Duck

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Early in the second month of my first semester, my roommates and I decided to get a duck. When the subject first sprung up (From where? How do ordinary people in ordinary conversation get on the subject of kidnapping a duck?) we believed it to be not only clever, but absolutely original. A duck! There were dozens of them on campus, and according to Dave, whose family had gone to the Y for a continuous ten years, they stayed there all through winter. We would have plenty of time to catch ourselves a duck this year, even with classes and work and what felt like a dance every day of the non-Sabbath weekend.

And what would we do with the said duck once we had it? The first suggestion for duck use was, naturally, as a bathtub accessory. Dan thought this was hilarious and squirted orange juice out of his nose between his snorts. “We could take a picture of me in the bathtub (in my swimsuit, you idiot!) with the duck and send it to my mom!” He suggested as he jumped up from his seat. “We could name him Ernie!” Everyone exploded into laughter.

“Or better,” Chris said, lowering his voice, “we could put it in one of the girl’s bathrooms.” No one but Chris thought that this was a good idea, but the duck concept had stuck, and over the course of the next couple of days, the duck was the starting point for every conversation.

“We could paint its nails with the girls’ nail polish, if they’d let us!”
“We could keep it in the cages in the basement!”

“What if I brought it to classes with me in my backpack?”

“We could let it free in the Bean Museum’s duck exhibit and claim it had come alive!”

We didn’t have much else in common, but everyone knew that we needed to get ourselves a duck. As soon as the humor of what we could do with a duck began to die down, the logistical problems of actually catching a duck set in. Our idea, evidently, hadn’t been as original as we had thought it to be, but we were willing to let that stand as it was, because that meant that it was actually possible, not just a joke. One guy said his older brother’s roommate caught one and kept it until cleaning inspections, when he was found out. What had been the punishment? He didn’t know.

Dan and Dave made the first attempt, using their laundry bags to try to catch the duck. They waited until they saw a lot of them, just swimming around, dense, you couldn’t even see any water between them. Then they simply ran into the thick of the ducks with the mouth of the bag wide open and the assumption that with all of the ducks, at least one of them would get in the bag. They returned muddy, but unbowed. The ducks were faster, if not smarter, than we had expected.

Dave was taking a psychology class and said that we were going about this the wrong way altogether. The ducks wouldn’t respond to force; they had generations of duck-hunter experience built into their instinct. If we could condition the ducks to trust us, we could just pick one up. Or better yet, the ducks would just follow us around. Or if we could find a baby duck being born, we could convince it that we were its mothers.

“Dave, do you have any idea how to find a duck egg just beginning to open?” He admitted he didn’t, but the other ideas were still sound.

For two weeks, Dave spent all of his free time by the duck pond with a loaf of day-old Wonderbread. He joked with us that he was training them to do his evil bidding and in just a few days he would have attack ducks, and then we’d better all just watch out. The jokes began to taper off and one day he returned looking absolutely dejected.

“It’s impossible,” he declared. “It’s just simply impossible.” He had shown up right after class with a loaf of bread, and whom did he run into but a mother with three children who had the exact same bread as him. They were throwing gobs of it into the water without any rhyme or reason. They were just feeding it to the ducks, not conditioning them.
"The ducks," he concluded his story, "can't be conditioned because there are too many other influences. If they were isolated, then it would be easy, but with so many factors, it's just impossible." We all looked at each other solemnly. How badly did we want a duck? To be honest, the idea had lost a lot of its novelty to me in the past couple of weeks, but I didn't want to be the one to stop the party short.

"We need to get a duck," Dan spoke up passionately. "We're not going to let a couple of ducks get the better of us, are we?" We shook our heads no. "Some students are now asleep in their classes, and if you want to be one of them, you have my leave, but they will someday, when you show them your duck, wish that they could trade places with you and fight with me this... weekday." The St. Crispin speech was lousy, but we understood Dan's resolution.

By asking around discreetly, we found that a guy in our ward had, for some unexplained reason, a crow trap. He had lived on a farm or something and evidently thought that as a student he would similarly need to rid himself of birds around campus in a humane way. We asked him if we could borrow it; actually Chris asked, and I think he lied about what we wanted it for.

The consequences for what we were about to do we didn't know, but something about this struck us as being wrong. We hid the trap in some bushes next to the canal. Dave set the bait, the last of his old Wonderbread. How many times we checked that trap in the next couple of hours, I don't know, but no one got much homework done.

"They are just sitting there, not ten feet away from the trap. Don't ducks have noses? Can't they smell the bread?" Chris was angry at the whole aviarial world.

"Maybe they've already been fed," Dave sighed.

"Why don't they go after the bait?" I asked no one in particular.

Dan slammed his anatomy book closed. "That's it. I can't take it anymore. Come on, guys, get your jackets; we're going out." We followed his exhortation. No one but Dan, and who knows if even Dan himself, knew what we were going to do. "If the ducks won't go to the trap, we'll scare them into it."

"That won't work," Dave said. "Remember when we tried to catch the ducks? They never go the way you want them to."

"It'll work this time, okay? We can't just sit around and do nothing. We'll catch a duck or we're not going home, got it? No duck, no sleep."

"You've got to be kidding," Chris shot Dan a look of disgust.
“I have homework to do,” I ventured.

“No. No one leaves until we catch a duck.” He paced in front of us, military-like. Behind him a red, white, and black sign expressly forbade any sort of playing in the canal. “If we want to do this, let’s do it.”

We chased the ducks around for a half hour. Why they didn’t just pick up their wings and fly away, down to the pond or something, I don’t know. Maybe they were tired; maybe they were complacent after having eaten too much bread. But every time we chased after them, they flew just in front of us and then settled down again. We must have looked like a bunch of idiots. Even Dan was beginning to see the futility of it, but then, the unexpected happened; in a sudden outburst of chaos, a duck had flown into the trap.

“Shut the door!” Dan screamed from halfway up the bank. “Somebody make certain the door shuts!”

Dave dove to slam the door shut, as did Chris, who hit him full force from behind. Dave clung to the cage as he rolled down the bank of the canal. I tried to get out of the way, but he beamed me, knocking the breath out of me and sending us both violently into the canal. The ducks scattered around us, quacking their offence, finally using long heavy strokes of their wings to rise into the sky and abandon the canal to us, the cage and the duck.

She was dead. Her neck had broken in the fall and lay behind her, twisted unnaturally. Her eyes were open, small and glassy.

“You killed it, Dave!” Chris picked up the cage and brought it out of the canal. Dave and I helped each other up and scrambled up the banks.

“I killed it? Chris, you’re the one who knocked me into the canal! I can’t believe you’re trying to blame this on me! This is entirely your fault!” Dave was in a frenzy. He swung his arms around himself, like a Japanese hand drum. I think he may have been crying.

Dan sidled up next to the cage. “This is no one’s fault.” He peered at the duck, inspecting her. “Is everyone okay? I mean besides . . .”

Dave and I nodded. Everything was silent, and a car drove by on the other side of the canal.

“What do we do now?” I asked Dan. He was the one who had worked this out. He was the one with the answers.

He looked around, not looking for witnesses, but more like he was taking in the entire scene. “We take her out of the cage and leave her in the canal. Ducks die. That’s what happens. We’ll just leave her here and the maintenance guys will know what to do with her.”
Chris scoffed. “Because so many ducks just naturally break their necks?” He kicked the cage. “Everyone’s going to know that it was murdered.”

“Okay then!” Dan shot back, exasperated. “What do you suggest we do?” Chris didn’t say anything.

“Maybe we could just put her in the dumpster?” Dave spoke up timidly.

He had sat down on the grass next to the bushes that were disheveled, but not destroyed. He was idly picking the leaves off the branches.

“I don’t know.” This whole thing troubled me a lot. I had never killed anything before. My uncle was big into hunting, but I had never gone. I wished that I had, that I would know the proper way to proceed once something was dead. I don’t know that the experience would have helped me in this situation. Both Chris and Dan had gone hunting, but they were unnerved. This wasn’t fair. The duck hadn’t died in battle, but as a trapped prisoner.

“What if someone goes into the dumpster to look for something they dropped, or climbs in to jump out and scare someone?” It had been happening on a semidaily basis lately, and a dead duck would be noticed.

“They don’t empty the dumpster more than once a week, and yesterday they emptied it. That means our duck would be in there a week and who knows what kind of a stink she would raise? No, Aaron’s right. If anyone’s in the dumpster, they’ll find our duck.” Usually, if Dan agreed with me it was the best thing I could get, but now it seemed like a hollow comfort. “Could we bury her?”

“Where? Here in the canal? Outside the dorm? Maintenance would notice, and they’d dig it up and would suspect foul play.” No one noticed the pun. No one laughed. Chris fell silent. We sat there, silent and guilty, on the bank of the canal.

Looking back at it, there are things for which I am grateful about the situation. I am grateful that no one suggested we eat her. I am grateful that we didn’t get into a physical fight about the blame. I am grateful that the night was cold and no handholders came across four boys and a dead duck in a cage. Still, at the time, it felt like the world was coming to a premature end and we’d been the instigators of it.

Dave had been staring at the stars, sharp, white against the sky. I looked up at them with him and, because I knew all of their names and histories, grew bored with them. My eyes wandered to the dark silhouettes of the mountains behind the campus. I got an idea, but I didn’t want to rush it.

“Dan, do you or your cousin have the car this week?”
“I do.”

“Could we take her to the mountains?”

He didn’t answer, but he stood up. We followed. He picked up the cage and we went to the parking lot.

The duck rode between me and Chris in the backseat. We drove past people we knew, who waved to us, and we waved to them, putting on smiles we didn’t feel and hoping they didn’t see right through us. Dan drove fast, faster than the speed limit, faster than he usually drove. We were lucky we didn’t get pulled over because, in addition to breaking the speed limit, possession of dead wildlife probably carries with it a fine.

We got up past city limits, on a side road that went into the trailhead for a waterfall. No one had said a word since we had left campus. The only noises I could hear were our footsteps and our ragged breath, and the duck rattling dead in her cage. We hiked up to where the waterfall fell, collected in a little pond, and became a river that would eventually give the ditch by our dorm its water. Chris put down the cage. “Well?”

“Let’s leave her here,” Dave suggested.

“Yeah, even if someone finds her and notices that she’s been . . . that she didn’t die naturally, there’s no way they can link her to us. She could have had her neck snapped by some predator, some raccoon or something. I’ll bet plenty of animals come here for a drink, probably carnivorous ones too.” Dan didn’t look as pale as he had before.

“She’ll probably end up being eaten by some scavenger anyway,” put in Chris. “Circle of life, right? We’re doing nature a service by providing lunch for something.”

We all nodded, but no one wanted to be the one to open the cage and take out the duck. “I think ducks have lice or something,” Dave offered feebly. Chris opened the cage door and shook out the duck onto the rocks by the pool. She lay there, broken and askew, like she had been dashed against the rocks by the waterfall. We stood there and stared at her for a while, until Chris reminded us that he had a lot of homework to do.

We piled back into the car, this time Dave, not Chris, sat in the back with me. No one said a word on the way back, except Dave, who said so quietly that Chris and Dan certainly didn’t hear, “Maybe we should tell the bishop.”

I would like to say that this event made us men and comrades. It did neither. In fact, we never spoke openly with each other again. Chris went on a mission, to Brasil (yes, he said it that way), after the first semester and
I never heard anyone say that they missed him. We just sort of opened the door and watched him go. Dan got a call to leave for Taiwan in March, so he went back to his hometown in California for a few months. Dave and I got two new roommates, two RMs, one named Brandon, and another Dan who was nothing like the first Dan. Dave and I had good times with our new roommates, but we never told them, or anyone, about the duck. As far as I know, no one ever has.