



THE UGLY DUCKLING

Once upon a time, there was a duck who lived on a little island in the middle of a lake surrounded by tall poplar trees. Many duck families lived on the lake, as well as swans, frogs, and fish.

The duck was very excited to have her own little family, and she liked to imagine herself swimming proudly around the lake with a bunch of little ducklings trailing behind her. She sat on her eggs and waited anxiously for them to hatch. Soon, she heard a knocking sound from inside the eggs, and one by one, the eggs started cracking and tiny beaks started to push themselves out into the world. Mama Duck cheered them on with loud, excited quacking. Six eggs hatched and the ducklings were waddling back and forth, fluffy and yellow like tiny little shining suns. Each one was prettier than the next! They were very impatient and curious to see what was beyond the reeds, but Mama Duck reigned them in with her beak. There was one egg left, and she was waiting nervously for it to hatch. It was somewhat larger than the other six, and the duckling didn't seem to want to come out. After a while, she heard knocking sounds coming from inside the eggs. First, the egg cracked a little bit, and then it opened as another head forced its way out. This head was bigger than the others, and grey like ashes. The duckling tumbled out of his egg and they saw

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that he was chubby, clumsy and stodgy, and had no trace of yellow feathers. As soon as the other ducklings learned to speak, they started to mock their grey brother. They told him he was ugly and strange. Mama Duck just sighed and hoped her ugly duckling would eventually turn yellow and look like the others. When old Mrs. Goose swam by, she gabbled loudly, "What pretty ducklings! Except that last one, he's so ugly and clumsy! You should hide him, Mrs. Duck." "No way! I don't care if he's grey; he's mine! Someday he'll be pretty," Mama Duck said.

The duckling sighed sadly and walked toward the others with his head bent. He was used to this treatment.

Every time they crossed the yard, all the animals laughed at the duckling, poking him and teasing him. One day, the duckling couldn't stand it any longer, so he stayed behind and hid in the bushes by the lake. He wanted to be alone. He was very upset about being so ugly. Every time he looked at his reflection in the lake, he saw a grey, chubby, ugly duck. He walked sadly along the lake, when suddenly he came across a family of wild ducks.

When the duckling saw that they were as grey as he was, he asked to join them. They didn't think he was ugly, and they welcomed him. He became friends with them, and they started to swim around and take little trips on the lake together. Then, one day, the wild ducks took off for a long flight to the south. The sky wasn't as sunny anymore and the leaves were slowly disappearing and floating about through the air. Every day the wind grew stronger. The duckling didn't dare fly so far, and so he stayed by the lake with the other animals. He missed his friends, and he started to feel ugly and misunderstood again.

The days grew colder and rainier. One day the rain was slashing down on the feeble shelter the duckling had built for himself. He didn't feel like going back to the yard, because he didn't want to hear more teasing and insults from the mean animals outside. Soon, a cruel winter came. Snow swirled through the air. The wind was cold and the ugly duckling shivered all over. He snuggled up in the bushes and it felt like he would freeze when, suddenly, a farmer walked by. He saw the stiff little duckling on the ground, so he picked him up, wrapped him

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in a blanket and took him home. The farmer gave him food and water and the children started playing with him. It was warm by the oven and the duckling felt alive again! Then, one of the children proposed that they play a hunting game. The duckling got so scared that he ran away, escaping through an open window in the bedroom.

It was freezing cold outside and the snow was so deep he almost couldn't walk. He hid in a cave nearby filled with whistling bats.

After a while, the sun started shining a little more every day and nature began waking up again. The ugly duckling didn't spend all his time in a cave anymore, and he started to search outside for food.

One day, he was swimming on a lake and met a family of swans. They were beautiful, with long white necks, and they swam gracefully in a group. "They're going to laugh at me for being ugly," the duckling thought, and started to swim away.

"Hey, why don't you swim with us?" one of the swans called out to the duckling. "We'd be glad to accept you."

The duckling couldn't believe his ears. "Why do you want to be friends with me?" he asked, suspicious. "Are you going to laugh at me for being ugly? I'd rather be alone."

"You're not ugly! Look at your reflection," the swan said.

The duckling hesitated and then looked at the water. He couldn't believe his own eyes. He wasn't an ugly grey duckling anymore - he was a beautiful white swan! Excited, he joined the other swans and swam with them toward the shore, where a group of children were playing. One of them looked at the swans and shouted, "Look, look! There's a new swan on the lake! And it might be the prettiest of them all!"

The young swan swam proudly on the lake, feeling like the happiest bird in the world. And from that moment on, whenever he saw a young animal who didn't fit in, he made sure to be kind and tell them that they, too, were special.