

A Friend in Need

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A never ending stream of honking from the geese caused Marjorie to look up from her suds-filled sink of breakfast dishes.

"What ever has gotten into those geese? Why are they raising such a ruckus?"

Drying her hands with a paper towel, she pulled back the sunny, yellow cafe curtains. Marjorie's eyes looked out across the pond where dozens of geese gathered around the water's edge, swept the length of the dirt path, then glanced upward towards the sunburst clock on the kitchen wall.

"9:38 . . .Strange, Alicia usually passes by around 8:00, 8:15. Wonder what's keeping her. Except for bad weather, she's usually down by the pond at this hour."

About the same time Paul Parker walked out onto his front porch and picked up the morning paper. He too, looked up when he heard the loud honking sounds.

"Humph. Just knew those geese weren't nothin' but trouble. Who needed the likes of them movin' in? Walk all about the neighborhood and mess up everyone's property. Yessir, we got no one to blame 'cept Alicia Watkins."

Alicia and her husband, Harley, moved to the community of Morgan's Cove shortly after he retired from the post office. After the hectic city life, they enjoyed the slow pace of the sleepy New England town. And, although they hesitated moving (they'd heard from close friends some small communities sometimes never really warmed up to outsiders) they found a small group of people who readily welcomed them.

Alicia loved her home but rarely ventured outside unless accompanied by Harley. It was he who continually cajoled her to attend church socials, prodded her into entering her home-made Apple Pan Dowdy in the baking contests in the local county fairs. Their small circle of close friends knew Harley was Alicia's whole world and when he died suddenly, they worried as Alicia retreated more and more into herself. For a while she seemed to cease

living. Then, slowly, she began to go out and walk along the perimeter of the pond.

One warm spring day, a Canada goose alighted on the smooth, almost mirror-like surface of the pond. Alicia momentarily stopped in her tracks; then gingerly threw a few bread crumbs towards the goose. After that, she'd leave early each morning to feed her new friend.

Soon the small community became divided as more and more geese took up residence on the pond. Some, like Marjorie Hawkins and Mark Brightman couldn't see any harm while others like Paul Parker and Rosie Dunn only saw the mess left behind by the geese. Undaunted, Alicia ignored the town gossip and every morning she could be seen alongside the pond tossing cubes of white bread to the town's newest arrivals.

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By 11:00 AM Alicia still had not shown up to feed her feathered friends and other townspeople began to express concern. "Mae, this is Rosie. Please be so kind as to ring Alicia. She usually passes by my place around 9AM and I haven't seen her this morning. While I may not like her new friends, I certainly hope that she hasn't taken ill. Thank you."

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As Jesse delivered the mail, he stopped by the Watkins place and knocked on the door.

"Alicia, it's Jesse. You all right?"

There was no response. He walked round to the left side of the small, neatly painted white and green bungalow and peeked through the living room window. Although the curtains were drawn, they were sheer enough to see through. Cupping his left hand over a pane of glass, he peered through a cream-colored haze of nylon; everything seemed to be in order.

"Not at all like Alicia to go off and tell no one. Sides, where would she go? It's not like she knows a whole lot of people. Uh-yup, sure seems odd."

Jesse walked back to the front door and knocked once more. Hearing no response, he shrugged his shoulders and continued his mail delivery.

Around noon the sound of squealing brakes brought a good number of townsfolk out onto their front porches. Hank O'Dwyer slid off the worn, brown leather seat and slammed shut the

door on his blue Ford pickup truck. "Damn birds! It's not enough they mess up the park grass. It's not enough their feathers dirty the water in the pond so you can't let your young 'uns dangle their feet in the water. Now they've got the nerve to tie up traffic. Why the hell are they crossing the road? I tell you, this situation has gotten way outta hand!"

Paul Parker bounded down the steps of his porch and tried to help Hank shoo the geese off the roadway. The geese only hissed at them and continued across. First one, then two. Soon close to two dozen geese were waddling across the two-lane highway. They waddled and honked until they arrived at Alicia Watkin's front lawn. Some spread and noisily fanned their wings, then clumsily waddled up the porch stairs and began pecking at the front door.

Watching from her front porch, Rosie called to her husband Mark, "better have Mae ring up Officer Thompson. I've never seen anything like this. Something real strange is goin' on."

Within minutes a squad car pulled up and Officer Geoff Thompson climbed out. Carefully he made his way through the noisy throng of geese.

As he knocked on the front door, Officer Thompson called out, "Alicia, you in there?"

When there was no response, he put his muscular right shoulder to the wooden door and leaned into it. Feeling it give a bit, he inched back, then pushed on it even harder. The door popped open.

"Alicia, it's Officer Thompson. You all right?" Still no answer.

By now Paul and Rosie had crossed the street and followed some of the geese into the hallway. As Officer Thompson looked from room to room on the lower level, some of the geese began walking up stairs. Rosie and Paul cautiously followed.

Suddenly Rosie's voice pierced the eerie quiet of the house.

"I've found her."

Sprawled out on the black and white tiles of the bathroom floor, Alicia lay motionless. Geoff Thompson bent over the almost lifeless, fragile form and put his fingers on the side of her neck. "Thank God there's a pulse."

"Rosie," said Officer Thompson, "call for an ambulance."

As the ambulance sped off, sirens whirring, the townspeople watched the geese stream out of the house, across the road and head toward the pond. Many shook their heads in amazement. Few could recall seeing such a thing.

The doors of the Strong Memorial Hospital Emergency Room swung open and Dr. Manteo emerged.

"Paul, Rosie, it's lucky you found her when you did. Maybe half an hour later and she'd have been dead. She's suffered a rather serious heart attack, but I think *I* can safely say that you got her here in time."

"Doc," said Paul, "we can't take the credit. It was the geese. They raised such a ruckus, really annoyed us when they marched right across the road -- began pecking on Alicia's front door. It was the geese that saved her life!"

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Marjorie Hawkins finished washing and drying her family's breakfast dishes. She smiled as she pulled back the yellow cafe curtains and watched Paul Parker and Rosie Dunn toss cubes of white bread to the geese milling about the pond.