

# The Duck, the Clock, and the Condom

*by* Laurie Ann Doyle

Every night famous authors read not only to us, but to a duck. A wild female who emerged from the lake just as we were gathering, settled her gray-brown feathers down not three feet from the podium, tucked her head inside her wing, and remained there. If the duck liked or hated what she heard, she didn't show it. She didn't flap, arch back, hiss. She simply sat there. Quiet, but not asleep, for sometimes she peered out at us. People speculated at her presence. Maybe the duck felt some kind of nutritional potential around nearly two hundred humans. Perhaps the podium had inadvertently been placed on her nesting spot. My private theory was she was courting something, but what I couldn't put my finger on.

On the third morning of this writer's conference in Portland, I walked down the stairs of the amphitheater two at a time to the lake, wanting to spot the duck close up. But no, nothing. Not even a worn down place in the grass. I walked behind the podium and looked out. How would it be, I wondered, to read to row after rising row of people leaning forward to catch my words. Have three or four successful books under my belt, draw crowds? With all the planning and revising and fiddling I'd been doing lately, my writing seemed to be moving more back than forward. The conference had given me lots of ideas, but when I sat down to put pen to paper, it all seemed forced.

I pulled out the inner shelf of the podium—one hidden from view of the audience—and found three things: a half-drunk bottle of water tipped on its side, a white clock with big black hands, and a torn condom wrapper, missing the condom, but with gel still oozing from its right corner.

It wasn't one of those fancy condoms—not ribbed or flavored or glow in the dark—but your basic Trojan. The kind boys in high school used to stick in their wallets and sit on day after day until their body heat ruined it. I picked up the light blue wrapper and noticed the profiles of two Greek warriors, with spiny white helmets rising from their heads.

I imagined a body leaning against the podium and another body thrusting against it. A man and woman at first, then two men, then a threesome. Had a book inspired this? A reading? More than a few had involved sex. I looked down the grassy trail that circled the lake, wondering if I'd see a foot, maybe a naked butt. Writers conferences had a reputation for such things. Bread Loaf, after all, had been nicknamed Bed Loaf. Participants supposedly came with three obsessions: getting published, getting drunk, and getting laid. As for me? Being published: absolutely, but since my book was far from finished, this seemed remote. Getting drunk: a few drinks, definitely, but past experience had taught me the loose pleasures of too many were sure to be followed by icepick stabbing pain. As for getting laid: there I felt vague, but definite, stirrings.

It'd been a while since I—or more accurately, my husband and I—had used a condom, more than a decade since we'd made love outdoors. One day in late July or August, we found a clearing among the pine trees in the hills above our house in Berkeley. It was warm but not hot, perfect for being naked and doing naked things. We spread an old quilt over the dirt and were just getting down to some of those things when a helicopter started to buzz overhead. Soon it was joined by others. Before long, flashes of red were circling in the sky above and I was certain they'd spotted the two of us. “Don't be ridiculous,” my husband said. “Probably a forest fire.” But the mood was broken and we had to go home to satisfy our desires on the safe square of our king-size bed. It'd been the same since—predictably so after the child we very much wanted arrived—the smooth Posturepedic, clean sheets, and a door that locks. We used condoms sometimes, a french tickler once or twice, complete with pleasure enhancing nubs, but usually less interruptive things. Who knew

when a hand would come knocking? Over the years, it had gotten quicker and, more often than I wanted to admit, less than inspired. Time was short.

I found something oddly exciting about this freshly opened package, the glint of gel in the sunlight, its missing corner. I tucked the wrapper in my pants pocket and set out on my morning walk around the lake, half-hoping to meet two red-faced people emerging from their altered reality. Maybe holding hands or acting as if they'd never met, pulling on shorts, or unabashedly half-clothed. I picked up my pace. Alert for signs of sex, I saw what I hadn't before. Blackberries in the mad bramble dash of late summer, wild bees flying undisturbed by me into nests hidden in the grass, iridescent dragonflies coupling wing on wing, and a pair of Stellar's Jays feasting on red elderberries. From the dark water, a fetid smell rose, strong but not entirely unpleasant. Toward the end of my loop, I met a man I'd caught myself staring at during the readings, attracted by his endearingly thin ankles and lanky brown bangs. We nodded good morning and walked on.

Having never discovered the lovers, I returned to the podium. The white-faced clock stood waiting faithfully for the readers of that evening, but someone had removed the lumpy bottle of water. I considered putting the condom wrapper back where I'd discovered it, or throwing it away.

Instead I kept it in my pocket. I went to a couple more readings, and on the last night plunked myself down next to the brown-haired man sitting two rows above the podium. The duck did not appear. He claimed it was because she hadn't heard any Dickens. "Think I'm kidding?" he said, his face flushed with knowledge. "Read *Great Expectations* and listen to its cadence." Maybe she just found better things to do, I told him. I'd grown tired of the speculating. I waited as he had every author personally sign the stack of books he'd packed just for this purpose.

"Hard to decide which ones to take?" I asked after they'd finished.

"Oh no," he said. "Never know when one of these might win a Pulitzer. I could make a killing."

I shrugged. We walked to the bar and he bought a bottle of champagne. I drank a glass, then two, and we danced. But as this man began to move across the floor like a wounded buzzard, the look of his ankles turned from delicate to bony, and his bangs stuck to his forehead with unbecoming sweat. My thoughts went to my husband, the rough feel of his gray-brown beard against my lips. He'd be asleep by now, after having tucked our son in bed, both of them ready to meet me at the airport in the morning. I wandered back to the dorm alone. With only a few hours left before my flight, I began to pack and slipped the blue condom wrapper in my suitcase. Why, I wondered as the plane tipped up into a bank of pink and yellow clouds. The sun was just rising. Maybe to make my husband laugh, inspire a few of our own creative couplings. I could still smell the lush lake. But there was something more. Everything wild, I realized, would come and go of its own unknowable accord. I wanted a reminder of that mystery.

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