

The Mallards of St. Catherine

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STEWART CAME FROM A TOWN where the water was abundant but never clean. Lillian came from a town where there wasn't enough water to keep the wildfires at bay.

Every Sunday morning they'd meet at a lone, wooden bench by the secluded pond at St. Catherine Trail. In the middle of the pond sprouted a fountain. On those hot days, the wind-blown mist from the glorious spout would make them feel reborn again. A set of weeping willow trees stretched over the east side of the pond, their leaves always on the verge of taking a dip. Wildflowers painted the perimeter, and sometimes, Stewart and Lillian were lucky enough to see a monarch butterfly flutter by.

A flock of mallard ducks made the pond their refuge in the warmer months. It was a frenzy of wet feathers, powerful splashes, enthusiastic quacks, and deep dives. Stewart and Lillian became so familiar with the mallards that they could point out the unique quirks of each one. There was the one with the white spot on its breast that looked like a cloud. There was the one that hopped instead of waddled. And there was the one that quacked in a remarkably deep pitch that always made Stewart and Lillian laugh.

When they sat on the bench, time seemed to halt and zip by in a flash all at once. Some days no words were needed, and other days all the words were needed. They shared what they

wanted to share and left out what they wanted to leave out. Sometimes they'd squint their eyes and see a pair of turtles poke their heads out from the pond and greet the sunshine.

Stewart and Lillian thought about carving their initials into the bench, but they ultimately concluded that it would be too cliché. They never exchanged phone numbers for fear it would take away the magic of their time at their sacred place.

Before the winter showed its harsh might, the mallards would disappear. Stewart and Lillian would say their good-byes, retreat from the cold, and dream of meeting at the pond once again.

As soon as the snow cleared and the ground thawed, they'd be back sitting on their beloved bench together. Shortly after, the mallards would return. Stewart and Lillian always wondered how the mallards found their way back to the same little pond after being so far away for so many moons.

One sunny March day, Stewart showed up to the bench, his face glowing with a peaceful smile. But Lillian wasn't there. He showed up the next Sunday, but she wasn't there. April, May, June, July, August, September, and October passed, and she wasn't there.

After the winter, Stewart came back to look for Lillian every Sunday. Years slipped by. The mallards returned every spring. And the weeping willows wept a little more. ❄️