

**THE GOOSE**  
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“Goose” was the name we called Harry until he died. He was Rose’s boy, related to Ralph and Liesel and Karl, the German wing of our extended family. I first recall him when I wrangled permission to attend services with him at the Holy Family Church. There, parishioners genuflected in a lofty worship hall under a bell that pealed an electronic boom, amplified to ensure every decibel and hasten arrival of the flock.

I remember feeling alone in my parents’ austere ranch-style home with white plush carpeting and a *Thank You For Removing Your Shoes* sign, strategically placed in the hallway to assault the eyes. Another sign instructed visitors with *Thank You for not Smoking*. Guests arrived by prearranged visit, accompanied by much attention to detail. Were paper napkins acceptable after five P.M.? Would the peanut dish wobble in the lazy Susan? Should I wear the hated blue sport coat?

My parents held no quarrel with attending Harry’s church; it simplified life for them. They gladly carted me the twelve icy blocks in November when snow mounds outlined shoveled sidewalks like blank rows in a crossword puzzle. They deposited me at his ancient, rambling three-story home. The screen-porch housed a lumpy sofa and cranky armchairs. Parkas lay on the sofa, with matching overshoes rooted into the floorboards by frozen water tendrils. The overcoats supplied a headcount and a clue to each visitor’s identity. More chairs languished in the garage until spring. On talkative afternoons that meant sitting space for six or seven visitors – more if you counted the wide porch-railings.

Aware that guests had more pull than natural children, I turned my manipulative skills on Harry’s dad, beginning with an obedient look plastered across my face. “Sir, can we sit in back of the church, by the ushers.” The reference to ushers was a gambit to conjure-up visions of baby-sitters and religious law-enforcement. It succeeded; Harry and I were free of the parental eye.

Donations became the first test of our nascent Christianity. At Holy Family, the collection basket hung nailed to a long pole, which I surmised was a symbol of crucifixion and the consequences of withholding donations. Ushers wielded the baskets with the skill of swordsmen, thrusting the poles deep into the heart of each worshiper’s space.

One Sunday the gray-haired deacon sidled his way to our row. I quietly pocketed my dollar. The basket stopped before Goose, busy contemplating the sin of withholding money. The wrinkled dollar chose that moment to stick in his jeans and refused to emerge. Guilty from the intended breach of trust, he hunkered in the pew, fighting the unwilling bill. At that moment the usher lost his grip on the pole. The basket shook directly before Harry, jingling coins and sending paper heavenward. Moved by unforgiving adrenaline, the dollar bill spewed from Harry’s pocket straight into the basket. Harry was redeemed.

Later, I discovered Harry attended his first confession like a college freshman suffering symptoms of a first psychology textbook. He began his litany to the window, "I'm a Glutton," he explained, "I make a pig of myself." He waded through more sins, while the silent witness said nothing. Certain that the final sin implied looking at girl's bodies, Harry whispered, "I think I committed adultery, too." Peals of laughter emanated from his unseen guide, as though God himself had taken humor at the transgression.

I continued church with Harry often and willingly due to the freedom vested in that last row of the church. Harry brought me to religion by proximity, not holiness. Like closeness to wet paint, something is bound to remain. Harry and I bonded and accepted our differences and the world as an inevitability of creation. Passing judgment on others emerged later, and maturity followed only as an after-thought.

Already unattractive, Harry grew skinnier than a sideways flapjack. Like Buddy Holly, the rock star, he wore horn-rimmed glasses. Freckles coated his body in swirls and ever-expanding patterns. His body stretched; arms and legs diminished to relative spaghetti-strand width. A broad forehead, a sharp nose, cheeks like caves, a wide chin and a long neck, complete with an Adam's apple emerged. Geese don't really have Adam's apples, but kids get strange ideas, and the term Goose attached to Harry. Once used, the nickname stuck like a mustard-tipped straw-cover to a malt shop ceiling.

Goose had become kid-ugly. Not adult ugly, mind you; adults know their faults and enforce an uneasy truce with themselves. Kid-ugly requires a victim to believe his inferiority while tormentors find scapegoats to deflect their inadequacies. Harry drew out the creative worst in others.

To my shame, I became one of the tormentors. My deficiencies pushed me to call Harry *Goose*. In a manner, Harry became my confessional. He accepted the slurs I doled out, and I felt better about myself. To me, it seemed an equitable exchange.

We began high school in the new Consolidated Central High, a departure from the custom of presidential names. But Central's construction deported teenagers from their comfortable neighborhoods and multiplied the opportunity for kid-ugly clashes.

One day in the gym shower, among the steam, glittering pipes and slippery ceramic tile, Harvey Ornsteen laughed at Goose's freckles. One of the Snodgrass boys, believing in his educational superiority, apprised us that Goose's freckles didn't cover the soles of the feet. This was cannon fodder for Ryan Bakenelli, with muscles triple the size of his brain. "Let's see. Grab him."

"Hang the Goose for Christmas," mocked Snodgrass, following Bakenelli's lead but keeping his own naked distance. Standing there with my hairless crotch, I understood the teenage peter-principle, namely: those with hair rule.

Four guys and I, grabbed Goose by the feet and jerked him upside down. With freckles and towel, he looked like a brown twig clutching a solitary white leaf. Then, voice resonating against the shower walls, he spoke and reached somewhere

inside me. “Would I do that to you?” The guilt seeded in a hundred sermons sprouted on fallow ground. Some disturbing fleck of a commandment, some phrase of a parable had rubbed off. I dropped my part of the foot and retreated. Others abandoned the conspiracy until only Bakinelli, glaring at the deserters, held a heel. Goose twisted his leg free into a splashing four-point stance, stood and walked, almost regally, to his locker.

Ryan’s ego, bruised by the aborted freckle check, announced itself with a slam of his locker door. I realized then that Bakinelli was mired, deep in kid-ugly. Despite his bullying, I felt sorry for him.

More profoundly, Harry had been called “The Goose,” not just “Goose.” A single article The, tacked to his name, had endowed a special status, like “The King” or “The Fonz” from *Happy Days*.

From then on, Goose found humor in the insults around him. Taunts bounced off his psyche. Oh, kids might make a comment in the movies. Sometimes voices from a passing car harangued him with a sing-song voice and a drawn out “G-oooo-se,” but the words floated away amid blaring radios and car exhausts. The bonds of kid-ugly, tenuous at best, had been broken.

Given Goose’s poor beginning, the change was a climb to lofty heights. Those last days must have seemed the acceptable year of our Lord to him, but he never adopted a superior attitude or dispensed retribution on me for my pecking-order mentality.

Easter of our senior year, my parents arranged to ship me to my grandparents in Arkansas. The Goose and his girlfriend, Irene, showed up in his pink Studebaker that early morning as my escorts to the bus station. We said hello to friends and headed for a last visit to the Burger Barrel drive-in. Irene bounced out of the car with an “I have to talk to....” She twisted through automobiles and people, bouncing between bumpers like a pinball. She danced her way through the throng with a pure exhilaration of movement and returned with Doris in tow.

Doris stood five-foot tall, with a plain face and insisted on calling herself *blonde* despite the darker tints that predominated. She piled her hair in a bun, further conveying a dowdy look. The four of us stood face to face. Like a visual traffic-jam, we skidded into each other’s eyes and laughed.

Everyone knew the meeting was a set-up. Doris and I, neither fitting among God’s creatures, were blessed with what we could not find for ourselves – belonging. On that bright, beautiful, glorious day, the charity mattered not one bit. We stretched-out together in the back seat, and the sun came down to us.

I, who poked fun at Goose to ease my growth pains, had been ushered into teenage society through him. I couldn’t explain why, but that afternoon, I belonged. I belonged in the back seat behind the intertwined Goose and Irene. I belonged beside Doris. I belonged among the scrum of hopped up cars with teenagers scarfing fries and hamburgers. Yes, by God, that was my place. I belonged in the pink, yes, pink, Studebaker as Irene’s headscarf fluttered from the front seat. I belonged with

my three friends in the bus station, flanked by a tired, smoke-stained Greyhound. I was no odd man out, no tag-along. By God, I belonged.

When they dropped me off, I wanted to shout, “Come back. Let’s go on.” The silent words were unsophisticated as words from innocence often are, but Goose couldn’t stay, and no, time wouldn’t stand still for me.

I watched The Goose peel out of the parking lot and thought, “Man. He’s gonna kill himself if he doesn’t slow down.” Later, in a kid way, I wondered if my thoughts had contributed to his death when the pink Studebaker ran a light where Van Buren crossed Highway 69, recently expanded to expedite traffic and increase safety. The movie *American Graffiti* had passed, still the film comes to mind whenever I recall Goose’s end. I wonder if most of us have an image that cements us to a time and place with a vividness we could never master alone. Perhaps movies root the young to their future as surely as dental adhesive glues the elderly to their past.

My last enduring image of Goose, was not of Goose at all. It was of a proud but grieving father accepting the diploma at graduation. The diploma was simply an act of administrative grace; yet the reverent silence of the assembly could not have been commanded by any authority. As they said Goose’s name, “This diploma is presented in memory of Harry Kibblehelm,” Goose’s father began to cry. He cried as he stumbled down the aisle. He cried as he shook hands with Principal Sterns. He cried into the microphone, and he cried as he trekked back up the aisle. He cried loudly and openly, unashamedly sobbing. I’ve never before or since seen a man cry, so oblivious to the small rituals around him and so full of love for his child.

Caught in my adolescent confusion, I was ashamed of the blubbing face and the trembling lips. I scorned the slumped shoulders and the bowed head. I despised him, just as I despised my own vulnerability. Had anyone asked, I would have denied I knew him. At the same time, I was proud in a way I didn’t understand until years later. I saw the spirit of the son, become a man, as the father ascended the podium, and returned up the aisle.

Flanked by rows of fresh graduating faces, I looked to the back of the auditorium. My parents were presentable, composed, starched, ironed and immaculate. They were all that I could pray for in a material world. But at that moment, being kid-ugly and called Goose didn’t seem such a bad deal. I wanted, no matter how briefly, to trade my time on earth for a seat in a pink Studebaker and a last burger with The Goose.

