RODE

J. ADAMS

An earlier version of “Quack” was previously published in the *12 Gauge Review*. An earlier version of the Martin section appeared in *Genre* magazine.

Copyright © 2022 by J. Adams

ISBN: 979-8-9856972-1-6 (paperback)

ISBN: 979-8-9856972-2-3 (ePub)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, Distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Interior design by Booknook.biz.

In memory of W. Wagner
(and everyone else up there)

CONTENTS

QUACK 1

RODE 15

12:04 17

12:38 49

12:55 65

1:31 97

1:53 105

2:04 117

2:15 131

2:38 155

NOT EVEN 3:30 199

NO ONE'S THERE 287

TIME TO GET MOVING AGAIN 327

A HORN HELD IN THE DISTANCE 347

BIRD 349

LAST TIDE 393

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 399

QUACK

There weren't any ducks the first time we came. Just us. Me and Skelly, skipping stones. Ripples across the pond. That whole Sunday seeming like it was never going to give way. No matter if it did, besides, with so many more spreading out in front of us. Classes had only been in session a few weeks, and we were still in the beginning part of getting to know one another, when she asked me to meet her that morning in front of the chapel.

Then she brought me here.

Along with some cheese, crackers. Wine poured into paper cups. Seemed like the only difference between us and church was the cheese, and when I mentioned it, she looked at me like I'd had some sort of epiphany.

Of course, it was a lot easier to impress her then. Easier to impress myself.

This morning, I came alone. Looking for a place to lie down. Imagined me all bucolic and laid out among the grass blades. Maybe some tweety birds in the piñons. I hadn't thought to incorporate a herd of ducks into the scene, but here they are. Honking, splashing, generally having their feathers all flapping, fighting with the occasional pigeon, getting chased by dogs. Not the ideal place to try to get some sleep, it turns out. I should probably have stayed up in Santa Fe last night like I was supposed to. I had reservations for Ren's couch, but I guess I hadn't been quite ready to go. It seemed like if I spent the whole night out I might be able to get my fill but all I got, really, was tired.

I throw down my pack for a pillow and stretch myself out on the damp ground. A chill soaking into my spine. I've got visions of waking with a beak clamped to my nose, but I manage to keep my eyes closed.

Next thing, the bell on the upper quad's chiming nine. Might have dozed off for a bit, but I doubt it. I'm usually quick to dream, and I wasn't dreaming anything, just a break taken from the glare of the world, and my thoughts drifted far enough away so I could get some leave of them.

It seems quieter now—hoisted up on my elbows and squinting in the bright light—with the dogs gone, having calmed the ducks. Something close to peaceful, and I'm wishing it would keep on like that when I hear the first voices of the students coming down the path.

All the science classes are still over here, according to Skell. I remember giving her my initial opinion on that subject, about halfway through the bottle of wine.

"So you science freaks have been keeping this pond hidden over here for yourselves?"

"It's hardly a secret, Jack. Maybe you should try to get out more."

"I've been getting out plenty," I told her. "I can already name two bars I can get into and that was with minimal facial hair." It sounded defensive, and it probably was. I didn't like being on my back foot with Skelly and took my time finding a near perfect skipper among the rocks and pebbles scattered along the embankment. Then I sent it jumping across the water.

"Nice throw," she said. "That's the best one so far."

"Thanks," I said, feeling like I was in position to push my luck, "but don't you think certain humanities scholars could be getting more inspiration from having this near North campus?"

Skell nodded politely, maybe hoping I'd leave it at that.

"Think Frost. Think Walden. Do you suppose Socrates could have come up with a single brilliant idea if he'd spent his days crammed between parking lots?" I could see her struggling with the flaws in my logic, but she still didn't say anything. What else could I do but follow my argument to some demented conclusion. "I say drain it. Drain it and move it to North campus immediately."

The redness in her face, which had been gathering in color, finally flushed in with her freckles. "And I suppose you think scientists have no need of contact with the natural world."

"Precisely," I said. "I'm glad we're in agreement on this." Then I gave a quick salute and plunged sideways into the water. When I came up, I let out a holler and looked over to see Skell laughing.

"You know, I was this close to pushing you in."

"I know," I said, laughing back, "I thought I'd save you the trouble."

Students are descending onto the lawn now. They collect in groups under the trees, by the bridge, chattering and joking, not seeming all that distressed about having classes in July, although it's still early. In the month. In the term. Half the time I'd been enrolled here, it seemed like it was too hot to think straight, but it's hard to remember exactly how things are when you're no longer on the inside of them.

When I asked how she felt about being back in school again, Skell thought for a moment and said, "It's more like a job now." I was straining to find a note of regret or even resignation in her voice, but I just don't think it was there. She was happy with what she was doing. Career-wise, at least, she felt like her life was moving forward.

Myself, I couldn't imagine being confined to another lecture hall. Actually, I had imagined it, a number of years back when I first applied to grad school. At the time, it seemed like a harmless next step, but I'd already soured on the idea even before I'd been accepted. Wanting to believe I'd been built for better than knees cramped behind more desks, debates without end, drinking too much at faculty parties. Presumably,

I would've gotten my degree this past spring and found myself pretty much where I am right now. Wondering what I was going to do next.

That was one benefit of being in school. Rarely having to make up your mind about anything important. Freedom without consequences. And while I was still attracted to the loose energy scattered across campus—all that potential in no hurry to be converted—the students themselves seemed barely aware of it. At least, that was the impression I got from the trio of undergraduates I found myself hanging out with earlier this morning.

The pretty blonde who, between sips of coffee, eagerly described the parts of her anatomy she liked best. Her maybe/maybe not boyfriend. Their third wheel, a bubble-headed girl named Nancy. Personally, I was enjoying the blonde's attempts at being provocative, but Nancy seemed to grow increasingly uncomfortable as her cohort began to elaborate on the topic of female genitalia and was soon pleading with me to take her across the street from the Pancake Palace to the Allsup's for a pack of cigarettes. I suspected she was probably used to these antics by now but agreed to go anyway. Feeling the increasingly easy pull of other people's lives.

When we got outside, Nancy asked if we could take the motorcycle over to get the smokes. She was hoping we could go for a spin around town afterwards, and even if that's what I'd been mostly doing since the late movie let out, I couldn't say I was opposed to the idea.

I was trying not to think about it too much. How it was going to be with the bike all locked up in storage. Buried in the back of Ren's shed, somewhere in between the broken air conditioning unit and his brother-in-law's Camaro engine. Anchored to its center stand, primed to gather dust. Tank full, but the battery disconnected and oil drained out.

Sure, another cruise was fine by me, so I undid the helmet off the back of the bike and handed it to her. Then I pulled the bootlace from around my neck and selected the starter key.

"Is that a necklace?"

"No, it's not a *necklace*."

"Well, what is it?"

"Like a chain, I guess."

"But it's leather."

"I don't know. I just wear it so I don't lose track of my keys." Plus, it gave me a good feeling having them right there against my chest when I wasn't riding, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

"I like it," she said.

"I'm glad. Now, where did you want to go?"

"Anywhere," she told me.

So we hopped on and drove up Central, then shot along Tramway hugging the base of the Sandia Mountains. The sky was starting to brighten. The bike's single headlight fading into the pavement. I looked out over the city, then further west beyond the interstate to the horizon, where I caught a glimpse of something so strange that I had to check the road and look again. But it appeared only more real the second time. Streaks of fog had spread up thick from the Rio Grande Valley, and I swear I was staring at the ocean out there—soft waves and gray water—drifting restless in the distance. You could almost believe that sometime during the night California had finally fallen into the sea, and with such force that it had managed to drag Arizona and a sizable chunk of New Mexico right along with it.

I pulled over to show my riding companion.

"Check this out," I said, "it looks like the Acoma Pueblo's got beachfront property."

The follow-up line on that was supposed to be "at least, until the government figures out a way to make a claim on their land," but unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to share my political views, because Nancy didn't really see what I was talking about in the first place.

"It looks kind of . . . cloudy," she said. And then added, "I guess."

I outlined the picture again with my finger, but she wasn't following it. So I backed off and tried to salvage the stop as best I could. "Anyway,

that's where I'm gonna be headed. All the way to the Pacific."

"Oh my God, to California?" Zero to sixty in about two seconds; I hadn't guessed she'd be the excitable type. "On your bike, that's so cool! Do you think you'll go to Hollywood? No wait, Venice. Venice would be so cool!"

I'd stopped nodding. "I'm actually taking the bus," I told her.

"Oh," she said, "that's kind of sad. Why are you doing that?"

Why? I thought. *Because I don't want the responsibility, right now, for anything besides myself.* "Because the bike needs a rest," I said.

"A rest," she repeated, nodding her head slowly. Then she opened her mouth part way and held it there, like she was trying to figure something out, before she dropped it all the way open and said, "Wait, your bike's not broken, is it? I mean, it's not dangerous?"

I fielded the easier part of the question. "No, I've been taking great care of the bike. It may well be in the best shape of its career."

"It does sound really smooth," she agreed, her confidence see-sawing back. "I don't see why you don't take it. Or at least fly, that'd be better than riding in a grubby old bus."

"Yeah, but sometimes airplanes get you there too quick. I want to feel the miles roll out from under the wheels. Appreciate the distance, you know what I mean?"

She didn't. "So you're trying to save money?"

"The bus isn't that much cheaper."

"I can't believe that. I always thought to myself if I ever really wanted to get out of here—and I was desperate—I could at least afford the bus."

"Well, it isn't that expensive. They have student discounts. I bet you got enough in your purse to buy a ticket right now if you wanted."

"Oh, no, I can't. I mean, I don't have enough money for sure." She held her purse tighter. "And don't you think we ought to be getting back? Because my friends are probably wondering where I am."

It sure doesn't take much for misunderstandings to crop up between people. Of course, I hadn't been suggesting she take off on the next bus

out of town, let alone take off with me. And I definitely didn't have any designs on her purse. All I'd been hoping to point out was that if she wanted to go to California, or anywhere else for that matter, it really wasn't very hard to get there.

I probably shouldn't have pulled the bike over to begin with. Just stayed driving, with that ocean view kept to myself.

On the way back down Central, though, I got to thinking how if Skell had been with me, she would've been sure to see what I was talking about. And even if it meant something to her to have a cushion between herself and the sea—something solid before the land fell off—I still think she would've enjoyed the image. She had a great eye, picking up everything from ladybugs on your jacket, to exit signs on the freeway. Combined with my kind of kaleidoscopic way of looking at the world, we'd managed to get around well.

It's hard to believe we had dinner together last night—that memory already feels like a relic from that same bygone era of Sunday wine—with her telling me she was finished with her lesson plan mockups as I was heading out the door. It was pretty clear she was up for going out, but I just couldn't handle running through the whole Last Night Together routine, so I said goodbye after dinner. Then stayed out, carousing around like I had nowhere to go.

After dropping Nancy back off with her friends, I headed over to the Frontier for yet another cup of coffee. Frontier was one of the brighter stars in the constellation of all-night restaurants that kept the city going after the early close of the bars, that city being Albuquerque, New Mexico, a.k.a., the Double Q. Skell came up with the name our sophomore year in retaliation to the lame "Burquee" tag that was being bandied about. Albuquerque wasn't a cute town, she said, and besides, how many places could claim a single Q in their name, let alone two. You just couldn't take things like that for granted.

In addition to having a handy nickname, Albuquerque also possessed a kind of low attitude cool, although, I have to admit, I hadn't been completely taken with the idea of moving back to our college town. It was right after Thanksgiving when Skell first brought it up. We'd been living at a celebrity chef's ranch north of Santa Fe, taking care of an arkful of animals, performing medium to light duties in exchange for trailer housing and a small monthly stipend. Skell had more of the responsibility with me still working twenty-four-hour shifts in town, and she'd had a lot of time to think. After a long stint in landscaping, she was ready to be having a more direct impact on people. She wanted to teach.

I admired her for it. Knew she'd be just the kind of teacher you'd want popping up on your class schedule. So I put aside any misgivings I might have had when she homed in on the graduate program at UNM. They offered the fastest accreditation in the state—you were out in the field your first year—and that meant taking courses in the summer. It all sounded reasonable, except I hadn't planned on having unemployed myself by the time we moved in.

It was just supposed to have been a pivot—from city firefighter to wildland firefighter. There shouldn't have been any looking back. Maybe I read too much of a sign into that little brush blaze up at the ranch, but there'd been a simple satisfaction in knowing we'd been able to put it out with boots, shovels, dirt. A feeling I rarely got riding around on the engine in town, where the lack of action had been bothering me for a while. The idea about switching got stuck in my head, and once that happened, it was only a matter of time before I did something about it.

Ren had been more cautious about the change, but, still, he'd made a call for me. To his cousin, Tito, who headed a crew out of Cimarron. It should have been a lock, but right after I got out there, one of the guys who'd retired at the end of the previous season changed his mind and decided to come back. My connection had no business overriding the seniority and it didn't. I was able to test for and get my red card while

I was there, but that just continued to sit in my wallet doing nothing. We were still under the spell of an El Niño, and the snowiest winter in years had turned into one of the wettest springs, but with no one believing the rain around here, I kept hearing the same thing: *You'll be good with that red card, bro. Just wait till the middle of the summer, the fires'll get going.* It wasn't an ideal position to be in, rooting for drought in a part of the country that suffered far too many of them, and at a certain point, I stopped not only believing the job was going to happen, but even wanting it to.

Until then, I'd done my best to be patient. Dutifully checking the messages at the end of every day to see if one of the crews I'd been waitlisted with had called me up. I passed the time gathering futile information online, with library books, dollar movies at the San Mateo 8, crossword puzzles, and games of Scrabble with Skell. I took the bike cruising, north to Madrid, east to Santa Rosa, south to Carlsbad and White Sands. I changed the oil, polished the frame, swapped out the windjammer for a bigger one, installed new saddle bags, and took it in to Bobby J's for a full tune up. After getting the bill on that, I decided to cool it on the expenditures. The balance from my former PERA account was only heading in one direction, and with no word yet from the Forest Service, I considered doing a little part-time work to tide me over. I made a couple of inquiries, but didn't follow up, thinking I could be called out any day.

Finally, I succumbed to the "easy money" ads on the back page of the *Alibi*. I sold my blood, my plasma, and was seriously contemplating the triple by offering up my sperm, but Skell put the kibosh on that idea real quick. "If you're selling it to anyone, you're selling it to me" was her first response. I was waiting for her to lighten up about it, and eventually, seeing my reaction, she did. "I'll pay double whatever the going rate is," she smiled, "and I won't make you use a cup." All I could think was, *You don't want my DNA; the kid'll probably get panicked after a few months in the same womb and need to relocate somewhere else.*

For years, the more time Skelly and I spent together, the better things were between us. The progression was nearly effortless. With hanging out at school becoming hooking up at school becoming hooking up after school had ended. Of course, we were both going to stay in New Mexico, of course she'd be spending the night occasionally, regularly, getting her own key. The timing always seemed right. And I never felt crowded in.

Admittedly, some of that had to do with her allowing me to pursue other relationships along the way, but I really don't think that explained everything. The first woman I'd taken up with had infuriated her, but by the time I'd bailed on the second, Skell had become, in many ways, more clearheaded about my prospects than I was. With me still thinking every time this was going to be The One, and her kicking back and waiting for the inevitable break-up. Then it would be just Skelly and me again, stronger than ever.

When we moved out to the ranch, I'm not sure either of us fully realized what we were signing up for. Our nearest neighbors were monks, but with their monastery five miles upriver and their habits unsurprisingly reclusive, we rarely saw them. Living in relative isolation offered us a new kind of intimacy, and at first we embraced it. We felt at home in each other's arms at the end of the day. Took pleasure in the projects we'd seen through. But as our friendship continued to deepen, it didn't seem like there was enough else to accompany it. It was difficult to ignore the feeling that we were roommates—with benefits, sure—but roommates nonetheless.

By spring, it was clear something was missing.

I wonder what ducks think about the whole thing, relationships and the rest. One of them has waddled over by my feet and seems to be carrying on about something. If she does have an agenda, I can't quite make it out. It's possible she wants to be fed, or that she wants me to move out of her way. The longer she goes on quacking, though, the more I feel

like I'm getting a reprimand. I've heard that ducks mate for life, and she might well have some strongly held views on the subject. Skelly would know about it, I'm sure. She's the one with the biology degree.

When we were packing up the trailer, I tried to be casual when I mentioned that I wanted to start seeing other people again. It had worked so well before, hadn't it? No, I didn't have anyone in particular in mind, but we were going back to the city, and even if it was a small one, I felt like we both ought to have the opportunity to explore some more. "Especially you," I said. "Think of all the time you'll be spending alone when I get called up."

Skell was folding a pile of clothes, and she waited until she'd finished before speaking. "It's been a while since we've done anything like this, so let me remind you what I've said in the past. I want you to be the most important person in my life, Jack. If you think we should see other people again, then I need to know I'd still be the most important person in yours."

The fact was, there hadn't been anyone who'd had a more positive impact on my existence than Skelly. She brought out the best in me and made it seem like the best was normal. She knew things about me that other people didn't, had seen more of my faults, and still wanted me around. She was upbeat, savvy, and easy to wake up next to in the morning. I couldn't imagine anyone taking her place and I told her that.

So we arrived back in the Double Q with freedom to spare. I never did anything with it besides flirt around, but still, it wasn't enough. With my job prospects dimming, the town was closing in around me, Skell was becoming more and more a part of the town, and I honestly couldn't tell where the one ended and the other began, because the tension was coming from inside. Trying to keep down the feeling that I was getting off track. But damn it, if I could name even one time in my life when I'd been able to change course after suspecting a wrong turn.

When I told Skell that I needed to get out of town, at least for a little while, she didn't seem all that surprised. She'd watched me get

increasingly irritable in the flat, had sympathized with my frustration without giving in to it. We were still making each other smile every day, but it was getting harder, and I couldn't see waiting around for that to disappear.

Skelly accepted my leaving the way she'd accepted so many other things, but the question was, where was the limit?

I couldn't figure it out.

Maybe she thought I had something to get out of my system, one final childish kick before I would grow up and come back to her. Or maybe her love for me was so strong that she was prepared to support me no matter what, willing to let me go even if that meant I might stay gone. Either way, she'd offered to drop me at the bus station.

RODE

12:04

Rain falls hard from the night sky but I'm not getting wet, under the ledge of this building. There's room enough to move. To pace, along the narrow strip of sidewalk covered by the overhang. But when the wind blows, pelting the drops toward me, I stop. Press myself up against the building.

I've got my back to the wall. I've got some change in my pocket. There's a payphone not far from here—at least there used to be, I haven't been by the park in a while—and as soon as the rain lets up, I'll take a walk in that direction. Meanwhile, the only thing crossing the intersection of 17th and Church is the cabled wire strung out above it.

I stare at the traffic signals. Not knowing when they're about to turn. It's better not to know . . . the minor suspense . . . but before long the timing's become as predictable as the colors, running over and over empty streets that can't tell the difference between coming and going.

Finally, a vehicle approaches from 17th. The light's just gone red, and the car comes to a stop. I can see the shadowed figure of the driver inside. Lean up to the windshield. Slouch. Lean up to the windshield again. The light's still red. No traffic. The wipers are shifting back and forth.

"What are you waiting for?" I want to yell. "Just go."

The driver glances to the side like he's somehow heard me. Maybe he sees me, I don't know, but when the light turns he floors it. The sound of wheels spinning wet pavement slashes through the rain, skidding the car a few feet into the intersection before the treads get a proper grip, pulling it away clean.

There's more room for error in a car, that's for sure. That same move on a motorcycle and it wouldn't take much to find yourself spilled over onto scrapes or a busted leg.

No, it'd be a crappy time to be out on a bike.

Not like that makes me feel a whole lot better about where mine is tonight. Over at City Cycle, but it might as well be a thousand miles from here.