

The Ugly Ducklings

When the advert comes on Marcus, 8 years old, is lying with his head propped on his hands in front of the television. It erupts in a flash of violence designed to show off the computer game's virtuoso use of True Colour technology. The words MEGA DEATH EXECUTION ORGY 3 are all that survive the carnage. Marcus realises that he must have this game.

"Dad!"

His father is frying onions in the kitchen and has trouble making out the words from the front room above the sshh. "What?"

"I want you to buy me Mega Death Execution Orgy 3." Marcus' eyes do not leave the television screen.

"What? I'm frying onions. I can't hear you above the 'sshh' - aaaaahhh!" He has inadvertently laid his right hand on the hot frying pan.

"I WANT YOU TO BUY ME MEGA DEATH EXECUTION ORGY 3."

"I'VE ALREADY TOLD YOU THAT I CAN'T HEAR YOU ABOVE THE 'SSHH'. WHY DON'T YOU GET OFF YOUR ARSE AND COME HERE!"

Marcus, oversensitive since his parents' divorce, gets up as quickly as his orthopaedic caliper will allow and limps clankingly to his room, stopping only to scream "I HATE YOU!" before he slams the door. His father groans loudly and turns off the gas. He does not enjoy cooking.

"Another meal ruined." He holds his burnt hand under cold water, wipes it on his suit trousers and heads for Marcus' room. He knocks twice on the door.

"Marcus, can I come in?" No answer.

"This isn't going to solve anything, you know." He hears movement through the door and then Marcus' tearful voice.

"Are you going to buy me Mega Death Execution Orgy 3?" He smiles and shakes his head. Kids can be so predictable.

"Marcus, I'm coming in." He opens the door slowly, sensitively, he thinks, and edges in. The curtains are drawn and the light is off. The light from the hallway illuminates Marcus' head where it lies on the pillow.

He avoids the toys on the floor by walking with a crab-like motion and sits carefully on the edge of the bed next to Marcus' thighs.

"Marcus, life's been hard for us the past couple of years, but it's going to start getting better. I promise you that. Now, I'm going to tell you a story, and I want you to listen carefully." No answer, but no objection either. He continues. "Once upon a time, there were two ducks who liked each other a lot. They used to swim everywhere together and sleep in the same . . . nest." No move-

ment. He silently congratulates himself on the recovery. "But one day, the ducks discovered that the female duck was pregnant. Now, I'm not going to pretend that the man duck wasn't completely freaked out by the news. But he thought he loved the female duck and so he supported her when she decided to keep the baby duck rather than have a duck . . . abortion." This is more difficult than he had expected. Luckily Marcus still isn't making any sounds.

"They got married and waited for the duckling to make an appearance. He was born with some serious but not life-threatening birth defects. His left leg didn't work properly and had to be supported by a metal frame, and his upper beak was attached to his . . . nose." The bedclothes begin to move a bit. "It was operated on but left a scar. The duck was also discovered to be a bit dyslexic. So yes, as you might expect, the other ducklings at the pond kept out his way and laughed at him behind his back. They called him names like 'cripple' and 'Frankenstein.'" He isn't too happy with the track the story is taking, but to stop now would just draw attention to the fact. He decides to press on.

"To make matters worse, the mummy of the disabled duckling started to go swimming with ducks other than her husband. After everything he'd done for her!" He takes a deep breath and counts to five. "She left them one morning for some idiot from the other side of the pond. So then it was just the two of them, father duck and son duck." Where is he going with this?

"The young duckling was lonely and deeply unhappy, and used to spend long afternoons in his nest watching television and wanting things that he thought would make him happy." He spies the end of the story on the horizon.

"One day he went down to the pond and looked at his reflection in the water. He saw the scar from nose to lip and the metal calliper on his leg as they dissolved in the water's ripples. 'Why?' he said. 'Why, God, did you make me this way?' And in that moment he knew what he must do. He closed his eyes and he wished with all his being that he looked like the other ducks at the pond. That his beak would be smooth and his leg strong, and that he wouldn't have anymore trouble with reading and writing."

"Suddenly a change came over the pond. The air felt heavier and clouds swept over the horizon at an impossible speed. Thunder growled in the distance."

"The duckling opened his eyes and leaned over the pond. The clouds made the reflection difficult to recognise. Slowly the shapes of the scar and the metal calliper came into view. The duckling's heart sank. But that was not all. His eye was sudden-

ly drawn to his left wing, which hung limply at his side. He tried to move it and winced with the pain. Not this too, he thought. But that was not all.”

“Above his scarred beak, where his left eye should have been, he saw a dark hole. No wonder he was having so much trouble seeing his reflection – he had lost one of his eyes!” He patted a hand on Marcus’ side.

“This story has a moral. Try to be content with what you’ve got, because it could always be worse.” He stands up, stretches his arms to the ceiling and walks to the door. “Love you, son. Sleep well.” Closing it softly, he goes to the front room where the television is still on. He congratulates himself on his par-

enting skills and fixes himself a whiskey, then sits down in the solitary armchair. No need to worry about buying the computer game, he thinks.

An advert for an electrical grill comes on. He watches the improbably succulent slabs of beef sizzling and feels his mouth begin to water. He realises that he must have this grill.

Meanwhile, Marcus is in his bedroom on the phone to his mother.

“Dad’s being really mean. He won’t buy me this new computer game . . . it’s called Mega Death Execution Orgy 3 . . . of course it’s suitable . . . you’re the best, Mum.”

That night everybody sleeps contentedly.

By Peter Crowe

..... Poetry

The Dream

Crow feather black,
Shiny dark against my eye,
Jump the fence,
Spring,
Must find the pool,
Dark pool mirror,
Black in the nightness.

Naked, running,
Skin so white,
Against the green brown dark,
Around me, voices,
Speaking in tongues,
I don’t understand.

Wet on my feet, so cold,
Screwed up eyes,
I squint, where is it!
Maybe over there,
Dark pool smiling,
Taunting me.

Wading in,
Searching, seeking,
Ignore the brightness,
of Pie-Eyed Moon,
Look for the glint, must find the gold,
Find the key before the story is told.

Thought-pause

Waiting for the quiet, hoping for the time,
When all the noise will disappear, when silence is sublime,
The absolute of nothing, the consequence of doubt,
The deliciousness of feeling, what it’s like to do without,
Riches are for paupers, knowledge is the key,
I live to learn, and learn to know,
That knowing makes me,
Free.

Thrill

Racing the leaves down
The Duchess’ lane.
Wheels spinning faster.
Wind whipping harder.

The birds are all gone
The sky threatens rain
Clouds scudding closer
Blood pumping hotter

Waves on the water,
All choppy and white.

One with the weather,
On the back of my bike.

by Jodie Mann