

THE DUCK WHO COULDN'T QUACK

by Karl Milde

Chapter 1:

“Quack, quack,” said the mother duck to her three newborn ducklings, her way of saying “Welcome to the world!” The baby ducklings had just managed to crack open their eggshells and climb out, but they were still a little sticky and slid around when they tried to walk. Dale blinked her tiny eyes and took in the bright world around her. Everything felt exciting and new!

That night, they stayed with their mother in the nest to dry out, a quiet place under a bush where no one could see them. Dale, the smallest duckling, wriggled around a bit until he found his perfect spot under her mother’s soft feathers.

The next morning, with the sun sparkling on the lake, their mother quacked a "Let's go!" She led her wobbly ducklings to the water's edge for their first swim. *Splash!* Dale dipped a tiny webbed foot into the cool water. It felt funny! Her sisters splashed too, their tiny legs paddling as they tried to keep up with their mother.

When the sun went down, their mother would bring them back each day to their nesting place under the bush. The three ducklings would tuck themselves in under her wings, warm and cozy, and go to sleep. They didn’t have their adult feathers yet, so without her warmth, they would have felt cold at night. Usually,

two of the ducklings snuggled under one wing while Dale, the smallest of the three, snuggled under the other.

During the day, their mother took them on short walks and showed them how to find food. They pecked at the ground the way their mother taught them, but they, especially Dale, didn't like many of the things they tasted. After a while though, Dale found food that she liked—plant shoots and tiny bugs—and she ate that.

Their mother brought them back to the lake several times a day to practice swimming. They found the paddling easier when they stayed in a straight line behind her. While they were still quite young, their mother led them all across the lake to an area with green algae. Dale dipped her beak into the algae and found it tasted good.

One day, while nibbling on the floating plant, Dale looked up and saw something wonderful. On the other side of the lake, a beautiful duck, even larger than her mother, floated peacefully on the water with its head held high. Unlike her mother, this duck's head and neck were a shiny green, its beak was a bright yellow, and the feathers on its back were gray and black, with a tinge of brown.

Dale's mother noticed Dale was staring and swam over. "That's your father," she said with an admiring smile. "He always stays nearby to make sure we are safe."

Dale didn't know what a "father" was. She looked at her own reflection in the water and saw she had dark brown and tan feathers, like her mother. It was a wonderful sight, this duck with a green head and yellow beak, but her mother kept her distance from him.

And for that reason, Dale did too.

Chapter 2:

When they were almost two weeks old, Dale's sisters began to imitate their mother's quacking. Dale heard them quacking to each other in this way, but when she opened her beak to join in, no noise came out. She tried again, wider this time, but only silence followed. When her sisters noticed she was unable to speak, they made fun of her, saying,

"Ha, ha, Dale! You can't quack.

Go away, and don't come back."

Their hurtful words made Dale's heart sink, and she closed her beak tightly. She watched her sisters chirp playfully, wishing her own voice would come.

Her mother noticed her struggling and wrapped a wing around her. "Quack," she said in a comforting tone. "It's going to be all right. Give it some time, and you'll see."

Dale opened her beak and blew air out, but no noise came. She couldn't help feeling sorry for herself. She was letting her mother down, she thought.

A month went by, and it was time to learn to fly. Dale still couldn't quack but she was eager to soar. She was growing quickly and was even slightly larger than her two sisters. While they were in the water, their mother flapped her wings and rose up slightly. She didn't take to the air just yet, but Dale could see the motions it took to fly. When she and her sisters followed their mother's lead, Dale

was surprised at how good it felt. When she flapped her wings the way her mother did, she was somehow *lighter*. She flapped some more and was lighter still. But neither she nor her sisters could take off. Yet.

Their mother quacked at them to show she approved of their efforts. She swam around them twice, flapping her wings to encourage them further. Then she swam away, as fast as she could, toward the far side of the lake. She flapped her wings wildly and took off! Dale remained still and watched her mother lift herself into the air. *I can do that too*, she thought to herself.

Dale mustered up her courage, took a deep breath, and followed after her mother. She paddled furiously beneath the water while flapping her wings as hard as she could. *I think I can. I think I can*, she thought to herself. Faster and faster she went until... her feet left the lake. Looking down, she saw the water below her fall away. She was *in the air*, moving forward and lifting herself by flapping her wings. The wind rushed through her feathers as her eyes took in the treetops. How wonderful it felt!

Chapter 3:

Dale looked down from the sky and saw the world with new eyes. She kept flapping her wings, but flying was easier now. Taking off had been difficult, but keeping aloft was a breeze. Literally. When she flapped harder, she rose higher, and when she eased off, she floated, coasting but keeping herself in the air.

She flew around for almost an hour, watching and copying her mother as she banked right and left. Her mother was teaching her, she knew, and she tried to imitate her as best she could. However, after a while, Dale became bored with these lessons. She waved a wing at her mother and banked away, signaling that she wanted to fly all by herself and could do it now.

Dale flapped her wings harder and rose higher and higher in the air until, when she looked down, she could see the entire lake. Her sisters were only a speck. She looked for the beautiful duck she had seen before, the one her mother had called her “father,” but he wasn’t where he’d been before. This made her wonder for a moment, but she quickly forgot him and looked out over the gorgeous landscape. From the air, it presented a whole new panorama of fields and forests, dotted with lawns and nearby homes. So much to see!

After a while, Dale began to feel tired and wanted to come down. She saw her mother in the distance and soared back down to follow her, turning slowly in a circle until she could see her two sisters again, this time much closer. She held her

wings out and glided around, letting the wind do the work and at the same time floating slowly down, still following her mother, to the place on the lake where she had started. She finally touched down and allowed herself to skid to a stop right next to her two sisters. They stared at her, but instead of smiling and clapping their wings to congratulate her, she saw that they were *angry*.

“Showoff!” quacked one sister in a nasty tone.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” quacked the other with clear irritation in her voice. “You’re making us look bad.”

But you can do it too! Dale wanted to say, but she couldn’t quack. Again, all she could do was wheeze.

Her sisters laughed at her. But they were nervous laughs. Dale realized her sisters didn’t think they could yet fly. She was ready, but her sisters were not.

Chapter 4:

As the summer wore on, Dale and her sisters became less and less dependent on their mother. After she and her sisters learned to find food and fly by themselves, their mother found other things to do. She left them and spent her time with other female ducks. She foraged for food to get ready for the great migration south for the winter. From time to time, Dale saw her swimming next to the big duck whom she called her “father.” Dale still didn’t know what the word “father” meant, just that this duck was amazingly beautiful. Her mother called him “handsome.”

Dale knew she could never be like him. She couldn’t even speak!

One day, after trying especially hard to quack without so much as a snort, she finally broke down and cried. Her mother saw her from across the lake and came hurrying over. “What’s the matter, my dear Dale?” she asked, comforting her.

Still crying, Dale made her wheezing sound, and her mother understood. “Why, that’s very normal,” she said to Dale. “You’re a boy, not a girl, and by the fall you’ll look just like your father. Male ducks don’t quack. They’re big, strong and silent. You will be too.”

Dale looked down at the still water and studied his reflection, as he had done many times before, but this time he noticed that new feathers had grown in. His

head and neck had taken on a bright green hue, and his body was now light gray.

Dale realized for the first time that he would soon look just like his father.

A month later, Dale flew south in a large formation of fellow ducks. Some of them quacked during the journey, but he did not. The thought had once brought him sorrow, but now, as he watched the gentle ripples in the water, he felt a sense of peace. His wings were strong, and his flight was graceful. The green on his neck would continue to deepen. Come spring, he would return to the same lake, but this time, he would know exactly who he was meant to be.

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