

A Typical Lakeside Breakfast

My lungs burn with effort as I gasp for air. The grass beneath my sneakers is slick with morning dew, which seems to glow unnervingly under the grey, slowly-lightening sky. The heavy cloud cover reflects ethereally off the lake to my left, a near-placid mirror of the heavens. Everything is wet, humidity cloying at my lungs as if it intends to drown me as I run. I rush over a curb into a parking lot, and my ankle twists askew as I misjudge the threshold between grass and pavement. An arm flails toward the sky as if God himself will reach down and stabilize me, but He does no such thing. Thankfully, it only takes a few scattered steps for me to straighten without divine intervention, and I'm rewarded with the traction I need to break into an all-out sprint.

Behind me, my pursuer has gained some ground. Skin slaps wetly and repeatedly against the pavement. Reams of feathers pound against air. I don't look back, don't dare to hesitate, as the monster makes its displeasure loudly known.

“HREONK!”

...I am being chased by a goose. If I'd known this was going to happen, I never would have come to the lake this morning. In fact, I probably would have stayed in bed to doomscroll.

Today started like any other Friday. I woke up predictably lethargic after five days of bouncing between my apartment and office, relieved to find myself at the start of another odd Friday-Saturday weekend. I decided to use my free time wisely, and go down to the local lakeside park to read and get some fresh air. I thought it would be the perfect way to recharge! After all, Friday is still a weekday, so there wouldn't be many people there. Besides, what better way to be reinvigorated than to spend some time in nature among the local wildlife?

Well, I wasn't exactly wrong- I'm certainly feeling invigorated, in a way, and it's certainly due to the local wildlife. But this isn't exactly what I had in mind, either.

“HOENK! HYOUN- hhYOUN- hh-YOUN- hhYOUNK!!” the goose cries out behind me, like a choking trumpeter suffocating around their instrument. I've apparently encountered the only goose on the planet that smokes a whole pack of Marlboros a day, and has been every day for the past fifty years.

I decide to chance a glance behind me, trying to gauge how much distance I have on the feathered beast. The answer is not much, but more than I thought. There's maybe just enough space between myself and the goose to fit a good

family couch, give or take about a cushion each time the goose makes an airborne lunge for my ankles. It makes for a terrifying image, each short burst of flight shaking free a small trail of dingy brown-grey feathers. When it moves closer, I can see the cloudiness of its eyes, accented by dull rusty rings of crust from where infection has oozed and dried.

When each attack fails, it lands gracelessly, feet twacking against the parking lot. It wretches another honk from its throat with all the force it has left, runs a few haggard steps, then lunges again. It glares viciously through its cycle of pursuit and attack, fixated with single-minded determination on the prize I clutch to my chest: a cold, slightly dry, unsliced everything bagel.

I acquired the fateful bagel earlier this morning, when I visited my usual breakfast haunt. I walked up to the counter and told the bored-looking highschool boy whose name I haven't bothered to notice that I wanted my usual order, a sesame bagel with strawberry cream cheese and a latte, size medium. The boy plugged my order into his register, then informed me that bagels were buy one, get one free. I only really wanted one bagel, but he insisted that he had to give me one. His register wouldn't let him give me my total, if he didn't. I asked if the free bagel included any toppings or spreads, and he said it didn't.

Unsure how to proceed otherwise, I agreed to take custody of the first random bagel I pointed to in the counter display. This happened to be an everything bagel, a type I find generally too exciting for my tastes. Since it was a bagel I had no intention of eating either way, though, I didn't care to change my selection. I planned to just bring it to the lake park with me, then throw it away in one of the park's raccoon-proof trashcans that in no way keep out raccoons, but make the city at least look like they put effort in.

Now, I wish I had just been rude and thrown the bagel out at the cafe as soon as I got it. Then maybe I wouldn't have been subjected to goose-induced involuntary cardio.

As I reflect on my conundrum, I abruptly realize I am running out of parking lot. The parking lot is only four rows of nine parking spaces, haphazardly framed by a wooden-post fence. Beyond the fence ahead of me stretches four lanes of light traffic. The fence isn't very tall. I can probably get over it fairly quick, and with any luck, one of the passing cars will take care of my goose problem for me. That's assuming that I'm able to dodge the cars myself, though. And even if I can, would I be able to sleep at night knowing I lured a goose into traffic in cold blood? No! No, I need another option.

Ahead and to my left, my car sits parked against the fence in the corner, a dull grey 2012 Ford Focus. It may be my only chance. If I can just get to it far enough

ahead of the goose to get inside and lock the door, I'll be able to hide inside until the goose gives up or dies of old age. Unfortunately, luck is not on my side. When I veer to the left, the change in direction robs me of momentum. By the time I reach the trunk of my car, I don't need to look to know I've lost ground; I can feel the displacement of air when the goose snaps at my ankles.

I rush around the side of the car, using it as an obstacle to hopefully gain some ground. Thankfully, the goose doesn't think to take advantage of its gift of flight, following me around instead of flying over. I squeeze myself between the hood of my car and the edge of the fence. Fully turned around, then, I begin running back across the parking lot toward the park.

I'm starting to feel just a little bit ridiculous. I don't even want this bagel. I never wanted the bagel. The only reason I don't give it to the goose is because I know it would hurt it. The yeasty dough would expand in the bird's stomach, causing indigestion at best and death by blockage at worst. It's out of the kindness of my heart that I withhold the bagel from the foul old fowl, and I'm being repaid with ungrateful aggression!

...no. No, that's not entirely honest, is it?

I don't hold on to this bagel entirely out of kindness. The goose obviously doesn't have much time left. The worst I could do in handing it over is accelerate what's already impending by offering a tasty last meal. In other circumstances, that's likely exactly what I would have done with only a second or third thought. However, I didn't have a chance to think that far when the goose approached me—or, more accurately, accosted me.

When I arrived at the park, the fateful bagel in one hand and a copy of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the other, I gravitated toward a small dirt path that extended out from the edge of the parking and ran parallel to the edge of the lake. It was more of a worn-out desire trail in the grass than an intentionally cleared walkway, following the edge of a short slope that disappeared into the lake itself. The grass on the slope side of the path was taller and wilder than the other side, too steep for the city's riding lawnmowers. I remember thinking, as I walked along the path, that a determined groundskeeper could probably cut the wild grass with a push mower. However, seeing as the local municipal office would often leave potholes alone until they became wells, it didn't take a stretch of the imagination to believe they likely didn't pay enough for determination.

Across from the slope, wooden benches had been set into the ground facing the lake, about two or so meters apart from one another. The first bench was barely a full stride from the parking lot, which I deemed not nearly far enough from civilization. The second bench was beneath a tree that was clearly popular with

birds, based on the sheer volume of poop staining the old wood. But the third bench, as it tends to go when things come in threes, was just right. Far from the parking lot and decently clean, it had a beautiful view of the lake and a small flock of docile grazing on the slope nearby.

Seemingly docile geese.

In a bold, sudden move, the old goose attacking me lunges not *for* me, but *over* me, attempting to block my path. Seeing as it was barely able to clear my head, it doesn't get to the ground before I catch up with it. I throw my arm wide, lofting the bagel in the air just as the goose collides with my chest. It hisses, I think. It's more of a fast gurgle, like high-pressure water escaping a kinked hose. In either case, the goose fails to get a good foothold on my shoulders, and instead flops to the ground between my legs. I barely manage not to trip or step on it as I move forward, and I can't find it within myself to be particularly concerned.

"HHRK- HYON- HYOOONK!" the goose rages behind me as it rolls to its feet. I feel a chill down my spine and assume the monster has just laid a curse on my bloodline. Or perhaps it is cursing the other geese in its flock, indifferent at the other end of the park, for failing to assist.

Shaking my head, I pull my bagel close to my body again, leaping over the curb of the parking lot and re-entering the grassy park. I run parallel to the path, that third bench where I had abandoned my book in sight.

The initial call to arms had been pitiful, compared to the goose's honking now. I had barely opened my book when, coming from the grass ahead of me, I heard what I thought was a whoopie cushion being stepped on in a mud puddle. I looked up, and the grass parted to reveal... a goose. *The* goose. Old, decrepit, and utterly repulsive.

It bent its neck down awkwardly and took a few slow steps forward, like a reanimated corpse in a horror film, or a badly-puppeted taxidermy. Then, it lifted its wings, raised its head, and released its battle cry.

"HROOOONK, HYON HYON hyon HYOOONK!"

Thankfully, the cry failed to rally any of the younger, healthier geese of the flock. I wouldn't have stood a chance against a juvenile goose with full use of its wings and a lust for the battlefield. But against a dying goose, whose remaining days likely wouldn't fill a calendar? My longer legs gave me an edge. And thus, our chase had began.

That's why, now running back through the grass toward the bench where it all started, I still don't give the goose my bagel. It's not just a matter of concern. It's a

matter of *principle*. It would have been one thing if the goose had approached me semi-calmly and made its interest known in some less aggressive way. In that case, it probably would have had its prize quite easily. But it didn't do that. It attacked me without so much as a warning. It doesn't matter how old the goose is, or how close it is to its end. I will not reward aggression. I will not cave to this insufferable bird!

Behind me, the goose sounds like it's starting to tire. It hacks and gurgles with each attempt to honk, limbs flapping with such poor coordination it may have confused its wings with its legs. "HK-ROOynK!" it declares with a pitiful wheeze. It must finally be running out of stamina, though there's no telling if it's because the bagel is no longer worth the effort, or because the last of the soul attached to its body is actively sinking to Hell.

In any case, the goose is beginning to abandon pursuit, which permits me to slacken my stride in turn. I pull in a deeper breath, and with the extra air, I also take in some doubts.

What am I even accomplishing here? Adding another failed conquest to what has likely been a lifetime of struggling for an elderly animal? I recall once seeing a documentary about the tragedies of animals in captivity. The film had pointed out that aggression from animals often comes from past cruelty or failure to have their needs met, not necessarily their inherent personality. Perhaps this holds true in the wild, as well. Perhaps, in this ancient goose's years, it has learned that humans will not share food willingly. How many times has it waddled over to a picnicking young couple, eyeing their sandwiches and salads hopefully, only to be chased away with the violence it's now returning to me?

While I'm perhapsing things, perhaps, to add to the present day's sting, the goose wasn't always chased away. The goose could have been quite handsome in its youth, having no trouble begging scraps off enchanted passerbys. In that case then, as it grew older and less attractive, perhaps the scraps became harder and harder to acquire. Perhaps it never learned to effectively forage like other geese due to lack of need, and now finds itself in a desperate state without its primary source of nourishment: human kindness. A kindness I am now withholding, as well.

I look over my shoulder at the goose as I slow to a job. Whatever the goose perhaps or perhaps not has been through, does it excuse the behavior? It attacked me! And while I sympathize with its theoretical pain, this bagel is my property, and I have the right as an American to do with my property however I please. I'm under no obligation to volunteer the bagel for this goose's last meal- and on that note! What if the bagel doesn't kill the goose? Then I'll have reinforced this behavior. The goose will learn that if it attacks someone long enough, it can have

its way. Then it will harass others who come to the lake to relax, and it will be my fault. I don't want to be responsible for this creature's crimes!

The pad of webbed feet in muddy grass slowly grinds to a halt. The goose wheezes, "HK- yoouunk," and then just... stares. Those dull, crust-rimmed eyes shift from the bagel to me, glaring into my soul with open hatred. I'm certain, in that moment, the haggard monster wants me dead. If it were able to kill me for this bagel, it probably would.

Frustration and offense rush through me in an adrenaline-inducing wave, hot and uncomfortable. "You want this bagel that badly?!" I challenge it. "You would have me dead for it, just so you can make yourself sick with indulgence?! HA!"

I march through the park under the goose's watchful eye, approaching the bench where this all began. There, just behind and to the side of the wooden seat, I find myself standing before one of the definitely-not-raccoon-proof-but-pretending-to-be trashcans. I lift the heavy metal lid with my free hand, then turn, making eye contact once again. "I am not enabling this," I declare. "I am not enabling this self-destructive behavior. I am not enabling this violence toward others. I am not enabling *you*. This ends now!"

My piece firmly said, I throw the bagel into the trashcan as hard as I can. With little other trash to land in, it thuds doughily against the metal bottom, bouncing once before coming to rest in the thin black plastic bag. I turn away from the goose and slam the trashcan lid back into place, the crash echoing through the park with satisfying finality.

"There," I pant. "Good luck getting your stupid bagel now, you nasty old bird."

I turn around... and the goose is no longer lingering behind. It's standing right in front of me. We lock eyes for a moment, and as the goose shifts its weight, I see years of rage and rejection building up in its feathered body until it can no longer be contained. It lifts its wings, pushes itself into the air, and clamps its beak down squarely on my nose.

As I punt the bird toward the lake like a dense, feathered football, I can't help but appreciate that for a creature that probably has more cataracts than there are ophthalmologists, it has incredible aim.