



- PHOTO BY AMY LINN
- *Goosey in his new home.*

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Good for the Gander

A stray bird may come to your door. Open it.

By Amy Linn

The winter I was saved by a goose, the cold swept in like a bad houseguest. The temperature hit 20-below after Thanksgiving and refused to budge. I spent my days wearing two pairs of socks and snow boots, inside the house.

My fiancé, Don, tried to cheer me up by lighting a roaring blaze in the fireplace one night. I forgot to open the flue, the result being such excessive amounts of billowing that the

smoke alarms went off, the dog peed in terror, we had to open all the doors and windows to air out the house, and I thought I'd never be warm again.

And so it was that I drove to the Missoula YMCA to jog and cycle myself into oblivion. I pulled into the parking lot and saw a large lump of something—a bag?—on the pavement. It was gray, barely visible. As my headlights illuminated the mass, I saw an orange beak.

It was a goose.

I parked and ran to the animal, wanting to move it so it wouldn't get run over. But the goose—a male, I'd find out—just stared at me, immobile.

"There's a goose in the parking lot," I told the two co-ed receptionists, after running inside for help.

"I called animal control," the young woman lamented. "They told me they don't really do geese."

The guy, a lanky teen, offered to help me herd the bird to the lawn, and we went warily into the cold. Geese, we knew, could bite hard.

The goose rose from his squat and hissed until we backed off and tried again. After repeating this dance one too many times, the teen swatted at the bird with his cap, nearly touching its neck, and the reluctant animal pigeon-toed to the grass.

I stayed alone with the goose for a while. Then I went to the reception desk and called the police and animal control, and tried to reach the only bird expert I could think of, Kate Davis, the founder of Raptors of the Rockies. No luck.

I checked on the bird's hunched form in the grass before leaving.

"Goodbye, goose," I told him. He hissed at me, and I drove away.

Early Sunday morning a week later, as I lay in bed wanting to stay there, Don came to roust me.

"Your goose is here," Don called out.

It was a rotten attempt at humor. He knew I was worried about the bird, who'd disappeared and probably died after the night at the Y. I looked outside, aggravated.

And there was the goose waddling up the front walk. I lived more than a mile from the Y, and somehow the bird had found me, walked to my house, and nearly made it to the front door.

There was blood on his beak from a scrape he'd been in. He stood on one leg, eyes lidded. I ran to the kitchen to drum up something to help him, but he refused my offer of

bread. Then I grabbed my biggest cooking pots, filled them with water, and laid them around him.

He drank, and drank, and clanged happily at the metal.

Bird expert Erick Greene, a University of Montana biology professor, arrived after I got his phone number from a friend. Maybe the goose was a pet that someone abandoned at the Bancroft Street duck pond, Greene theorized.

Kate Davis arrived with similar speed. She sized up the bird—he was still as a stump. He could die in 24 hours, Davis said.

Goosey, as we began to call him, had other plans. He nested in my garage on a raggedy blanket I gave him, covered it with goose turds, and wagged his tail when I brought him food. He seemed incapable of flying, so after a week I moved him to the fenced backyard.

Since stores don't sell plastic kiddie pools in winter, I used plastic sleds for his water. My daughter and I broke the ice out of them in the morning and refreshed them often. The goose greeted me with happy honks, nibbled at my feet and knees, and exhibited friendliness that verged on the alarming. One day he climbed on one of my daughter's 11-year-old friends and sat on her head.

A Google search revealed that Goosey was probably a Graylag, the bird used by Konrad Lorenz for imprinting studies. He spent the days nestled in the yard under the dining room window, where I could see him while I worked. I loved him, but knew I couldn't keep him.

My first newspaper ad—"Found: Gray goose, friendly, a pet?"—got no responses. The next ad did, for the wrong reasons. "To Give Away: Pet goose, to good home only," provoked a flurry of calls from Grizzly Adams types who seemed to want the goose cooked.

After consults with Davis, I decided on a different course: As soon as spring arrived I would fulfill my "Born Free" fantasies and return the goose to the wild, or at least to the duck pond. Davis offered to help.

On Goosey's big day, Davis calmly walked up to him, snatched him by the neck and hugged him to her chest, beak-forward. He hardly struggled except to nibble her hair. She climbed in the front of my Subaru with the goose in her lap, the bird looking straight ahead like a dignitary. We had officially become a Disney movie.

We deposited the goose on golden stubs of grass by the water. I told myself not to look back at him as we trudged to the car, but of course I did. The goose was following us like an abandoned kid.

Davis never complained when I told her I couldn't leave him after all. She grabbed him and hugged him again, and as we drove back to my house, I felt a wave of fondness for life.

I placed the last ad a few weeks later: "To give away: beautiful, friendly, pet gray goose, to good home with pond/river." Sandy's gentle voice was instantly the one I wanted to hear. She lived on a farm by a creek in Frenchtown and had a white female goose that was depressed because her mate had died. Was my goose a male, she wondered?

I found Sandy's farm off a dirt road along a shaded stream. She was as kind as her voice. I unloaded the goose, and watched him explore for a while. He did not follow me back to the car.

When I visited a month later, he was a new bird, with a pretty new goose wife. When I walked toward him he hissed ferociously. He didn't seem to recognize me, or if he did, he was too happy to care.

Was it coincidence that the bird found me? I wondered later. Why did strays wind up on certain doorsteps, and why was rescuing them so gratifying? For reasons I'll never know, the goose chose me. He showed me that forces in the world are still magic, that invisible threads tie us to wild things that in turn tie us to wonderment. If I was patient, the goose seemed to say, something might waddle up to my doorstep in the middle of winter. The world would bring good things. Gray, and beautiful.