

Walter and the Duckling

By
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For Julie

The sunlight, streaming through the tear in the windowshade, awakened Walter in the morning, as it had every morning for the last dozen years or so. He arose from his old bed in the corner of the room, and, as he had every morning for all those years, stretched until his broad hands brushed against the ceiling with its peeling strips of paint.

It was a morning pretty much like other mornings; in fact they were all alike now, since he'd retired. His birthday--had he really walked this earth seventy-six years? he wondered -- was in a few weeks, not that there was anybody but him to celebrate it, since try as they might he and Eloise, rest her soul, had never conceived a child. No, he kept his own company these days, and it wasn't all that bad, after all: couldn't he for hours just sit in his old smoking chair and relive his memories? Being an old man had its pleasures.

After his stretch he pushed aside the shade to see what weather the Lord had given him today. He looked out from the Boston side over the calm, steady Charles River. He had a nice apartment that way, he wouldn't trade it for any old folks' home, thank you very much, no matter how cheap. He could look over the roadway and see the river, and the riverbank, and watch whatever happened to be going on then.

On warm days, such as today was promising to be--about time, he thought, being April and all--sometimes the schoolchildren would show up on the grassy riverbank over to the left of the stand of birches. They'd feed the ducks crumpled-up pieces of stale bread, sometimes pieces of apple, sometimes pieces of Oreo cookie; Walter wondered how that went down those ducks' gullets, but they kept coming back for more. And the children, they always loved feeding the ducks. Walter had watched them now so long he'd seen some grow up--back in the seventies, was it? he'd seen his first batch of children, him being new in his new pad, as he called it back then; and in the eighties he'd seen the same children, a bit older; and in the nineties, the children, now shy teenagers with their giggling girlfriends; and weren't they the same children who came by just last week with their own little ones?

And, all those years, the Charles had peacefully flowed, its gentle wavelets lapping the shores. A lot of water under the bridge, Walter thought. A whole lot.

Sometimes when the children were there Walter left his apartment and walked nearby, just to hear their voices and their laughter. The children loved the ducks' funny quacking, and their

pompous waddling, and their snow-white feathers, which, when found on the ground by an excited toddler, became instant treasures.

Today was Wednesday, which was Grocery Day. Every day had a significance to Walter: Monday was Bank Day, on which he deposited his Social Security check, received on Friday (Mail Day). Saturday was Phone Day, on which he called his old friend Nathan back home in Jackson, Mississippi; Nathan lived with his children in a suburb, no less. Walter didn't mind the daily routine at all -- since everything he had to do was laid out already, he could let his mind wander and contemplate other more important things, like remembering Eloise.

Keeping her in his mind was something he committed himself to. Since he knew he'd be meeting up with her pretty soon he wanted her fresh in his mind.

This afternoon after Groceries he knew he'd find himself looking out the window again, putting aside the old shade. And, since it was a nice enough day, he knew he'd see her; her meaning not Eloise, God rest, but her meaning a certain young woman who came every day to feed the ducks. Walter didn't remember her as a child; she'd only started coming to the riverbank near Walter's apartment a few weeks ago or so.

She was very pretty. She had long black hair which lightly brushed against her shoulders, and the kindest smile Walter had ever seen. When he saw her Walter couldn't help being reminded of his own youth, before the curly hair on his own head turned grey, then white, and then finally mostly fell out.

Back in the fifties, back when he was her age, they called him Negro, a colored man; a man whose skin, and whose soul, was not as pure as whites'. In the sixties all that changed: Walter still thrilled whenever he thought of Dr. King's speech on the Capitol steps; and he remembered as well that day in April in Memphis, when Dr. King's dream came to a terrible end. At that moment Walter was no longer white man's sidekick but an angry and determined black man. His heart was with Malcolm X, and with that bomb-thrower Stokely Carmichael. Dr. King's death made him a fighter, and he led demonstrations, and chanted Black Power, and sat in, and registered voters, and speechified.

And, looking back, he could see now that times really had changed. And so, he knew, had he. Because now he looked in the mirror and could see not a colored man, or a Negro, or even a black man, but just a man, a *man*, pure and simple. That he could feel that way about himself gave him peace, and contentment in his old age.

Lately, he'd noticed, a young man had been showing up on the riverbank around about the same time as the young woman. He'd come by, oh, no more than fifteen minutes later than her, and would sit himself down on the park bench and watch her feed the always-hungry ducks. She, for her part, generally pretended not to notice him.

Shyness! Imagine, in this day and age, thought Walter, who knew perfectly well what was going on. For you are never too old to recognize love when you see it. Walter watched television from time to time, a half hour or so until his tired eyes couldn't focus on the little screen anymore, and

one thing he never saw on all those soap operas and sitcoms and miniseries was a boy and a girl being shy with one another.

Men and women were sure shy in his day, though. Walter could remember having to summon up every last ounce of courage back when he was all of sixteen to ask Eloise just to go to a movie. He was so scared that he was sweating when he finally did ask, and after she said yes, he very nearly passed out; he remembered how the world suddenly got dark. They'd both gotten a good laugh from that, years later when he could tell her about it, when he wasn't shy anymore. That was long after they were married, after the friendship between them had started, the friendship which lasted them some forty-eight years.

Walter reminisced on all things so long that he nearly forgot to go collect his groceries, few though they were. On the walk back from the store Walter noticed the golden setting sun over his apartment building, and it occurred to him that the sun seemed unusually bright that day, and uncommonly beautiful, though for no apparent reason.

After putting the groceries away Walter peeked out his window, and, sure enough, there was the young lady feeding the ducks; and there was her shy admirer, walking down the street towards his park bench.

It was at that moment that Walter conceived of his plan. He laughed out loud as it unfolded in his mind, and did a little jig on his kitchen floor. It was sure to work.

The sun set; darkness came down over Boston like a wool blanket. But instead of going to bed promptly at eight o'clock as he always had, Walter stole away outside, crossed the street to the now deserted riverbank. He stealthily walked right down to the water's edge.

Like a hungry tomcat he stealthily snuck up on the duck's nest. He could see them now, the mother duck and one, two, three ducklings. Oh, he was quiet! Just like back home in Mississippi where he and Nathan could sneak up on rabbits without them knowing it.

He reached down and grabbed one of the ducklings. Instantly it started to squeak piteously, and an enraged Mama Duck squawked loudly, and snapped at Walter, to no avail. "Hush, Mama," he whispered, "I'm serving a higher cause now, and your baby will come back to you tomorrow, I promise."

He took the duckling back home with him, and held it in his hands to keep it warm all night long. He only took short little naps that night, for fear he'd let go of the duckling, and it'd catch cold, or the like.

The next morning Walter dug out of the medicine cabinet an old eye dropper he'd had ten or fifteen years ago for some drops he'd had for pinkeye, which the doctors said he'd contracted by swimming in the then-polluted Charles. Whatever, he thought, as he cleaned the old dropper. Then he gave the duckling a little water from the dropper which it drank greedily.

Walter waited for the afternoon when the woman and the man would appear. Sure enough, on time she showed. As he peered out of his window and saw the young man, Walter gathered up the squeaking duckling and went outside.

He quickly crossed the street, and ran, on legs that suddenly felt alive again, to the stand of birch trees. The young man was just now sitting on his bench. The girl glanced at him quickly; Walter could see just the hint of a smile on her face as she saw her admirer.

Walter and the duckling were hidden from the man and woman now, behind the birch trees. Now for the moment of truth, he thought. He let the duckling down on the ground, gave it a little shove toward the park bench, and then hurried back to his apartment to watch.

Rushing back inside, he took deep breaths; not a young man anymore! he thought, not enough room in my chest to hold all the air I need! He anxiously looked outside. To his dismay, the duckling hadn't moved an inch.

"Come on, little duck!" Walter shouted. "Come on, run to the nice people!" But the duck wouldn't move. "RUN, DUCKLING!" Walter shouted again, and though the little creature could not have possibly heard, it was as if it had, for suddenly it ran as fast as it could out from the birches.

The young man and the young woman noticed the duckling at the same time. The man was closer, and moved to rescue the tiny bird. The young woman raced to him, and as he held the duckling, and began to stroke it tenderly, Walter could see the young woman and the young man noticing each other, and noticing each other's eyes, and looking down into each other's eyes, and each other's souls.

Not too many of us are granted such a moment in our all-too-short lives, that is, to see true love between two people ignited; but such was Walter's good fortune. And when, only an instant later, Walter knew that the Good Lord wanted him to end his days on this old earth, he didn't mind particularly.