

Birdgirl On Walkabout



James Armstrong

Norman Maine Publishing

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*For my sisters,
Maya and Christine.*

*Maybe someday
we'll make it to the Grand Canyon
after all.*

Birdgirl on Walkabout

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Birdgirl on Walkabout premiered June 8, 2000, as part of the Boston Playwrights' Platform Summer Festival of New Plays.

MIRIAM: Stephanie Fredericks

BILLY: Louis See

Birdgirl on Walkabout

Winner of the Best Play Award
Boston Playwrights' Platform Annual Festival of New Plays

DRAMA. A brother and sister head west on a roadtrip to visit the Grand Canyon when their car breaks down in an Arizona desert. Stranded, the two must confront pain, anger, and confusion as they search for meaning in their lives. Billy, the pragmatic younger brother, ridicules his idealistic sister, Miriam, for her desire to pursue the wonders and beauty of life. As layers of the past are revealed, the tension between these opposing realities erupts. This compelling coming-of-age drama evokes both the disturbing uncertainties of life and the necessity of forgiveness and understanding.

Performance Time: Approximately 25 minutes.

Characters

(1 m, 1 w)

MIRIAM: 22, aspiring ornithologist; idealistic.

BILLY: 19, Miriam's younger brother; cynical, pragmatic.

Setting

Eastern Arizona desert. The present, summer, about noon. The interior and exterior of a run-down auto-repair station office. A screen door separates the outside from the inside of the office. Inside the office is a bench made out of the old seat of an automobile. Just offstage is a soda machine (unseen by the audience). On the wall hangs an old yellow sign that reads, "Smiley's Garage." Outside, is the sky.

Props

Purse
Coins

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(AT RISE: As the lights come up, Miriam appears outside the office, her hair in a bun. She is about to go inside but stops short of the screen door and lets down her hair. She shakes the dust from her hair and allows it to cascade down over her face. Billy appears behind Miriam.)

BILLY: You look like Cousin It. *(Miriam enters the office, letting the screen door slam behind her. She sets her purse down on the bench and puts her hair in a ponytail. Billy follows her into the room.)* I don't trust that guy.

MIRIAM: He seemed really nice.

BILLY: Yeah, well Dad always said, "Never trust a mechanic."

MIRIAM: Billy, this is the same man who thought that the Yugo was a piece of fine craftsmanship.

BILLY: We should've kept driving.

MIRIAM: That would've been stupid.

BILLY: The guy's probably going to charge us a couple grand for a hose.

MIRIAM: I would have seen it if it were a hose.

BILLY: Not if it...

MIRIAM: I would have seen it if it were a hose.

BILLY: And you know about cars? Right. Whatever, Birdgirl.

MIRIAM: Don't call me that.

BILLY: You got some change for the Coke machine?

(Miriam hands him some money.)

MIRIAM: Here. Give me a sip.

(Billy exits. A brief pause.)

BILLY: *(Offstage.)* Shoot!

MIRIAM: What's wrong?

BILLY: (*Offstage.*) It ate my money.

(*A loud rattling is heard, as Billy shakes the machine.*)

MIRIAM: Don't shake it. You could crush yourself.

BILLY: (*Offstage.*) You sound just like Mom.

MIRIAM: It's true. More Americans per capita are killed annually by vending machines than any other nationality.

(*The rattling stops. Billy enters.*)

BILLY: What?

MIRIAM: I read it somewhere.

BILLY: Why Americans?

MIRIAM: I don't know. We're just impatient, I guess.

BILLY: Sure, Birdgirl.

(*Billy exits and resumes shaking the machine.*)

MIRIAM: Stop that!

BILLY: (*Offstage.*) It ate my money!

MIRIAM: It was my money. (*Miriam exits momentarily and returns with the change in her hand.*) Look. It didn't even accept it. No wonder why, all the "empty" lights are on.

(*Billy enters.*)

BILLY: Oh.

MIRIAM: You should've seen that beforehand.

BILLY: They don't have anything to drink?

MIRIAM: Well, you already drank that whole cooler we brought.

BILLY: It's a desert. I'm thirsty, so sue me.

MIRIAM: If you didn't drink so much, we wouldn't have to stop every half an hour for you to pee.

BILLY: I refuse to be judged by the size of my bladder.

MIRIAM: Well, if it weren't for your pit stops, we'd be making a lot better time.

BILLY: Time? To where? We're not going anywhere.

MIRIAM: Well, the Grand Canyon. Generally. That direction.

BILLY: Great.

MIRIAM: I'd like to see the Grand Canyon. Look, you asked to come along.

BILLY: To get away from Mom!

MIRIAM: Well, stop complaining.

BILLY: Sure thing, Birdgirl.

MIRIAM: Stop...

BILLY: Fine! Calm down.

MIRIAM: I wish you'd stop teasing me.

BILLY: Sorry, it's just...you're so easy to tease! I mean come on...an ornithologist? An aspiring ornithologist? What a bird-brained idea! You're so flighty! Ornithology is for the birds!

MIRIAM: Stop it.

BILLY: Or what? You'll flip me the *birdie*?

MIRIAM: Just stop. Okay?

BILLY: All right. You have to admit, though, it's kinda weird my sister's gonna be...

MIRIAM: I'm not.

BILLY: Oh, get off it. You are and you know it.

MIRIAM: No, I don't. Not anymore. I'm just confused.

BILLY: But they already accepted you into the program, Miriam. They're even giving you a fellowship.

MIRIAM: But is that what I want to do? You said yourself it's weird. Do I really want to spend the rest of my life studying birds?

BILLY: Well, yeah.

MIRIAM: But what's the point? What will I have to show for it?

BILLY: Don't ask me. Hey, just *wing* it. Why are you thinking about all this now, anyway?

MIRIAM: I don't know. It's just...ever since I was accepted, I've been asking, "Is this...?" What does it all mean?

BILLY: You know what your problem is, Featherbutt? You think too much. It's too hot to think.

(Miriam looks at landscape.)

MIRIAM: It's beautiful, though.

(Billy looks around, unimpressed.)

BILLY: It's a desert. There's nothing here.

MIRIAM: How can you say that? Just look out there. Look at all the colors.

BILLY: Why people like deserts, I'll never know.

MIRIAM: I'd never seen one before. Not really. I mean, I'd seen pictures, and on TV...

BILLY: Ugh! There's like an inch of dust on this bench...

MIRIAM: And those old westerns Dad watches are always in the desert, but I'd never been to the Southwest...

BILLY: Why couldn't she have found herself at Daytona Beach?

MIRIAM: It's a whole part of the country I'd never seen before, Billy. I wanted to see what it was like. That's all. And I like it. Yes. I think I like it.

BILLY: Well, that's a good thing, because we're going to be here for the rest of our natural lives.

MIRIAM: He'll fix the car.

BILLY: And charge us through the nose.

MIRIAM: The guy towed us all that way. I mean, he didn't have to.

BILLY: He wanted our business.

MIRIAM: No. He seemed sorry for us.

BILLY: Sorry for us?

MIRIAM: Yeah. Two kids stranded out in the middle of the desert. He seemed sorry for us. I trust him.

BILLY: You're trusting a mechanic? Trusting a mechanic with your car is like trusting Rasputin to take care of your wife and kid. You're hopeless.

MIRIAM: *(Injured.)* Yes. I suppose that I am.

BILLY: *(Ignoring her.)* Ugh. My kingdom for a glass of iced tea.

MIRIAM: Billy, do you think I should've been a doctor?

BILLY: What?

MIRIAM: Do you think I should've been a doctor?

BILLY: You're so random.

MIRIAM: Maybe I should've applied to med school after all.

BILLY: Yeah, but you didn't. It's too late.

MIRIAM: You think that. You think I made a mistake. You think I should've been a doctor.

BILLY: I don't think anything, Birdgirl. It's too hot!

MIRIAM: Sorry.

BILLY: Don't be sorry. Listen, I gave up on you a long time ago.

MIRIAM: I know.

BILLY: You *are* hopeless.

(Miriam goes outside through the screen door.)

MIRIAM: Billy, come here.

BILLY: It's even hotter outside.

MIRIAM: Just come out here and take a look.

(Billy goes half outside but still hangs onto the screen door.)

BILLY: I see rocks.

MIRIAM: *(Looks up, points.)* Look up there. There's a hawk circling above us.

BILLY: *(Looks up.)* I think that's a vulture.

MIRIAM: Who's the bio major?

BILLY: Fine. A hawk.

MIRIAM: Watch him. He's soaring.

BILLY: I'm thirsty.

MIRIAM: Quiet! Just look. Look at the wings.

BILLY: I wish that loser had restocked...

MIRIAM: Will you shut up?! (*Billy goes back into the office. Miriam follows him.*) We've been driving through some of the most beautiful highway in the country, and all you've done for the past week is complain. Well, I'm sick of it.

BILLY: Well, I'm sick of it too. I wish I never came on this stupid trip!

MIRIAM: Well, I wish I'd never let you! All you've done is make the whole thing miserable for me.

BILLY: Well excuse...

MIRIAM: Shut up! (*Regaining control.*) Look, we'll both just not say anything for a while, okay?

BILLY: Fine with me. (*Both sit down in silence for a few moments. Billy is about to say something, but then thinks better of it. They sit, not looking at each other. A long, unbearable silence.*) I'm hot.

MIRIAM: Great. That was a wonderful fifteen seconds.

BILLY: I can't help it. I'm hot.

MIRIAM: Well, I'm hot too. Everybody's hot. Do you know why everybody is hot? It is Arizona, Billy. It is Arizona in the summer, and Arizona in the summer is hot!

BILLY: Don't talk to me like that!

MIRIAM: Like what?

BILLY: Like I'm a little kid.

MIRIAM: That's what you're acting like.

BILLY: Just because you're my big sister, you think that you always know what's best for me.

MIRIAM: Well, I usually do!

BILLY: Things are different now. I'm the one who knows what he's doing now. Look at yourself! You're wandering around in the middle of nowhere trying to decide something you've already decided anyway.

MIRIAM: Did I ever say I had all the answers?

BILLY: You don't have any of the answers, Birdgirl. You don't even have a clue.

MIRIAM: I may not have made the same decisions as you...

BILLY: You haven't *made* any decisions. You just let things happen to you.

MIRIAM: (*Unsure.*) That's not true.

BILLY: Just like now. Going out into a desert and praying for enlightenment or something. I'm sorry, but that's just stupid. You're acting just like Mom.

MIRIAM: I am not acting like Mom.

BILLY: Yes, you are! This is just like those stupid little mind games she always plays. "Who am I?" "Where is my life?"

MIRIAM: Well, I don't know.

BILLY: You know darn well where your life is. It's cooped up in some stupid university somewhere never again to see the light of day.

MIRIAM: Things just aren't clear.

BILLY: The only things that aren't clear are why you wanted to go on this stupid trip to begin with, why I was stupid enough to come with you, and why Smiley-the-missing-link is looking at the engine when the car is perfectly fine.

MIRIAM: The car is not fine.

BILLY: Why do you always have to be inventing problems for yourself? I have no respect for you. (*He turns away.*)

MIRIAM: I can't believe you just said that.

BILLY: I'm not taking it back.

MIRIAM: Billy, look at me. Billy. (*Billy turns around.*) Did you see that hawk?

BILLY: Yeah.

MIRIAM: What did you see?

BILLY: A bird. What was I supposed to see?

MIRIAM: It was flying. Did you ever think about how weird that really is? There's an animal flying through the air. We see birds all of our lives, so we don't think about how incredible it actually is.

BILLY: So?

MIRIAM: Try to look at it as if it were the first time you've ever seen a bird. It's, it's...

BILLY: Stupid.

MIRIAM: No. It's a miracle.

BILLY: If we ever get our car fixed, that will be a miracle.

MIRIAM: You don't understand.

BILLY: No. I guess I don't.

MIRIAM: I just can't see myself as a doctor.

BILLY: Hey, did I say anything about being a doctor? It's too late for you. I've already given up.

MIRIAM: I'm hopeless.

BILLY: Why did I come out here?

MIRIAM: You always sounded so proud when you told people I was going to be a doctor.

BILLY: Sure. I could never stand the sight of blood.

MIRIAM: But if I close my eyes and try to imagine what kind of doctor I would make, when I try to visualize myself ten, 20 years from now – a physician – I, I just go blank.

BILLY: Can you see yourself watching hawks 20 years from now?

MIRIAM: No. No, I suppose not.

BILLY: See. No difference. A doctor just happens to *do* something, to *accomplish* something, and to make about ten times more.

MIRIAM: I knew you'd get to that sooner or later.

BILLY: Oh, yes! The selfish little materialistic brother! Just because I don't want to starve doesn't mean that money is all I care about.

[End of Freeview]