

## Across Genesee Street

Margo Oswald sat in the back of the station wagon, gazing out the window at a group of high schoolers smoking in the Laundromat parking lot. *Ick*, she thought, *that's bad for you*.

Mrs. Oswald stopped at a yellow light, and there was an impatient sigh from the front seat—Margo's older sister had soccer practice in ten minutes, and she liked to be punctual.

"Sidney, please," Mrs. Oswald said wearily. "You know they never start on time, anyway." Margo was happy with the delay, as she was not particularly concerned with sports and had just noticed a family of ducks about to cross the street. At nine years old, she was still young enough to be delighted by these types of things, and she leaned forward in her seat.

"Look, ducks!" Margo announced, drawing her sister and mother's attention to the mallard leading the single-file line across Genesee Street. The ducklings tripped and stumbled into each other in an effort to keep up—Margo squealed and Sidney, despite her annoyance with being late, was intrigued. The Oswalds watched the family pass under the stoplight, and Margo admired their boldness. *They don't even know how out of place they are*, she thought, *here on the street with all these cars that could squash them flat in a second*.

As the mother duck approached the curb, Margo noticed a sewer grate in her path. A square hole covered by a metal grid—the kind by which Margo liked to crouch and drop rocks through to hear them *plunk* into the water below. The mother duck continued over the grate and onto the curb, and the ducklings forged onward behind her.

Margo realized what was about to happen a split second before it did, and her stomach lurched. The holes in the grate were bigger than the ducklings' downy bodies, and with wide eyes Margo watched the first one drop, like one of her stones, down into the sewer.

The world stopped turning. Margo and Sidney cried out in surprise. The light turned green.

"NOOOOO!"

"NO! NO! Someone stop the others!"

*"Stop them!"*

But no one did. Margo felt her heart racing as the rest of the ducklings dropped, one by one, through the grate like holes-in-one at putt-putt, until the street was empty and the mother duck had fled in a flurry of feathers and wings, spooked by the disappearance of her single-file shadow.

Margo's brain felt fuzzy. She and Sidney shouted over each other at their mother as they unbuckled their seatbelts and fumbled with the door locks.

"Pull over NOW! Please!"

"MOM! You have to pull over!"

Mrs. Oswald obliged—Margo saw she was also shaken—and the girls leapt out of the car and ran to the sewer. They knelt on the pavement, bits of asphalt poking their skin, and peered through the grate.

"They're okay!" Sidney cried, her voice high with excitement. Margo felt a rush of relief as she saw her sister was right—the ducklings were peeping frantically and running in circles on the carpet of mud that covered the bottom of the dry sewer.

"Yes, they're just scared", Margo diagnosed. She glanced at her mother, who was on her cell phone. Mrs. Oswald was wearing the same face she had when she'd called 911 after Margo was crushed by a large potted houseplant last year while attempting to conceal herself behind it during hide-and-seek—Margo felt the situation was under control.

"Don't worry, help is on the way!" Margo called into the sewer, hoping the ducklings knew they weren't alone. Their feathers were turning a muddy brown as they waddled about in the muck. Margo and Sidney called words of reassurance to the ducklings until the firemen—the authorities of wild animal mishaps in Maplewood, New Jersey—arrived and shooed the girls away. One removed the sewer grate and descended heroically with a large pink plastic bucket, and Margo waited with her eyes fixed on the sewer for what seemed like a year. When the man finally surfaced, the bucket was peeping.

Margo rushed over and knelt down to look inside. The ducklings gazed up at her, puzzled.

"Don't touch," warned the fireman. "This one here, he's having a rough time." Kneeling at the bucket across from Margo, he scooped up a duckling black with muck, its eyes and beak caked shut, and gently poured water from a plastic bottle over the small face to wash away the mud. Margo watched the

duckling struggle for air, hardly able to breathe herself, and was beginning to feel lightheaded when the fireman met Margo's eyes and sighed.

Margo outstretched her hands, and the man tipped the duckling into her palms. Looking at the creature, she pictured the life they could have together—she wasn't allowed pets, but surely her mother would understand that this orphaned duckling needed her. Margo whispered to the ball of feathers and mud in her hands.

“Breathe, please! I'll take you home, and Dad will build you a pond in the backyard! You can sleep at the foot of my bed, and we can read books and play games... you can ride in my wagon!”

But Margo's future with the duckling faded as he grew still in her hands. She felt her heart sink to her toes and her hope deflated like a balloon after a party, and she carefully laid the duckling on the pavement. Her nose started to prickle so she knew she was going to cry, sitting right there in the middle of Genesee Street. She cried for the duckling, for the man who had tried to save him, for all the duck families who didn't understand the dangers of sewage grates. She cried for herself—she cried at the unfairness of it all.

Margo heard Sidney approach, and felt her sister's arm around her shoulders.

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Margo walked slowly down the sidewalk, dragging out the last few minutes of her lunch break before returning to the office. The afternoon stretched before her unpleasantly as she pictured the unanswered emails waiting in her inbox. She counted off the days until the weekend.

She looked up to light a cigarette and noticed movement a few hundred feet ahead—a mallard leading a single-file line of ducklings across the path. Margo stopped abruptly, a fuzzy memory floating to the front of her mind like the melody of a song she'd heard a long time ago. She glanced around the street for sewer grates. There were none.

Margo looked at her lit cigarette—*I should quit*, she thought. The ducks went on their way and Margo, casting her eyes back to the pavement, continued on hers.