

THE DUCKS, THE WOMEN, AND THE TRUTH

For three days I was in Hamburg, three long days, and on the last and longest, a sunny Sunday, a friend who had moved to the city years ago, among other things because as a born Dresdener he loved the Elbe so much, took me for a walk along the Alster.

What we saw met all the requirements of an idyll: The branches of the weeping willows, like green strands of hair, drooped into the stale, brownish waters of the Alster , whose surface was ruffled by faint ripples, here and there already flecked with traces of foam. On shiny white sailboats, rolling gently in place because there was no wind, a tribe of youthful humanity lay basking, bodies gleaming with suntan lotion, in peak condition, almost naked, and approximating to an alarming degree the androgynous ideal of beauty held by the ancient Romans (or Swedes?). Along the riverbank the most nuclear of families, playing a game called leisure, were strolling in motley dress, as were individuals sporting decidedly gender-specific, but tasteful looks. There was much smiling, waving of hands, mutual greeting, and smoking.

Surely everything would have continued along its customary Hamburg summer-specific Alster-Sunday-walk course, if our gaze, roaming occasionally away from our fellow humans and towards the shore, had not suddenly seized upon a strangely quiet and therefore all the more dramatic scene.

There was a handsome drake, dunking his little head into the water time and time again, as if he were searching for food, a behavior that at first glance appeared utterly unremarkable in a duck. But we were soon to notice that the drake was by no means re-emerging with a soaked bread roll or some other food but rather held in his bill the head of a duck, a head that appeared pitifully small and strangely limp. Attached to the duck's head and to the neck, which resembled a section of a bicycle's inner tube, was the lifeless body of a duck with soggy feathers. The duck, which was obviously much too heavy for him, slipped away from the drake and disappeared in the water like a stone. But immediately the drake dived after the duck, again seized it by the neck and held its head above water, until he had to let go of her because otherwise she would probably have pulled him down with her. The drake dived, dragged, dived, with concentration and indefatigably; it looked as if he did not want to believe that the little duck had drowned, as if he could not abandon the hope that she would start to breathe again, if only he succeeded to hold her bill up to the air long enough with his own.

The scene was one of desperation and deeply moving, and from the ever-growing group of almost exclusively female spectators the first speculative interpretations of the situation could be heard. "Her foot probably got caught in some plastic junk or in an illegally placed fish-trap, and that's why she went down," one woman shouted. "We need a hand net right away and a vet; perhaps something can still be done," said another. "Come on, let's go," the

friend of the Elbe, and of me, hissed through his clenched teeth, probably because the turmoil made him nervous. But I would not listen and now even had to add my own two cents worth. "He is the father," I screamed, "he is saving his baby." "But the drake doesn't know that the other one is dead as a doornail; he's just a bird, after all" – that was a variation on my hypothesis offered by an elderly lady. Unmoved by so much attention, the drake kept grabbing the neck of the cadaver, which obviously was driven by no greater wish than to go under for good. "The poor daddy duck," a little girl wailed, "the poor baby duck," wailed her mother.

At this moment, chosen with dramaturgic precision, an unkempt, unshaven man, about fifty years old, stepped forth from behind the trunk of a huge weeping willow, assumed the pose of an enlightened Mephistopheles, and began speaking: "Nonsense. I have observed this thing from the beginning. That one is the last of eight drakes that were all fucking this one duck. Even the seventh one was too much for her, and then this one had to come along to finish her off. In his obscure frenzy he attacked her like a crazy creature, again and again and again, and without realizing that he was just doing her in and nothing more. In any event, he didn't get to finish. It is just because he wants to finish screwing her that he keeps pulling her up; he does not have any other motive. It's all because there are too many drakes. People feed them and feed them, and nary a one still dies in winter. And the runts that don't get to mate with any of the big ducks then ruin the little ones, the ones from last summer."

The polemical counteroffensive was not long in coming: "Oh, be quiet, you and your dirty male chauvinist fantasies!" – "It takes one to know one, you stupid loser of a social Darwinist." – "But he might still be the father."

I was embarrassed, because I had brought up the mawkish variation of the troubled father trying to save his baby and now sensed that the zealous observer of nature was telling the truth. But as I was opening my mouth to make a clean breast of it, my old friend from Dresden grabbed me by the nape of the neck and pulled me away with him. "Let it go," he said. "Even if it's true, it isn't right."