

A Gander at Love

By Anica Mrose Rissi November 23, 2014 7:15 pm

Menagerie: Just between us species.

When people ask me what my father is like, I tell them about the geese.

It's a question I never had to answer growing up on an island off the coast of Maine, where everyone already knew everyone else. But it comes up in adulthood, most often on dates, which of course means it is also a question about me.

Both of my parents are bird fans. Our regular Sunday phone calls usually feature an avian update — reports on what species have visited the feeder or floated past on the cove — and I've witnessed my father express affection by insisting my mother take the seat with the best bird-watching view. Long before it became cool or formerly cool to “put a bird on it,” my parents populated their home with bird paintings, sculptures and miscellany: an egret candle holder, loon napkin rings, a piece of driftwood reminiscent of a heron. Their lawn ornament of choice was a fat, copper-plated rooster that had only partially survived its fall from atop the weather vane on my grandfather's church in Hauptwil, Switzerland, where my father was born. And through most of my childhood, my family had its own actual living flock of interchangeable mallards and several opinionated geese.

The ducks were fun. After they hatched, they'd follow my brother and me around the barnyard, peeping and toddling in a line behind us, as if we were their mothers.

The geese were not so much fun. Watching them, I learned all about the brutality of the pecking order, years before encountering it myself in junior high. My least favorite chore was removing goose poop from the parts of our lawn where humans needed to walk. And while the duck eggs were delicious, the goose eggs tasted strange. I protested whenever my mother tried to sneak them into our pancakes.

My parents found the birds charming, but I was unmoved as our geese died one by one, picked off by predators, automobiles or time, until finally only two remained. Because when you get right down to it, geese suck. Geese are mean and geese are dumb, and what makes both those things worse is that geese are proud. And nothing made our tall, knob-headed Brown African gander prouder or dumber than his love for his white-feathered, blue-eyed Embden mate.

Papa Goose may have won over Goldilocks by default, being the only other goose left standing, but it gave him swagger. He showed off for her, strutting and preening and flapping his flightless wings. He protected her, hissing and charging at any car that dared pull into our driveway. He doted on her and adored her, and went out of his way to make all her desires come true. When she wanted to swim, he escorted her to the pond. When she wanted to nap, he stood guard while she rested. When she thought it might be nice to rest her belly on warm pavement instead of on cool grass, he walked into the street, chest first, to stop traffic for her. She called all the shots.

This was business as usual until the day I turned 15. My birthday that year fell on Easter Sunday, so my family celebrated with dyed eggs and cake, under orange-and-yellow streamers and the goose-shaped paper lantern that my parents always hung from the ceiling on birthdays. I wore two hats perched like rabbit ears as I blew out the candles and wished for my braces to come off soon. But as the cake was being served, the party was disrupted by a loud, pitiful wailing coming from outside. We put on our coats, went out to investigate, and found that Goldilocks was gone — hit by a car, we assumed, unless the raccoons had gotten her — and Papa Goose was beside himself with grief. He honked and cried, running in circles and throwing himself at things, desperate to find her.

Geese have small brains and short attention spans, so we figured this couldn't go on for very long. We were wrong. His delirious anguish escalated into such pathos that eventually my father — who didn't even think we should allow our dog inside the house

during winters in Maine, and whose immediate admonishment if he saw me cuddling our (outdoor) cat was, “Make sure you wash your hands” — let us bring the goose into the dining room to distract him from his misery. But Papa Goose would not be distracted. He continued his keening long into the night and we worried that if the grief didn’t kill him, we might have to.

The next morning, Goldilocks reappeared. She wandered out of the bushes where she’d spent the previous day, and Papa Goose nearly burst open with joy. You have never seen a happier goose. He strutted and doted and glued himself to her side so he would never, ever lose her again.

The following day, he got hit by a car and died. Goldilocks continued with her routine. She took a swim in the pond and a nap in the sun, and had a nice afternoon constitutional. If she even noticed that Papa Goose was gone, she apparently did not give a damn.

Two weeks later, my father was in the kitchen, drinking his coffee. It’s not unusual to hear my parents pointing out things they each want the other to notice. “Did you see how red the sunset is?” Or, “Look, there are three deer in our field!” That morning, my father called out to my mother, “Renie, come quick, you have to see this beautiful fox!” So my mother went down to the kitchen. She slid her arm around my father’s waist and looked out the window at the beautiful fox that was eating our last goose.

That is what my father is like.

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