

Mama Duck

and Her Eleven Babies





Mama Duck

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A nature story from a sod cabin by a quiet lake



a story by

Blurt Snodgrass

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Mama Duck and Her Eleven Babies

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This is a work of memory and observation.
The lake, the cabin, and the ducks are real
to anyone who has watched a year go by
with patient attention.

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*For the patient ones
who wait for hatching day
and trust the cycle
to turn again.*



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PROLOGUE

I'm going to tell you about Mama Duck and her eleven babies.

She is a wild mallard duck. Most mallards fly south for the winter and north for the summer. But Mama Duck is a little different. She stays here all year long. Every year Mama Duck raises a new family. Every year her babies grow up and fly south.

I live in the north in a small sod cabin by a creek. The creek goes into a small lake and out the other end. In the lake there is a warm spot. It's like a hot springs only it's warm. I like to swim there. So does Mama Duck and her babies.

My cabin walls are made of big squares of grass and roots and dirt stuck together — sod. In summer they keep the heat out. In winter they keep the cold away. The earth itself is my walls.

A small waterwheel turns in the creek just outside my door. Day and night I hear it. A soft rhythmic turning. It makes enough power to keep my cabin lit and warm in winter and cool in the long summer days. I have lived here long enough that I no longer notice the sound. It is like a heartbeat. It is simply always there.

I eat what the creek gives me. Most mornings I take my flat bottom boat out onto the lake, the outriggers keeping her steady in the wind, and I fish. Perch mostly. Sometimes bass. In my kitchen window I grow baby greens in long shallow trays. Spinach. Arugula. Tiny lettuces. The window faces east and the morning light is what they like.

It is a quiet life. A good life.



AUTUMN

The Drake Arrives



The first cold morning of autumn I see him from my window.

He is standing at the edge of the lake where the creek runs in, his green head catching the early light like polished glass. A mallard drake in his full breeding plumage is one of the most beautiful things nature makes. That green. That impossible iridescent green. A white ring around his neck. A chest the color of dark chestnuts. He stands very still, watching the water.

I make my mint tea and watch from the window.

She comes from the reeds on the far bank. Swimming low and steady, her brown feathers the color of last year's leaves. Quiet. Practical. Beautiful in her own way.

He sees her.

He begins to display immediately. Head bobbing. Bill dipping to the water and up again. He rears back and splashes, spreading his wings just slightly, showing himself off. *Look at me. Look at this green head. Look at these colors. I am the finest drake on this lake.*

She ignores him. She tips forward to feed, tail in the air, legs kicking.

He bobs harder.

I drink my tea.

WINTER

The Pair



By the time the first frost coats the reeds, they are inseparable.

I see them every morning from the boat when I go out to fish. She feeds and he stays close.

The waterwheel turns. Ice forms at the creek's edges but not in the main channel where the water moves. Fog rises from the warm spot. They rest there sometimes. Mostly they tuck into the reeds with their bills under their wings. Sleeping. Waiting for the light to return.

I grow my greens in the kitchen window and watch the snow fall on the lake and think that there is nothing more peaceful in the world than a pair of ducks sleeping in winter reeds while a waterwheel turns in the moving creek.



EARLY SPRING

The Nest



Something shifts in late February.

The light changes first. A little longer each day. The waterwheel sounds different somehow, lighter, the creek running a little faster with snowmelt from the hills above. The baby greens in my window grow faster. I thin them and eat the thinnings in a bowl with a little salt.

She is different too.

I notice it from the boat one morning. She is not feeding on the open water. She is moving through the reeds along the near bank, close to my cabin, her head low, her movements deliberate. She is looking at something. Measuring something. Deciding.

He follows her but at a distance now. Still close. Still watching. But something has changed between them. She is busy in a way he is not.

• • •

Over the next several days she builds her nest.

I do not watch too closely. I take my boat wide of that bank and look the other way when I pass. Some things deserve their privacy. But I see enough. A hollow in the tall grass just above the waterline. Dry reeds pulled in and arranged. Soft down from her own breast lining the center. It takes her several days and when it is done you would walk right past it and never know.

She begins to lay.

One egg each morning. I know this not because I look but because I have read it and because I have watched enough springs on this lake to trust what I know. One egg. Each day. Until there are eleven.

Eleven eggs, pale and greenish white, nestled in a cup of down and dry grass, three feet from the waterline, on the bank of my creek.

He stays close during these days. Swims the near bank. Watches the reeds. I do not know if he knows exactly where the nest is. I think he does. I think he is keeping watch in his own way.

SPRING

She Settles. He Leaves.



The morning she begins to incubate, everything is still.

I wake before dawn to the sound of the waterwheel and lie in my bunk listening. The cabin is warm. Outside the sky is just beginning to pale at the edges. I get up and look out the window toward the near bank.

She is on the nest. Settled down low, her feathers spread wide over the eggs, her head up and alert. She will sit like that for nearly a month. Twenty-eight days. She will leave only briefly each day to feed and drink, covering the eggs carefully with down before she goes. She will lose weight. She will be patient beyond what seems possible.

He swims past the near bank twice that morning. Slowly. His green head turning toward the reeds.

Then he is gone.

By afternoon he is on the far side of the lake feeding in the shallows. His season of courtship and guarding is over. His work for this year is done. This is not abandonment. This is simply how mallards are made. She does not need him now. She never did, not for this part. She has everything she needs.

I take my boat out quietly, and give the near bank a wide berth.

She watches me go with one bright eye.

APRIL

The Wait



Twenty-eight days is a long time.

The creek runs full with spring rain. The waterwheel turns faster and I have more electricity than I need. I use the extra to run a small light in the garden plot behind the cabin where I have started some tomatoes under glass. The baby greens in the window are bolting in the warmth and I trim them back daily.

I check on her through binoculars. She is always there. Rain or sun or cold snap. Always there. Settled low and still over her eleven eggs.

Once a crow lands nearby and she rises up, wings spread wide, and the crow leaves in a hurry. Once I see a large snapping turtle slide out of the water and move along the bank and I hold my breath watching from the window. She holds very still. The turtle moves past. She settles back down.

I let out my breath.

The lake has settled into its spring rhythms. Frogs have started calling at dusk. The first damselflies appear, hovering over the creek mouth like small blue sparks.

And then one morning I wake to a sound I have been waiting for.

Peeping.



HATCHING DAY

Eleven Voices



It starts before dawn.

A small sound. High and insistent. Coming from the near bank.

I do not go out. I sit in my chair by the window with my tea and I listen. The peeping grows. More voices joining. She is very still on the nest, her head tilted down, listening to her eggs.

Inside each shell a small bill has begun to tap.

It takes time. Hatching is hard work and ducklings do it themselves, entirely, from the inside. She does not help. She simply stays. She keeps them warm while they work.

By mid-morning I can see movement under her feathers. Small shapes shifting. She rises slightly and I catch a glimpse of something wet and dark and alive.

By afternoon the peeping is almost constant.

By evening she is surrounded.

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Eleven ducklings. Wet and exhausted and blinking at the world. They are very small and very dark when they first hatch, not yet the yellow-gold of the ducklings in pictures. They dry over the next hour, huddled under her wings, and as they dry they become exactly what you imagine when you imagine a duckling. Round and soft and yellow-brown, their dark eyes bright, their small bills testing the air.

She preens them. She rearranges herself to cover them. She makes a low sound deep in her throat and they answer her.

Eleven voices.

I eat my supper by the window and watch the near bank go dark and think that of all the things this lake has shown me in all my years here this is still the finest.



THE FIRST MORNING

Into the Water



She stands up before sunrise.

Just like that. After nearly a month of sitting, she simply stands, shakes her feathers out, and steps off the nest.

She calls. Low and firm. *Come. Now.*

And they come.

Eleven ducklings scrambling over the rim of the nest, tumbling down the short bank, landing in the wet grass with small surprised sounds. Their legs are strong already. They are born knowing how to walk. They are not graceful yet but they are determined and they follow her voice without hesitation.

I watch from the window as she leads them to the water's edge.

She steps in without pausing.

The ducklings stop.

The water is cold and the bank is steep and they are very small. They bunch together at the edge, peeping, looking at the water, looking at her.

She calls again.

One duckling steps off the edge. Then another. Then all of them at once, a small cascade of yellow-brown fluff, landing in the water with tiny splashes, popping up to the surface like eleven small corks.

They can swim. Of course they can swim. They were made for it. But there is a moment just after they hit the water when each one seems surprised by its own ability. A moment of pure discovery.

I am outside on the bank now, keeping my distance, watching. The morning is cold and bright and the waterwheel turns in the creek and eleven ducklings swim behind their mother in the first light of a May morning and I think I am the luckiest man on any lake.

LEARNING

The Pond Is a School



The pond is a school and Mama Duck is its only teacher.

She teaches by doing. She tips forward to feed, tail up, legs kicking, and they copy her. She preens and they preen. She watches the sky and they learn to watch the sky.

They learn the difference between a heron standing still in the shallows, which is danger, and a heron flying overhead, which is also danger. They learn that the shadow of a hawk moves differently from the shadow of a cloud. They learn the safe places. The reeds. The shallow coves. The overhanging bank where my flat bottom boat is pulled up and tied.

I take the boat out early, before they are active, and I come back before evening. I move slowly. She has learned that I am not a threat but she watches me anyway. Old habits. Good habits.

...

The eleven grow quickly. In the first week they seem to double in size. Their down stays soft and yellow-brown but their feet are growing, their legs strengthening. They can cover the width of the cove in minutes now, eleven small bodies cutting eleven small wakes through the flat morning water.

I grow fond of watching them learn to feed. The tipping. The legs in the air. The small splashes as they surface. They snap at insects on the water's surface with great enthusiasm and mixed success. They nibble at the green growth along the bank. They are always hungry and she is always leading them to more.

One morning I toss a handful of thinned baby greens from the window onto the water near the bank and watch eleven ducklings discover spinach. They are not immediately certain about spinach. Then they are very certain indeed.

After that they come to that spot each morning.

I make sure there is always something there for them.

SUMMER

Growing Up



June arrives and the ducklings are no longer ducklings in the way you first picture them.

They are larger now, their baby down being pushed out by real feathers, brown and streaked, the females looking more and more like their mother, the males beginning to show the first hints of darker color at the head. They are gangly in the way of all young things, their wings too large seeming, their feet too big, their voices changing from peeping to the beginnings of proper duck sounds.

The lake in summer is a different place. Full and loud and alive. Frogs call all night. Dragonflies and damselflies work the surface from morning to dark. The bass are active and I catch enough for my table easily. My tomatoes behind the cabin are doing well and I eat them warm from the vine with salt.

She still leads them. Still watches. But they are more independent now. They spread out further when they feed. They venture into the reeds alone. Sometimes in the evening they gather on the flat rock at the creek mouth, twelve ducks preening in the last of the light, and I sit on my step and watch them and drink my mint tea and feel no need to be anywhere else in the world.

• • •

The drake I have not seen since early spring.

Somewhere on this lake or one nearby he has been going through his own quiet transformation. His bright colors have faded. His green head has dulled to something closer to brown — a camouflage, protection during the weeks. He cannot fly. He has kept to the dense reeds, hidden and still, waiting for his new feathers to come in. This is called *eclipse plumage* and it lasts most of the summer. He is not gone. He is simply invisible. Waiting.



LATE SUMMER

First Flights



One evening in August everything changes.

I am sitting on my step with my mint tea when I hear a rush of wings from the near bank. Then splashing. Then more wings.

The young ducks are trying to fly.

It is not elegant. One runs across the surface of the water, wings beating hard, and lifts into the air for perhaps three seconds before splashing back down in a tangle. Another gets higher, actually clears the water by a good ten feet, makes a wide wobbly circle over the cove and lands back in the water hard, skidding to a stop.

She watches from the flat rock.

She has been flying for years. She knows exactly how it is done. But she cannot teach this. They have to find it themselves.

Night after night they practice. Each evening the flights get longer. More controlled. One by one they find the thing that flying is. The lift. The balance. The way the wings catch the air. Within two weeks all eleven are flying properly, circling the lake in loose groups, landing and taking off with growing confidence.

I watch from my boat some evenings, lying back on the outrigger arm, looking up at eleven young mallards cutting circles against an August sky, and I think that learning to fly must feel like the best thing there is.

AUTUMN RETURNS

The Cycle Turns



September brings the cold back to the mornings.

The tomatoes are done. I pull the plants and turn the soil. The baby greens in the window are going strong again in the cooler light. I catch the last of the summer bass and smoke some of them over alder wood behind the cabin for the winter months ahead.

The lake changes its colors. The reeds go gold. The maples on the far bank turn. The light comes lower and softer across the water in the afternoons and everything looks like it is lit from inside.

And then one morning I see him.

A drake. Standing at the edge of the lake where the creek runs in. His green head catching the early light like polished glass. A white ring around his neck. A chest the color of dark chestnuts.

He is back.

Whether he is the same drake from last spring I cannot say for certain. But he stands in the same place. He holds himself the same way. And when she comes swimming from the far bank, low and steady, the color of last year's leaves, he begins immediately to display. Head bobbing. Bill dipping. Wings spreading just slightly.

She tips forward to feed. Tail in the air. Legs kicking.

He bobs harder.

I drink my mint tea and watch from the window and smile.

Some things do not change.

• • •

The eleven are still on the lake. They will be for a while yet, feeding and resting and growing their winter strength. Some will stay when the cold comes, finding open water where they can feed through the ice months. Some will feel the pull of distant water and lift off one morning and not come back until spring.

This is how it is supposed to be.

She does not seem to watch them go. She is busy with her own season now. The courtship. The pairing. The long winter ahead and what it is building toward.

FOLLOWING SPRING

The Nest Again



I know before I see it.

Something in the way she is moving along the near bank one March morning. Low and deliberate. Her head tilted, measuring.

She is looking at the same spot.

The same hollow in the tall grass just above the waterline. The same stand of reeds. The same place she has nested before — perhaps every year of her life, always returning to this bank, this creek, this lake.

I take my boat wide of that bank.

I look the other way as I pass.

But I am smiling.

Because I know what is coming. I have seen it before. I will see it again. One egg each morning until there are eleven. Twenty-eight days of waiting. The sound of peeping before dawn. A small wet duckling blinking at the world for the very first time.

The waterwheel turns in the creek.

The baby greens grow in the kitchen window.

And on the near bank, in a hollow lined with down, in the quiet lee of a sod cabin by a creek that runs into a small lake and out the other side, Mama Duck settles onto her nest.

And waits.

THE END

The waterwheel turns.

The cycle turns again.



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by Blurt Snodgrass