one day we'll get adopted and have a good life with a new owner.

HATCH: Hey, sorry to interrupt, but is there any water around? Ducks need to stay wet and to have lots of water to drink.

ANGELA (nodding): Yes, there's a bird bath with a fountain. Just go out the pet door.

HATCH (exiting): Thanks! Nice to meet you! Good luck! Bye!

Act II

GRETA: While we actually have some quiet, tell me something more about the shelter, Angela. My mistress wanted to help here, because this shelter does rescues. Obviously, it does, but how else do the keepers help animals here?

ANGELA: Well, the shelter operates a low-cost spay/neuter clinic. It serves a four-state area and is so popular that there's always a waiting list. Over 2,000 cats and dogs have been altered, just in the past few years.

HATCH (returning): Doesn't the shelter also specialize in long-distance operations?

GRETA: How does he know that?

ANGELA (chuckling): How does he know anything?

HATCH: I heard the keepers talk. By the way, my name is Hatch.

ANGELA: Hi, I'm Angela. To answer your question, our shelter has placed over 50 dogs alone throughout the United States and Canada. Also, because this is a no-kill shelter, any animal that doesn't get adopted, gets to stay here forever in the sanctuary home.

HATCH: A new fact for me! Thanks! I'm back, because it's starting to get windy and rainy outside. I don't care for bad weather. Ducks do like water, but storms are a completely different matter. Say, what is there to eat?

ANGELA: There's a pantry with a fridge in the next room. You can get bread, peanut butter, cereal, milk, crackers, cheese, rice, and lots of other stuff. Of course, I just eat fish food.

HATCH (shaking head): Bread and crackers and other grains like them aren't healthy for me. I can eat vegetables and hard-boiled eggs. I'll go take a look to see what there is.

ANGELA (waiting until Hatch leaves): He reminds me of Sprinter, always on the move.

INCOGNITO: Wh-what ki-kind of an-animal is Spr-Sprinter?

ANGELA: Sprinter is a hamster and a health nut. He probably could give Hatch some food tips. Sprinter is preparing for a marathon and so is always on the move. He's just a blur. He calls hello as he runs past us. On a normal day, I'd say you'd meet him, but not on a day like this when the whole shelter is in constant motion and chaos.

(The keepers return. The first is holding onto a rope to which a parrot is tethered. Now the keeper unhooks the rope and releases the parrot. The second is holding a bunny.)

CRACKER (flying about stage): Cracker wants Polly. Cracker wants Polly. Cracker wants Polly.

GRETA (looking upward): And this is who?

ANGELA (shrugging): Someone else new.

KEEPER 1: This seems just a good of place as any to let Cracker stay. He can fly around, but by being in just one room he won't get lost.

KEEPER 2: I feel sorry for him, being separated from his friends.

KEEPER 1: Me too, especially this Polly he's pining for. Most of these animals are social and to be separated from their kind, their families, their friends.... It's hard for them.

KEEPER 2: Aren't parrots loud? Won't he bother the fish?

KEEPER 1: They can be, but Cracker just seems to want to mourn. I don't think he'll cause any headaches. Just to be safe, let's grab some toys and food to occupy him. Actually, while we have a few seconds, let's grab food for everyone here. Angela should get fish flakes and some shrimp brine. Greta should get lettuce and apples. Incognito should get fruits and vegetables too. And Cracker, but we should also provide him with seeds.

KEEPER 2 (looking around): Wasn't there a duck around here too?

KEEPER 1 (nodding): Yeah, get some insects, while I see if I can even find him.

KEEPER 2: Should I leave the bunny here?

KEEPER 1: Sure. Guinea pigs and bunnies get along. As for all the others, they won't attack him and Hopper is too small for him to hurt anyone.

(The second keeper puts the bunny on the floor with the other animals. They keepers leave.)

INCOGNITO (taking a deep breath): I'm-I'm Incognito. Is-is there some-something wr-wrong with your le-leg?

HOPPER: I'm Hopper. I can't hop well, because my owners put me in a cage with a wire bottom and I injured my leg. Then they didn't want me.

INCOGNITO: I-I ha-have a ba-bad le-leg too. I was bor-born that way in a mi-mill. My own-owners were go-going to ki-kill me, but the ke-keepers here re-rescued me.

(The keepers return with Hatch. They place him with the other animals.)

KEEPER 1 (admonishing): You need to stay here and not roam.

KEEPER 2 (scanning area): There's getting to be quite a number in here.

KEEPER 1 (pushing hair off forehead): Some days are like this. (Keepers walk towards stage

exit.) We still have some exotics to place, frogs and iguanas I believe. And then we have dogs and dogs and more dogs. I don't know where we're going to put them all until we find them homes.

HATCH (speaking to animals): Frogs shouldn't get sold to people either. They need to stay moist and cool. They require delicate care. They also need ponds. They'll probably get placed with us ducks, if there are more ducks.

HOPPER: You're like a walking encyclopaedia!

HATCH (bowing): Thank you. Did you know that when frogs croak their throats swell? Also, the keepers are right to keep them here. Rabbits get along just fine with frogs. (Eyes the ceiling, from which Cracker hangs.) I don't know about birds though, which means maybe they were wrong.

CRACKER: Won't hurt frogs! Just want Polly! Just want home!

GRETA: What do frogs like to eat? Can you get something for them from the fridge?

ANGELA: Still always caring about others! That's one reason I liked you.

HATCH: Frogs like yard stuff. I'll go outside and see what I can find.

KEEPER 1 (returning with a frog): Everyone, please meet Belcher. Be kind!

KEEPER 2 (picking up Greta): Time to go Greta! They'll be more rescues tomorrow too. You might need to wait to return until things are more settled.

GRETA (waving): Nice to meet everyone! I look forward to seeing you again!

Act III

ANGELA: Nice to see you again Greta!

GRETA (dragging bags behind her): I come bearing gifts.

HOPPER: I like gifts!

(Greta lets go of bags, hobbles around, and hugs everyone she sees.)

INCOGNITO: I li-like hugs!

IGGY: I like grandmothers!

ANGELA (scolding): She's not that old, Iggy!

GRETA (laughing): Sure, I am. Five years is old for a guinea pig. Besides, everyone likes to have a grandmother. They're loving and giving and sweet.

INCOGNITO: M-may we call you Gr-Grandma? You-you are my elder. Or wo-would that make you fe-feel too o-old?

GRETA (hugging Incognito): Grandma Greta would be perfect. Now tell me everything that has happened since my last visit.

ANGELA: Well, not only were the keepers busy with integrating new animals, they were also busy taking care of adoptions. Twenty animals were adopted this past week!

GRETA: What exactly goes into the adoption process? My mistress said it's quite involved.

ANGELA: Yes, our keepers set very high criteria for choosing the right homes. They have an application process. On the application the keepers ask questions that help determine whether the home would be the right one. If the applicant is found to be a good match, the keepers schedule a home visit by a volunteer. Your mistress might sometime get asked to help with visits.

GRETA: I hope someday you get adopted—all of you. Now let me hand out gifts. I've been so looking forward to this!

GRETA: Angela, my dear old friend, I brought you laminating paper. You can draw pictures of everything your heart desires, then laminate them, and stick them around your tank to see.

ANGELA: I shall draw pictures of the pet show first and then sketches of everyone here.

GRETA: And Incognito, my first new friend here, I thought about bringing you cubes so you could build your own maze, you're smart enough, but wanted you to have something different than the rats. I brought you a spy cap, magnifying glass and tape recorder, so you could record your observations.

INCOGNITO: Wa-watch out ev-everyone, I am a spy!

GRETA: Hopper, I thought you might like to dig and build. I got you a tree to plant.

(Hopper silently takes the tree sampling from Grandma. He cradles it and stares at it.)

ANGELA (prompting): Hopper, do you actually have nothing to say? I'm amazed. You *always* talk about anything and everything!

HOPPER (exclaiming): I have a tree to plant! Can I go?

GRETA: Hopper, yes! Go use my gift!

(Hopper drags the sapling backwards off the stage.)

HOPPER (calling over shoulder): Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

IGGY (swinging tail): I like you. You're quiet and nice.

GRETA (beaming): Iggy, I brought you a blanket and a plush dinosaur.

IGGY: I like dinosaurs! Do you know iguanas look like little dinosaurs? And do you know my skin is made out of the same material as human fingernails?

GRETA: Ah, Hatch has given you his fact for the day, has he? As for you, Hatch, I brought a squirt toy for you.

HATCH (accepting gift): Did you know Mancala and Backgammon were among the first games?

GRETA: Interesting! What about the first toys?

HATCH: Dolls, kites, and yo-yos.

BELCHER (groaning): Why do you know about toys, of all things? Of what value are toys?

HATCH (puffing up): I know everything! And toys are fun! (Squirts Belcher) Don't you agree? (The two race around stage playing with Hatch's new toy.)

ANGELA (beckoning them back with fins): Hey, you two, Greta brought a gift for Belcher too!

(Belcher hops next to Grandma. She hands him poster supplies.)

BELCHER: Name your campaign! I'm your man!

GRETA: Just make good use of them and enjoy.

BELCHER: Thank you! (Pushes Hatch towards the stage exit and whispers to him.) What do you know about guinea pigs and their needs?

CRACKER (flying just out of reach of Val): Greta, nice to see you again!

(Val accidentally lands on Iggy's back. She jumps off and shakes herself. Iggy shakes too. Cracker lands beside Angela.)

CRACKER (hooting): Lovely first impression! Lovely first impression! Lovely first impression!

(Val arches her back, extends her claws, hisses, and spits.)

(Cracker retreats to the ceiling of the stage.)

GRETA: Val, how nice to meet you! (Grandma pulls fabric pieces from her bag.) I know you have particular tastes and so I thought you might like to make a quilt. I brought lots of different pieces. Hopefully, some of the designs will fit your life story. I also brought some blank pieces, so that you can create your own designs. (Greta fumbles with the mass of fabric she brought.) Would you mind taking them for me? I'm can't hold things the way I once could.

(Val grabs the fabric, retreats to a corner, and spreads pieces on the floor with her paws.)

GRETA: For you Cracker, I brought cards for you to fill out and send to your friends. If you need help with words, try asking Hatch. He seems to know everything.

CRACKER (landing next to Grandma): Thank you. You've made us all feel a little better about being here. You've made us feel liked and welcomed.

GRETA: (putting thumbs up): Yes!

CURRICULUM IDEAS:

1. Interview the local veterinarians to find out what are options for tagging pets, so that they can be returned to their owner if they lost or otherwise homeless. Decide what would be the best way to tag your pet or the pet of a relative.
2. Research recent disaster events, their effects on pets, and how they got rescued. Now, make a package for your area to prepare for an unexpected disaster.
3. Have each student take a walk around their block, a local park, and a local business area. Look for stray animals. Count how many and what type. Then write a proposal about how to prevent stray animals and another one about how to care for animals after they become strays.
4. Make a gift for your pets. Have a pet show in your classroom and give gifts to the pets.

PLAY EXTENSIONS:

1. Imagine a disaster hit your town. Then imagine that all kinds of animals were being brought to a central shelter. Some were made homeless by the disaster. Some were already homeless. Others still have homes, but need help moving back into them. Portray the mixed emotions animals might feel and how the community might best help them.
2. Imagine you were separated from your pets. Who would you turn for help? How would you react to those who tried to help or those who didn't try to help? Write an act for a play about how you and your pets were reunited.
3. Imagine you found a group of stray and homeless animals. How would you try to help them? How might they react to you? Write an act for a play about how the animals found homes.
3. Imagine you found a group of abused animals. How would you try to help them? How might they react to you? Write an act for a play about how the animals got rescued.

HUA Descriptions of Animals

Tabby Cat – “Val”

Val is a “Valley Girl”...always primping and checking her appearance in the mirror. She talks like a snob, and she thinks she is superior to the others. She is a “Valley-Cat” with real catitude.

Angel Fish – “Angela”

Angela is a beautiful and wise fish. She is kind to her friends, and they respect her very much. Angela is calm and very skilled at giving good advice.

Amazon Parrot – “Cracker”

Cracker is a jokester. He loves to mimic people, and he is always looking for a good time. He is very intelligent, very witty, and full of energy. Cracker had a girlfriend in the rainforest names Polly. Whenever he gets lonely, he says “Cracker wants a Polly”.

Black Lab Puppy – “Midnight”

Midnight is 10 weeks old. She loves EVERYONE. She follows the others around and asks, “Can I play?” She is still a baby, and has needs and actions of a baby.

Duckling – “Hatch”

Hatch was an Easter duckling. A department store in the city was giving away chicks and ducklings for Easter. They only problem was the family that took Hatch had no way to keep him in the city, so Hatch was taken to a farm pond and dumped. Hatch has some pretty strong feelings against making pets out of wildlife or farm animals.

Baby Rabbit – “Hopper”

Hopper is a happy, hyper, honey of a rabbit. His cage was all wire, which caused Hopper to have some foot problems. When his foot problems developed, the family took him to the local animal shelter. Hopper is an eternal optimist, and he hopes that someone will adopt him.

Red-Legged Frog – “Belcher”

Belcher never quite perfected his croak, so when he makes his frog sounds, he makes a deep, long “errrp”. Belcher was sold in a pet shop. He is very concerned that frogs are kept as pets ... Numerous factors in the environment are resulting in the disappearance of many red-legged frogs in their native California. Belcher is angry, and is becoming a spokesman for his followers. He is a frog with an attitude.

Iguana – “Ignacious” (Iggy for short)

Iggy loves to lie in the sun, soaking up the rays and doing nothing for hours. He is always the last one to catch on to jokes. Everyone loves Iggy...he’s just a little slow.

Hamster – “Sprinter”

Sprinter loves to run and work out in his cage. He is kind of a health nut. He runs approximately 2 miles per day on his wheel, and someday he would love to run in a marathon. He loves to tell the others when they look like they have put on a few pounds, and he suggests that they get their own exercise wheel.

Mouse – “Incognito”

Incognito was born with a deformed leg, which causes him to walk with a limp. Incognito knows something about EVERYONE. He is that quiet little mouse in the corner of the room who hears lots of things. He often is unnoticed by the others, but when he speaks the others listen, because he knows a lot!

Guinea Pig – “Grandma Greta”

Grandma Greta is getting near the end of her life. She was a classroom pet in a kindergarten class for 6 years, and then the teacher “retired” Greta. The teacher said that Greta had been a faithful and loving friend to many children. It was now time for her to relax and let people take care of her. Greta is almost blind, so depends on her friends for help getting around. Others come to Greta when they need advice.