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American English, Italian Chocolate

Rick Bailey

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AMERICAN ENGLISH,
Italian Chocolate

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SMALL SUBJECTS OF
GREAT IMPORTANCE

RICK BAILEY

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For Tizi, Lisa, and David

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1

Big White Birds

I'm not supposed to see this: a woman is stopped behind me at an intersection, cell phone pressed to her face, her free hand chopping the air while she gives someone what for. This sunny Tuesday morning in June, the grass is green, the trees are in full, gorgeous leaf, and the woman's face is breaking into jagged pieces as she pours out her anger. I fix my mirror, the better to see her. It's a private moment, but I can't help but watch because some years ago, on this very corner, my wife and I were having such an argument, and I was chopping the air too, a grotesque mask of anger on my face, and we were being watched.

But on that day my wife was in the car with me, and the person watching was beside us, not in front of us, watching us with a bemused look on her face, not unlike the look on my face right now. When I stopped fulminating and took a breath, my wife turned and looked out the window at the woman spectator.

She jerked a thumb in the woman's direction. "What's that bitch looking at?" she said.

The light changed, and we both burst out laughing, which meant whatever the conflict was, in all likelihood, we were going to get through it.

When the light changes, things are getting worse for the woman behind me. I drive through the intersection, watching her complete a left turn. Then I see it: a male mallard standing by the side of the road. Never a good sign. I slow down and see, flattened on the centerline, a female duck. But for the orange feet, it looks like a savaged sofa pillow. I feel this tightening in my chest. Who wouldn't? Who doesn't love a duck?

For a month or two every year, we have ducks in the neighborhood, in our yard, in our ditch. We have two ducks, a male and a female. We'd like to think that, like us, they mate for life. They squabble, they bully each other and shut each other out, but they hang in there and make things work. This idealized notion of duck love, it turns out, is a fantasy. Termites mate for life. Wolves and swans mate for life. Ducks do not.

We'll look out an east window of the house and see two heads bobbing in the ditch, or we'll see the two of them squeezing through the fence to get to the neighbor's bird feeder. Sometimes they sit under one of our apple trees and have a conversation. She says, "Quack." And if my sources are correct, he answers—when he does—with a soft, low-pitched, slightly uxorious "Rhab-rhab." Wherever they go, she goes first. He follows, more brilliantly colored, slightly wider, possibly dumber, possibly mesmerized by her tail. And wherever they go, they almost always walk.

Why on earth do they walk?

Why would they squeeze through a fence when they can fly over it? Why would they walk across the road? Maybe it's a relief not to fly. Flying is hard work. In seasonal migration, ducks fly fifty miles per hour at altitudes up to four thousand feet. With a fifty-mile-per-hour tailwind, they cover eight hundred miles a day, a trek so demanding they then take three to seven days to rest and feed and recover.

But in the case of these ducks, our yard ducks, my belief is they don't fly because when they fly, they don't really know where they're going. They know our yard and Beverly's yard. They've been to John's yard across the street. *Let's waddle over to Beverly's and see if she put out some of that corn.* They know the Mississippi flyway and their flight plan between here and Arkansas and Louisiana. But otherwise, I think they're pretty much lost most of the time. When they take off and get above tree level, how do they know where they're going? Do they think, *Hey, I saw some water over by the library.* Or, *Let's fly over to Drayton Plains.* I don't think so. They must think, *Where the hell are we going?* And, *Whatta ya say we head back to the ditch and chill?* It's not like they're looking for other ducks to hang out with. Unlike geese, which get mobbed up, ducks seem to pair up, find their little bowers of delight, and lie low.

We refer to these two as "our ducks." My wife refers to them as Mr. and Mrs. Mallard. We have the idea, probably ridiculous, that the same ducks come back to us year after year. Like our ditch is their Poconos, and the lovin' is easy.

So seeing the dead female, even if it's not our female (and how can I be sure?), and her swain by the side of the road, even if they don't mate for life, is a shock. I feel vicarious mallard grief.

The dead duck—and our fantasy of the two of them mating for life—reminds me of the miraculous appearance of swans in Free-land one year.

"Let's go for a ride," my father said one Sunday.

As a kid, I remember having a sense of total disorientation, usually in the car, usually at night, my father driving, my mother sitting next to him, my brother and I in the back. I would wonder, a pit of fear in my stomach, *How can we not be lost? How do they know where to go?*

We took lots of rides on Sundays, usually in the late afternoon. While my parents talked in the front seat, my brother and I looked

out the car windows, hoping the ride would lead to Mooney's Ice Cream Shop in Saginaw. Some days my father would take circuitous routes to fool us, so we would have that moment of surprise when we recognized at last where we were. If we found ourselves on Brockway, that odd hypotenuse in mostly perpendicular Saginaw, we sat forward in our seats, eager for sweets. But this particular day, I knew Mooney's was not in the picture. We were going the wrong way. As I monitored our left and right turns, the farms and barns and bean fields, I got the idea we were going to Breckenridge, which should have meant a visit to my grandparents. No such announcement was made. The mood in the car was somber. My parents talked, when they talked at all, in hushed tones. Something was wrong.

We passed the road to my grandparents' house. Then came a turn I recognized, toward Henry and Kathryn's house. Henry was my father's childhood friend. They had been in the war together, Henry on a ship in the Pacific, my father operating a radio for the Army Air Force. My father was the last one to see Henry's brother Don alive. They met by accident on a train moving troops. Don had a box of fried chicken his mother had sent him. They sat on the train in the middle of nowhere, ate chicken, and talked about home and where they thought they were going. When the train reached Chicago, they said good-bye. From there my father went to Guam. Don went to Italy and was killed.

Henry was my father's age, but he looked older. He had smoker's gravel in his voice. His face was red, tracked with blue veins and broken capillaries. He had a substantial gut, spindly legs, and tattoos on his right arm. He seemed ill at ease around kids. When we swung into Henry's driveway that day and got out of the car, my father pointed at the rope swing hanging from the willow in the front yard. He told us to stay outside.

Ordinarily on a Sunday afternoon, Henry and Kathryn's son Billy came outside, and we played together. That day he did not. Billy wasn't there. My brother and I killed time for a while. We took turns

on the swing. We threw rocks at frogs in the ditch. Finally we went inside to ask, politely but firmly, still thinking of Mooney's, when we were going to get out of there.

My mother was sitting on the sofa in the living room with Kathryn, whose face was red and distorted, her eyes swollen from crying. My father was at the kitchen table talking to Henry. When he said something quietly to him, I saw Henry sit back, shaking his head, and blow a stream of blue smoke at the ceiling.

We were given a few vanilla wafers and ushered back outside. A few minutes later my parents came out of the house and pulled the door shut behind them. We rode in silence back to Saginaw, went to Mooney's, and got ice cream.

On the ride home I crunched on my cone. My brother, two years older and a better listener, leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Henry has a woman."

"Huh?" I said. "A what?"

He put his finger to his lips. "A woman," he said. "Henry's got a girlfriend."

I couldn't make sense of it. How could Henry have a girlfriend? I looked at my parents, at the space between them in the front seat of the car. Had my mother, I wondered, ever sat over there right next to him in the car? Had they once held hands? I'd seen them all dressed up and dancing together at a social function one night and found it to be funny and embarrassing. What were they doing? The thought of them having a life separate from each other had never occurred to me. Nor had it occurred to me that they could ever want to be with anyone else. Every night, after they turned the lights off, I heard them kiss each other and say good night. Five kisses.

"Good night, sweetie."

"Good night, dearie."

When I came downstairs the next morning, they were up already, in the kitchen, being parents.

Henry, Kathryn. A woman.

My father sat up straight in the car, as usual, but that day he seemed a little smaller, like something had crumbled inside of him. We seemed vulnerable.

Sometime after that, there was a small commotion in town. It had rained hard for a week straight. The Tittabawassee River had risen above its banks and flooded the flats on both sides of the river. Word traveled: there were swans west of town. On the next Sunday afternoon we got in the car, drove across the bridge, and stopped on the west side of the road, joining a throng of people looking out over the flooded remains of a cornfield. A hundred yards out, two swans swam in the brown floodwater. My mother had brought binoculars. We took turns looking at them.

“Where do you think they’re going?” someone asked.

No one knew. We just hoped they would stay and maybe come a little closer. When it was my turn, I held the binoculars to my face and brought the birds into focus. All the buildup. They were kind of a disappointment. What was the fuss? They were just big white birds.

The next day they were gone. A week later the floodwaters had receded. In the stretches of river water left in low sections of the field, carp flopped around, slowly suffocating. As far as I know, the swans never came back.