



Duck, Duck, Goose

“Max,” The Boss said, “we’ve noticed your efforts around here and it’s time we did something more than just notice. Starting the first of next month you’ll move into Jack Jeffries old office and you will be known as Media Services Director. You’ll also notice a modest bump on your next paycheck. I wish it could be more, but as it is, I’m going to have to slip this thing by the Board while they’re distracted by bigger numbers in the budget.”

Max Tanner was quietly ecstatic. Almost everything about Max was quiet, except for his aloha shirts, which he wore year-round. He loved what he did: the website tinkering, the Facebook page, the Twitter feed, the Instagram account. It still took his breath away when a new Facebook post hit a thousand views.

He took out his iPhone and texted Genevieve, his girlfriend of ten years. At thirty-eight and thirty-seven, most people assumed they were married, but they weren’t. Max didn’t know whether Gen preferred it that way or was silently perturbed that he hadn’t brought an offer to the table.

Maxie, that’s terrific! I just forwarded your text to all my peeps. Let’s have a party! A big party!

This made Max quietly distraught. The problem with big parties was they weighed on him like he imagined water weighed on a drowning man.

In pre-school Max had been the one who sat quietly at a table with a book, while almost all the other kids buzzed around like happy little bees. It would have been fine, except the teachers' job descriptions did not permit them to allow one student to sit at a table and read while the others buzzed around. Max would lay his book on top of his pile of books, and join the game: "Duck, duck, goose. Duck, duck, goose." Since then almost every social occasion seemed like another game of "Duck, Duck, Goose."

I was hoping it could just be you and me celebrating, Gen.

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He knew what he had to do. He left work early and stopped at Jensen's Jewelry. He'd been there once before, to buy Gen some earrings for her birthday.

It was a crazy thing he was doing, but maybe he needed to be a little crazy. The young saleswoman was really helpful. He had no idea what Gen would like as an engagement ring, but when he described her to the woman she smiled knowingly, and thirty minutes later he walked out with a little jewelry box. For a quiet guy he was about to make a statement.

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"Maxie," she said, when they talked about the party that evening, "my friends, even my family, all think you don't like them. You never want to visit them, you never want to have them over. It's embarrassing. For a man who earns a living with *social* media, you are so freaking *anti-social*. I get tired of making excuses for you."

Gen, he thought, I like these people, but one or two at a time is better. At a neutral site, where it doesn't have to be about someone's beautiful house. There was so much they needed to do to their own little hovel.

And maybe if it could be more talk about books and movies and "tell me a story about yourself" and less "Duck, Duck, Goose." And, really? I'm someone you have to make excuses for? What else are you tired of?"

What he said was, "Gen, you're right. We talk about this all the time, and I know it bothers you. It's time I opened up a little. Where shall we have the party?"

"Right here, you goof," she said. "Why spend a bunch of money to go to some noisy place where we can't even talk to everybody? Anyway, it'll be a reason for us to fix this place up. I've got a bunch of ideas."

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Thirty people crowded into their two-bedroom, one-bathroom bungalow. For some reason Gen hated it when he called it a *bungalow*. She would never tell him why. As usual for these kinds of events, Max sucked down half his emergency pint of Southern Comfort before the guests started arriving, a self-defense technique he'd learned in college. Maybe if he'd had a sippy cup of SoCo to suck on in pre-school, he'd have gladly put down his books and given "Duck, Duck, Goose" an honest try.

Gen had made the place look more festive than he imagined possible. She had a knack. Everyone loved the little party favors he'd helped her assemble. It had cost them more than he expected, for the food and alcohol, but it seemed worth it. The compliments from everyone were over the top.

That went well, he thought two hours later, while he and Gen cleaned up. After the last dish had been dried and shelved, he grabbed one of the leftover bottles of wine and steered Gen into the living room. He pointed to her favorite end of the couch, and she flopped into it, leaning back with a happy sigh. He pulled up a chair and sat on the other side of the coffee table.

He took the little jewelry box out of a pocket and put it on the table. She sat up quickly, her half-smile turning into a full frown.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked.

"Probably," he said.

"Max, we have to talk," she said.

"Okay," he said. "Let's talk. But, you haven't even heard what I have to say."

"I can pretty much guess," she said, "and it might be better if I say what I have to say first."

He nodded and leaned back in the chair, arms crossed.

"Maxie, we are so different. I watched you tonight. Every chance you got you sneaked off into the kitchen, or your office, or even outside to futz around with something that didn't matter. You were trying to avoid having to talk to people. I don't understand, Max. These are my friends, my family. If we did what I think you're going to ask me to do, I'd have to deal with this for the rest of my life. I don't think I can do that. Maybe you need to see somebody about this need to avoid people. What about that, Max? I could ask around. I'm pretty sure Marie's husband has the same problem you do."

They looked at each other for a few seconds, then he leaned forward and scooped up the jewelry box.

“It’s okay, Gen,” he said, “No big deal. I found this in that cardboard box my brother gave me awhile back, when he was passing out the last things from our mom’s estate. It’s just some of her earrings. I was going to ask you if you wanted them, but I’ll do it another time. Maybe for your birthday.”

“Oh, great,” she said. “Now I feel like an idiot. Oh, well. Besides this little kerfuffle, I think things went pretty well tonight. Monday you move into your new office. I’m happy for you, Max. I just wish you could be happy for yourself.”

Max thought about that while he showered and brushed his teeth. He eased into bed beside Genevieve, who was already asleep. No reason to wake her. He fell asleep wondering whether there was really somebody he could see who would help him be happier.

He dreamed they were playing Duck, Duck, Goose. He was It. Every time he would tag Gen, but every time she tagged him back, before he could get back to her vacant spot. Over and over. He was always It.

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