

Flip and Flop

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We saw the woman standing on the shore as we cleared the bend in the river. She walked out to the end of her dock, then waved both arms at us, cupping her hands to shout.

Can you please call my geese? I'm teaching them to swim, but they're afraid of the water.

We'd slipped our kayaks into the Sauk River early that morning from Frogtown Park in Cold Spring, Minnesota, where the water ran fast and clear, divided by boulders and low, tree-covered islands. We'd end seven hours later at Anton's, an old speakeasy turned river restaurant on the outskirts of St. Cloud, famous for popovers and the semi-feral packs of geese you could feed from the deck.

Dale, my father-in-law, had grown up around rivers, first the Columbia and later the Rogue, and he instinctively pointed out to me where fish would hide. But we rarely fished anymore. Though he loved my young sons, he couldn't always control his impatience that turned into curt hectoring when they fidgeted or lost interest. Like many older men, he was better with his grandkids than with his kids, but teaching lessons seldom ended well. My wife remembers how her

stepbrother, Dale's only son, slumped at the table when the two of them returned from deer hunting. When he married my mother-in-law, he relinquished primary custody of his son and daughter to his addict ex-wife. Both kids died young, suicide and an overdose. My wife recalls how her stepbrother tried to leave his disintegrating home in the Rogue Valley, but Dale and my mother-in-law no longer had room in their house, and they wouldn't let him and his girlfriend move into an unfinished workshop on their property.

Dale was at his complicated best with small things that needed and loved him: toddler grandsons he could roll around with on the carpet; pet chickens; cats that would ride around on his shoulders. The errors, though, could be fatal. Once he discovered a litter of baby rabbits in a shallow hole on our front lawn. He lifted one up reverently to show us. Tainted by a human hand, that was the one the mother rabbit later left to die.

The woman's geese, Flip and Flop, waddled back and forth from dock to shore—not sure they were ready to learn about water. She'd raised them both from hatchlings. We'd called out to them, sweetly, encouragingly, at the woman's request (*Here, Flip! Here, Flop!*). We were about to give up when, with a tremendous propulsive beating of wings, Flop rocketed horizontally right next to Dale's kayak. The three of us cheered as Flip joined his brother a minute later.

We'd lingered near the dock for almost a half hour by now, paddling backward or looping around to push our way upstream. The woman yelled, *You'd make great goose parents*, and we all laughed as Dale and I waved goodbye. We'd almost reached the swiftest part of the current when the geese surprised us a second time. They followed us out, paddling away from the woman, floating alongside us downstream. The three of us laughed again, a little nervously this time. We imagined they'd return to shore in a moment or two. Fifty yards away, about to slip around the next bend in the river, I yelled out to the woman that we'd end up at Anton's. We barely heard her shouting out her phone number. But we were too far apart to understand each other. We told ourselves they'd fly back any minute.

They followed us for hours. Whenever one of our kayaks floated in front of the other, they'd fly forward to nestle against the one in the lead. We were a new flock: Flip, Flop, and the two mysterious huge water birds that had summoned them from the only home they'd known. Dale spoke gently and affectionately as he would to any young animal, but a sense of responsibility hovered over us.

We had no easy way of reaching the woman and no confidence that the geese would find their way back.

When we beached ourselves on the shore at Anton's, the spell ended. Dale and I left our kayaks, and the mysterious water birds—like centaurs split into humans and horses—ceased to exist. Flip and Flop lost all interest in us. They waddled instead to the geese resting in a nearby grove. Dale and I found a table inside with a view of the flock. I asked the waitress if a woman had called in to ask about her missing pet geese. The answer, of course, was no.

We knew then that no one would come for them. We were the only customers in the spacious dining room and sat quietly as we waited for our food. From the restaurant's windows we watched Flip and Flop try, again and again, to join the flock. Each time they'd be attacked by a dominant bird. Flop, the smaller brother, seemed to have developed a limp.

I didn't yet know, as we sat quietly watching together, that Dale and my mother-in-law would move away from us in just a few years, back to an arid piece of land near the Columbia, where they'd need to build a home and barn from scratch. They'd be in their seventies and early eighties then, and they'd be doing much of the work themselves. Dale's health and their finances would both be precarious, and my mother-in-law would be hoping to compete again in 50- and 100-mile endurance horse races, just as she had decades ago.

My wife would try to convince them to stay. Our sons were their only grandkids. *You're getting older and you might miss being around these boys who adore you.* Her mother would refuse to register that they, themselves, might lose out in this exchange. *They're growing up now, she'd say. You won't need us.*

And I'd think, as they left, about how my in-laws never talked about Dale's children. There was limited room for them in the new marriage, and so they drifted away to their mother—who'd threatened to kill herself if Dale didn't let her raise them. It would occur to me then how we make decisions with whatever judgment we have at the time. When things go wrong, it's comforting to pretend we had no agency, or that no one's really harmed by our choices. It's even easier to imagine we never made a choice at all—or that people just do what they do, and none of it's really anyone else's business.

That day on the river, Dale and I stayed far longer at Anton's than we'd intended. Our waitress said to take our time. Lunch service ended, and the wait staff eventually began setting tables for dinner. The bar slowly filled up for happy

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hour. We watched as Flip and Flop retreated a short distance from the flock and nestled down for the night. Neither of us suggested anything we might do. We said very little when we finally turned from the window and left.

