

Birds of a Feather Learn Together

By Thomas van Kalken

<<harp music to indicate we're traveling into a dream>>

<<everything has a slight echo>>

<<stadium atmosphere>>

Announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 26th annual paint drying world championships...

<<applause>>

Announcer: This year, representing the United States of America is ... Guy ... Raz!

<<applause>>

Guy: Thank you! Thank you!

Announcer: Competitors, prepare yourselves!

<<affirmations in various languages>>

Announcer: Freshly painted walls at the ready ... on your marks ... get set ... stare!

Audience: <<chanting>> Dry dry dry dry!

<<harp music brings us out of the dream>> <<the chants of dry are replaced with mindy saying guy>> <<the rumble of the ice cream truck going down the freeway fills the space>>

Guy: <<half asleep>> Dry ... dry ... dry ...

Mindy: Guy! Guy! Guy Raz! Wake up! We're almost there!

Reg: Coo!

Guy: <<wakes up with a start>> Ooh! <<yawns>> Oh, Mindy, I was just having the most wonderful dream ...

Mindy: Well it's time to let go of your dreams, Guy Raz.... Look! We're almost at the university!

Guy: <<reading>> University for clever birds ... next exit.

Mindy: I still can't believe my little reggie is all grown up and going off to college.
<<starts welling up>> Ugh, pass me a tissue, reg.

Reg: cCo!

Guy: And UCB, no less! Such a prestigious university! I'm sure you're going to do great there reggie!

Reg: Coo!

<<the ice cream truck slows down and pulls onto a different road>> <<we hear a muted crowd outside the truck as they drive through campus>>

Mindy: And here we are ... the University for Clever Birds ...

<<we hear the ice cream truck start to sputter>> <<pieces of the truck start to fall off>>

Gr: Oof! What was that!?

Mindy: And it looks like we got here just in time

<<the truck sputters to a halt>>

Mindy: Well, this seems like as good a place to stop as any ...

Guy: Mindy! We're right in the middle of a four way intersection! You can't stop here!

Mindy: What do you mean I can't stop here? I just did! ...

Guy: Ugghhhh!

Mindy: Besides ... Reggie's dorm is just around the corner from here. We can just get out and walk the rest of the way!

Reg: Coo!

Mindy: See! We're all set ...walk walk walk walk walk...

Guy: Mindy, wait up!

<<scene change>>

<<college campus atmosphere>> <<crowds of people>>

Guy: Wow, Mindy, look at this place!

Mindy: I know ... look at all these different birds with all their humans. They all must be so proud ...

Reg: Coo!

Orienteer: Hey y'all! Welcome to the University for Clever Birds, known by everyone here as UCB! Can I interest you in a sticker or a sweatshirt or a hat?

Mindy: I'll take all 3!

Orienteer: <<struggling with mindy>> Hey ... what the--wait a minute ... not the hat I'm wearing! Look ... I've got one right here for you ...

<<clothes are handed over>>

Mindy: Ooop, sorry

Orienteer: Sheesh.

Mindy: I'm just so excited.

Orienteer: I suppose I can understand that, what with you dropping off your little bundle of feathers here.

Reggie: Coo!

Orienteer: Oh, I'm just teasin'. I know you're a big bird.

Mindy: Yup! This is my pigeon, Reggie.

Reg: Coo!

Orienteer: They grow up so fast don't they?

Mindy: <welling up again>> Yeah ...

Orienteer: Well, don't worry ... today isn't just about your little Reggie here. We have plenty of events goin on for all ya'll humans too ...

Guy: Oh, really?

Orienteer: You bet! It's all right here in our flyer ...

Mindy: Oooh! I love flyers! Gimmie gimmie gimme ...

<<mindy snatches the paper>> <<paper sfx>>

Orienteer: Oh, for land's sake!

Mindy: Sorry!

Orienteer: <<sigh>> Ok, now, um ... as you can see we've got plenty of activities ... The acapella songbirds are performing at 2 ... there's an aerial display by our resident peregrine falcon at 4 and of course ... ya'll are welcome to sample any one of our in-bird classes.

Mindy: Oooh, free classes!

Orienteer: That's right ... they're all listed on that flyer ... right there, you see

<<points to paper>>

Mindy: <<gasps>> Guy Raz! Look here.

Guy: What is it Mindy?

Mindy: This class ... right here ...

Guy: Trash Can Opening 101 with Professor Birdman <<pronounced birdmun>>? Mindy, what is this?

Mindy: I've heard about this course, Guy Raz ... it's based on a new study from the Australian Museum Research Institute ...

Guy: The Australian Museum Research Institute?

Mindy: That's right ... it's all about how one of Australia's most popular birds ... the sulfur-crested cockatoo ... has learned to open and get into trash cans ... using only its beak ...

Guy: Huh ...

Orienteer: Actually, that's one of our most popular courses.

Mindy: Ooooh can we check it out Guy Raz!?

Guy: I mean, I don't see what's so impressive about opening a trash can, but I'm excited to see what the teaching facilities are like here ...

Mindy: Yay!

Orienteer: Oh, ya'll are going to love it ... the lecture hall is just over thataway ... head past the bird housing and the bird baths and then hang a left before you get to bird seed stadium.

Mindy: Thank you!

Orienteer: <<walking off to another couple>> <<fading out>> Hey y'all!
Welcome to UCB! Can I interest you in a sticker ... sweatshirt ... Hat?

<<a bag is dropped on the ground>>

Reg: Coool!

Mindy: Oh, you're gonna go set up your dorm room?

Reg: Coool!

Mindy: Well, do you need some help decorating??

Reg: Coool!

Mindy: Okay okay ...

Guy: What is it Mindy?

Mindy: Apparently Mr. Independent here doesn't need any help from his humans anymore ...

Guy: Well, Reggie's a full grown pigeon now ... it's time for him to do things for himself. He's finally leaving the nest.

Mindy: Actually Guy Raz, Reggie's new dorm room is a giant nest, soooo ...

Guy: Of course it is.

Reg: Coo.

Mindy: <<to reggie>> alright reggie ... <<to guy>> He says he'll catch up with us later once he's settled in.

<<bag is picked up>>

Reg: Coo!

Guy: See you later Reggie!

Mindy: See you soon buddy!

<<the hustle and bustle of campus continues>>

Guy: Alright Mindy, should we try and find that class?

Mindy: Yeah, let me see if I can find the lecture hall on the map here...

Guy: I think he said it was this way ...

Mindy: Good news! The map says it's this way too! Walk walk walk walk. ...

<<Mindy and Guy walk on>>

Guy: So, Mindy, what exactly is this class about again?

Mindy: Trash cans!

Guy: And how some birds in Australia were able to open them?

Mindy: Sulfur-crested cockatoos, yeah!

Guy: And why is there a class about that?

Mindy: Well, have you ever tried being a bird and opening a trash can?

Guy: No! Actually, I haven't tried doing anything as a bird, mindy!

Mindy: Well, let me tell you from personal experience ... It's really hard to do ... you can't really use your wings, so all you've got to work with are your little bird feet and little bird beak.

Guy: Uh-huh ...

Mindy: And secondly, it's how these birds were able to learn this new skill that's the most interesting part.

Guy: What do you mean?

Mindy: Come to the class and you'll find out! Speaking of which, I think we're here.

Guy: Past the bird baths and left at the seed bell ... Yeah I think this is it
<<reading>> The Larry Bird Lecture Hall ...

Mindy: Come on Guy Raz. Let's get in there before all the seats are taken.

<<transition from outside to inside>> <<the lecture theatre is full>>

Mindy: Ah man! Are we too late!?

Guy: I think I see a couple of seats over there Mindy ...

Mindy: Good eyes, Guy Raz!

<<Mindy and Guy barge their way past people>> <<human annoyance can be heard as well as squawks from various birds>>

<<Mindy and Guy sit down>>

Mindy: Aaaaaand seated! Psst! You want some popcorn?

Guy: What?

Mindy: <<mouthful>> Nothing.

<<the door opens>> <<everyone goes quiet with anticipation>>

<<we hear a flutter of wings and then a bird perch>>

<<a beat>>

Bird: Squark!

<<the audience laughs>> <<all audience sounds should be interspersed with bird noises for the birds that are also in the audience>>

Guy: <<whispering>> Uh, Mindy ...

Mindy: Yeah, Guy Razy?

Guy: Is that supposed to be ...the Professor?

Mindy: I don't know. I mean it is a class about how sulfur-crested cockatoos open trash cans and that is a sulfur-crested cockatoo.

Bird: Squark!

<<the audience laughs again>>

Guy: Mindy! This is awful, I have no idea what's going on! I don't speak cockatoo? Do you?

Mindy: Unfortunately I don't, Guy Raz. I'm only fluent in pigeon and falcon.

Guy: Well then what are we going to do?!

<<we hear the door swing open again>>

Professor: <<british accent>> So sorry for being late everyone! I see you've all met my teaching assistant Lulu ...

Guy: <<to self>> Lulu the cockatoo?

Lulu: Squark!

Professor: Yes, very good. <<clears throat>> Greetings one and all and welcome to how to open a trash can 101! I am Professor Birdmun ...

<<applause>>

Professor: I can see a lot of eager feathered faces out there ready to dive in ...

Mindy: Hey! I don't have a feathered face!

Random: Shhhhh!

Professor: However, this is a gradual learning process. It doesn't just happen overnight ... but! By the end of this course, if you put in the hard yards and commit yourself I guarantee that each and everyone of you will be able to do ... this <<a swoosh of a silk cloth reveal>>

Gr: There's the trashcan!

Professor: ... Lulu, do you mind giving us a demonstration?

Lulu: Squark!

Mindy: She's so small compared to that thing! Is she really going to be able to get the lid off that trashcan?

Random: Shhhh!

<<a flutter of wings>> <<a bird perching>> <<dead silence from the audience>>
<<anticipation builds>> <<we hear lulu shimmying the lid open>> <<finally we hear the lid come off>>

<<the audience breaths a sigh of relief>> <<applause>>

Gr: Whew!

Professor: Yes yes, very good ... now, I know what you all must be thinking; blimey! That's an awfully talented bird you have there mr birdmun ...

Mindy: That's exactly what I was thinking!

Guy: Quiet Mindy!

Random: Shhhhh!

Professor: And that is true ... Lulu is a very talented bird ... however ... this specific behaviour was learned, and, is something that I believe each and everyone of you can learn too!

<<the audience applauds>>

Mindy: Isn't that incredible Guy Raz!

Guy: I'm gonna be honest Mindy ... I still don't see what the big deal is.

Mindy: The big deal Guy Raz ... is that for a long time now, scientists believed that only humans and a few other species like apes and meerkats were capable of learning skills like that from one another.

Guy: You mean skills like opening a trash can?

Mindy: Exactly ... you see a lot of learning in the animal kingdom is genetic ... it's something that they know how to do deep down in their guts ... they're just born knowing it.

Guy: Like a buffalo knowing where to migrate to and at what time of year to do it.

Mindy: Exactly, it's pretty rare that one animal will teach another animal how to do something ...

Guy: Huh, Okay Mindy. I think I'm starting to get why this class is so special.

Professor: Now, you might be asking yourselves ... why would you, a bird, want to open up a garbage bin lid ...

<<Mindy squirms in her seat>>

Mindy: Oooh oooh, me! Me!

Professor: What possible reason could you have for wanting to open a trash can ... uh ... yes ... you, the one with the ants in her pants.

Mindy: Actually, my ants are in my other pants sir. However, I do know the answer to your question.

Professor: And, what is it?

Mindy: <<triumphantly>> To enjoy an all you can eat garbage buffet!

Professor: Well, we in academia call it foraging, but yes! You are essentially correct ... Now foraging is <<the Professor's voice fades out>> the search for provisions, which, for most animals, consists of two phases. The wandering phase and the collection phase...

Guy: So mindy ... these birds have been learning how to open these trash cans to forage for food?

Mindy: That's right, those researchers from Australia called it a ...

Professor: ... researchers from Australia called it a unique foraging behaviour

<<murmur from audience>>

Mindy: What he said.

Guy: Huh ... and how did these scientists know that this ... unique foraging behaviour ... was in fact a learned skill and not something they knew deep down in their bones ...

Mindy: Well, they were able to figure it out with a little help from citizen scientists.

Guy: Citizen scientists?

Mindy: Yes, a citizen scientist is a

Guy: I know what citizen science is mindy. <<very proud>> I'm actually part of a citizen scientist project at the moment with my local lepidopterarium ... uh, a lepidopterarium is a zoo for butterflies ...

Mindy: I know what a lepidopterarium is Guy Raz!

Guy: Well, anyway ... everytime I see a butterfly in my backyard; I make a note about what kind of butterfly it is in my notebook. Then at the end of the week, I send my observations to the scientists at the lepidopterarium so they can get a better idea of what kind of butterflies live in the area.

Mindy: Huh ... that's pretty wow.

Guy: Yeah! Just because I'm not a scientist doesn't mean I can't help with scientific research!

Mindy: You're right! And it's exactly what these researchers from Australia did.

Guy: They called for help from some citizen scientists?

Mindy: Exactoritos! These researchers, with the help of everyday citizen scientists ... observed this behaviour in more than 40 different neighbourhoods around the Australian city of Sydney.

Guy: Huh

Professor: Now, I have a few visual aides here...

Mindy: Oh look! Professoressor birdman has a map of it up on the big screen ...

Professor: On this map of Sydney ... these dots here mark where cockatoos were observed opening trash cans. As you can see, the dots are not scrambled all over the city ... no, instead they are strung together ... one neighbourhood ... to another

Guy: He's right Mindy, look at that map ... all of those observations seem to be attached to each other ...

Mindy: Meaning ...

Guy: Meaning that this unique foraging behavior of opening trash cans ... is being spread by word of mouth!

Mindy: Well technically it's being spread by word of beak, but yeah!

Gr: Fascinating!

Mindy: As you can see on the map, it looks as though this behaviour is traveling from one neighbourhood to the next.

Professor: And as we can see this behaviour is traveling from one neighbourhood to the next.

Audience: Ooooh.

Mindy: Hey! That's what I said.

Professor: And this used to be the only way that one could learn this sort of behaviour. Word of beak! But now, thanks to this new course at ucb, we'll be able to pass on these crucial life skills to all you little birdies!

<<applause>>

Professor: Thank you so much and I look forward to seeing all of your feathery faces at the start of the semester.

<<applause>>

<<the crowd starts shuffling out>>

Mindy: Hey, Guy Raz ... let's get outta here ... this lecture hall's getting a little stuffy!

Guy: Yeah and we should probably go check on Reggie.

Mindy: Walk walk walk walk ...

Guy: Y'know Mindy, that class was actually a lot more enlightening than I thought it would be.

Mindy: I know...And that new research can really help us understand how animals learn from each other ...

Gr: And also how animals are able to adapt to urban environments, like big cities.

Mindy: You mean like how animals and humans can live together in the big city?

Gr: Exactly!

Mindy: You know...There's a lot we can learn from bird college. Whadday say we get ourselves from feathery toucan suits and enroll ourselves?

Gr: Whaddaya say we don't?

Mindy: Oooooopening the door ...

<<doors open>> <<transition to outdoor college atmosphere>>

Mindy: Ahhhhh! Good to get back out in the fresh air.

<<flutter of wings>>

Reg: Coo!

Mindy: Reggie!

Guy: Wow! Look at you Reggie, you're dressed head to toe in UCB spiritwear!
You've got the hat ... the jacket ... the <<pauses>> ... cape?

Reg: Coo! Coo coo!

Mindy: Oh boy ...

Guy: What is it Mindy?

Mindy: You're not going to believe this!

Reg: Coo!

Guy: Believe what?

Mindy: Reggie's made a new friend!

Guy: That's great news! I knew he'd fit in here.

Mindy: With a cockatoo!

Cockatoo: Coo

Guy: Oh.

Mindy: And the cockatoo has invited us all to lunch.

Gr: Oh, what a nice offer

Cockatoo: Coo

Mindy: Care to guess where we'll be getting this lunch?

Guy: Oh no....Not the....

Mindy: <<bleeps and bleeps>> Let me just plug in directions to the nearest trash can...

Reg: Coo!

Cockatoo: Coo

Gr: You know, I had a really big breakfast earlier and I'm doing this intermittent fasting thing, and I've got all of these bird seeds in my pocket here for snacking on and...<< trails off>>

THE END