

Fear of Falling*

Geraldine

Alice, Geraldine's daughter

Emma, an acquaintance

Dr. Geras, a primary care doctor

Chorus (Greek)/Narrator

Chorus/Narrator: Geraldine and Emma both in their 80s, are waiting to see their primary care doctor, Dr. Geras.

Geraldine: Oh, Emma, do you have an appointment today?

Emma: I do.

Geraldine: (proudly) My daughter, Alice, brought me. Alice, I've told you about my friend Emma. We go to the same bingo session at the community center. *And* we have the some lovely doctor, Dr. Geras.

Emma: Nice to meet you, Alice.

Alice: Hi Emma.

Emma: I had to get a cab. I hate doing that. They always promise to come back as soon as I call, but they never do.

Alice: We can give you a lift, Emma, back to Shady Havens.

Emma: I would be so grateful!

Alice: I wish ma would move in there. I am just so worried about her falling.

Geraldine: Oh Alice, you know I don't want to leave the house... (pointedly) the house where *you* grew up! (To Emma) I'm here for a check-up. And I need a referral for one of those bone tests.

Emma: Dexa-scan? I get those too, every couple of years. How are your bones?

Geraldine: Terrible. Dr. Geras says they are like bird bones. I have osteoporosis.

Emma: Oh my dear I'm sorry to hear that.

Geraldine: You and me both. When I first found out, it felt like I was made of glass. Dr. Geras told me it was so advanced I could have a compression fracture just by sneezing or coughing or bending down the wrong way. I was terrified!

Emma: No wonder. How are you doing now?

Geraldine: I've been taking medication – the same one Sally Fields takes – and my bones are getting denser.

Emma: That sounds like a good thing.

Geraldine: Oh it is. But I'm so afraid of falling and breaking something, especially a hip.

Emma: That can be the end of you. Dr. Geras told me that 15-20% of women die within a year of a hip fracture.

Geraldine: Exactly. She told me (imitating doctor's voice), "In your sixties you break your wrist (I finally agreed to get that DEXA-thingy after I broke *my* wrist - twice!); in your seventies it's your spine; and in your eighties, it's your hips."

Chorus: (sings) London Bridges falling down, falling down...

Emma: I've had some falls myself recently. Luckily, nothing broke, but still. It makes me afraid to move around, for fear I'll fall down. And it's so embarrassing, I'd just rather stay home than risk somebody seeing me.

Geraldine: (confidentially) You know, I don't even use the upstairs part of my own home any more. Alice got me one of those electric chairs because she was afraid I'd tumble down the staircase, but I'm afraid to use it. Once it got stuck halfway up, and I had to climb out and get up the rest of the way on my own. I was sure I'd miss my footing and fall. I've never got in that contraption again.

Alice: Ma, I can't believe you won't use the chair. And it was so expensive!

Emma: I'm getting so I don't like to go anywhere unfamiliar. I'm afraid the ground will be uneven and I'll trip and go down like a ton of bricks.

Chorus: (singing) Take a key and lock her up, lock her up, lock her up...

Nurse: Geraldine, Dr. Geras is ready for you.

Geraldine and Alice: Bye Emma, see you later.

Dr. Geras: Hi Geraldine. Hi Alice. How's everything?

Geraldine: Not so good, Dr. Geras. I'm terrified I'll fall down!

Alice: I'm terrified she'll fall down too! I worry about her all the time. My biggest fear is that I'll come over and she'll have been on the floor for hours with a fracture or worse.

My cell is on 24/7. If something happens to her, I feel it'll be my responsibility. I want her to move into an assisted living facility so I can get some peace of mind.

Geraldine: I'll never do it!

Dr. Geras: Well, this doesn't sound good. Geraldine, it's true you are at greater risk for falling because of your increasing frailty, and especially because you have some weakness, a slow walking speed, and generally low physical activity.

Geraldine: (with some asperity) Of course I have low physical activity. It takes all my energy to get out of bed, get dressed, and make my breakfast. What? Do you expect me to be a gymnast?

Dr. Geras: (ignores this question) Also, now that you've been diagnosed with MCI, your risk of falling is increased.

Geraldine: What's MCI?

Alice: Ma, remember? Mild cognitive impairment.

Geraldine: There's nothing wrong with my memory!

Dr. Geras: (ignores this exchange) We'll also review your medications, and make sure you're not taking any more drugs than is absolutely necessary. And let's send you to the ophthalmologist to make sure your glasses are correct. Geraldine, have you had any recent falls?

Geraldine: (embarrassed) A couple of stumbles.

Dr. Geras: And what do you think is causing these falls?

Geraldine: I have no idea! It's so frightening. I didn't know what happened, I was down on the ground. Now the fear sticks with me.

Alice: I feel helpless. I can't stand it. I can't control the situation. Ma doesn't listen to my advice.

Geraldine: What advice? Don't fall down?! What kind of advice is that?

Chorus: (singing) Build it up with wood and clay, wood and clay, wood and clay...

Alice: Oh ma. I told you to be careful when you stand up from a chair.

*Based loosely on Faes MC, Reelick MF, Joosten-Weyn Banningh W, de Gier M, Esselink RA, Olde Rikkert MG. Qualitative study on the impact of falling in frail older persons and family caregivers: Foundations for an intervention to prevent falls. *Aging & Mental Health* 2010;14 (7):834-342; and guidelines for fall prevention from the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons.

Geraldine: Same thing.

Alice: Ma, you take a huge risk by keeping on doing things when you're too tired. You're too stubborn!

Geraldine: Oh, all right boss. (To Dr. Geras) See how she treats me like a child?

Alice: I don't want to be the parent, but somebody has to take charge.

Geraldine: You don't like to admit it, Alice, but falling is just a natural part of aging. There's no way to control it and there's no way to change it.

Chorus: (singing) Wood and clay can wash away, wash away, wash away...

Dr. Geras: Not necessarily, Geraldine. You know, many falls are preventable.

Geraldine: I can't believe that. If I don't know why I'm falling, how can I stop them?

Dr. Geras: Loss of independence and increased withdrawal are serious long-term problems resulting from the fear of falling. What steps have you taken to reduce falls?

Alice: My husband and I installed grab rails, we removed the throw rugs, and arranged for better lighting. We put in a raised toilet seat, and added non-slip strips to the shower. We even put colored strips on the first and last steps from the front door.

Geraldine: You gave me one of those buzzers to press in case I fall. But the one time I tried it, that last time I stumbled, nobody came. I had to pull myself up all by myself. I'll never use it again!

Alice: (exasperated) Ma, we discussed that. It was a system malfunction. They gave us a refund for the month. You are so stubborn! (To Dr. Geras) We also bought her a cane, and a walker. We thought those might help. But it still doesn't seem like enough.

Dr. Geras: In fact, Alice, those are all excellent ideas. At least one-third of falls are caused by hazards in the external environment. I think your mom's walking should be formally evaluated so that a trained geriatric physical therapist can decide whether she needs specific assistive devices, such as the cane or walker, which ones would most benefit her, and instruct her how to use them properly. (To Geraldine) Geraldine, you might benefit from a fall prevention program. In fact, you both might benefit from attending such a program. You'll both learn about what causes falls. You'll get valuable tips about how to walk, how to stand up safely, and even how to fall.

Geraldine: How to fall?!

Dr. Geras: It's all about balance and strength. You'll learn to develop your balance and increase your strength.

Geraldine: I'm too old to have any balance or strength.

Dr. Geras: Don't be too sure about that. Even people in their 90s can benefit from careful exercise, such as gentle water exercise or tai chi.

Geraldine: Tie what?

Alice: Ma, it's that exercise old Chinese people do. You know, in the park?

Dr. Geras: Well, tai chi is good for all kinds of people.

Alice: You know, I'm old too. Maybe I could learn a few things that would help me as well as ma. And this way I'd be able to help supervise whatever they told her to do.

Geraldine: All right, if you'll drive me, I'll go.

Dr. Geras: Now let's make sure we order another DEXA-scan...

Chorus: (singing) Build it up with iron bars, iron bars, iron bars...