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Ducky Fuzz, Fuzzy Duck

by Brian Moore

"Bunco!"

John slammed the book together and looked up. The tiles in the suspended ceiling bounced in their frames, dropping bits of gray dust onto his corduroy pants. The neighborhood gaggle was crowded around card tables in his family room, rolling dice, drinking margaritas, and jumping up and down with each 'Bunco.' He didn't get their excitement, the game was pure luck. The other Bunco widowers were equally stumped; he asked them just last month at the Jansen's holiday party. Neighborhood parties are always uncomfortable for the men. The men, being men, don't know each other well, but thanks to their wives and their all-girl parties, they know things about each other they shouldn't: how much the other guy makes; who he voted for; whether he had a good review, or got a bonus at work. One family left the state after the wife leaked it that her husband had missed out on a million dollar dot com stock option windfall by accepting a job one day too late.

John leaned over and turned the stereo up another three notches. Any higher and it would drive him out of his basement sanctuary. Three or four times a year his wife hosted the gals. When the kids lived at home it was okay; he would take them out to eat and then to the arcade or to a movie. By the time they got back it would be almost normal - most of the posse left by 9:30 or 10:00. A few would stay until Amy walked them to the door - the ones with babies who never got out and a few of the empty nesters. With the kids on their own it was just John hiding in his basement office, reading, the stereo cranked up to drown out their hyena calls of 'Bunco'.

John shifted in the old recliner, releasing a dank miasma from the padding. When the de-humidifier ran full time, it kept the damp in check, but then the bill was a chest grabber. His back hurt - the garage-sale relic extended at an angle that twisted his spine out of whack. He pulled the lever to retract the foot rest - forcing it in the final inches with his calves - better. He pushed back into the chair and re-opened the Lincoln biography; dry stuff but he had vowed that this time he would finish it. Thank God for coffee. John reached for his mug - the only bit of class in the room. No office freebie, but one of a matching set from Longaberger. Like Tupperware and Pampered Chef, the wives sell the stuff to each other at their little parties - all just an excuse to get together, get loose, and dish. The mug sat on a heavy pine side table, another of Amy's garage sale treasures. The whole room was early American garage sale - the rec room favorite of the 70's that hit the curb in the 90's. Crap!.. out of coffee! John looked at the mug, and then to the ceiling. Without more coffee he couldn't stay awake late enough to get a decent night's sleep. Then it's up at 3am with nothing on but get rich quick schemes, miracle diets, cures for skin problems. Who would buy such stuff, and from such people?

John grabbed the arms of the chair, one thumb hooked through the mug handle, and lurched to his feet. The last sip of coffee splashed to the carpet. He rubbed it into the Berber with his socked foot until it was less defined and shrugged. With the door open their noise beat back his music. Is the gauntlet worth it? Between two card tables at the top of the stairs and then past the kitchen table all creamed with Bunco queens - half of them drunk on margaritas. The host's husband is always fair game for dirty jokes and butt pinching - he needed a bigger mug.

He started creeping up the stairs but stopped when he saw their feet through the wide gap at the bottom of the door; a do-it-yourselfer screw-up from a decade ago. Their voices were clear now, not just a crowd of sound. Amy's best friend was prodding her for a confession.

"Come on Amy," Nancy said. "It's your turn to give us the juice."

Now what? Once she'd come home with the masturbation statistics for all the teenage boys in the neighborhood. Poor little bastards; they never knew why their moms' friends gave them such strange looks.

"I don't know," Amy said. "It wasn't like that for me and John - it wasn't so... exciting."

Christ - not our first time! He may never come out of the basement.

"Amy... Amy... Amy." Chanting. Peer pressure the Bunco way.

"Okay. But it was sweet, not exciting."

Sweet! He may never live this down. Should he interrupt them? That might make it worse - he could be forced to listen while they watched him. He started back down the stairs - determined to wait them out.

"We had been out a couple of times... to the movies... for pizza... cheap dates. Neither one of us had much money," Amy began. "One Sunday, John called me up and said he would pick me up and we would go for a walk."

John stopped and sat on the stairs. It wasn't about their first time - that came much later.

"Cut to the juice... Cut to the juice."

"I warned you it wasn't exciting," Amy said. "Anyway... he picked me up and took me to a park over on the river... the one with the gazebo the little bands play in? ... I remember it was one of those first real warm days... when the buds explode from the trees... anyway we got there and we walked up along the edge of the river... along a muddy little path... my shoes got caked with it and I was wearing clogs - wooden ones - remember those?"

"Get to the good part."

"Okay. So we came to an open area along the river and a little duck family came waddling by. The mother duck leading six perfect little fuzzy babies. John stopped walking and we stood there - perfectly still - as they passed," Amy said. "He kept squeezing my hand..." She trailed softly off.

"That's it?"

"What? ... no. Then John said... 'Look at them - aren't they cute.' And then I knew... John was the one... my one."

John turned his head and looked through the crack. He shook his head. It was hot that day - he did remember that. As for the rest ...

It had been one of those almost-hot spring days. John had called Amy to see if she wanted to do something. They had been seeing each other for a few weeks and the more he saw of her the

more he wanted to see of her. He hadn't had a real plan - just to be with her... to hold her hand... smell her hair... listen to her voice.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey right back at you," she said.

"Wanna do something?"

"Sure. What?" Good question. He should have planned ahead.

"Ummm... how about we go for a hike?"

"Okay. Pick me up in an hour?"

"Sure... Amy?"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing, I guess. I'll see you then..."

"Okay... Bye..." John held the phone to his ear. It was a couple seconds before he heard her hang up. He smiled - had she waited too?

John pulled into her folks' driveway a little early and was invited inside to sit with her old man until Amy was ready. Past the for-show living room, through the Formica and gold kitchen, sweet with that morning's pancakes and syrup, and to the family room. The old man's TV haven. That day, it was baseball. On others it was football, or golf, or bowling even. John tried to talk to him a little, to make a good impression. Soon, John would learn that as long as he echoed the old fella's comments they could sit there for hours without talking about anything real. John would day dream about Amy, or think about work, or flip through old Field and Stream magazines. At least they both like the outdoors - only John liked to be out in it - not on the couch reading about it or watching it on TV.

Finally, Amy appeared and John saw the clogs right off. Clogs on a hike? He had said hike, not a walk at the mall, or down the street. But she looked so cute in the white ankle socks that he just changed his plan.

They headed out. John held the car door for her and then skipped around to his side. While he drove they were mostly silent, holding hand between shifts.

The park along the river was packed. Families spread out everywhere; desperate to seize a quality family moment. Most in the sun, the shade of the just blooming ancient black oaks meager and unwanted. John parked and they walked back through the lot to the entrance. They wandered along the brick paths, enjoying

the warm sun on their faces, and the clean spring scents of new grass and blooming flowers. Holding hand and talking little. Past cedar benches with whispering couples, under antique light poles, and around the little gazebo that on special days held a string quartet. All the benches were in use so they wound around the park several times before John spotted the gravel path leading away toward the river. Gravel - halfway between a walk and a hike.

"Do you want to check out this trail?" John asked, gesturing along it.

Amy looked. It was a wide gravel path that disappeared in tall grass near the river. She looked down at her shoes and then up at John. He smiled at her.

"Come on," John said. "We'll be closer to the river. Maybe we'll spot a good fishin' hole for your dad."

"Okay."

Hand-in-hand, they headed down the path. Amy's hard wooden clogs crunched and popped the gravel. Soon the spring scents of budding plants and barbecues gave way to an organic pungence. John pulled it in deep and smiled, not noticing Amy rub the back of her index finger under her scrunched up nose. The trail curved and dipped behind a crowd of brush and the din of the picnickers and the streets behind them dropped to a hushed murmur. The river spread out before them; high and chocolate brown, the spring run-off swept over the river bottom in great swells - the surface a bumpy, rolling, expanse. Away, up-river, Butterfield Road crossed over a crumbling concrete bridge dressed in rusted filigree.

Amy stopped. John stood beside her and drank the scene in. The distant traffic noises only served to amplify their solitude. John turned and smiled at Amy, to share the beauty of a wilderness in the middle of town. Amy returned the smile and squeezed his hand.

John strode forward, eager to explore along the banks. He made it half-a-step before Amy's grip spun him around. He looked at her with his eyebrows arched. She looked down to the path. The gravel had ended. From there on it was dirt - wet and puddle. John looked at her city shoes and then towards the river.

"If we skirt along the edge of the path, on that grass there," he said, "we'll be all right."

Amy looked along where he pointed and sucked on her bot-

tom lip. She looked up to the river and then to Jon; his eyes bright. "Ja-ohn, if I get all muddy..."

"Don't worry. The grass'll keep you up off the mud."

John stepped down the path, his right hand wrapped tightly around Amy's left. Amy balanced the tightrope of the grassy strip between mud and brush. A hundred feet along, the path opened to a small hidden prairie. They stepped onto the firm turf.

"See...that wasn't so bad, you're not muddy," John said.

Amy checked her clogs, "No...it wasn't. I think my shoes survi...John look," she finished in a fast whisper.

"Isn't this an awesome spot?" he said, excited that she shared his love for the outdoors. His eyes slipped from the rushing river to gaze down on her.

"Oooh, John...look." Amy squealed into his ear and then dipped her head inland, away from the river.

A duck waddled through the prairie. A nondescript brown. Regal in bearing: its head held high, not looking to the right, or to the left. Shoulders squared to its march. The source of its pride struggled along behind it: a string of ducklings hopping and pulling their tiny yellow-tufted bodies over the uneven ground. Amy squeezed John's hand and bounced up and down against his arm.

John had felt Amy's hot breath in his ear and her soft warm body rubbing up and down his arm.

"Wow," he had said.

"Yeah."

John's mind wandered from this memory to the next, connecting the dots, until it returned to him there, sitting on the basement stairs. George Thorogood screamed out his last line and the silence surprised John. He turned toward the door and through the gap under it saw that only a few pairs of feet were left shuffling around the family room. He stood, climbed the last few stairs, and opened the door.

"Well, well, well," Nancy said. "If it isn't mister bad-to-the-bone himself."

"Hey Nance," John said. "What happened to the Bunco Bunch?"

"It's nearly 10:30. The ones who aren't quite as b-b-bad already left."

Amy came out of the kitchen and saw him standing - stiff by the stairs. "John...?"

"Wait Amy," Nancy said. "Let's ask John the question of the

day."

"No," Amy said. "I never told him - he won't..."

"John. Here it is." Nancy paused and the eyes of the other Bunco stragglers speared into him, eager for blood. "Question. When did you fall in love with Amy...strike that!" Nancy looked around at her crew, giggling with drink and anticipation - except Amy stood apart and twisted a napkin in her hands. "Every guy's answer is the same - the first knobber." Nancy absorbed their snickers and then went on. "When...the exact moment...did Amy fall in love with you?"

John looked from one to the next and then his eyes bounded around the room, seeing things he hadn't really seen in years - a cross-stitched duck family over his chair, a ceramic mallard on the mantle, the duck heavy border along the ceiling. Then to Amy, who shrugged her shoulders and gave him a tiny smile, her eyebrows raised.

"Answer," John said, "to both questions. It was the ducks."