Ducksology

Back on the job was just fine, according to J., who had been out for a while with a nasty cold.

But his return was exquisitely, if accidentally, timed with the first morning of the invasion of the hunting ducks: Mallards with glinting green flanks moved in silently between the stacks, feral Muscovies circled above, sights poised for the perfect landing spot, white-feathered racers, a single black-billed Barrow's goldeneye glided around the corner of "South America A - D", a gang of ruddy Jamaican Bays in their summer plumage went on cigarette break in the bathrooms--a swarm of Fulvous Whistling Ducks took turns dive-bombing in the elevator shafts. All day long they swarmed the storeroom, second floor, third floor stacks, way up to the eighth floor storage and the mailroom, where they were then snatched up, crated up and shipped out.

As the weeks went on, J. did not seem to be bothered by this. Like car alarms, the steady 'wak 'wak, 'wak 'wak became customary after a while (—You got used to it, he said.) It was better than car alarms--rather comforting, in fact, and far better than the infuriating moans of the pigeons in the stairwells at home. Generally speaking, none of the other employees seemed to mind either, though Roget, the guy in Acquisitions with a silver quill through his septum claimed that the noise made him queasy. It was Alice who pointed out that the real problem was not noise but hygiene and that these ducky, ducky, duckies could come barging in here with their blunderbusses and attack weapons all they wanted but they still got you know what doo-doo all over their regulation spats. Not to mention the slick spot right in front of the elevators. Soon, she argued, the customers were going to complain about the water sloshed all over the floors of the washrooms--if someone didn't slip on the floor and seriously hurt themselves first.

Then Horace, the mail clerk, complained that he needed some help up there. Orders were piling up, he said, and boxing up the birds was not as easy as filling up an order for, say, the 1911 *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

What do you mean. 'boxing up ducks'? What the hell are you doing up there? The Strand is a *bookstore*, not a slaughterhouse! Alice exploded, as if she, too, had not noticed what was really going on.

Well, I keep getting calls for our special ducks—you know, celebrate the holidays with a good book and Roast Stranded Duck!

Oh God. That meant we had to do something. After the day's receipts had been tallied up, after Hernan the cleaning guy had swept the last aisle and, once more, wiped away the spots in front of the elevators, we convened. Roget begged and pleaded not to be included, but Alice gave him a withering glance and called him a Wuss! to his face which sent his quill a-quiver. Ready, Everyone? she said, handing out soft cotton surgical masks. She fitted hers over her mouth, hooked the strings over her ears and took the lead.

We marched over to the elevators where only one small greenish blob had landed in spite of Hernan, the cleaning guy's, Herculean efforts. Careful! warned Alice, sounding slightly muffled behind her mask. Ummm, we nodded. J. pushed the up button and we watched the lights over the two lifts—8, 9, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2—It's here, he said. We crowded in and after he pressed for 8 the doors slid shut with an odd wak! wak! One of 'em must be on top of the thing, Roget mumbled, looking pale as a whirrrrr and a flutter ensued. What do they do when we get to the top floor?

Oh, they wait till it goes down again and then fly up—up and down, rrrreeeeet, dive, whirl, nosedive until someone pushes the button again. Then they hitch a ride and start all over, said Horace, who was not very happy about the group inspection that was about to begin.

Duck-ologist! said Gary, of Non-fiction, normally taciturn in the extreme. We reached 8 and the doors slid open, this time to a chorus of wak-wak-waks—Shall we give 'em a ride? he asked and without asking pressed the down button behind us. Off, presumably, they went. We, on the other hand, had to deal with the top floor. Horace leapt to meet us when we entered the mail room. He made no bones about wanting us out of there in a hurry and clearly was trying to steer us away from anything untoward.

Packaging here, he said, pointing to several stacks of cardboard boxes of different sizes, as yet unassembled. We tape em up here, take newspaper from there and fold them into the boxes, then we take the books—he gestured towards several piles—fold more newspaper around them, especially if they only go in mailers—you, know, one or two, and then we take them over here to where Rosie our new girl weights them, stamps em 'books' and then piles them in the cart to take to the Post Of—

Come on, Man, interrupted Roget. Show us the slaughterhouse.

We do not *slaughter* ducks. They would leave immediately if they thought we were merely offing them, and that that's the only reason we put up with them. You asked, and he signaled us to follow him through a door to a room at the back. Inside was a long table at the end of which sat three elderly Muscovies, one oddly bespeckled with wire-rimmed glasses. A basket to one side of them contained what looked to be about a dozen to a dozen and a half eggs and, suspended above that, a makeshift heat lamp. For the most part, the room was scrupulously and uncharacteristically clean. Horace pushed his own horn rimmed glasses down his nose and stared at Roget. We *cull.* Or, rather, *they* cull. For every egg that hatches, one must go. It is their way.

They keep warning us— Wak!, wak!—

Horace's voice trailed off...