

## How to Be Jealous of a Duck

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"I'd like you to meet Gus." My mom said as she plopped a box down on the kitchen counter and pulled out a round, three-inch peeping ball of yellow. My younger sisters gathered round as she drew a duck up to her face and nuzzled it. After sharing a few pecks on the cheek, Gus was placed on the hard linoleum floor to explore our house. Mom gave him a complete tour, narrating all the fun they would have in each room while Mary and Elley were left at the counter to contemplate their new baby brother Gus.

Thus began our life with Gus. He had a rough childhood up to this point and was found at the end of a driveway, abandoned and all alone. Through a series of random events, Gus made it into my mom's arms. She had recently been experiencing empty nest syndrome with all of her daughters doing their own thing in high school or college and this duck seemed like the perfect fix. If you ask her, she'll say fate brought them together.

In May, my sisters and I all returned from school to spend one of the last summers in which we would all still live at home together. Though there didn't seem like there'd be much extra time amidst all of our busy schedules of work, camps and friends, we were optimistic about the possibilities the summer held. Every day before going our separate ways, Mom would yell up the stairs to wish all of us a good morning and then walk out to the barn to give Gus his breakfast— a scoop of feed, and a fresh cup of water to last him until she'd rush home from work to play with him in the afternoon. Gus was the only one who could be guaranteed to be home on any certain day anxiously awaiting his mom.

"Play" consisted of them either lying in the grass, or walking around the yard. The goal was to train him like a dog, never mind the fact that our own twelve-year-old dog Willy still ran away with the ball when she tried to play fetch with him.

Us girls, her four human children, soon formed a sort of secret club of watching them through the window.

"Come quick!" Elley would yell, and we'd all run in, taking our usual stances of kneeling or crouching by her window. That was clearly the best spying place because it was on the second story and we could survey all their activities from there, as well as have the beds handy when we

needed to fall back and laugh uncontrollably.

That day, the lesson appeared to be on following. Our Mother, who despises water and especially hates getting her hair wet, was out there in the cold drizzle with a duck that was clearly in his element and basking in all her attention. She had on her bright red wind jacket, zipped all the way to the top. Under that red hood, a baseball hat stuck out, resembling a duckbill, and it made me wonder if she was trying to look like him.

When they walked, Mom was always in the front with Gus anywhere from directly below her to fifteen feet behind. His little webbed feet and short legs only went two speeds; slow and fast. Slow was a turtle's pace, and fast was when his whole compact body shook left and right as each leg rotated similar to a child's pull toy. To keep up with her big strides he'd switch between these two speeds, shooting ahead till he caught up and was directly between her feet and then slowing down until the whole process had to be repeated again.

When she seemed satisfied with their practice for the day, they raced over to the three-foot diameter baby pool we had cleaned and set up with a piece of plywood for a ramp. This was Gus's reward for a hard day's work.

Gus followed the path of Mom's red arm in the air, from the ramp to the water, where he gracefully dove in. All of his baby fuzz, which hadn't quite turned into feathers yet, was submerged and he stretched out his neck. He came up and sat floating on the water, turning for the approval of his mom. She had taken a seat on the limestone rock next to the plastic pond and sat, arms around her knees pulled tight to her chest, simply watching this little creature enjoy the lucky life he had happened upon.

From our perch in the warm, dry house, we rolled our eyes as Mary cranked the window open and shouted at her.

It was only after the third "HEY MOM! What are you doing?" that she actually come out of her daze and turned to look up at us. Even then, all we got was a smile and a wave that turned into a point at Gus, to signal she was focused on him. We all joked that she'd completely lost it, that turning all her love and affection towards a duck was simply crazy. But these were words we would never say to her. We knew better than to get between her and Gussie Bussie.

Gus became our mom's new obsession. My sisters and I were told the day he intruded on our family that Gussie Bussie was a new 'pet' for us, but it quickly became clear whose 'child' he really was. All the house rules seemed to vanish just for this small descendent of a dinosaur. What used



to be a strict "No animals in the house" rule turned into a "No animals in the house, except Gus" policy. Tasks my sisters and I never used to want to help Mom with before such as cooking dinner and gardening became all the more appealing when she didn't actually want our help, only Gus.

"Hey Mom, want me to butter and garlic the bread?"

"Oh no, I'm going to do that. Gus likes when I drop some scraps down for him to eat."

We weren't the only ones falling in the shadow of Gus. We watched our dog Willy not only give up his pool, but also get pushed aside as the door was opened for Gus, and then slammed in his face. Not surprisingly, these two did not appear to have the best relationship. At first, as is typical with Springer Spaniels and birds, he wanted to bite Gus's head off. When he did this, we would pull Willy by his red collar to the garage where he was confined while Gus was free to roam. The rest of the family quickly sided with Willy when this happened, but Mom chose Gus. Therefore Gus won. Eventually Willy started to just ignore him. The dog had learned like the rest of us it was best to not even try to compete for attention.

We also learned what it felt like to be brushed aside as people no longer asked how anyone else in our family was doing, only the duck. I'm surprised we didn't have birth announcements made up and sent out to all our friends. Our local newspaper has a section where the readers can submit their best photos throughout the summer. You can bet it didn't take long for Gus to make it in there. The caption underneath read something like, "The newest member of the Ries family" This laminated clipping, along with approximately 5 other poses of him proudly hung on the fridge, making up The Shrine of Gus.

One day I awoke to find a note next to The Shrine of Gus with a list of things to do:

Let Gus out.

Hang the clothes on the line (Gus likes to help, wear Crocs)

Water flowers (He also likes to play under the hose)

Meet me for lunch (Bring Gus if you want)

It seemed that watching Gus was going to be my fulltime job during the only week of freedom I had before starting my real, paying job. So I started my list of "chores" and retrieved that beloved duck from the barn, wearing the specified Crocs. We started with the clothesline. That simple task became ten times more difficult with a small animal darting every which way below my feet. It's a good thing he didn't wear a leash because I would have definitely ended up on the ground the way he was waddling

around. I began a silent mantra in my head, "Do Not Step On Gus. Hang shirts from the bottom. Do Not Step On Gus. Get more clothespins. Do Not Step On Gus." Little Gussie Bussie did not make it easier on me because his favorite things in the world appeared to be to eat bugs that I never would have known existed, and then stick his little beak in the holes of my rubber Crocs, to nibble at my bare feet. Upon checking item number two off our to-do list, I moved on to watering the flowers. This was much easier for me because in the duck world, water ranks much higher than Crocs. I actually kind of enjoyed zigzagging the hose back and forth, varying the pressure of the water for Gus to chase.

After finishing our chores, I put Gus in the pool to keep him occupied while I went inside to get everything ready to go. When I came back out I realized I didn't have a box to bring Gus with me. I know it wouldn't have been hard to find one, but I didn't look at all. The thought of bringing a duck to school came off as slightly ridiculous to me. So after unsuccessfully trying to coax him out of the pool and down the ramp, I just reached in and grabbed him, causing wild quacking and flapping of his underdeveloped wings and marched him back to his place in the barn. Then I went to meet my mom for lunch.

When I arrived, I noticed she glanced at my empty hands and appeared to be disappointed, but tried not to let it show. My eyes went from her face to the new 8 by 10 framed and matted photo of Gus mounted above her desk. The absolute first thing everyone saw upon entering the school was Gus nuzzled up to a yellow rain boot.

"Mom! Not that I'm jealous or anything, but that is more than twice the size of any pictures you have of your biological children!"

"Oh honey, but isn't he cute? And look at the colors. They just match so well."

Pictures at home began to get replaced as well with those of this little creature, and I even heard her say one day, "If you girls don't give me any grandchildren, I'm going to fill this house with ducks."

This made me vow to give her at least one grandchild.

Then one warm June night, we arrived home later than planned and realized no one had put Gus away. He was nowhere to be found. Panic broke out and blame was shoved in all directions as to who should have put him away. It didn't take long until we came together and formed a plan to search for the little guy. We combed the entire yard investigating all suspicious shadows and singing his name to coax him out of the dark. Everyone was equipped with flashlights, and my dad even got out the



riding lawn mower, thinking the sound and slight shaking it makes as well as the blinding headlights would help find Gus.

After a long, exhausting hour of searching, Elley whispered to me, "I saw something in the field, and I think it's what took Gus."

"When did you see this?"

"Just about a half hour ago. It was way out there." She pointed.

We stopped talking as our sad and defeated Mom returned to the children she had left. No one knew what to say to comfort her.

Finally after exhaling, Mom said, "I think he must have been ready to fly south for the winter."

We kept all thoughts about that dark shadow Elley saw to ourselves. Everyone knew perfectly well Gus didn't even have fully developed wings and was unable to fly more than a couple of feet off the ground. They also disregarded the fact it was only June as well. All that mattered was Gus, the duck that captured our mom's heart was gone. And she was crushed.

The next couple of days we all tip-toed around and watched Mom transition back into life before Gus. She would sit gazing at his photograph for minutes, and then shake her head and walk away. My sisters and I tried our best to keep her busy, but everything we did, she had once done with Gus. People who didn't know about his disappearance still asked, and we'd try to silence them before Mom heard. Usually we succeeded and were able to avert that issue, but about two weeks after his disappearance, we knew she had moved on to the next stage in her grief when she surprised us by replying,

"He was a good duck. He never quacked back."