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Geese in Autumn

by Ivor John

The low autumn sun shining obliquely across the lake, threw long, afternoon shadows ahead of them, as they walked together along the cinder track through the fields. A few hundred yards away, the traffic on the A140 was a distant hum, almost inaudible unless you paid particular attention. Holding each other's hands, they were laughing as they walked back towards the National Trust Car Park to where they had parked his car. Groups of unusual birds, some kind of geese he imagined, squawked and caused a volley of splashes as they crashed one after the other into the water.

"Just look at those beautiful ducks," Jane said, shielding her eyes from the glare as she looked across the water.

"Ducks, are they ducks? I had assumed they were geese," he said, letting go of Jane's hand and clapping them together, blowing on them for warmth.

"What is the difference Paul, between a duck and a goose?"

"Well it's mainly the necks isn't it? Geese have such long necks. It's quite surprising that they can fly, with such long necks."

It was getting quite late in the afternoon, and darkness was descending, taking away the last remnants of the autumn sunshine. For the first time, he felt the cold. He pulled his zip towards his chin and adjusted his scarf.

“I have never really got on with a scarf,” he said, “other men seem to manage them very conveniently, but I can never quite see the point of them. When I was at college they were generally very popular, but I never really saw the point.”

“Oh come here, Paul, let me.”

In a perfunctory manner, she lowered the zip of his jacket and rearranged the scarf. Looping it in the style of a cravat and tucking the ends back into his jacket before roughly zipping it up again. He half expected that she would take out a handkerchief and wipe the corners of his mouth.

“There you are Paul, now isn’t that much better?”

Actually he found it quite uncomfortable, but chose to say nothing. They walked in silence together, back to his car. He held his arm so that his hand was brushing hers, hoping that she would take it. She didn’t, but neither did she remove her hand either. A couple were walking towards them. Middle aged, probably retired he thought, they were wearing expensive walking clothes. She had a small pair of binoculars hanging on cord around her neck.

“Lovely afternoon,” the man said, as they passed each other.

“This lake attracts such a lot of birds,” the woman said, moving her hand to her binoculars as if to emphasise her claim.

“It is beautiful, enjoy your walk,” Jane replied. Polite, but not encouraging of further conversation. Paul was now very self-conscious of his conspicuously knotted plaid scarf and fumbled with his neckline, which only drew attention to it.

They continued to walk without speaking, but now Paul took her hand. She was impassive, but didn’t take her hand away. When they reached the car park, which was empty apart from a Red BMW X3, which he assumed belonged to the couple. He unlocked his car remotely. They shook mud from their feet before getting into his car.

“Shall we find somewhere to eat Jane? Perhaps the pub we passed this morning?”

“We should speak Paul.”

He had known this was coming. She would expect him to make a decision. A commitment to their relationship.

“What have you told her? where does she think you are?”

“At a business meeting in Norwich, which isn’t far from the truth is it?”

He didn't want to argue with her, and neither was she angry, more disappointed he thought.

"Tomorrow, you will go back home, and act with her as if everything is fine. But I can tell even when we are together, they are on your mind, your family are never in your past, you carry it everywhere."

"That isn't true Jane, that is unfair, shall we go and get some supper?"

"It is the truth Paul, I think we should collect our things, and we can drive home. You won't have to worry. You don't have to do this."