

Zawad Chowdhury

2000 words

March 15, 2023

[zawadx@mit.edu](mailto:zawadx@mit.edu)

## Stories by the Shore

They say it sucks to be out and about in the winter. I don't think that's true, especially here by the lake. The currents flowing on the lake and the jet streams flowing above keep things warm all year round. Even when the nights grow long and the year comes to a dark close, I don't shiver by the lakeside.

The swans in the lake feel differently. They're here all summer, making a ruckus that drives all the fishing tourists crazy. But by Halloween they disappear. Mrs. Wickham, my science teacher, taught us about migratory birds. Who seek greener pastures every winter. But swans weren't supposed to migrate. Swans have beautiful white feathers to guard against the cold.

I caught a swan one summer. Well, a cygnet, to be precise. The fairy tale proved to be an accurate guide to identifying one, though it wasn't as ugly as you might believe. It was a beautiful pale gray, and had a soft fuzz which made me want to snuggle it next to my cheeks all day. Even though Paps had warned me against putting dirty things on my cheeks. Said

that's why I had all the pimples. But still, the cygnet was too soft to put down without a snuggle or two.

I'm starting to hate calling the cygnet an "it". I don't really know how to tell a male swan from a female swan. And, I mean, when it's a baby does it really matter? Cousin Ricky (though he prefers the name Richard these days) told me once about how you can use they for a person instead of she or he. Can you use they for a swan? For a baby? A baby swan? I'll have to ask Ricky when I see him next. Though I haven't seen him since before my first milk tooth fell out. He's in Chicago these days. Or maybe they's in Chicago.

I asked Mam for a swan plushie, last time Ricky was in town. Or sometime around then. Mam hadn't indulged me. Said I was getting too old to still keep playing with dollies when I could be helping at the farm. I'd tried explaining, a plushie is not a doll. Dolls are for playing house. They have moveable limbs, and usually come with a house. I didn't want a house, just one soft plushie! That all came out of Mam's other ear. She was in her seventh month carrying Bess, so she didn't stick around for too long when I started crying. Locked the door to keep me in, and then went to the kitchen.

Ricky had given me his sloth, when I started crying about the swan at his house that week. Said the sloth's name was David Hasslesloth. It had long fur all over, but its body was still soft to the touch. And it had two big brown eyes with huge black holes inside, which stared at you

from its spectacled face. David was lovely to hold, and I cried even louder the first time Paps caught me sneaking it to school.

Say, it's ok to use it for David, right? It's not an animal, just a plushie. It can't be male or female, or become a baby or not-baby. It feels wrong though. Mary uses he or she for all of her plushies. Her most recent one is a bat, named Edward after some book or another.

There's Amelia, she's a big squishy cow with white clouds all over her fat black belly. And Mary told me how she always sleeps with a shark that's taller than her, whose name is Cindy. Apparently Mary's mom came up with the name Cindy, and told Mary to name all her other plushies.

Mary likes the name David Hasslesloth. I haven't told her that Ricky came up with it. She's always fussing over the plushie, when she visits. Or well, the two times she visited. "He's so soft!" she squealed, her red pigtails draping over its back as she cuddled it to her face. I think Amelia or Cindy are softer, based on what she's told me. But of course, I've never seen them, so I can't judge. Mary's never invited me to her house. She doesn't really speak to me, now that I have the pimples and braces.

I wanted to name the cygnet Sam before showing it to Mary. That can be a she, short for Samantha. Or a he, short for Samuel. Uncle Sammy's name is Samuel. He's Ricky's father. I think Paps calls him Samuel though. Even though it says "Uncle Sammy's Watercrafts" on

their boat rental place. I asked him about it once, and he said something about how the tourists think Sammy's a more appropriate name than Samuel. I didn't ask too much more. Paps gets into a foul mood when talking about Uncle Sammy. And sometimes, when he's had too many beers, he starts complaining about how he should've inherited the lakeshore instead of taking the farm.

Uncle Sammy was visiting my house the day Mary came over. He was very interested in my new friend, asking her where she lived and how her parents were doing. I suppose it's only politeness. Ellie's mother asks me how I'm doing whenever I go to her house to study. But her voice isn't as upbeat as Uncle Sammy's was. Ellie's mother likes to talk much more about herself, how it's hard to keep up with the prices of eggs and milk when the farms can no longer grow their usual winter crops. How Ellie's father spends too much time in the pub, and her older brother spends too much time in the woods. Sometimes she's so distracted by her stories that she forgets to offer tea to Ellie and I! Ellie gives me a sheepish smile on those days, as she fixes up snacks herself.

I know better than to ask Paps how our farm is going. But I've heard the shouting matches between him and Mam. He's worried that this will be the third year that the mandarin trees won't bloom. How the brussel sprouts will turn out tiny if there isn't a freeze. Of course, he doesn't say it quite so scientifically. "Those sprouts will stay smaller than my balls if there isn't a fucking freeze, woman!" would be closer to his words. I mean, he's better than Mam.

She goes for direct attacks. How he's a fool for letting the cheap labor go. How his balls were too small to hold seed for a son. How he should've sold the farm to his brother when things were still half-decent.

I've tried explaining to Mam what Mrs. Wickham taught us last year. How the smoke and pollution from all the factories in the towns was trapping more and more heat on Earth. Melting the ice, creating hurricanes and tornadoes, and messing up the freezes by the lake. But Mam's gotten even better at ignoring me with the years. She told me I was yapping worse than the swans, and told me to go pick up Bess from the grade school.

The grade school is by the pine woods, just south off the market road. It's a long walk, but I preferred wandering through the village to helping with the harvest. The sprouts need to be picked by hand, and the small ones cling to the trunk the strongest. The path also reminded me of the times Cousin Ricky had led me there, when his school had recessed for the same winter harvest break.

I first saw Mary with a man that day, as I cut through the woods to get to Bess's school. I doubt she saw me, with how her face was buried in his. He had hands running through her curly red hair, though one was struggling to get into her shirt. I'd hastened my footsteps when I realized he was trying to unhook her bra. I couldn't bear to stick around when that happened. The guy had looked up when my footsteps got louder. His green eyes had locked

onto me, shooting me a perverted wink. Those eyes, his hooked nose, the thick bushy hair -- they all reminded me of Ellie.

Of course, I knew Mary liked guys. She'd told me at school about meeting Uncle Sammy outside our house. How she liked him patting her arm. How he'd hugged her seven times, two more than the number of times she hugs her plushies each night. How comfortable she'd been with sitting on his lap. And then, she'd turned red, before whispering, "I don't know if I need to marry him now. Isn't he already married to your auntie?"

Mam had told me how it was sinful to hug a man outside your family without a good reason. I'd never asked what the good reason might be. I asked Mary if she had a good reason for marrying Uncle Sammy. She'd just turned red, and said she liked him.

I'd thought I would marry Ricky, back before I knew I didn't like guys. I of course didn't like him the way Mary liked men. I just knew I had to marry someone when I grew up, and Ricky was the man I liked the most. The person who had been kindest to me, in fact, among everyone I'd met so far. I declared this one day when walking with him along the path from grade school. He'd stopped in his tracks, his face muscles pulled back into a horrible expression. That had felt almost as bad as hearing how Mary liked someone who wasn't me.

I don't know what happened to Sam the cygnet. They must be a full-fledged swan now, too old to be called "it" anymore. Would I know them, now that they were covered in white feathers instead of the gray down? I think so. I'd taken them to the farm, keeping them in my room and stealing them feed every day from the coop. I'd even taught them to sing, or at least make a particular noise. It was the noise that got me in trouble. Paps heard the noise when he returned from the field one day. He didn't say anything that night, but the next morning Sam was gone. Paps swore he hadn't done anything, but he'd muttered a lot about how chickens don't lay many eggs if they aren't fed enough, the next time he got back from the pub.

I gifted David Hasslesloth to Mary, when I couldn't show her Sam. She'd taken him, saying she would treasure him forever. But that hadn't stopped her from calling me names and telling everyone how a stinky farm girl like me deserved pimples. I don't know what she did with David. There are some things you care about a lot as a child, but you don't know where they are now.

Part of me hopes this winter is warm enough that the swans don't fly away. Then I'll be able to use Christmas break to listen to all of them, and find if anyone is singing Sam's song. Or maybe Sam will come find me, if their flock sticks around. I know I'll be able to find Sam, wherever they are. I'll be able to see them fly, see them perch on the rocks, see them fight with the ducks over bread crusts. I'll be able to tell them about Mary and Uncle Sammy, and how I'm still waiting for my first kiss. I'll be able to tell them about how the factories are melting

the ice, how Paps's balls are too small to keep the farm running, how the mandarin trees won't bloom this winter. I'll be able to tell them that it's okay to be out and about in the winter. That I'm here for them if they need a warm place to stay.