

Good For The Ducks

by Roz Warren

It's dawn. It's quiet on the pond in the Public Garden. The light is calm, the pollution is mild, and everything is still, except for the occasional cruising taxi. It's the beginning of spring -- tulips out, leaves just starting to show, the air sweet and fresh. One of those mornings when it feels damn good to be a duck.

I'm sitting on the bank of the pond, half asleep, with my head tucked under my wing, dreaming of Florida. In my dream, I'm on the Intercostal Waterway, bobbing about in the wake of the big motor boats.

The sun is hot on my back and I'm thinking that I could use a bite to eat when this kid leans over the side of a yacht and drops an entire peanut butter sandwich into the water! It lands with a plop! right under my bill, but before I can grab it several other ducks scoot over to check it out. The fight begins! We're hauling it this way and that, kvetching at each other. The sandwich starts to fall apart, but I manage to dive under somebody else's bill and grab a nice big hunk.

I'm about to make off with it when my buddy Ralph breaks into the dream by poking me hard on the neck.

"There's a man on top of the Ritz," says Ralph.

Sure enough, there's a man in evening dress standing on top of the hotel that faces our park. He's standing right on the roof's edge. He's young, in his twenties, and he has the sort of kind, quiet face that you often see on people who feed ducks. He looks unhappy.

Every few minutes, he leans forward to look down at the pavement below.

If he didn't seem so sad, he'd look very nice standing up there at dawn

in his formal suit. Everything else is so sweet and mild. The rising

sun has caught a row of windows a few floors below him and they're shining gold.

"Human beings," says Ralph, rising slightly out of the water, wings flapping. "Crazy -- every last one of them."

The only other human around is also wearing evening dress. He is curled up asleep on the lawn beside the pond. He had woken us up late last night, stumbling across the bridge over the pond, humming a cheery little song that carried well over the water. We ducks had stirred uneasily, listening to the tune and the unsteady crunch of his feet on the gravel path. He left the path, ploughed through a bed of tulips and stumbled onto the lawn that slopes gently toward our pond. He tripped over the Keep Off The Grass sign and went down. The song stopped.

After a moment, Sadie, curious, had left the pond and approached him cautiously.

"He's out," she said. She poked at his pockets. "No food," she concluded, returning to the water.

For somebody who didn't feed ducks, this gentleman was spending a lot of time in our vicinity. Earlier in the day he had been standing with his arm around a beautiful, auburn-haired girl on the bridge, a favorite spot for courting couples. I had joined the group of ducks floating on the calm water by the bridge, watching them.

Although pretending to watch us, neither of them was really paying us much attention.

"He can't make you happy," he was saying to her as I paddled up.

"But it's not right," she said.

"What's not right is for you to throw your life away. We have to tell him about us. He'll understand.

"I don't want to hurt him."

"Marcy," he said, taking her hands and looking into her eyes. "I can't live without you anymore."

Ralph poked me. "If I had a cheese tidbit for every time we've heard that line..."

"Shhh! hissed Sadie. "I can't hear! I want to know how it comes out!"

"Look at them!" scoffed Ralph. "You know very well how it's going to come out."

"Marcy," the man on the bridge was saying, "I'm not trying to force you into making any decisions you may regret later."

"The hell you aren't, buster!" scoffed Morris. "Tell him to go to hell, Marcy!"

"Go for it Marcy!" yelled Ruth. "Grab all the gusto you can!"

"Kiss me," the man said, pulling the woman to him.

It was a good long kiss. Ruth, who makes a hobby of timing clinches on the bridge, said it came very close to setting a new record.

"And the worst thing about it," Ralph had said as the couple walked back through the park toward the Ritz, holding hands, "is that

they're going to order a romantic little dinner from room service.

But the lovesick fools will barely touch a bite. And then they're going to throw it out! All that good food!"

The rest of us murmured hungrily.

But that was yesterday. Now the man is passed out on the lawn, the woman has vanished, and Ralph and I are watching this other

fellow on top of the Ritz. A few of the other ducks are awake now.

I'm getting hungry.

The man on the building suddenly hurls a small object toward

the pond. It's a long shot -- all the way across both the street and

the lawn, but a few of the optimists among us follow its course expectantly until the sunlight catches it and it glints. If it glints it can't be food. Somebody gives a disappointed cluck. It lands with a ping! on the sidewalk and rolls into the gutter. It's a gold ring.

"What do you think?" Ralph asks me. "Is this good for the ducks or bad for the ducks?"

I'm about to reply that it's too early to tell when the guy backs away from the edge. We assume that he's leaving. I'm about to go

scare up some breakfast when he reappears. He hadn't left after all --

he'd merely gone back to get a good running start. The next thing we

know he comes galloping up to the roof's edge, and goes sailing right

off the top of the Ritz -- arms outstretched, back arched, legs flung back.

"Beautiful form," Ralph mutters approvingly, and there is a mild squawk of appreciation from the other end of the pond. It's really

as nice a take-off as you could imagine. Unfortunately, not being properly equipped for flight, the poor fellow soon loses momentum and

drops into the center of Arlington Street.

The sound of impact wakes everybody else up. There's a flurry of squawks, squeaks and bleats, wings flapping and bodies splashing into the water.

It also wakes up the man lying on the grass. His head comes up. He looks around. Then he peers over at the crumpled form in the

street and his head gives a little jerk.

"Oh dear God," he cries. "Harry! Oh sweet Jesus, no!"

He stumbles to his feet and staggers toward the street,

moaning. He doesn't notice our pond until he's right on top of it.

The
next thing we know he's fallen in and is floundering around,
splashing
and cursing. We flee to the opposite bank.

"This can't be good for the ducks," I say to Ralph as the
guy flails about in the water.

Two police cars and an ambulance come tearing around the
corner, sirens wailing, and stop in front of the Ritz. People pour out
and surround the still figure on the pavement.

They are putting him on a stretcher when the auburn-haired
girl runs from the hotel. She is wearing a long silver and blue
evening

gown. Seeing her, everyone becomes so quiet that over at the pond
we

can hear the clatter of her high heels as she runs to the man on the
ground. She shoves aside a cop and throws herself down with her
arms

around the dead man.

"Marcy!" screams the man in the pond, but another police
car

has appeared and its sirens drown him out. He goes under, then
resurfaces. "Darling!" he calls feebly.

We are in a quandary. The water isn't deep but it's cold
and the bottom is slippery, and this guy is floundering his way
toward

the middle of the pond. The water is deeper there.

We decide to alert the cops. A few of us waddle, frantic,
across Arlington Street, but when we arrive, bleating, the cops kick
us

out of the way. (One, however, tosses me a quarter of a donut!) We
retreat. When we get back, we learn that the poor klutz has
managed to

hit his head on one of the boats tethered in the center of the pond,
and

has gone under for good.

Now we're really upset. It's only nine o'clock and already there's a dead man in our pond.

"Everybody wants to be a duck this morning," remarks Ralph.

"First they try to fly. Then they try to float. What the hell's the matter with them all?"

"This can't be good for the ducks," we all murmur, paddling about, agitated.

But the sun is up now and the kid is due. As we wait for the kid to show up, the cops take both the man who couldn't fly and the auburn-haired woman away in an ambulance. Except for the dead man on the bottom of the pond, by the time the kid finally arrives, you'd barely know anything out of the ordinary had happened.

The kid is only ten but he brings us a loaf of Wonder Bread every morning on his way to school. A whole LOAF! And he never misses a day. We adore him. He throws us entire slices, which we compete for, churning up the water and grabbing them away from each other and having a wonderful time.

This morning, he arrives on schedule and whistles for us as usual. We're heading for him from every part of the pond when he sees the guy in the water. He gapes at the body for a minute then drops the bag of Wonder Bread and runs off. After a minute a bunch of us climb out onto the shore and try to get the bread out of the plastic bag. The top is tied with a funny knot and we're pulling and tugging at it, more

and more of us. I'm busy trying to make a little hole in the plastic, but every time I let go to get a firmer grip somebody else grabs it.

Then the boy is back with a cop. The cop flaps his arms and shouts, and we all clear off. Then he picks up our bag of bread and drops it into the trash bin!

Soon more cops are there, wading into our pond.

We haven't finished fretting about this when the news teams arrive. Bright lights. Noise. Commotion. A crowd gathers. The cops

set up barriers around the pond and are busy fussing with the body.

The regular duck-feeders arrive, one by one, but aren't allowed to get to us. They're held back behind police barriers -- the young professional couple who always carry baggies of Cheerios in their

briefcases for us, the bag lady who throws us stale poparts, the little

girl and her babysitter who feed us cheese crackers. All day, our friends try to get through to us and are shooed off. We are frantic and

unhappy and very hungry.

"This is horrible," we complain. "Horrible. Can it possibly get worse?"

It can. We suddenly discover that under cover of all the brou ha ha, somebody has made off with Sol! Probably a hungry bum.

As my mother, God rest her soul, often remarked, there are two kinds of people in this world -- people who feed the ducks and people who eat the ducks. If you want to survive, you'd better be able

to figure out who is who! Poor Sol.

We are very upset, particularly Irma. Sol and Irma have been mates for several years. Poor Irma's first mate was gunned down

over Long Island Sound. Her second mate was hit by a scull on the Charles River. And now Sol.

As we are trying to comfort Irma, a taxi pulls up in front of the Ritz and the auburn-haired woman gets out. She has a friend with her now, a plump, nice-looking woman. They walk with their arms around each other. The auburn haired woman is still wearing her evening gown and she's still beautiful but her eyes are red and her hair is a mess and her face is an unhappy mask. She looks just like we on the pond are beginning the feel -- frantic.

The newspeople swarm across the street toward her, asking questions and pointing their cameras at her. She begins to cry. Her friend leads her into the Ritz. Duck falls, the barricades are dismantled, and the cops leave. We are sadly concluding that it's been a very black day for the ducks when who should come cruising in over the trees, and land with a long happy swoosh along the surface of the water, but Sol! He's got a little metal thing attached to his leg but appears otherwise unharmed.

He tells us that two teenage girls had led him away from the pond and through the park by dropping a trail of Cheetos. At the park's edge, one of them scooped him up in a net. They took him away, fed him an entire bag of Cheetos, measured him, put this thing on his leg and let him go. Now he's a science project!

Irma scolds him and fusses at the metal tag, but is obviously overjoyed. We all settle in for the night, hungry. I begin a dream in which I am floating alone in the center of a small pool of water while hundreds of small children line the bank, throwing kreplach at my head.

Ralph wakes me up the next morning, early.

"There's a woman on top of the Ritz," he says.

I look over at the building. Sure enough, the auburn-haired woman is standing there, still in her evening gown, which is beginning to look somewhat the worse for wear.

"If this goes on," I say to Ralph. "we're all going to starve to death."

Ralph nods agreement. The situation is desperate. We wake everyone up. We cross the street in masse, about 40 of us, and start milling around on the sidewalk below her. We don't know much about her, but you can tell she's not the kind of woman who's going to squash an innocent duck.

"Shoo!" she shouts down to us. "Shoo! Go away!" She flaps her arms about.

We look up at her. What a ridiculous sight she is, this sad young woman in a soiled evening gown, standing at dawn on the roof of the Ritz.

Eventually, she gives up trying to make us go away. She stands there looking down at us, hands on her hips. We look back up with a few encouraging quacks.

Finally, the doorman comes out of the Ritz and chases us back across the street.

We return to the pond and look back at the building. The woman had gone. We settle down to wait for the kid. He's late, and a few of us are getting worried that he won't come at all because of what happened the day before, but when he finally arrives, we understand the delay -- he's brought us two bags of Wonder Bread!

He opens them up, and begins tossing us breakfast. We're so

busy scarfing it up that most of us don't even notice when the auburn-haired woman comes out of the Ritz, crosses Arlington Street, and walks up to the kid. She's finally changed out of her evening gown. Now she's wearing blue jeans, a black sweater, and sneakers.

They start talking, and he stops tossing us the bread. He points towards the area of the pond where he first saw the dead man.

She looks for a moment, then looks away. She says a few more words, gesturing towards the top of the building, then pointing to us. The kid smiles at us and shrugs his shoulders.

"Never mind all that," we say to him urgently. "Cut the shit and toss the bread! We're starving!"

The kid laughs and our feeding is resumed. After watching him for a moment, the auburn-haired woman returns to the Ritz. All too soon, the rest of the bread is gone, and the kid goes off to school.

We're floating around on the water, our appetites merely whetted, when what should we see but the auburn-haired woman coming across the street toward us, carrying a large paper bag.

"This is going to be good for the ducks, I just know it!" Ralph murmurs, giving me an excited shove. Sure enough, when the auburn-haired woman arrives, she reaches into the paper bag, pulls something out, and tosses it into the pond. Ralph identifies it first.

"Rolls from the Ritz!" he cries. She throws in more. We stampede them, barely able to contain our joy. She smiles. It's a sad smile, but it's a smile. More important, it's clearly the smile of a person who plans to continue to feed the ducks.

