

GOLDEN GEESE

Thomas March

From the window they could see the fish market and the traffic on the bridge. He'd joined her there when he walked into her office as bidden, and he pressed his forehead to the glass, alongside hers. It was the thing to do, to let her observe everything but what she'd brought him there to observe, until she was ready to come out and say it.

"Don't they look cute," she said, "all of those fish men unloading the boats? The fish look like trays of silver from up here, don't they?"

When she turned her head for his reaction, he stifled his first thought and simply nodded, tossing in arched eyebrows and a firm mouth just in case. Ever since the interview, when he'd confessed to being from the same backwater place—a fact he'd learned by looking up her bio in the company literature—she'd taken an interest in him. It must have been weariness from four interviews in two days that brought on the lapse, he reasoned. He'd simply run out of conversation. And she'd seemed to be looking for a better reason to like him. He was still attractive enough that he never noticed it except in the face of unwanted, or in this case only half-wanted, attentions.

He'd enjoyed it, too, and everything that followed, for its own sake and not really for hers—especially when she seemed shocked, or impressed, when he didn't show the slightest trace of an accent. But, then, neither did she, not usually.

"You know, as high up as we are it would still stink if you opened that window, even a crack. Then you'd see just how charming the whole scene is." She always seemed to liven when he became curmudgeonly. He had come across this fact quite by accident one day, when he had failed to stifle himself and her eyes had widened and she'd taken the conversation so much farther than it had been before.

"Oh, you're so fussy," she said, slapping playfully at his elbow.

“Why don’t you ever show your sense of humor around the office, not even when we’re in private?” She walked back to her desk and leaned against an empty corner. “Don’t you ever look out your window and just watch, sometimes?”

He didn’t suspect it was a trick question. They were well past that, on the one hand, and not quite there, on the other. “No. I’m usually too busy keeping an eye on things *inside*.”

She laughed and slapped at the air in his direction. “Oh, I know. You have to, or those girls would do nothing but gossip all day long.”

He took his cue from her staring silence and walked to the door, and as he closed it he watched them out there, mumbling to each other out of the corners of their mouths as they typed, keeping as quiet as they could so that they could hear whatever happened in her office. There were around twenty of them, more or less, a different number every week, always someone new, and always someone just about to be gone. He wished there were some way to tell them, without provoking an official complaint that would waste too much of his time, that they wore too much perfume, too much *bad* perfume. It was not only unpleasant but, he suspected, the cause of the headaches he’d been getting ever since this started.

He took his usual place in the chair in front of her desk.

She leaned forward and smiled at him over her desk clock, which ticked like a metronome. Each side bore a clock face, with the slogan “Time wastes” engraved across the bottom of the stand. At least it didn’t say “Time’s a wastin’!” he thought, but that was what always came to mind when he saw it under her chin. It was an inescapable association. He could still hear the typing from behind the closed door, and that coupled with the ticking made him squirm in the chair. He stopped as soon as he noticed it, though, because she was smiling, and that might be an inescapable association, too.

She wasn’t looking at him after all, but at the clock. After a few seconds of staring and smiling, she said, as if it had just occurred to her, “I think we should order a big fat goose this Christmas from that Jewish butcher shop down the block.”

“They call it kosher, not Jewish. And it’s an Italian butcher shop, besides. Anyway, that’s a lot of goose for just the two of us.” When she didn’t say anything, he continued, “I guess what we don’t eat we could send down to the garbage for the bums to pick through.”

“You’re right—I hate to waste it. But you told me you used to pick at the same bird for a week when you wa— when you *were* a kid.

And I really had my heart set on having goose this year. ‘Christmas goose’—it’ll be a tradition again.”

That was just it. They’d been going over this for weeks, ever since the plan to stay in the city for the holidays had been settled—she’d been especially kind the day he came up with the perfect excuse to give their families for not flying (and then driving and driving) home. And at every mention of the idea, he saw his mother plucking goose feathers all afternoon on Christmas Eve. Turkey wasn’t any better. And why not ham? There had never been any pigs at home. “Well, I don’t like it that way now. I don’t *have* to like it that way now.” He realized then that he was pouting and that she had noticed. So he sat up straight and tapped his fingers against the armrest in happy rhythms, hoping to show that he got the joke, or that he was willing to move on, if it wasn’t one.

“Fair ’nough.” She was pretending to mock—or was she slipping back into?—the old accent. She laughed because she wasn’t sure and because it was funny when there were only the two of them to hear it. But she was grateful that he’d closed the door.

While she stared at the clock again, he smiled thinly and smoothed the creases of his pants, still waiting for whatever it was. He couldn’t stand her staring pauses. But even after all this time, he wasn’t certain whether she was easily distracted or clumsily crafty. If he hadn’t pouted, he thought, she might have come to the point by now. He knew she hated to make him angry; she made a point of saying it every time he raised his voice. And then, “you remind me of back home,” she’d add, “when you get mad. You use the same swears as my daddy, and probably your daddy, too.”

He saw the order form for the employee Christmas gifts on her desk. “Say, order an extra cheese and sausage gift box, would you? I have no idea what to send my father this year. The girls out there seemed happy with it last year, didn’t they? It’s cheap, but at least I know he’ll like it.”

She glanced down at the form and shrugged before moving it out of his sight. “You know, they swear too much,” she said, tilting her head to one side and smiling, the way she did whenever she wanted something, even here.

“I know,” he said, leaning forward and smiling conspiratorially, hoping to head off whatever was coming. “If only they’d stop saying ‘Fuck!’ ‘Fuck!’ ‘Fuck!’” He lowered his head so that in order to look into his face, she’d have to pass by the clock face first.

But she wasn’t having it. “But don’t you think that if they made

fewer mistakes, they'd have less of a reason to swear?" She raised her eyebrows now, her head tilted at that same angle, speaking through the same thin smile. He leaned back again and looked out the window, but all he could see now was the building across the street. "And we might even be able to hire fewer of them to finish the same work. I suspect it's all in their plan, you know, to work slowly but with minimal competence, in order to force us to hire more of their friends. Make a note never to hire two with the same last name. Fucking wetbacks."

"But they're mostly from Puerto Rico, I assume, and this isn't Texas or California."

"What's the difference? Wet from a river, wet from a boat." Her neck went rigid as her head shot upright again. The smile vanished, and her lips moved almost imperceptibly, as she searched for and tried out the next words.

"It doesn't matter." He knew where they were now. "It doesn't matter. I know what you mean."

She relaxed into her chair, and the smile crept back again. "I know you do. Now open the door, would you? Just a crack so that I can see out. They've gone unsupervised too long. And I don't need them murmuring about closed doors."

He walked to the door and pulled it open just a few inches. "You shouldn't worry about their gossiping. What do you care what they think of you? Or me?"

"It's not that," she said, pointing to his chair. She waited until he sat down again before continuing. "The more they talk, the less they work."

"I suppose you're right."

"Yes." She was staring at the clock, a little too late for him. He could see that her eyes were following the sweep of the second hand, as usual. He could never determine whether she were entranced by this or clumsily timing herself. It would be like her, he knew, to have read and taken religiously to heart some suggestion in a management book as to the appropriate length of the powerful pause. Surely, there were prescribed pauses for every circumstance—the planting of discomfort, the emphasis of important words. She was a quick, if not very subtle, study.

He wasn't sure whether he could leave. There was more to it, or she'd have sent him out the door instead of just asking him to open it. She started suddenly, her eyes narrow, listening. "Do you hear

that? It's 'puta' this, and 'puta' that." She shuddered. "I don't even know what that means. But it *sounds* nasty."

"'Puta'—that's 'whore,' ain't—*isn't*—it?" He smiled, ready in case she got the joke. But she was still looking through the door. He chuckled to himself, and she turned back to him, frowning.

"What's so funny about that? Why would they be calling each other 'whore'?"

"I don't know. What are they doing?"

"Working like a hive full. That's what doesn't make any sense."

"Hmmm. I haven't any idea."

She leaned back in her chair and stared at the ceiling, looking at him now and again from the corner of her eye, to see whether he was understanding her or looking out the window again. "You know, those Puerto Rican boys play stick ball every damned day in front of the building. And it's a *nice* neighborhood. I thought for sure that they'd stop when it got cold outside, but they're out there every day, in the snow and ice. They're going to hurt somebody, make somebody fall down, I just know it. It scares me to death, absolutely to death, when I have to walk through them and interrupt their game. They're looking at me, I just know it—yes, saying things like...*puta* underneath their breath at me. I didn't realize it before, but I'm *sure* that's what I've heard them say. Now, how else am I supposed to get home, by helicopter? I get so afraid I want to call the police—that hard rubber ball they use just bounces and bounces all over the place so fast, hitting the buildings, hitting the windows, knocking against the garbage cans. They're going to put my eye out one day, I just know it. Or worse."

Here it was, a little late in coming. He stifled the sigh and was out the door before she finished. He could still hear her as he walked over to the girl's desk and whispered something over her shoulder. She would do—she *had* been warned before. They'd spoken privately a few weeks before, in his office. He couldn't remember what the conversation had been about, but they were all the same. He would accuse, and they would offer excuses. If they were new, they would promise to do better.

Behind the closed door again, he sat on the corner of the desk and motioned the girl into the chair.

"I'll make this quick, not because it's not important but because what I have to say is fairly simple. We spoke a few weeks ago, you and I, about the number of errors that have been showing up in the

spreadsheets you've submitted to us. Now, those figures are correct when we give them to you. You know that. It's a simple matter of putting things in their proper places."

He noticed that she looked at him almost without blinking, her head erect and her lips tight. She wasn't defiant—that would have been easy to handle. It was something else that he wasn't used to seeing, not behind this door.

"I don't know how you expect to keep a job. It's Christmas time, I know. But I want you to think about that. Christmas time is just another paycheck, down in the payroll office. I want you to think about that, too."

She didn't say anything. When it became obvious that he wasn't going to say any more, she stood up, nodded at the woman behind the desk and walked to the door.

"This is my last day," she said, closing the door behind her.

He didn't know what to say, as he watched the girl go. It had never gone so well, he thought. Perhaps he was getting better.

She walked out from behind the desk and stood in front of him, smiling as widely as she ever did. She pulled him to his feet and kissed his face, in all the same places.

"We can get the biggest goose you want," she said, "whenever you want it. And if you want more goose the next day, we'll just go buy another one."

Just like every other payday afternoon.

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