

THE LURKING DUCK

by *Scott Baker*

JULIE: 1981

It was Tuesday evening, just before dark, a few weeks after my birthday. I was four years old. Mother and Daddy had just had another fight. Daddy used to be a policeman before he got paralyzed but Mother was still a policewoman and she was very strong and sometimes she lost control and knocked him around a little. That's what she called it and that's what happened this time, but even after she got him to shut up they were still both really mad, so she took me down to the lake to watch the ducks and the swans while she ran around the lake to calm down. The swans were mean but I liked the ducks a lot.

She put me on one of the concrete benches and got out the piece of string she always kept in her pocket when she was with me, then made a circle around the bench with it. The string was about ten feet long but the circle it made was a lot smaller and I had to stay inside it. Then she went off to do her jogging.

After a while I noticed there was an old green car with no one in it, one of those big bump-shaped cars like the ones in the black-and-white movies on TV, parked a little ways away from me on the gravel, up under a tree where it was pretty close to the water. The sun was already gone and it was almost dark but I could still see that every now and then one of the ducks would get curious about the car and waddle up to it and stick its head underneath to look at something, then sort of squeeze down and push itself the rest of the way under the car. I couldn't see what happened to the ducks underneath but none of them ever came out again. I saw two of the ducks with the bright green heads- mallards- and one brown duck go under the car before Mother came back to do her jump-roping.

When I told her about the ducks she got real mad again. At first I thought she was mad at me then she went and found a man hiding in the car under a blanket and she arrested him. He was all dirty and ragged and skinny and he smelled bad. His hands were big and red. Mother said he was a drunk and that he was sick in the head but he wasn't very old. He'd made a hole in the bottom of his car and put a lot of duck food on the ground beneath it so the ducks would come under where he could grab them by the neck and kill them without anybody seeing what he was doing. Mother said Daddy'd arrested him for the same thing back before the accident. She found five dead mallards and seven brown ducks and two white ducks under the blanket with him but they were already dead.

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JAMES PATRICK DUBIC

I. From the *Sand City Tattler*, May 9, 1981:

DUCKNAPPER NABBED AGAIN! by *Tattler* Staff Writer Thom Homart

The *Tattler* learned yesterday that twenty-nine year old aerospace heir James Patrick Dubic, a former instructor of computer sciences at Monterey Peninsula and Chapman Colleges, was arrested Tuesday evening by Police Officer Mrs. Virginia Matson on charges stemming from the alleged theft and slaughter of fourteen ducks from El Estero Park in downtown Monterey.

Officer Matson, who was recently promoted to the Monterey Municipal Police Tac Squad (where she replaces her husband, Thomas Philip Matson, paralyzed in a tragic skate board accident during the Parent-Teacher Day celebrations at Monterey High School last fall) was off duty at the time of the arrest. She had taken her daughter Julie, four, to the lake to "get her out of the house for a while" when Julie noticed there were a lot of ducks going under an old car parked near them but none of the ducks ever came out again! She told her mother and Officer Matson investigated, only to find James Patrick Dubic hiding under a blanket in the back seat. With him she found a cloth sack containing fourteen recently-killed ducks. The floorboards of the car had been removed and duck pellets scattered on the ground beneath it to attract the birds.

Dubic is currently out on bail on previous charges stemming from the alleged sale of seagulls and cats to four ethnic restaurants on the Peninsula. The restaurants-Casa Miguel, la Poubelle de Luxe, the Ivory Pagoda and Ho's Terrace Cafe-have been charged with serving the seagulls as duck and chicken in a variety of dishes such as *Cantonese duck*, *Polio con Mole*, and *Duck a l'orange*, while the cats are alleged to have served as the basis for a number of rabbit dishes.

Dubic has not only been convicted on three previous charges of violence against domestic birds and wildfowl, but is also the man whom Monterey County Prosecutor Florio Volpone attempted to

prove last year was the head of the dognapping ring which has been responsible for the deaths of thousands of Irish Setters sold to the Mexican fur industry for their beautiful “pelts”. Judge Hapgood ruled the evidence insufficient to prove Dubic guilty of the dognapping and related conspiracy charges.

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II. The Trial

“Objection sustained,” Hapgood ruled, but it was already too late, Volpone’d been able to get the jury thinking about the dognapping charges again, with that bit about Mexico thrown in to appeal to their racism. The bastard. He knew as well as I did that it was all bullshit, I’d never had anything against dogs. Or cats either, and he was trying to get them to believe I was killing cats too, and that wasn’t true. I’d always loved cats, I even had one of my own for a while and he knew it, but it didn’t make any difference to Volpone, he was going to try to get me for the cats anyway,

“... a rubber duck,” Wibsosome was saying the next time I bothered to tune in to him. I hadn’t been missing anything. I’d heard it all before, and anyway he was even clumsier than usual. Probably because he knew there was no way he was going to get me out of anything this time no matter how hard he tried, so he wasn’t even trying.

“A rubber duck,” he continued, “which the late Robert Tyrone Dubic had the habit of filling with ball bearings before he used it to beat his defenseless baby brother into unconsciousness. The same rubber duck with which he often threatened to kill that baby brother, James Patrick Dubic, here before you on charges stemming from what the prosecution claims is a pathological hatred of birds in general and ducks in particular.

“But I ask you-is there anything really all *that* sick about the defendant’s feelings? Would any of you have had a great fondness for our feathered friends if you’d been repeatedly beaten by a sadistic older brother with a lead-filled duck? If you’d been so badly mauled by your aunt’s flock of geese that you were hospitalized for three weeks? How would you have felt if your grandfather had disinherited you in favor of a bird sanctuary in Guatemala?

“I’m not going to pretend that James Patrick Dubic is just like everybody else. He isn’t. But what he is is a man of intelligence and principle, a research scientist who has made invaluable contributions to our national defense and a

teacher who was always respected by his students. He is neither irrational nor insane. His dislike of birds, regrettable though it may be, is a perfectly normal reaction to the unique and unfortunate events of his childhood..."

It wasn't going to work. Not this time. Wibsone wasn't even trying.

"We'll appeal," Wibsone told me when he came back and sat down again. Meaning that there was no way they were going to find me innocent. "Those articles in the *Tattler*-I'm pretty sure we can prove they prejudiced the jury and kept you from getting a fair trial. And there may be other things I can turn up when I've had the time to study the transcripts from the trial."

"Wibsone," I said, "you know I didn't have anything to do with the dogs, or with the cats either. You know I always liked dogs and cats-"

"Of course, Jimmy." He didn't believe me even though he was supposed to be on my side. "Not the dogs and cats. Just those nasty, nasty birds."

"Yes!" He was laughing at me again. Like Bobby used to, before they shipped him off to Vietnam and killed him. But if I ever got out of here I was going to get Wibsone just like I was going to get all the rest of them. That oh-so sweet little girl and her bull-dyke mother and her paralyzed father who'd lied about me at the dognapping trial. The bastard who'd written those articles for the *Tattler* and all those restaurant owners who'd tried to put each other out of business by accusing one another of hiring me to get their seagulls and cats for them when they'd hired me to get seagulls themselves and knew I wouldn't touch cats. And Judge Hapgood and Florio Volpone and the jury and the ducks.

All of them. But especially the ducks.

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III. From the *Sand City Tattler*, July 3, 1983:

... you remember that the jury agreed with our editorial staff and that Dubic was sentenced to three concurrent terms of ten to twenty years in the state penitentiary. Since then his lawyers have made repeated efforts to have his convictions overturned, most recently by charging that the *Tattler's* crusading editorials unfairly prejudiced the jury against him and so precluded a fair trial. Dubic's lawyers accompanied this latest appeal with a multi-million dollar suit against the *Tattler* for libel and defamation of character.

We are very happy indeed to report that Dubic's appeal has been denied and that all charges against us have been unconditionally dismissed.

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JULIE: APRIL, 1988

It was a really hot night and the air conditioner was broken again. Mother was yelling at Father and he was whining back. Pretty soon he'd start yelling and then she'd start hitting him. They'd been drinking a lot, like always. I was eleven and they'd been doing the same thing as long as I could remember. I couldn't stand either of them.

I got my slingshot-the hunting kind that shoots steel balls, not one of those rubber band things for little kids-and went down to the lake. We lived four blocks away, by the Navy School. Sometimes when there wasn't anybody else there I'd try to get the swans or ducks with my slingshot-I'd already killed one of the black swans with the red beaks once and hit four others and a lot of ducks-but there were too many people out on the lake on those stupid little two-person boat-things you pedal like bicycles. Aquacycles. Couples mainly, some high school kids but mostly old people, tourists and golfers. They all looked stupid.

I didn't like the park much but I didn't have any friends that lived close and I didn't feel like riding my bike all the way up Carmel Hill to Beth's house. But I couldn't stand staying home any longer either, not with them still fighting. It would be OK later, when something they both wanted to see came on TV, or when Father had some more to drink. After a while he just got quieter and quieter until he went to sleep. Which was why I was glad he drank all the time, even though he got pretty nasty at night and when he woke up in the morning. That was OK anyway, because he had a right to get angry even if not at me, the way Mother treated him. She treated him like shit and he never did anything wrong, all he did was sit watching TV and drinking a little beer through his tube. He didn't hurt anybody and it wasn't his fault if he sometimes smelted bad and that he'd gotten sort of fat and droopy-faced and pasty-looking, not like he looked in those pictures Mother had from before the accident, when he still looked a lot like that mess sergeant Mother sometimes brought home with her from Fort Ord, the one who kept telling me he was going to fix the air conditioner but never did. Only Father'd been a lot handsomer.

The sun was going away but it wasn't quite dark yet. Everybody was coming

in to shore and turning in their aquacycles. I had to be careful. I could still remember watching Mother arrest that man who was killing ducks under his car. I still had the clippings, including the one in the *Outlook* where they said I was the one who really caught him.

I didn't want to try anything with the ducks on shore, where people could see what happened and where it would be too easy to be fun anyway. I was watching the ducks and swans out on the water. The swans were nasty but I didn't dislike the ducks or anything-though I didn't much like them either, with their mean little suspicious eyes and the way they walked around on land like they thought they were the most important things in the world. But there wasn't anything else I could do to get back at something when I felt like this. Just like Father yelling at Mother whenever he got to thinking about how really bad it was to be paralyzed and that we had to feed him and help him go to the bathroom, or Mother hitting him when she couldn't stand looking at how horrible it was for him anymore.

The ducks were all paddling around in groups and quacking at each other. A lot of the male mallards were doing that thing they do together when they all swim after one of the brown females without ever catching her and then they take off together and chase her through the air but they still don't catch her, and a few of them were doing that thing where they beat their wings and sort of get up out of the water like they were standing on tiptoes and beating their chests like Tarzan. But most of them were just swimming around and sticking their heads down under water the way they do when they're looking for something to eat but don't feel like diving for it, or doing that thing where they turn all the way upside down like they're standing on their heads with their tails sticking straight up out of the water.

There was an old lady down at the other end of the lake, throwing bread crumbs to the swans but I didn't think she'd notice what I was doing if I waited until it was just a little darker.

One of the mallards, a really pretty male with a bright green head and a big patch of shiny blue on his side, was off alone out in the middle, not doing much with the other ducks, just sort of floating there like he was half-asleep though he didn't have his head tucked back or anything. He was pretty far away but I thought I could hit him with a good enough shot.

Suddenly he started doing that thing ducks do when they're real mad at each other or fighting over a female, or that the females do when they're telling all the males to go away and they stick their necks forward with their mouths wide

open and charge at each other using their wings to go fast so they're almost running on top of the water. But the weird thing was the duck wasn't charging another male, he was charging a whole group of four or five females-I could tell they were females because they were brown and speckled and one even had some black and yellow baby ducklings swimming around her-and he wasn't making that sort of hissing warning all the other ducks always made when they charged like that.

He didn't stop like they usually do when he was close enough to warn them off, either. All at once he was in with them and they were all squacking and beating their wings and trying to fly away. I thought I saw something real bright like a knife blade flash, only it was too dark for a piece of metal to flash like that, and then all but one of the females were flying off and the babies were running across the water peeping and trying to escape.

But one female-maybe the mother, I couldn't tell- was floating with her belly up and her orange legs twitching. Then the legs quit twitching and I could tell she was dead. The male was gone. It hadn't flown away and it wasn't anywhere I could see, so it must've dived down to the bottom and stayed there. Maybe it was lurking down there like a snapping turtle.

It was getting too dark to see anything, so I bought a Big Mac with some money I took from Mother's purse the last time she left it around the house, then went home.

When I went to the lake the next morning with binoculars the dead duck was gone. I couldn't find the other one then, but it was there when I came back after school. It always stayed floating out near the middle, away from the shallow water where the other ducks liked to feed, and it only moved just enough to keep away from people on their aquacycles. That's how I noticed it, because when an aquacycle came within maybe fifteen feet of it, it would move away so it stayed just the same distance away, then come back as soon as the cycle was gone. And it did the same thing once with a boat.

Besides, it never dived or preened itself or seemed to be looking for food and all the other ducks ignored it. They didn't seem scared, they just didn't pay any attention to it.

But that was only when the sun was shining. As soon as things clouded over it would start swimming towards the other ducks, but it always stopped and went back to floating on its own away from everything else when the sun came out again.

All except one time, when a lot of really dark clouds covered the sun for fifteen minutes. The duck started swimming towards another duck-a male mallard this time-but it didn't stop like before when the sun had come out from behind the clouds again. I was watching it through the binoculars to see what it did if it attacked the male.

It swam closer and closer until the two ducks were maybe a yard away from each other, then it put its head down like it was looking for food on the bottom and dived.

A second or two later the other mallard gave a sort of shocked SQUAWK! and got pulled under, just like a giant snapping turtle had reached up from underneath and grabbed it in its jaws and pulled it under. Only I knew it wasn't a snapping turtle, it was the other duck.

I watched where it went under for a while but there wasn't any blood or feathers, nothing to show a duck was getting killed or eaten under the water except that it never came up again.

But five minutes later the killer duck came bobbing up again. It was all muddy and I thought maybe it had been lying down there on the bottom eating the other duck and then had buried what was left like a dog with a bone it's finished with. It preened itself for a while, looking pretty and silly like any other mallard, then went back to sunbathing.

I came back after dinner and just as the last light was going away, I saw it make its other kind of attack. Only this time I had the binoculars ready, so I got to see how it worked.

It charged just like any duck, only it didn't stop when the other duck tried to get away. It was after another male mallard-there were lots of them out on the lake, like always-and the killer duck kept right on going faster and faster with its bill wide open until just before it was going to ram the mallard a pair of shiny steel shears came out of its mouth like a giant metal snake's tongue and cut the other duck's head off.

The scissors went back in the killer duck's mouth and it grabbed the dead duck's head in its bill, then dived. Only this time it left the headless body floating in the water and it didn't come up again before dark.

I was there with the binoculars the next day at sunrise. There was a cluster

of big water lilies I hadn't noticed before where the duck had vanished.

About an hour later the water lilies disappeared like fishing-line bobbers yanked down by a big fish and the duck bobbed to the surface. It was all muddy but it preened itself until it was clean, then swam back to the middle.

I went home. Mother hadn't come back at all last night but Father was already awake. I helped him get up and dressed, then made us scrambled eggs and toast. He yelled at me for spilling prune juice on his shirt so I just left him there and went to school.

It rained all afternoon,' and when I went to the lake after school I couldn't find the duck, though all the others were still out, and I looked a long time.

I went to some sports stores and checked out their fishing nets. They all cost too much and anyway the duck could've cut its way out with the scissors in its mouth. Besides, I didn't know what it did after it pulled the ducks under. The scissors meant it was some kind of machine or maybe a real duck that had been changed so it was part duck and part machine like the bionic man. So maybe it had all sorts of ways to break out of the net. Like claws or a hooked sword or something under its feathers it could use to drag the ducks it got in the daytime under.

I went home and checked Mother's purse, but all she had was twenty dollar bills and I was sure she'd notice if any were missing. But she had six quarters and a fifty-cent piece, so I took three quarters and put two nickels in their place so it would feel like she still had about the same amount of money. And that night one of her friends called to ask if I could babysit his kids Saturday afternoon. Mother'd already decided to stay home with Father, so she said go ahead and I ended up making twelve dollars.

It rained the whole next week, so I stayed away from the lake and didn't get to see the duck. But I was glad I stayed away because there was a movie on TV Sunday afternoon that I watched at Beth's house, *The Invisible Boy* with Robbie the Robot, where an evil computer takes over Robbie and makes him do things he doesn't want to. That made me think about kids with radio-controlled toy sailboats and I started wondering if someone came down to watch the duck with the controls hidden in his pocket or something. So when I came back I didn't do anything, just watched, but though there were some people who came down to watch the ducks and feed them almost every day, there wasn't anybody who was there every single time the duck killed something, and I watched for two weeks to make sure.

By then I had enough money from Mother's purse and babysitting to buy a net. The only way I'd figured out to catch the duck was to wade out to where its lily pads were some night when it was sleeping or turned off and scoop it up off the bottom in the net and hope it stayed turned off or whatever until I got it into the ten-gallon grease can I had ready. But I was scared to try because for all I knew the duck never really turned off, it just went down in the mud to cut the ducks it killed up into little pieces with the scissors in his mouth so nobody would ever find their bodies, and I couldn't think of any reason it couldn't kill me like the ducks and swans. Besides which, I was afraid somebody'd come by in a car and see me, or that the car's headlights would turn the duck back on and then it would get me. But I didn't want to give up, I needed that duck a lot.

A few days later I got the idea of putting a noose at the end of a bamboo pole we had in the garage and using it to snag the duck's lily pads. They had to be connected to the duck, so I could use them to drag it up out of the water. The thing is, I didn't know if that would wake the duck up or not, or if the stems were strong enough to pull it out of the water without breaking it. If it was all metal except the feathers it had to be very heavy. And if I woke it up like that I didn't know if it would try to get away or if it would try to kill me to make me stop and keep other people from learning about it. I'd never seen it on shore so for all I knew it couldn't even walk and I'd be safe as long as I didn't go in the water.

But then I'd already seen it do that half-flying thing where it came part-way up out of the water to attack the other ducks, so maybe it could really fly. And I didn't know how it dragged the other ducks under or what it did to them there. Perhaps it had big knives, hidden in its wings, or hooks, or even some kind of built-in spear-gun it used to harpoon them from the bottom so it could reel them down, then cut them up into little pieces there.

But the real thing wrong with trying to catch it at night was that I wouldn't be able to see it without a light, so I wouldn't know what it was doing. And somebody might see the light and come to find out what I was doing. So I finally decided to pull it out some morning when it was near shore, just after the sun came up but before the duck was ready to surface on its own. That way, maybe it wouldn't be all the way turned on, and even if it was maybe it would just swim back out to the middle and start sunbathing a little early.

Then one night I saw it was down in the mud close to shore, and hid my ten-gallon can, some plastic rope, and a heavy khaki sack from the Army-Navy surplus store in somebody's hedge. I had a little water in the can in case the duck needed it.

I went down to the lake early next morning and waited for things to get bright out. Not many cars drove by and nobody paid any attention to me.

When the sun came up I went after the duck. It was easy to snag the lily pads with the noose but when I pulled them in to shore I saw they just stretched back to the part of the bottom they'd been floating over. I waited a moment, then touched the pads and stems. They felt like some sort of tough plastic, so I got all the stems together and started pulling on them. At first they came real easy, then I felt them grab and when I pulled again I could feel the duck on the other end. It was heavy but it didn't seem snagged and it wasn't fighting me like a fish or anything, so I knew it wasn't trying to get away or come after me.

A red Porsche came by, going a lot faster than it was supposed to. I just stood still, pretending all I was doing was looking at the water. The Porsche went by without stopping but now I could see another car over on the other side of the lake, so I knew people were getting up and starting off to work and that I had to drag the duck in a lot faster.

Pretty soon I could see it, and it wasn't a duck at all, more like a big piece of wood, a branch about a yard long and a couple inches thick, with four or five broken-off little branches sticking out of it. At first I thought it was just a branch I'd snagged, but then I saw that the lily pad stems came out of the ends of the broken-off branches.

As soon as I had the branch up out of the water it began to change. The ends started humping in to the middle and the middle bulged out, but everything was real, real slow, like a slug creeping up the porch steps after it rains. I threw the sack over it but I could see it kept on changing underneath until I got the lily pads under and out of the light too, and then it stopped. It wasn't much bigger than a real duck, though it didn't look like a duck any more than it looked like a branch, just a big lump of mud. I pushed it into the sack with the pole and tied the sack closed, then picked it up, making sure it didn't swing too close to my body. The duck was just a lump inside and it didn't move at all. It only weighed about twenty pounds but that was still heavy enough so it was hard work getting it to where I had the can hid.

I put the bag in the can but the lump was a little too long and I couldn't get the lid on. But it was too late now to open the sack and let in some light, so I just put the lid in the net and carried everything home and put it all in the tool shed behind the garage. Mother never used the shed but her Mess Sergeant sometimes made things out of wood for us back there, or fixed things. He wasn't really a bad

man, even if I hated him. So it was real dusty and full of cobwebs and junk, but the lights worked and the shed was in good enough shape to keep the rain and sunlight out. When I went inside and closed the door I could turn on the lights and nobody could see me from the house.

I put the can under the work bench, behind a broken TV so nobody could see it and so even when the door was open the light from outside wouldn't touch the can. I'd been planning what to do for a long time and I had it all figured out, or most of it, anyway.

I even knew whose duck it was. James Patrick Dubic, the one I helped Mother arrest. There couldn't be two people who hated ducks that much, and some of the clippings talked about how smart he was and how good he was with computers. I'd figured it out for sure that time I saw *The Invisible Boy*. Afterwards I got my clippings out and studied them so I could be sure what he looked like and kept an eye on the people at the lake, but he wasn't ever there, at least not unless he'd changed a lot.

I locked the shed and left the duck in the dark until Saturday night. That way, if it had solar batteries maybe they'd run down enough so it couldn't hurt me even if it wanted to.

Saturday night before Mother went to work I asked her what'd happened to Dubic. She said she didn't know but she could find out if I wanted. I said yes. It was only six-thirty when she drove away, so it wasn't dark yet.

I went back to the shed around nine. When I unlocked the door and pushed it open I shone a flashlight inside before I went in and turned the real lights on, but the duck was still in the can. I closed the door and dragged the can out, then pulled the bag out of it. I stayed by the door so I could run away if the duck came after me. Then I turned the lights off and used the flashlight while I dumped the duck out of the sack.

It was still just a big lump. It smelled like mud and sewers. I poked at it twice with a hoe and it didn't do anything, so I turned on the lights. I was right by the door with my hand on the switch, but it still didn't do anything even when I poked it again. I watched it for three or four hours but it never did anything. I was afraid I'd broken it somehow but if I hadn't maybe I'd be able to handle it safely at night with the lights on, which was good. I got it back in the sack, then pushed it behind the TV again.

Mother was home all day the next day and she and Father had some of his

old friends over for a barbecue. They cooked chicken and hamburgers in the back yard, then sat around drinking beer and talking about what things'd been like before Father's accident and how good a cop he'd been then. I couldn't get into the tool shed with them there. Father and Mother seemed to be having a pretty good time, like they liked each other again. After a while I got bored and uncomfortable so I put my swimming suit on under my clothes and rode my bike up to Beth's house, but her brother had all his friends over to use the pool and her cousin was there too so she couldn't go away with me even though she didn't like them any more than I did. I went to Swenson's and got a double cone and a banana split, then rode down to the wharf and watched the tourists for a while. It was a nice day, all hot and clear, and there were two sea otters playing in the water. One of the tourists threw a beer can at them. He missed but I told the cop who was keeping people from driving out on the wharf and he came and made the man leave.

It was almost dark when I got home but Mother and Father were still out back with their friends. Father was making nasty comments about Mother every now and then. I didn't understand everything, but I could tell when something was mean by the look on Mother's face.

I asked her about Dubic but she said she hadn't had a chance to check yet and she'd find out for me Monday. I said I had to do homework and went to my room to read about ducks.

Monday she didn't go to the station until late. I tried to tell her I was sick and couldn't go to school but she had a hangover and got really angry and hit me. She said she had enough sick people in the house without me pretending to be sick when I wasn't, so I had to go anyway.

She wasn't home when I got back but she'd put Father's wheelchair by the window because there wasn't anything he wanted to watch on TV and that way he could look at the birds and flowers if he didn't feel like reading. I couldn't get in the toolshed with him there.

The next morning I sneaked back to the shed before it was light out. The duck was still under the workbench. I used the flashlight to see by while I got it out of the sack. It still looked wet even though most of the mud on it was dry and falling off.

I wasn't sure if it was safe to touch even after I jabbed it with the hoe again and it still didn't do anything. But I already knew I had to learn how it worked if I was going to make it do what I wanted, so I opened the door again. It was still

dark out. I got on the door side of the duck, then reached out and touched one of the spots still coated with dry mud with my finger, real quick.

The duck didn't do anything. I pushed it a little, on one of the spots that looked like wet muck, to see if it did anything, but no motor started running inside it or anything else. And it wasn't really wet at all, just all smooth and slick and sort of greasy, like the bottoms of those non-stick frying pans.

It still hadn't done anything, so I ran my finger over it. It felt the same everywhere. Then I pushed it again, a lot harder. Nothing happened. I was starting to get really afraid I'd broken it somehow.

I watched it for a while, trying to get my courage up. The sky was beginning to go pink and purple. I picked the lump up and put it down by the door real quick, where the sun coming in would hit it soon. The door opened in so I couldn't put the lump right inside, it had to be maybe two feet back. I tied a long piece of string to the door handle so I could pull the door shut from outside if anything went wrong.

Ten minutes after the light finally came through the door and hit the duck it started to change again like before, only slower. It humped itself in tighter and tighter, until it was just a little bigger than a real duck and almost the right shape, only it still didn't have a head or tail or wings or feathers or legs. The dry mud cracked and fell off so the whole thing looked wet and glistening. That took another hour and it was getting late, so I pulled the door shut with the string and went back inside the house.

Mother was already up and in the bathroom with Father. I'd forgotten to close the bathroom curtains but she hadn't noticed me or she would've come out to find out what I was doing. I put her coffee on while she made us oatmeal.

The phone rang out. Mother got it. When she hung up she told us a lot of cops had caught some sort of weird ten-day flu and she was going to have to fill in for all sorts of people. Everybody's hours were going to be messed up even worse than usual, so she wouldn't be able to come home much for a while. I could tell she was lying and had somewhere else she wanted to go, maybe up to Lake Tahoe to go gambling with her Mess Sergeant again. I asked if she'd found out about Dubic yet and she said she'd been too busy to check and why was I so interested all of a sudden? I told her I'd found the newspaper clippings when I cleaned up my room and she seemed to think that answered her question because she didn't ask me anything else.

Father said something about liberal judges and parole boards and how you had to exaggerate the truth a little sometimes, like with Dubic and the dogs, and look how they'd let him out that time anyway. Mother agreed and they talked about police work for a while.

We wheeled Father into the living room in front of the TV and I set up his reader for him. I made sure the switch to change from the TV to the reader was where he liked it on his shoulder and strapped tight enough so it wouldn't slip back to where he couldn't get at it if he nudged it too hard with his chin.

* * * *

Father was asleep in his chair by the time it got dark that evening. When I opened the shed I saw the duck had changed, but just a little. It was still in the same place but something had started to push out where its neck and tail and wings were going to be. It was starting to look almost like a real duck, only all covered with mud.

After I got back in the house Mother called to say she wasn't going to be coming home that night or the next day. She wanted to know if there was enough food in the refrigerator. I checked and told her there was, and she said if I ran out of anything or needed help just come to the station and her friends there would take care of it. I said OK and she hung up.

I took a nap, then made Father macaroni and cheese with tuna fish. When I was giving him his bath he said it was a good thing I was strong for my age and not just tall and skinny, because even though he was still mainly skinny he was awful flabby and he'd be getting fat pretty soon, so moving him around was going to be a lot of work. I told him the exercise would be good for me and all I had to do was wheel him around a little and help him in and out of the bath sometimes, and anyway I was used to it. He said, thank you for saying that, Julie, but I know how hard it is for you and your mother with me like this, and then he started talking about how wonderful Mother had been before the accident, when she hadn't had to take care of him, and that made me feel bad for him again and at the same time like Mother a little more, though I knew that half the reason he was telling me that was because even though it was all true he wanted me to tell him it wasn't so he could pretend things weren't all his fault.

Wednesday morning when the sun came in the door and hit the thing it finally changed all the way back into a duck. The head and tail and wings pushed their way out from inside until the duck was the right shape, even though it didn't have any legs and was all smooth and brown, like one of those pottery ducks

people use for sugar bowls.

It started reeling the lily pads in. The stems got shorter and shorter and at the same time the lily pads were closing up like flowers turning back into buds, only even tighter, so that by the time the stems had been reeled all the way back into the duck the lily pads weren't any bigger around than the stems and they just followed them into the duck.

Then all over the duck's surface a lot of things like, tiny doors opened, only none of them were much bigger than the lead in a pencil and they were all over the duck, so it was like the whole duck was a Venetian blind somebody was opening. Then the doors all closed again, on the other side, so that what had been on the back of them and hidden inside the duck before was now on the outside where you could see it and the duck had feathers again.

Finally the orange legs came pushing out and it started trying to swim. It wasn't walking like a real duck on land, it was trying to swim like it thought it was under water and had to get to the surface.

A few seconds later it stopped, either because it thought it was on the surface or because it had figured out it wasn't in the water. I couldn't tell which. But it wasn't standing or lying like a duck on land, it had its feet sticking out backwards so it was tilted forward with its tail in the air. That didn't seem to bother it, though, and it started preening itself like it always did after it came up out of the mud in the morning even though there wasn't any mud on it.

When it finished it looked all around, just like a real duck only it was still tilted forward like a wheelbarrow. I wondered what it thought about being in the shed, if it knew there was anything wrong or what to do about it. Then it started paddling, trying to swim out into the light, and even though it wasn't walking that pushed it slowly across the floor.

When it came to the door sill it hopped over it just like a duck hopping over something in shallow water, then it padded off across the grass to the center of the yard, as far away from the fence and shed and house as it could get, with its chest still pointing down and its legs sticking out behind and its tail up, all stiff and fake-looking. It looked more like it was trying to dig its way into the lawn than like it was walking.

Since the sun was shining bright I knew it wouldn't attack me, so I inched forward until I was about fifteen feet away from it, but I was afraid to get too close. I went back inside and got Father up and fed him, then put him in front of

the TV with his back to the window.

I told him I didn't want to go to school. He said, OK, if the school called just give him the phone, he'd say I was sick and he wouldn't tell Mother. It was the only thing he was ever really able to do for me and he did it whenever he could, even though Mother sometimes got real mad at him for it and yelled at him and even hit him.

I went back out and came up real close behind the duck, but it still didn't notice me, even when I circled around in front of it where a real duck would've seen me.

I remembered those old men on Carmel Beach with their metal detectors looking for money people've dropped, so I got the hoe out and came at the duck with the metal end, real slow. I got to maybe a yard away from it before it started trying to escape, and then I spent a while chasing it around. But I always made sure I kept it away from the shade, even though it looked so clumsy and pompous and even stupider than a real duck. When I quit it worked its way back into the middle of the yard.

Only that wasn't good enough because in the lake I'd seen it, avoid wooden rowboats too. So maybe it had some other sort of thing to keep it away from wood. Plus whatever it used to find the ducks and swans. I tried it with the wooden end of the hoe and it didn't move until I touched it, and then it only moved a few feet, just far enough so that if the hoe'd been a branch the duck wouldn't have gotten snagged on it.

Maybe it had some sort of radar or sonar to keep it away from big things like boats and piers. So I used the metal end of the hoe to herd it over to the side of the fence that was still in the sun, but it wouldn't go close to the fence; when it was maybe ten feet away it always went off sideways at an angle and never got any nearer.

The phone rang. I ran inside and got it, then held it up to Father's ear and mouth. It was the school, asking why I wasn't there. He winked at me and told them I had the flu, it probably wasn't too serious but I wouldn't be able to come in today or tomorrow. And, no, I wouldn't have a doctor's excuse because he was my father and it was up to him whether or not he let me go to school, and he wasn't going to pay some doctor just to write me a note. And, no, he wasn't going to write a note for me either, because my mother was away for a few days and he happened to be paralyzed from the neck down, but if they wanted to send somebody out to make sure he really was my father and sitting in his wheelchair

paralyzed from the neck down, they were welcome to do so. The school said, Sorry to have bothered you, Mr. Matson, and he had me hang up. I kissed him and went back outside.

The duck was still sunbathing in the middle of the lawn. I wanted to push it into the shade and see if it attacked me even though I was bigger than a swan. It wouldn't be very dangerous because the duck would stop as soon as it got back out into the sun. But I didn't want to be too close when it came at me in case it moved a lot faster than when it was just paddling around.

I took the hoe and tied the bamboo pole to it to make it longer, then used the metal end to push the duck into the shade. It was maybe ten feet out of the sun when I stopped. That took almost ten minutes.

As soon as I took the hoe away it moved its head like it was searching for something, then started coming at me, paddling as fast as it could and ripping up the lawn a little. But even so it was still just inching and sliding across the grass slower than I could've moved on my hands and knees. It wasn't trying to use its wings, it only used its wings when the sun was going down. I stayed just on the bright side of the shadow's edge and let the duck chase me. It was so slow and stupid-looking and I was in the sun, so I wasn't worried. Besides, I wanted to see what it would try to do to me when the time came for it to drag me under.

What it did when I let it get to about three feet away was, it stuck its head down under its body, pushing it in under its puffed-out chest, which made it look even sillier, because the way its chest was already resting on the grass with its legs sticking out behind made it look like, some sort of crazy toy wheelbarrow. Then it kicked off with its legs like it was trying to dive down to the bottom, but all that happened was that it fell back into the wheelbarrow position again. But it didn't seem to even notice it wasn't underwater, because then it pulled its head out from under its chest and stuck it straight at me and paddled as fast as it could at me until it was just at the shadow's edge, then it suddenly arched its head and neck and body backwards and did something with its wings real fast that made it fall over on its back. I moved down the shadow line a little so it could come after me without getting in the sun. Now that it was over on its back it was using its wings like oars and that was working better than the other paddling because even though the grass was smooth the wings could sort of catch in it and scoot the duck along. I stood where I was this time and when it got maybe two feet away from me its legs moved away from each other and turned around sideways so its feet were facing each other like it wanted to clap them together. Big steel claws like meat hooks came out of the feet very fast and its belly opened up and something like a long rotary file and a drill and a buzzsaw all at the same time

came out and started whirling so fast it was just a blur even though it didn't make noise like a drill or a buzzsaw usually would.

The duck had finally gotten to the line between the sun and shadow and I knew if it came any farther it would be out in the sun and just go back to being a fake duck, so I used the hoe to turn the duck around facing the other way. But it just used one wing to turn itself back so it was coming at me again, and this time I let it get out into the sunlight.

As soon as its head was in the sun the claws went back into its feet and the drill-thing stopped turning and started going back into its stomach. I got a better look at it this time, and it was all covered with barbs like fish hooks and other little knives that turned around on their own, not always in the same direction as the whole thing, but before I could get a better look the duck's stomach closed up and it was just a fake duck lying on its back again.

It couldn't seem to turn itself back rightside up so I used the bamboo-stick end of the hoe to tip it over.

It was too slow and clumsy in the daytime to be any use if I just left it in the backyard. I was sorry we didn't have a swimming pool and tried to think of how I could use Beth's pool but I couldn't come up with anything. But even though I couldn't see how to make the duck work right except maybe just throwing it on someone it was still good to know that the duck would try to kill people and not just other birds.

Then I remembered the duck had a whole different way of attacking things at sunset, when it used its wings a bit and went a lot faster over the surface of the water to cut off the other duck's heads. So maybe that would work. Only if it did work I didn't want to be there in the back yard when the duck attacked.

For a while I thought about getting a dog or cat and putting it in the back yard with the duck to see what happened but the idea made me sick and I couldn't do it. Then I thought of catching a real duck, but it would probably make a lot of noise unless I killed it, and if I got caught killing a duck with the way everybody knew how I liked to go watch the ducks they'd get suspicious of me and wonder how many other ducks I'd killed and think I was crazy or evil, so if somebody got killed right after that they'd be sure I did it.

But then I thought, it doesn't have to be a live duck. I had enough money to buy one that was ready to cook at the poultry shop, and I could get one with the feathers and head everything still on it. So I rode my bike there but all their ducks

and chickens were already plucked so I had to buy a goose, which cost a lot more than I wanted to spend. They gave me a sheet of instructions for how to cook it even though I said it was for my mother.

I put the goose half-way across the yard from the duck. That way I could see how fast it could go when it was after something. But the sun wasn't quite down yet, so I went inside and tried to play checkers with Father. I couldn't get interested, so after one game I went into the kitchen where I could watch the back yard out the window.

But when the sun went down and the light went away the duck didn't even try to do anything to the goose. It just turned back into a log and stuck its lily pads out of the ends of its broken-off branches.

I went back into the living room and watched *Shanghai Express* with Father. *Shanghai Express* was pretty good, but I'd been refilling Father's drinking bottle with beer all day so he was pretty drunk by the time the movie was over, and instead of getting sleepy the way he usually did he was wide awake and something in the movie had made him all angry and sad at the same time. It was awful.

First he got angry at Mother and told me what a bitch she was, how she treated him like shit and even brought the Mess Sergeant home with her as if it didn't make any difference what Father thought... He went on and on, yelling most of the time, but then he got real sad again, and that was even worse. He started talking about what a good wife Mother had been back when *he* could take care of her and he'd been handsome and strong and everything the Mess Sergeant was now only better, and how she would have been a perfect wife to him if only he hadn't had the accident, and it wasn't her fault if he couldn't be a husband to her, and even if she got angry at him and had to find someone else to do all the things that it was his duty as her husband to do for her he couldn't blame her, because at least she hadn't divorced him or put him in a home.

After a while he was crying and then he was yelling again. His bottle was empty so I went and got him another beer, only this time I put half a librium in it like Mother sometimes did when she wanted to make sure he got to sleep, and in a while he calmed down and passed out.

I went out and put the log back in the shed, but I couldn't figure out what to do with the goose. It would probably rot if I left it in the shack but if I put it in the freezer Mother'd find it if she came home, and at first I couldn't think of any reason to tell her why there was a goose in the freezer.

Then I thought, I'll say I bought it with my savings because she'd been away working and I wanted to cook it for a celebration when she got home and I'd gotten all the directions for cooking it and everything, only they looked too hard. And if she asked me why I'd gotten a goose instead of a turkey I'd tell her it was because goose was something special people had for Christmas in England and I wanted this to be very special. She'd have to believe me because she wouldn't be able to think of any other reason why I'd have a goose to put in the freezer. Unless I'd stolen it, and I had the receipt and the piece of paper with the instructions to show her.

I put the goose away and got Father into bed. It really was like he was a big baby, only even though I was real strong for how big I was, he was twice as heavy as me and I almost dropped him like I'd done a few times before, but I didn't.

I still wasn't sleepy, and there wasn't anything good on TV, so I got a frozen dinner out and put it in the oven.

It was a chicken dinner and when I took the tin foil off at the end I thought, maybe that's how the duck figures out if something's alive or not, because if it's alive it's got a temperature, 98.6, just like I do, only maybe it isn't exactly the same for birds. Unless the reason it hadn't attacked the goose was because the goose had just been lying there and not moving. But not all the real ducks I'd seen my duck attack had been moving, and it had come flopping across the lawn after me even when I'd been standing still watching it. So if Mother didn't come home tomorrow I'd put the goose in the microwave and get it out in the back yard all hot right when the sun went down to see if that'd be enough to make the duck attack it.!

Mother called in the next morning to say she was going to be gone two more days on an arson case. I asked her if she'd found out anything for me about Dubic. She said yes, he was still in prison. He was doing some sort of hush-hush special work there for the Defense Department through some sort of special arrangement and had volunteered for Aversion Therapy, which was going to make it impossible for him to ever touch another bird again without getting sick and throwing up. But even so his parole board wasn't going to let him out for at least three more years.

It wasn't even eight in the morning yet, but I could still hear what sounded like a party in the background, a lot of drunks and yelling and music and laughing, or maybe she was in a casino in Tahoe or Reno. I could tell she wasn't anywhere close like she pretended because there was so much static on the line I could

barely hear her.

She told me to go see Desk Sergeant Crowder at the station after school and he'd have twenty-five dollars for what she called my "babysitting time." That made me really mad again, not that she was trying to bribe me, but that Sergeant Crowder was covering up for her, because even though he didn't come around to see us anymore nearly as much as he used to, he'd always been one of Father's best friends and Father still thought he was.

After Mother hung up I told Father she wasn't going to be home for another two days but I didn't mention Sergeant Crowder. He looked unhappy, more miserable and hopeless than angry for a minute, but then he grinned at me even though I could tell he was making himself do it and said that in that case maybe I'd better dial the school for him so he could tell them I still had the flu.

After he talked to them I put him in the living room and poured a beer in his bottle, then got the duck. I didn't bother to be extra-careful this time, I just picked up the log and dumped it in the back yard.

I played cards with Father most of the morning-we had a little rack set up so he could see the cards in his hand-and I let him win even though I was a better player than he was. About four o'clock I rode over to the station and got the money from Sergeant Crowder. One of the other cops came over just as if it was something he'd decided to do on the spur of the moment and told me what a great job my mother was doing and how they all hoped pretty soon she could get a chance to stay at home like she wanted. I said I had school and everything but Father got lonely sometimes and Sergeant Crowder said it'd been too long since he'd come by and he'd drop in on us soon. I told him that would make Father feel good.

I cleaned Father up for dinner, then put a whole librium in his beer so I could cook the goose without him noticing I was doing anything. He fell asleep at the table and I put him to bed with plenty of time left before sunset.

When the sun was almost all the way down I put the goose in the microwave but I left it in too long and all the features got singed and it smelled really disgusting when I took it out.

I propped its head up with toothpicks and ran out in the yard and put it down a long way away from the duck.

Then I ran as fast as I could back into the house.

The duck already had its neck stuck forward with its mouth wide open and was doing its paddling thing by the time I got the door closed and could watch it through the window. The way it was beating its wings wasn't quite enough to make it really fly but it was still close enough so the duck was sort of half-running and half-hopping across the lawn and it was going as fast as I could have run or maybe even faster until it got to the goose and then the scissors came out of its mouth and I was close enough this time to see they were all jagged-edged like the saws butchers use, and then the duck cut the goose's head off.

The scissors went back in its mouth and it closed its bill and did that thing it'd done before, when it tried to dive down through the ground to get at me, only this time after it paddled a while it just stopped and turned back into a log.

So I knew that all I had to do was get Mother out in the middle of the back yard when the sun went away and the duck would kill her. I could do it tomorrow night when she came home, or whenever I wanted to after that.

I was real excited and happy. I rode my bike all the way to Lover's Point and the Asilomar beaches in Pacific Grove because I felt so good and I was laughing to myself all the way there and back.

But next morning Father woke me up yelling because I was late with his breakfast and he had a hangover and because I'd put him to sleep so early the night before he'd had all of yesterday's beer still in him and he'd wet his bed in the middle of the night and when he woke up the bed was all sticky and wet and disgusting and he had to yell and yell and yell to get me to wake up and come help him. He was really angry with me just the way he was always angry with Mother, even after I cleaned him up and got him breakfast and set him up for the day in front of the TV with his reader.

And when he yelled at me again at lunch I realized something that I should've realized a long time before. With Mother gone there'd be no one left to take care of him except for me and pretty soon he'd hate me just like he hated Mother and I'd hate him just the way Mother hated him. With maybe a little love left that would come to the surface now and then when we remembered what it had been like before, but less and less until all we had left was that we hated each other.

Only it would be even worse, because they'd put me in a foster home and him in some sort of nursing home- and that was the one thing Mother'd promised never to do to him where she'd kept her promise. Then when I was old enough to

go back to taking care of him I'd have to pay for him along with me for the rest of his life, and I'd never be able to go away or get married or even have boyfriends or do anything because he'd be jealous of me the same way he was of Mother.

He hated what he was and the only way he could stand hating himself like that was to take it out on someone else. It wasn't his fault, he couldn't do anything about it, but that's what it was, he had to hate somebody and make them miserable and if it wasn't Mother it was going to be me.

I thought about it some more and then I knew I'd have to kill Father first. He wouldn't mind, not really, not if I put three or four librium in his beer so he wouldn't feel anything. He probably would've killed himself a long time ago if he'd been able to and if his mother hadn't raised him to be a Catholic. I'd heard him tell Mother that a lot of times.

And then the duck would go back to just being a log again and I could hide it away again until I was fifteen or sixteen before I used it to get Mother. Nobody'd ever guess what it was if I kept it hidden someplace dark.

Only what if when the other police came by all they found were my footprints and they took the log in to examine it because maybe they found blood on it? If they didn't figure out what it really was they might blame me and then be sure it was me when I got Mother, later, and if they did figure out what it was they wouldn't blame me but I wouldn't be able to use the duck again. All they'd have to do was pick it up and they'd know it was too heavy to be a real log.

But what if Father just disappeared, like the ducks my duck pulled under? The thing that came out of its stomach looked sort of like a meatgrinder. Maybe it ground up their bodies so small there wasn't any pieces left.

He wouldn't feel anything if there was enough librium in his beer. Or if he did it wouldn't be much worse than it was like for him just to be alive every day anyway.

With him gone Mother wouldn't be angry with me all the time. She might even go back to being like she was before, the way he always told me she'd been when she married him.

And if she didn't, I still had the duck. But I had to find out what happened to the bodies of the ducks my duck pulled under.

Father was watching a football game turned up loud. I refilled his beer

bottle then checked out the bathroom. It was in the corner of the house, with two big windows. There'd be bright sunlight in it for the rest of the afternoon.

I opened the windows so the glass wouldn't screen out any of the sunlight in case that made a difference like it does when you want to get a tan, then got the log out of the shed and dumped it into the bathtub. It was an oversized bathtub, all long and deep, made out of the white stuff they use for bathtubs and sinks and toilet bowls. The only metal in it was the faucet and the drain plug.

Maybe forty-five minutes later the duck was floating at the far end of the tub. It didn't seem bothered by the walls. Maybe they were pushing the same on it from all four sides so it didn't have to try to go anywhere else.

I put the goose in the microwave until it got hot again, then tossed it in the tub and quick went out into the hall and closed the door. I ran outside and closed the shutters for both windows, not quite all the way because I wanted the duck to think it was cloudy but not that it was night time.

And my duck dipped its bill in the water like it was taking a drink, then dived down under the goose, grabbed it in its meathook claws and used its meatgrinder drill to rip it into tiny, tiny pieces. That took about five minutes and then the duck left what was left of the goose on the bottom of the tub like it was some sort of mud and went back to floating.

I opened the shutters wide to let the sun in, then got the hoe so I could hold the metal end between me and the duck, even though I didn't think it would attack me with the sun shining on it. I went back in and pulled the bathtub plug.

What was left of the goose drained out of the tub with the water, except for a few little pieces of bone. When I picked them up they were all soft and rubbery, like cauliflower, so the duck had to have some kind of poison or acid it used to make sure even the little pieces that were left dissolved.

But if it could do that I didn't know why it left the headless ducks floating on the surface every night. Unless that was Dubic's way of making sure that when he got out of jail he could come watch his robot killing ducks for him even if what they'd done to him made it so he couldn't touch the ducks to kill them himself.

I went back into the living room. Father was still watching the football game. His bottle was empty. I emptied his urine bag, refilled his bottle with beer and added four librium. He was still half-awake when he finished the bottle, though he was passing out fast, so I gave him three more librium by telling him they were

vitamins he was supposed to take. He was too groggy to wonder why I wanted him to take them just then. . I went back to the bathroom and filled the tub two-thirds full. With him in it it would be all the way full. Then I pushed his wheelchair into the bathroom and got him out of it into the tub.

The duck stayed down at the far end, floating over his ankles.

I closed the door and went outside and shut the shutters. Not all the way, just enough to cut down the light like it was a cloudy day. I didn't watch, just walked around the yard looking up at the sky, out at the fences, over them to the neighbor's houses, anywhere but at the bathroom windows.

Then I closed the shutters completely, but I still didn't look in through them. I went back inside, turned off the TV, turned it back on again, walked around, finally opened the bathroom door and turned on the light so I could see what had happened.

The bottom of the tub was covered with red-brown mud. The log was half-buried in it.

I pulled the plug. The sludge drained out. I kept the water running a long time to make sure the drain wasn't going to get plugged up, then pushed the log under the running water so I could clean the last of the sludge off it. When it was clean I picked it up and put it back in the shed, under the floorboards this time.

I poured some Draino down the plug-hole to make sure nothing got clogged up and washed the tub with cleanser, then put the wheelchair and urine bag and all of Father's clothes back in the living room. The football game was still going.

I rode over to Beth's and we went swimming for a while, then I said maybe it would be a good idea if we went back down to my house. I had some money there and we could buy hamburgers or ice cream.

So we rode our bikes down to my house and when we found Father gone I called Sergeant Crowder and told him I was scared, Father was gone but his wheelchair was still there and I didn't know what had happened to him, whether they'd taken him to the hospital or somebody'd kidnapped him or what.

He said he'd send somebody right over.

* * * *

JULIE: 1991

That was three years ago. I'm fourteen now. A year after Father disappeared Mother married Don but even without Father to take care of she was as bad as ever and he divorced her a year later. The duck's still back in the shed. I took it out to check last week when Mother was out of town for the day and it turned from a log into a duck in the morning and back into a log when it got dark out again. So I can use it on Mother whenever I want. It would be better if I could wait two years but I don't think I can stand it that much longer. It might be better just to let them put me in a foster home for a year or two.

Anyway, I don't know if I can wait any longer at all, now. Three weeks ago Judge Hapgood disappeared and a week ago Thom Homart, the one who wrote those articles for the *Tattler* that Dubic's lawyers sued them for, also disappeared. Plus the Forbidden City-the Chinese restaurant that changed their name from the Ivory Pagoda after they were convicted of buying seagulls and cats from Dubic ten years ago-burned down and its owner died in the fire last week.

I've been going down to the lake to feed the ducks almost every day now since Father disappeared. It's not so much that I've learned to like them or anything, though I guess I like them a lot better than I used to, but just that I wanted to be there watching if another robot duck ever appeared.

There's another one there now. A female mallard this time, brown with black speckle marks and bright blue on its side-what the bird books call its mirror or speculum-and an orange and brown bill. It's been there almost a month. And every day now, for just a little over a month and a half, a skinny middle-aged man comes down to sit on a bench and watch the ducks. He comes early in the morning and he never leaves before dark and he never, never feeds the ducks or swans or pigeons, though he spends all day watching them.

Mother tells me that James Patrick Dubic was released from prison three months ago. So that has to be him, down there watching his new robot killing the ducks he can't kill for himself any more. I don't know what he thinks happened to his other robot.

And while he's sitting there on his bench, or maybe at night after he drives away, he's killing all the people who helped put him in jail. I just don't know how, maybe with a robot person or taxicab or something else that works just like the ducks.

Mother's one of those people, so if he gets to her before I do he'll save me a

lot of trouble and I won't have to worry about getting caught. And in a way it'd be a good thing to know that if I don't get her he'll get her for me for sure.

But the thing is, I'm another one of the people who helped put him in jail. Maybe even the main person, except for Mother, if you believe what the newspapers said. And from the way the skinny man watches me sometimes when I'm feeding the ducks I'm sure he knows who I am and that he's watching me.

But he's too smart to try to get us all at the same time, at least not unless he's figured out enough different ways to kill us so that nobody'll see the connection between all our deaths. He's probably going to wait a while before he tries to get me or Mother. And I've still got his duck and I've spent years thinking about the best way to use it.

So I think I'm going to put a lot of the librium I saved after Father disappeared in Mother's whisky glass tonight if she's alone, or tomorrow night or the night after if she isn't, so that she'll still be knocked out the next morning when it's light enough for me to get her into the bathtub with the duck. Only this time it won't be like with Father and I want to watch it happen.

And then the same evening when the sun's going down and before Dubic has a chance to find out about Mother I'll take the duck down to the park and watch it jump on him and cut his head off with its scissors.

I've got it all figured out and I'm not really scared at all.

This time it's going to be fun.