

Duckegg

& Persons of Interest

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CHAPTER ONE

Duckegg always felt good when he played hooky. It made everything look better when he knew he was where he wasn't supposed to be, when he wasn't supposed to be there. He leaned back and let his weight pull the oars just beneath the surface of the grey water. He paused to wipe his hand across his forehead and then lifted. The boat slid noiselessly along. It was a small boat, thin like a canoe, but flat on the bottom. It had appeared one day on the Pond and no one had known for sure from where. Duckegg being the first to find it, floating, partially submerged, about twenty feet off shore, had commandeered it. There had been several later claims to its ownership, but so far all attempts at repossession had failed. Duckegg had claimed, no doubt rightfully, that if he hadn't found it when he did, it would have sunk and then it would have been nobody's. It was a nice boat—a super boat. Its only inadequacy was that due to several small but persistent leaks, it required constant bailing. The boat slipped by some clumps of bushes and on past an old yellow cottage, half hidden behind the foliage of two maple trees. As he rounded a thicket of sprawling water lilies, Duckegg let the oars drop into the water again. The warm air dispersed tiny drops of perspiration on his thin face and his clammy hands slipped a little as he pulled. He stopped to rest, letting the boat glide almost silently to a stop. He listened for a while to the gentle flap of the water inside the boat

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and out. He measured the depth of the water in the bottom of the boat with an oar and then splashed about in it with his feet. Duckegg felt good.



Billy Duckworth, Duckegg's younger brother, was in no hurry to get home. He was in no hurry to anything. On the other hand, it was dangerous to hang around too long, particularly if he forgot to watch out for Kenny Sixsmith. He thought about how he hated Sixsmith. Not just today or yesterday, but always, ever since he could remember. Sometimes he hated him more and sometimes he hated him less, but he'd always hated him, he was sure of that. Today was September 22nd. Today everything had gone wrong. At school he'd been in trouble. He'd lost his lunch money and forgotten to bring back the money he'd owed for yesterday when he'd lost a quarter from his lunch money. He'd left his homework in the boy's john, where he'd gone to copy it after swiping Kenny Sixsmith's homework from the shelf under Sixsmith's desk. And he'd then forgotten about it because he was concentrating on what else he was doing in there. And now Kenny Sixsmith was out to get him after school, and he had to watch out for him. He pushed his steel rimmed glasses up on his nose and held them there for a while, looking around as he did. There was no one around, no one of importance, that is. There was old Mavis Brown out in the middle of her fenced yard, leaning over with her face close to some bush she was inspecting, turning over the leaves as she looked at their undersides. Her thin grey hair was pulled back into a bun which bobbed about by itself when the rest of her head disappeared behind the bush. She seemed to sense suddenly Billy's presence and stood up to stare at him with her hands on her hips and her eyes screwed up and her mouth tight. He sauntered by, dragging his hand along the

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white fence and staring back defiantly. If Mavis Brown had not been there, he would have committed some act of vandalism on the chrysanthemums or on one of the other floral displays. It would not, of course, have been the first time, nor the last, facts of which they were both aware. After all, the display in Mavis Brown's front yard, the manicured bushes and blossoming flowers and neat circles and rows of this and that were an invitation—no, an obligation to Billy. He thought for a moment to satisfy himself with saying something crude, but then he thought he saw a movement in the basement window and he figured George Brown was looking up, sneaking like he always did, so he refrained, and took a kick at the fence instead.



The weather was freaky hot for late September, and *that* among other things was what had prompted Duckegg to take an unscheduled vacation from school. The other things were his aversion to school, school teachers and all forms of mental coercion. He raised one oar and slowly guided the boat around a curve. The Pond narrowed abruptly and the boat slowed as the bow cut into a patch of green lily pads. The oars snarled in the stalks and tiny bubbles appeared on the surface of the water as the oars hit bottom. He laid one oar across the boat and with the other, he pushed against the muddy bed. The Pond, if anyone had bothered to measure it, which they hadn't, had a surface area of a little less than twenty six acres. It was the sole water supply for Bradbury, running underground and feeding a deep well and pumping station in the center of the town. A few homes in outlying areas, such as the Duckworth's, operated independently on their own private wells, which usually ran dry, or almost so, in the summer months. Duckegg saw something move. A dark thin form flitted just beneath the surface and was gone. He leaned over the edge of the boat, his

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face close to the water and sat still and silent. Another! And two smaller ones! The boat began to tip sideways as he leaned further and the water poured all to one side of the boat. He jerked back to the other side to avoid capsizing. He felt about in the water under his seat and pulled out a tin can. After a minimum of effort, which reduced the level of the water to a place where it lapped easily over the hole in the toe of his left sneaker, but stopped short of submerging his ankle, he tossed the can back under his seat, picked up an oar and began to push himself free of the lily pads.



Billy was daydreaming, walking along slowly, looking over the top of his glasses, not really seeing very much. He was daydreaming. He wasn't thirteen anymore, he was a man, a grown man. He was a big boss at Phelps Pharmaceuticals. Everybody was ascaerd of him. He, Billy Duckworth, was boss of everybody. He wore a suit, smoked fat, foul smelling cigars like fat, foul smelling Garstang, only he wasn't fat and he wasn't...A bus passed by on *his* side of the road. The passengers were looking out of the window. Some of them looked at him. He stuck out his tongue...He'd make Duckegg sweep the floors and empty the garbage cans.

"Hey, Specky-Four-Eyes! Specky-Four-Eyes!"

The two boys were behind him. He swung around, pushing up his glasses again, holding them for a second and then letting go and letting them slide back down his nose.

There was a tall lanky boy and a not so tall, fat one. The tall one, Joe, was Kenny Sixsmith's big brother, the other was Enoch Whitmeyer.

Billy walked backwards saying nothing.

"I hear you wiped your behind on my brother's homework."

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Billy said nothing. He walked backwards faster.



Duckegg was a thin boy, thin for a boy almost sixteen. He was big boned like his mother, only lacking the flesh to adequately cover his bones. His hair was red and thick, with scraggly ends that hung down over his collar. His face was freckled and there were small red patches on his cheeks and around his chin which might have been scurvy. His pale blue eyes were keen but overshadowed by broad shaggy eyebrows. He wore a brown oversized shirt which sagged loosely around his shoulders. His bony knees jutted out between the bottoms of his cut off jeans and the tops of his socks. He stretched himself out and pushed his feet against the stern of the boat and laid his head back onto the wooden seat. The boat glided slowly with a rocking motion. He placed his hands behind his head and stared up at the sky. He listened to the gentle slop of water against the side of his boat and let his mind float amongst the grey puffy clouds.



Billy ran. He ran farther than usual before the stitch got him. It seemed to cut straight into Billy's side. With no other choice, he swung around to face them with his fist flailing—swhoosh—and he swung again. He couldn't see—his eyes were red hot, burning. It struck him in the face—the nose—the side of his cheek. A gorilla was smashing his face in. He was stunned—absorbing the pain. A...aaah...and then the wildness got him. He leapt forward onto his attackers—fists and feet and teeth—no pain—nothing—just a desperate need—scratch—bite—kick. His eyes were closed. He was in a blackness—crack—a hit—a surge of joy. His knee struck something hard, sharp—a howl—kill the

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rotten bastards. A hand, twisting his arm. He strained his neck sideways, reaching his head downwards—his mouth open—his teeth aching to bite the thing that grasped him. The pain came swarming back on him—he was losing. Oh, Christ, damn them. He was falling to the ground... “YOU PIGS, YOU FUNKY PIGS.”



Duckegg guided the boat towards the side. A heavy stench hit his nostrils as he plowed through some tall grass past the rotting remains of some animal. He pushed on, past a black tree stump and into the thickly vegetated side. Two or three yards beyond the stump, the lush green grass ended and a cindered path, scattered with pine needles, seemed to appear from nowhere. The path led back through the undergrowth about five hundred yards and emerged not far from a brown wooden house. He stretched himself out and pushed his feet against the stern of the boat and laid his head back onto the wooden seat. The boat glided slowly with a slight rocking motion.



Billy dabbed the back of his hand against his lip. There was a dot of blood. He licked it with his tongue and it smarted more. He sniffed and picked up his glasses which were right at his feet and he knew where they were because he was stepping on them. The lenses were unbroken and the metal frames were bent at the nose piece and at one ear. He straightened them out and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and replaced his glasses on his face and thought about what he knew. He knew that some days were bad days and some kids were rotten, and some day, after Bill Sixsmith’s brother and fat Walters had stopped growing and become stunted, he, Billy would mop them up

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until they begged for mercy, and he wished he had wiped his ass on Sixsmith's homework.



Having dragged the boat ashore and pushed it beneath a tangle of scrubby undergrowth, Duckegg sauntered leisurely with one hand in his pocket, up the cindered path. He whistled quietly to himself. He stopped to break a brittle twig from a thorny bush. One by one, he removed the thorns with his thumbnail and then he peeled the bark from the twig in long strips. He swung at a stone with his new hockey stick.



Billy had mousy hair, sort of streaked between blond and brown. He had a pudding bowl cut, compliments of his mother, and he preferred to let the bangs in front dangle down over his eyes as they were now. His hazel eyes, were they not obscured by his hair and by the top rim of his glasses, would have appeared slightly green in the sunlight. His complexion was darker than that of his brother or his sister or his mother. That was the problem—he didn't look like anybody else. He wore grey pants, green at the knees and down one leg from the hassle in the grass, and a long sleeved plaid shirt, sweat stained under the arms and now ripped along the shoulder seam. The corner of his lip and some place up in his nose were smarting. His knee was hurting where he'd hit it on Walters teeth.



As he emerged from the comparative darkness of the sheltered path into the sunlight, Duckegg spotted his brother walking towards the house with his head down. Billy stopped

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and wiped his shirt cuff across his nose and then examined the contents of his nose as they appeared on his sleeve.

“You bin fighting again.”

“Shut-up!”

“Your nose ain’t bleeding.”

“I never said it was.”

“What you lookin’ for then?”

“Shut-up—I ain’t looking for nothing.”

Duckegg grinned. “Enoch Whitmeyer beat you up again.”

Billy swung around to face his brother, fists clenched by his side. “Nobody ain’t beat me up.”

Duckegg shrugged. “Then you fell in a cement mixer—face first,”

“And you smell like you fell in a sewer,” Billy countered, “and come out a frog.”

“Kiss me an’ I’ll turn back into a prince.”

“Yuk—make me sick!”

Duckegg turned and walked towards the house with Billy following. They entered the house through the back door into the kitchen.

“How come you’re dressed like that?”

“Like what?”

“Shorts an’ all *that*.”

Duckegg grinned.

“You played hooky again,” Billy said, pointing an accusing finger.

“So?”

“So I hope you get caught an’...”

“Aw, little brother’s jealous ‘cos he went to school an’ got beat up by Enoch Whitmeyer.”

“There was two of ‘em,” Billy squealed. “He couldn’t have beat me up by hisself.”

“So why didn’t you smash him one anyway, Billy?”

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“I told you, there was two of ‘em...TWO of ‘em.”

“So why didn’t you smash ‘em both one?”

“I did—I really smashed ‘em.” Billy hit his fist against the palm of his hand.

Duckegg nodded. “Sure you did.”

“The other was Kenny Sixsmith’s big brother,” Billy sneered. “I’d like to see YOU smash ‘em both at the same time.”

“I might do it.”

“What beat ‘em up—both of them?”

“Yeah.”

“Both of ‘em,” Billy said. “at the same time, BOTH of ‘em?”

The kitchen was dark, both by contrast with the sunlight and because the yellow shade at the kitchen window was pulled down. It was pulled down so low that its torn end dangled almost into the sink which was under the window.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?”

“You’re all talk—all mouth.”

Duckegg flicked on the kitchen light which supported three overhead bulbs, two of which were burned out, leaving a small forty watt bulb to dispel the dimness. He hooked his foot around the back leg of a wooden chair, and with practiced expertise, whipped it out from under the table. He sat down and immediately tipped the chair back and balanced it on its two rear legs. It remained suspended four seconds before it fell forward with a thump.

“You wanna go fishing on Saturday?” Duckegg said.

Billy got up from the table and disappeared into the pantry. It was a tiny room with a grey stone floor and wooden shelves. Billy picked a half empty jar of gooseberry jelly from one shelf and returned to the kitchen. He eyed Duckegg. “Why?”

“To catch fish, stupid. What d’ya think you go fishing for?”

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“I mean why Saturday, stupid yourself. We never caught nothin’ lately and I thought you quit trying.”

Duckegg watched his brother thoughtfully as Billy scraped liberal portions of green jelly onto two pieces of bread. “I seen lots of little fish today, and I say where there’s little uns, there’s big uns.”

“Yeah,” Billy grinned. “When there is little ‘uns, their ma’s got to around somewhere.”

Duckegg leaned forward and let the front legs of his chair hit the floor again. He sighed long and audibly and covered his eyes with one hand. “My God,” he groaned, “how could I possibly have such a stupid brother?” He peered at Billy then, between his parted fingers. He shook his head. “Nope,” he said slowly, “it’s gotta be true. You’re...you’re not my full blooded brother.”

Billy jumped to his feet. “There ain’t nothin’ stupid here but YOU,” he screamed, “and it ain’t me.” He opened his mouth wide, revealing the contents of chewed bread and green gooseberry jelly. “It’s you, you’re the bastard.”

Duckegg got to his feet and moved around the table to place himself on the opposite side from Billy.

“It’s you and Lucy that’s bastards,” Billy yelled. “You’re the bastard—an’ she’s a bastardess.”

“Yeah, then how come I look like Lucy and we both look like Ma and you look like the rubbish man?”

Billy’s smooth face erupted into wrinkles. “I ain’t no damned bastard.” His voice was squeaking, “And I’m tellin’ you called me a bastard again and you played hooky—and I’m the only thorough-bred,” Billy screamed. “You...”

“Okay, okay—You ain’t no bastard.” Duckegg was laughing. “You’re just a throwback...”

“I ain’t no throwback neither.”

“That’s nothin’ bad, stupid. It just means you look like somebody from another generation.” Duckegg leaned his head

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suddenly into his hands and began to shake. He looked up with a red face. "As a matter of fact, you look like somebody from another planet."

"SHUT UP, PIG!"

"Don't be mad." Duckegg tried to control himself. "Martians might be good lookin' for all you know."

Billy wiped his cuff across his eyes and stared at his brother. "Maybe I wouldn't mind being a Martian," he said. "I could zap anybody I wanted." He poked his finger in the air. "Tzoo-tzoo...with a laser beam for a finger."

"Nah...there's nothing wrong with being a Martian," Duckegg grinned.



Enoch Whitmeyer was draped sideways over the living room rocker manipulating his loose front tooth, moving it back and forth inside its gum socket. Whitmeyer's mother was draped frontways over the kitchen sink manipulating a Brillo pad, moving it back and forth inside a burned casserole pan. Enoch Whitmeyer's mother's day-ward, an extremely mouthy five year old child with bulgy grey eyes and orangy-red hair was also in the living room. She was sucking her thumb.

"Why is your tooth coming out?" She removed her thumb temporarily.

Enoch ignored her.

"They're not supposed to come out when you're fourteen."

"I'm not fourteen, I'm fifteen."

"They're not supposed to come out when you're fifteen."

Enoch stuffed a piece of gum in his mouth. "Go take a pee."

"Who hit you in the mouf?"

No answer.

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She tried another approach. “Gimme some gum.”

“Shut-up, brat.”

“Gimme some.” she said, letting her voice rise to a high pitch.

“I don’t have no more, dummy—so shut up.”

Lucy spontaneously responded by emitting a shrill penetrating scream.

Sadie Whitmeyer erupted through the living room door and stood dripping liquid Joy on the rug. “What the hell’s going on in here?” She glowered at Enoch.

“He’s gonna hit me,” Lucy volunteered.

Sadie turned on Enoch and raised the sudsy back of her hand menacingly. “You just have to cause trouble, don’t you? Fighting, coming home with loose teeth, threatening little kids. If you didn’t cause trouble, every day, every day, first thing when you get home from school, you cause trouble...”

“I ain’t causin’ trouble. She’s a lying bi...”

Sadie Walters took a step closer to her son and went as to strike him with the back of her hand, stopping an inch from contact with his face. Enoch jerked back and cowered. He glared at his mother and she at him. The two held the frozen pose in silence for several seconds. Finally Sadie lowered her hand and turned upon Lucy. Lucy sat wide-eyed, fascinated by the encounter she had observed.

“As for you,” Sadie moved closer towards her and waved her index finger in Lucy’s face. “You stop that mouthing off. We don’t allow mouthing in this house.”

She turned and walked from the room giving one final threatening glare at her son.

Lucy Duckworth extended her tongue at the retreating figure and returned her thumb to her mouth.