

Ducks Run Home

Lauren Franken

Needles showered down from the branches above as my friend and I wiggled out from underneath the evergreen. From our hiding spot we could see the base, dimly lit by the dying bonfire. We'd won the game so many times that summer that we had our strategy perfected. She'd wrap wide left while I ran wide right, swooping in behind the defending team and securing victory. I dug the tips of my shoes into the soft soil, ready to bolt forward.

Just as we began to lunge, three sharp duck calls rang through the damp summer air. She looked back at me — her eyes wide with disbelief that my time was already up.

And then we ran.

She hooked wide left, kicking up dead pine needles as she went, but I turned my back on her and began my flight home — a dead sprint across scarcely lit backyards, dodging gardens, sheds, and swing-sets enthralled with the rush of my new competition. As soon as I got up over my neighbor's hill, I could see my dad under the patio light, leaning against the side of our house, his duck call in one hand, the other outstretched to high-five whichever of his kids got home first. Wispy strands of what thinning russet hair he had left blew slightly in the breeze, and the light glared against his skin, making it look more sickly and yellow than it actually was. Even from a backyard away I could see the home-chemotherapy pouch weighing down the front pocket of his hoodie, its tubes snaked under his sleeves to methodically administer an aggressive combination of chemicals that attempted to kill an even more aggressive combination of cancers. But, regardless of how late

it was or how sick he felt, my dad always served as the finish line of mine and my little brother's footrace, so I knew when I made it to my dad and his duck call, I was home.

Every evening our parents set a curfew as my brother and I darted out the door, our dad's favorite saying echoing in our heads as we went.

"If you're not early, you're late," he'd warn with a smirk.

We learned to leave our devices behind when we went out — because we couldn't be late if we couldn't tell the time. It was the ultimate loophole for kids who grew up under the reign of an old-fashioned father, who set every clock he owned ahead five minutes to ensure he was always at least that early. We got away with it for mere days until my dad, a habitual outdoorsman, developed a method for calling us home that didn't require phones or clocks of any kind.

He had a favorite duck call, a weathered thing with a plastic yellow mouthpiece and a dirtied camouflage barrel. As soon as he came home from work, he promptly changed out of his slacks and button-up, swapping the tie around his neck for the duck call. When my brother and I started routinely missing curfew, he made a new rule: run home when the duck call sounds. Sometimes he'd blow it twice, but often his calls echoed through the neighborhood until my brother and I arrived.

From then on, the amount of time I had left never crossed my mind because I counted on his call to always beckon me home. But as I got older the calls started coming later and later — eventually they stopped entirely.

We buried my dad with his duck call draped around his neck, the harsh yellow a stark contrast against his dull green shirt. In the following years I still sprinted home to make curfew, but running in the silence made my flight feel foreign.

Even now, as an adult free from the restraints of a curfew, I stand up a little straighter when I hear the ducks in South Dakota migrate overhead near

the end of every August, because though seven years have passed since I heard my last come-home call, I still fight the urge to take off running.



Fallen Leaves

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