

The Ugly Duckling

The ugly duckling looked into the water, and behold! He wasn't a duck after all. He had grown over the winter, and the reflection staring back at him was that of a beautiful white swan. Spreading his huge white wings and stretching forth his graceful long neck, he lifted himself into the air. With a new song pouring from his throat, he soared off to join his swan cousins flying together happily over the lake."

Melody closed the book and looked around her. Two-year-old Tommy had fallen asleep to her right, thumb still halfway in his mouth, a drop of spittle drooling down his chin. Five-year-old Katy gazed up at her, gray eyes wide under lashes that were so blond they were almost white.

"More," she wheedled.

"Oh no," said Melody with a stern shake of the head, starting to wonder if she was going to regret having accepted this babysitting job. "No way. I've read you five books already, and if your parents come home and find you still awake they're gonna scream at you and at me too, okay?"

Katy sighed and slid off her brother's bed to clamber onto her own. It didn't take her long to fall asleep under Melody's watchful eye. Melody lingered a few minutes longer, contemplating the sleeping children with their hair the color of sweet August corn. A lot of folks in the tiny Midwestern town of Lake Tickitacki had blond hair like theirs. Melody's hair was dark, wavy, and stubbornly unruly. She didn't look like anybody from these parts. In truth, it was a problem.

She didn't look like her Uncle Wes or Aunt Connie, with whom she lived, or like their children Cynthia, Allison, and Russ. All of them had dirty-blond hair, blue eyes, and sharp features. Melody had a longish nose, a full mouth, and large eyes that were very dark brown. Sometimes in school the kids teased her. "What are you, Italian?" they would jeer, although most of the time they used rude substitutes for the word "Italian." Her best friend Zoe Lundstrom's mother thought differently. "I think you look like a gypsy," she enthused. "With a pair of gold earrings and a headscarf, I could almost see you reading my palm and gazing into a crystal ball. When you're older you'll be glad to have such exotic looks."

But Melody wasn't so sure, and Zoe's mother didn't have any idea what made Melody look so different. The reason for her differentness was a closely guarded family secret, rarely mentioned even among the family. It was clearly a source of pain for her Uncle Wes, who was her dead father's brother, and he only talked about it when he'd had one or two beers too many.

Uncle Wes felt he had lost his brother quite a few years before he actually died. "He was just too talented for his own good," he would sniffle. "If he had just been an ordinary guy who stayed in town and worked in the factory like everybody

else, none of this would've happened! But Bobbie was never ordinary, poor guy.”

Melody had heard the story often enough: how her father, Bob Wheaton, had early on displayed an astonishing talent for music. He took up piano and trumpet and played in all sorts of groups. “He won a full scholarship to college to continue his studies,” Uncle Wes would boast. “The whole town was proud of him!” The Wheaton family was pleased as punch until they realized that Bob’s new world had pulled him so far away from Lake Tikitacki that he would never come home to settle down. Not only had he acquired vocabulary that none of them could understand, not only had he started to drink wine with weird foreign names instead of good old American beer, but then, to top it all off...

“He started dating that Jewish girl from New York,” Uncle Wes had growled contemptuously, one evening when they were cleaning out the desk and came across some old photographs. Uncle Wes’s views about Jews were well known in the family. He knew an awful lot about them, which was all the more remarkable given that he’d never met a single one, aside from Melody’s mother. He was thoroughly convinced that Jewish people were, in his words, “the trickiest, stingiest, connivingest race to ever pollute the face of the planet.” What was worse, according to Uncle Wes, they owned all of the banks, all of the newspapers, all of Hollywood, and even most of his favorite sports teams. Melody had a black mark on her name even before she was born.

Melody’s mother had been the worst kind — a Jew from New York. “The trickiest ones come from New York,” Uncle Wes asserted with a knowledgeable air. Susan Wheaton was a violinist who had studied at the same university as Bob, also on a scholarship. They shared a love of music and a love of

life, and pretty soon after they graduated they married. After awhile, little Melody made her appearance.

“That Susan was nothin’ but bad luck to him,” Melody had once overheard Uncle Wes telling Aunt Connie. “First she pulled him away from all that great country and rock ‘n’ roll he used to play, and got him into all that highfalutin, sissy garbage” (this meant classical music and jazz).

“He could’ve made it in the best rock bands, and here she kept him down working in jazz clubs. It’s her fault they got killed, she was the one who wanted him to take the gig that night! What a shame, oh, the whole thing never should’ve happened...” Then Melody heard him sniffing back a tear, and popping the top off another can of beer.

Uncle Wes’s account was, strictly speaking, neither accurate nor fair. What happened had not been Sue Wheaton’s fault at all. She had only encouraged Bob to accept a gig in the city closest to Lake Tikitacki because she declared it was high time Bobbie paid a visit to his family. The gig was in a classy revolving restaurant at the top of a skyscraper, but they’d played in fancy places before. Bob and Susan had first come and spent time with the Wheaton family, bringing two-year-old Melody with them. They had left Melody with Wes and his wife Connie as they cheerfully drove off to play their gig, performing clothes on hangers in the back of the car and instruments in the trunk.

Tragically, they never came back. “Towering Inferno Kills 65!” screamed the newspaper headlines the next day. Everyone in the restaurant died of smoke inhalation, including the two guest musicians and the backup band. Two-year-old Melody’s visit was extended forever, for she had nowhere else to go; her mother had been an only child, and Melody’s grandparents were long deceased. Wes and Connie Wheaton dried

their tears, grit their teeth, and made space in the attic for Melody. Melody learned early to stay out of the way and not make too much trouble.

The situation could've turned out a lot worse. Uncle Wes had a good job as a foreman in the cereal factory that employed much of the town's population. They lived in a wooden frame house that was neither fancy nor shabby; it looked just like every other house in their development. Aunt Connie worked mornings at the Donut Delite truck stop just off the main highway. Every morning at five-thirty she would put on her pink uniform and a frilly apron and pour coffee and sling hash for the truck drivers stopping in for breakfast. Between the two of them, there was never any lack of breakfast food in the house. Uncle Wes brought home huge cartons of cereal from the factory, and Aunt Connie could be relied on to bring home the day-old doughnuts. Melody never had to worry about an empty stomach. In her case, the only part that felt empty was a secret, guarded place in her heart.

Melody now stood up and gave one last glance at the sleeping Svenson children, feeling a pang of envy for their cornsilk hair and picture-perfect family. She went downstairs and began solving the extra-credit math problems her teacher had assigned, and barely an hour later the doorbell rang, signaling the return of the Svensons from their night out.

"Were the kids all right, Melody?" asked Mrs. Svenson anxiously, rummaging in her purse for money to pay her.

"Fine," Melody answered, gathering her homework and stuffing it into her knapsack.

"Thank you so much," said Mrs. Svenson. "It's such a pleasure when you babysit for us. The other girls just get on the phone and yak all night. With you I know I'll come home and find the children asleep." She pushed some dollar bills into

Melody's hand and then stayed on the front steps to make sure Melody got home all right as she walked down the block back to the Wheaton house.

Uncle Wes was sitting out on the front steps, smoking a cigarette. "Where were you?" he asked suspiciously. Rex, the family's German shepherd, wagged his tail unenthusiastically.

"Babysitting for the Svensons," she replied.

Aunt Connie didn't let him smoke in the house; she said it was a filthy, lowlife habit, and besides, the smoke fumes were bad for Allison and Russ, who were on sports teams and always in training. So, in deference to his children's athletic endeavors, Uncle Wes always stepped outside to smoke.

"What was it tonight, their anniversary?"

In Lake Tikitacki, there were very few secrets. Melody nodded. "All right," said Uncle Wes, shrugging. "Get yourself inside, then."

Melody entered the house, where Aunt Connie, Cynthia, Allison, and Russ were sitting in a darkened room, watching a movie about a runner who lost his legs in a car accident and then went on to become a world-famous coach. A few minutes was all it took for her to decide she wasn't interested. "Good night," she said politely.

Aunt Connie grunted. Russ growled, "You're interrupting," and the girls didn't bother to respond at all. The movie had turned sad, and they were too busy fishing for tissues. Melody sighed and made her way upstairs to her room in the attic.

Going into her room meant she had to first pass the storage section filled with all the Wheatons' old bikes, rusty trunks, sports equipment, Aunt Dottie's old love seat, and crates of books that nobody but Melody ever bothered to look at. After that the attic became Melody's domain, which was sparse but more or less neat with her bed, Aunt Dottie's

old dresser, and an old, cracked Formica table she used as a desk. During the summer, the heat rose and gathered like a cloud in the attic; in the winter, the wind howled through the rafters and hissed through the cracks in the roof, and Melody would put on two pairs of socks and a bathrobe to keep from freezing.

Now she flipped on her little radio and played with the tuner until she found something she liked. Sometimes she wondered what she would do if she didn't have music to lift her spirits and break the boredom. She'd listen to anything, even stuff everybody else thought was weird. She just followed her ears and listened to what sounded good to her.

It was rarely what sounded good to the Wheatons. "Would you turn that down?" Cynthia would screech, as her room was directly below the attic. "What is this, the Paris Opera or something?"

"It's not opera," Melody would yell back.

"Whatever," Cynthia shouted with the exasperation of a sixteen-year-old whose delicate musical sensibilities have been offended. "Wouldja please just make it lower — like, much lower?"

Melody would scowl and turn it down. Cynthia, of course, had no qualms about blasting all her rock and country favorites right through the ceiling. She and Allison would dance around their room, their thumping audible even over the high volume of the music. They were always trying to keep in shape; Cynthia had been Junior Miss Lake Tickitacki two years ago and now had her eye on the senior title for next year. She lavished hours of time on her hair with the blow-dryer and curling iron, and made sure to check her hairdo every time she passed a mirror. The year Cynthia had been Junior Miss Lake Tickitacki, she had been insufferable, putting on a lot of

airs and entirely too much blue eye shadow. Allison and Russ were much easier to take. They were both athletes who were more interested in their teams than their hair. For them it was softball and baseball respectively in the summer, and hockey and football in the fall. “Russ was born with a football in his hand,” Uncle Wes loved to boast.

“And what did I have?” Allison would retort, annoyed at being left out, “a hockey puck in my hand?”

“In your mouth,” Russ taunted.

And what was Melody good at? Certainly not sports; she wasn’t particularly strong or coordinated. School, on the other hand, came very easily to her. The other kids, despite themselves, often had to enlist her help for homework assignments. The problem was that in Lake Tikitacki, being a whiz in school did little to heighten one’s popularity, and looking like a gypsy or an Italian didn’t help either. So Melody hung out with her friend Zoe, who was also considered something of an outsider, and tried to pretend the rest didn’t exist.

“The time at the tone will be 11:30,” said the announcer’s voice on the radio. “And now, selections from Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s ballet *Swan Lake*.”

Having just read Katy a story about swans, Melody’s curiosity was piqued. She snuggled into bed, listening. The sad, hauntingly beautiful strains of the ballet pulled at her heart, and she listened for a long time before she finally fell asleep.