

Duck Tales

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Added new "duck fan" opening 7/26/10

A LITTLE DUCK TALES

Duck Tales

At the age of five, I see my first Mallard floating serenely on the shallow pond near the Scarsdale train station and become a serious duck fan. I am hooked. Here's an animal with almost chillingly beautiful green iridescent feathers, actually floating on the top of water and moving with an unseen power which only reveals itself as he comes closer. In the shallow water near the shore I can see his webbed feet paddling. Months later, on this pond, I see a Wood Duck sporting wildly extravagant feathers of green, yellow, blue, black, white, light grey, flaming red eyes and a robust breast of colorful white-spotted russet feathers. I stare in open-mouthed wonder and admiration. I've never seen anyone dressed this fancy.

In the Saturday movies, Donald Duck makes me laugh because he talks a "quack-talk" and when he is angry, he sputters. For years I wonder why such a character wears a hat, jacket and formal bow tie but runs around with no pants on. I'm amused by this and find the idea of running around pantless intriguing and slightly erotic.

Later in life, when I become an aviator, I develop an even greater appreciation for duck talents. They can move around so many more ways than people. A duck can swim on the water and under it. Ducks can waddle considerable distances and if they're in a rush fly, navigating to a particular pond thousands of miles away.

It must be swell to be able to swim all day, dive underwater for lunch, take a stroll and then just fly off to another pond.

Ducks are so graceful with their long necks and gently curved heads sloping forward to beaks of just the right length. They remind me of a curvy yacht.

Years later while driving through Maine, I stop at a woodcarver's roadside stand displaying hunter's decoys. I look at his hand-painted wood birds and notice one decoy that hasn't yet been painted. It is a raw duck in its purest form, softly carved and shaped from a single block of wood. I ask if I can buy the unpainted bird. He looks insulted and shrugs saying, "Sure, but it ain't gonna be as pretty as when I get finished with it." For me, the beauty is in the ducks graceful form. Today it sits high on the ledge of my bedroom loft and after 45 years still makes me smile when I wake to see this beautiful bird glowing in a splash of rising sunlight.

Soda Quackers (This section read HVWC 7/20/10)

"Oh, how adorable! Does he sleep with marbles pressed into his cheeks?" They say this and poke fingers into my dimples. For a nine-year old, all this attention is not fun. Still, whenever Mom takes me to Nielsen's Ice Cream Parlor, Scarsdale's official ladies lunch place in town, her friends will pass by our table to say hello and torture me. I suffer this ordeal for the reward of a two-scoop ice cream soda because sugar is a rare treat during World War II.

Hoping to discourage any more cheek-poking, I make loud gurgling sounds, sucking the last sweet droplets of chocolate milk from the bottom of the glass. The liquid is gone so I suck mightily at a glob of vanilla ice cream, collapsing the straw.

I dip a long-handled spoon into the glass and lift a lump of cold sweet vanilla ice cream to my mouth. I stop, open-mouthed, spoon in mid-air and stare at a rising line of helmeted soldiers climbing up from behind the embankment across Scarsdale Avenue. Cars stop, as twenty uniformed men in high-laced boots with canteens and hand grenades strapped to their belts advance menacingly to the curb across the street. They carry large frightening rifles and I think they might be attacking Neilsen's. My ice cream falls off the spoon and plops on the table. Mom points her spoon towards the window and says, "Oh, look at the soldiers. They're training. What fun!"

I relax my tightened muscles and watch as the Sergeant points the men towards our ice cream parlor. The soldiers, all hunched over and looking very serious, begin moving towards Nielsen's. The first few men step into Scarsdale Avenue. Suddenly, a brown duck, leading nine baby ducklings, emerges from the same embankment, and quickly waddles, single-file, across the street in front of the troops. I fear that cars will strike the family of ducks but the sergeant quickly raises a hand, signaling the auto traffic to stop, and then turns towards the troops. I can hear him through the window as he shouts "Halt! Hold up!" Everyone stops, including cars, pedestrians and waiters. The customers are not munching. Nobody moves as the Mommy duck shepherds her convoy of babies leisurely across the avenue.

The world is frozen during this march. As the duck family reaches our side of the street, the mother hops up on the curb and watches while all nine ducklings toddle and wiggle up the low curb to join her. When the last little duck wiggles over the curb, everything snaps back to life. Patrons giggle and make "awww..." sounds. Waiters bring meals and the sergeant waves to his unit to continue the assault on Scarsdale. I watch as one boyish-faced soldier kneels and leans against the glass of Neilsen's front door, looking urgently left and right for snipers.

Watching the bamboozled soldiers, I learn that ducks, when they are not being hunted from the bulrushes, have the power to stop all human activity. With their focused and organized Mommy-missions, ducks command instant smiling human admiration.

Feeding Miss Billie

One September afternoon, two months after my eleventh birthday, my mother invites me to ride with her for her daily late-afternoon trip to pick up my father at the commuter railroad station. She dangles and shakes a small paper bag at me. It's stale bread with which we sometimes feed the ducks. She says. "When your father's train is late, I go and toss bread to the ducks. Want to come?"

In the few minutes that we spend tossing scraps at the flock of eager and competitive splashing ducks, I notice a small brown female duck swimming on the outskirts of the flock. She's not in the fray, competing for the bread. All the other ducks are fiercely charging about, snapping at pieces of bread but the outsider just watches.

Occasionally, she starts into the feeding frenzy but the others snap at her and she retreats timidly. I notice that most of her upper bill is missing. She's got only the lower beak and a half-inch of upper bill with which to eat. She tries to gobble a morsel but it's difficult and by the time she almost has a piece in her mouth, the other ducks pounce on the food. She twists her head left and right looking for the food. She seems confused. Standing on the edge of the pond, my heart tugs for this poor little duck who might soon die because she can't compete with the hungry flock. I'm fearful for her and so sad. I'm going to see that she gets fed. I'll call her "Billy."

My strategy works. I toss a tiny piece of bread to the side of the flock that is away from Billy. When the ducks swim towards that morsel, I tear off a big chunk and toss it right at Billy's tail and shout "Billy, here!" When the flock sees the bigger chunk, they turn but it has landed right next to Billy and she quickly manages to bite a nice piece for herself. I grin and whisper "Good girl, Billy." I orchestrate this maneuver three times and it works. Billy and I are a team. I have powerful feelings of love for this duck, and imagine that I've saved her life. (*Too much? Feelings of attachment?*)

Almost every day after school I walk alone, back to the station pond to feed Billy. I'm always thrilled to see that she's still plays our little game.

When, the fall rains and cold arrive, I'm not able to visit the pond for a few weeks. When I return, I see most of the ducks have flown away on their winter migration. Billy is gone.

I carry bread every day to feed the few ducks that have stayed the winter.

The following spring, the summer ducks return and I call them to my side of the pond by flapping slices of bread in the air. The ducks swim towards me, a quacking armada, and I see at the back, my friend Billy. My eyes tear and I'm almost crying as I shout "Here, Billy" I pitch a big piece of bread at her tail. She's slower and some feathers are missing. My heart tightens when I see that now her beak looks even more deformed. She's even more damaged than I recall. It is so good to see her. I'm both thrilled that she's returned and sad because I my friend Billy is failing. The other ducks swing their heads back and forth scanning the surface for new scraps but Billy stares directly at me. I wink at Billy, carefully toss the last piece at her tail and continue my walk to town. For the next two weeks, I look for my friend every day but don't see her. That first day of her return was the last time I saw Billy. She still lives in clearly in my mind. Whenever I think of Billy, I feel sad but proud that she survived a year with just a small bit of creative help. We shared a tiny piece of a hard life.

Duck and Run

When I am 13 years old, I meet one duck that actually asks me for a favor. On my walk home from school, I pass the edge of tiny Crane's Pond where our neighborhood skates in the winter, warmed on the shore by campfires. In the summer, kids fish with worms and toss bread at the two large resident white ducks we all know as Donald and Daisy.

We think we know which is Daisy because she's the slightly smaller and friendlier bird. We are told these eight-pound farm-raised ducks are too heavy to fly and are pets of the owners who live in the big house on the edge of the pond. We figure that even though they are big and fat, Donald and Daisy must not get enough to eat because they will peck at your socks if you run out of bread while feeding them. It's a fearsome sight to see an angry, quacking giant white duck charge at your shins and pull your socks or shoe laces in an effort to remind you that they're still hungry. We laugh and dance aside to escape.

One day after school, I walk to the pond and wave a half sheet of notebook paper in the air as if it were a slice of bread. Donald is sleeping but Daisy swims towards me, fast enough to make an impressive wake. Dripping wet, she trots up to my toes and stretches her long white neck up to receive the bread. I laugh and toss the paper on the ground. She bites the paper and tosses it aside and marches directly to my feet and, without pausing, places her big orange webbed feet on top of my penny loafers. She's very heavy and reaches up to my thighs. Daisy is wagging her tail feathers and quacking up at me. I'm screaming with laughter and look to see if anybody is near to see this spectacular huge bird standing on my feet. I'm alone with this smart-alecky duck. She starts pecking at my pants with alarming beak power, pulling the fabric away from my leg. This is one hot-tempered duck and if she were my dog, I'd bend down and rub her head in a friendly "I love you but stop doing that" gesture. I'm afraid of Daisy's snapping beak so I bend over and quickly put both my hands under her folded wings. Her silky feathers compress and she doesn't resist.

She continues to quack as I lift the eight-pound bird into the air and toss her, like a boulder, towards the water. Daisy flaps her wings mightily but she cannot fly. The flapping prolongs her descent and she plops with a mighty splash into the water. Quacking even more rapidly, Daisy makes a U-turn and swims back to my shore, waddles soaking wet, out of the water and stands on my shoes again. By this time, Donald is awake and is paddling back and forth watching from a safe distance. Daisy, still standing on my shoe tops, flaps her wet wings, soaking my pants and shoes and quacks directly at my face. I'm convinced she's having a good time and wants to fly again. I bend down, grab her and again fling her towards the water. Once more, she manages to flap for a few extra seconds in the air before splashing into the water.

My arms hurt from hurling an eight-pound weight into the air so when Daisy, joined this time by Donald, charges quacking for my shoes, I dash for my schoolbooks on the bench and retreat, panting and giggling, into the road.

On my walk home, my shoes squish and my shins are cold with pond water and I'm smiling and imagining that Daisy is now telling Donald about how today, she learned the secret of flight.

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