

Duck, Duck, Death

Inspired by "Duckie" by [PrismoTheSmoke](#)



When Randen first started his career as an artist-murderer, he never thought that his mother would be the inspiration for what would make him so well known. After all, he already had all the markers of a serial killer--white, male, heterosexual, coming from a middle-class background and about average smarts in most things but particularly good at smiling at the right time and appearing innocent of even the smallest violent action--but struggled to figure out what he could do to make a difference. So, one night at Mom's home (he lived at home with his mother at the time), as he sat at the kitchen table, unkempt hair coiling around his fingers, nine hundred ninety-two yards into his thousand-yard stare, Mom asked him what was bothering him so much.

"Nothing," he said, though in the way that he instantly knew she didn't believe him. Mothers always knew this sort of thing, he'd heard. He slumped into the chair, his black jeans tight enough to pinch his crotch and make him adjust his posture. Then he flopped back, his Converse shoes kicking against the forest of dinner chair legs.

"That's not true," she said, falling into his prediction just as he knew she would. Mom still limped, though the car accident was nearly eight years over by now, angling herself to sit down on the immaculately clean kitchen table. It hurt her to do it, but a dirty kitchen was unconscionable--a belief that she'd tried (and failed) to inculcate in her son. She leaned forward, pianoing her lacquered fingernails on the wooden tabletop. He glanced up, against his will but unable to avoid the draw that sound had on him, and met her gaze. "Tell me what's wrong."

He heaved a sigh and shoved his hands into the front pocket of his pullover hoodie. There, the familiar, cold contours of his best friend greeted his eager fingers. He fondled the nub-of-a-button, but didn't press it, lest he accidentally cut himself. The silence stretched like a rubber band, at last passing the point of no return and breaking--

in this case, with an actual snap. His mother's fingers gave that dry, insistent snap that was as familiar as the tapping of her fingernails on the dinner table. "Randen. Tell me."

Randen blew out a breath and said, "I don't know where to go with my art."

"Ah."

He waited. Mom could deliver all sorts of messages with her vowels. "Oh?", for example, usually meant that she didn't believe what she heard at all but would do you the courtesy of momentary credulity until such time as she really wanted to unload on you. "Uh" was a warning as clear and obvious as descending arms in front of a railroad crossing. "Ah", in this case, meant that Randen had confirmed her suspicions and that she was unhappy about being right. He watched her as she straightened in the chair, the curly black hair that was the source of his own shining with streaks of silver and white in the ringlets. "I thought as much."

"It's fine, Ma. I'll figure it out."

"No, tell me. You've got an art degree--and a minor in history. Surely that's enough to get you somewhere?"

Randen felt the pinch between his eyes of an incipient headache. What could she say that he hadn't already said to himself a dozen times before? "Yeah, I know."

"But you aren't a teacher."

"Not my style, no." He tried to keep his face neutral, even though he really wanted to grimace. "I don't do well with kids."

Mom suddenly brightened. "Well, what about a thinktank?"

"What?"

"You know? I heard about them on the news the other day. Thinktanks are always looking for bright young minds to add to their value."

"What do they do?"

Her eager face rumped, the luster of her apple-red cheeks fading if only a touch. Randen had always felt that his mother was a real-life version of Snow White, except for her hair style. Moments like this only added to that impression. "I...don't really know. But I know they like people who know politics, too, and you're always interested in reading political stuff online."

Randen shifted a bit. He glanced down. The only thing on the table was his phone, which sat like a square eye, black and fathomless, staring at the ceiling with the patience of death. It knew he would scoop it up soon enough, get lost in its glowing corridors without much more effort than the swipe of a finger. It could wait.

She continued, "I mean, I've seen some of the recommended videos on YouTube that you're always watching. Those are always really political, aren't they? What do they talk about? In...intels? In--"

"Yeah, but I'm not *good* at politics," said Randen, eager to redirect the conversation. As much as he hated that he was a stereotypical late-Millennial who lived with his mother because his college degrees had earned him nothing but debt, he couldn't deny that it was exactly what he was. And it was better--much better--to talk to his mom about career plans than it was to go into his online habits with her. "So unless they need someone who's good at photography and sculpture, I don't think there's a lot

I have to offer them." He almost added that the medium he most wanted to work on was human flesh, but that probably wouldn't land quite right. He decided that it was best if she just assumed it was a general *I'm-not-feeling-inspired* kind of ennui that he was suffering.

She frowned. "Well, what art are you working on now?"

"That's the thing--I don't *have* any inspiration. I want to stand out, to be different than everybody else, but nothing comes to mind. No muses are singing, if you feel me."

"I feel you," she said with a sigh. "Okay, so the well is dry. I get that. Have you thought about returning to your roots?"

"My roots?"

"The things that inspired you as a kid. You know, you used to play with whatever you could, putting them into these small adventures and tiny...um...I can't remember the word, but they were always so carefully arranged, carefully put together. Your eye for detail was always outstanding, you know."

He grunted. Part of him wanted Mom to stop talking, to stop mothering him so much. But the other part of him sat up straighter. It was true: He had spent countless hours as a kid in his bedroom, taking what pitiful toys he could find and arranging them into tableaux (the word that his mom couldn't remember).

"There was a time, I remember," said Mom, interrupting his own reflections, "when every scene you made was with a rubber duckie." She chuckled, shaking her head. "Remember that? You were on a rubber duckie kick, demanding them for birthdays and Christmases and whatever chance you could."

"I'd forgotten about that," he said, a tingle of excitement in his chest, a long-lost feeling that stirred in him the hope of maybe finally getting something right, of making something worth remembering.

"Yeah! You could do the same thing, right? I kept all of your duckies."

He perked up. "You did?"

"Absolutely. I figured that, once the grandkids came along, they'd like to play with them..." She trailed off. She'd broached the Forbidden Topic, albeit innocently. She pursed her lips and looked away. "They're in the attic."

"Do you mind if I get them down?" asked Randen, willing--this once--not to react to the Forbidden Topic. He started to stand, leaving his friend in his pocket and reaching out for his phone.

"I suppose. I mean, it's getting late, isn't it?"

"I'm not tired."

"Oh, well..." Mom tugged her threadbare bathrobe tighter over her pajamas. "I think I'll catch some Hannity and then head to bed."

"Okay."

"Good night, Randen."

"Good night, Mom."

She gave him a one-armed hug, then shuffled down the hallway to her bedroom, her limp as apparent as ever. Once the door closed, Randen sped from the kitchen to the stairs, taking the steps in twos, and skidding to a halt beneath the string that led to the

attic. He pulled the stairs down, clambered up through the dust and stale air, and clicked on the single bare bulb. It took only a few minutes of searching to find them in a plastic container. The lid was marked "Randen Toys", but the duckies were visible through the sides. He dragged the container to the stairs, manhandled it down the narrow steps, and, after returning the ceiling-mounted steps to their place, scurried into his room, arms encumbered with the small toys of his childhood.

They'd never been very wealthy, growing up. Mom probably loved that he had been in a rubber duckie phase for as long as he had been, since they didn't cost a whole lot and they'd always been a hit. Now that she'd mentioned it, he couldn't stop thinking about the things. As he pulled them out--secure behind his locked door and with the blinds closed--he smiled at each of them. They weren't the kind of friends that he'd want to carry around with him at all times, but they were familiar enough to him that he felt like he was at a high school reunion. Not that he would ever go see those idiots, even if it was coming up on the ten-year reunion in just another two years or so.

Hours passed as Randen carefully cleaned each duckie and set it on his emptied-for-this-purpose desk. He stopped only when he ran out, which, by his count was forty-eight of the blobs. Each had a vapid grin on its face, but there was a surprising amount of variety: Superhero duckies and Zorro duckies; fireman duckies and doctor duckies; professor duckies and cowboy duckies. The permutations of yellow (and, here or there, pink or green or blue) ducks and professions never seemed to end.

So what to do with them?

Randen's smile slid as he realized that he didn't really know what to do now. He just knew he needed them...but why?

The moment of inspiration struck him when he got his order at the local café and his coffee was knocked all over him by an oblivious idiot. Looking at the accidentally crumpled cup as the hot liquid ran down the cardboard like blood, the ballpoint pen number of his order, 281, smeared and mixed with the light cream and two sugars. He hadn't even felt the scalding heat, nor did he really hear the apologies--hasty and insincere--thrown at him over the shoulder of the person who'd bumped him.

He had finally figured it out.

From the café to the art supply store was a fifteen-block trip, and he was low on bus fare. No problem; he could walk. Better to save the money for supplies, after all. At the art store, he picked up some paints, a slew of paintbrushes, and disposable gloves. Now encumbered in the best of ways, he took the long walk home.

In his eagerness, Randen neglected to call in work and make up some explanation for why he couldn't come in and complete his shift at Big Lots. Lonny, the store manager, called or texted maybe a half dozen times before Randen shut off his phone. He didn't have time to be distracted--not now that he finally was making progress.

He toiled through the night, taking much longer to complete his project than was strictly necessary. But he had to take his time. The last thing he wanted was to bungle something. *Perfect or not at all*, he repeated to himself as he caressed the paintbrush on the front of yet another rubber duckie, filling in a preselected number on the bath toy's

chest with dark paint.

Picking the numbers was the hardest part. He started with simple things, like his favorite number growing up (8) and then moving onto the day when he'd first asked a girl out on a date (that was split between two duckies, 12 and 17). He thought of doing his birthday, but that was too obvious, and besides, he didn't like the idea of aging. He'd rather pretend to immortality until death proved too inevitable. No reason to count down to the end. (He disliked New Year's Eve for the same reason.)

Eventually, after much agonizing, he'd selected forty-seven different numbers and painted them on the front of his collection of rubber duckies. The last one--a plain one, as straight forward a toy as one could hope to find--sat on his desk, alone and unpainted. Sunlight was drifting in through the east-facing window; Randen hadn't slept at all that night. Now he was feeling the grind. His eyes felt weighed down and filled with grit. It was hard to focus. But this one, he knew, was special. It was the first one he'd use, the first one to put into the world. It had to mean something, it had to kick him every time he saw it...

And then, as easy as breathing, he got it. With delicate precision, he painted, in large numbers, 281.

Randen smiled to himself, then collapsed into his bed. Sleep came immediately, filled with pleasant dreams of others' screams.

* * *

Randen stood outside Lonny's apartment door and waited for a response to his knock. It was a Sunday, the one day a week that Lonny took off (he said it was for religious purposes, but Randen had his doubts). A D-SLR camera hung from a strap on his right shoulder, next to his backpack. He had two things in his hoodie's front pouch: his best friend, and Number 281. He rubbed the wiped-down toy with one gloved thumb; he gripped his best friend's curvy body with his other hand, taking care not to press the nub-button.

He waited for a bit longer, then pressed the doorbell again, holding it down until he heard some shuffling and grousing on the other side of the door. He stepped back and bounced on the heels of his feet. He glanced up and down the apartment's hallway. Sunday morning--this early, too, with the sun barely up--meant that no one with any sense would be awake yet. At least, that's what he was counting on.

The door opened with a curse from Lonny, who was standing in his underwear and a threadbare bathrobe (different color from Mom's, but of the same style). "The hell are you doing here, Anderton? The hell time's it, anyway?"

"I wanted to apologize, Mr. Berkins, for what I did."

"What you did?"

"The other day. Missing work and all that."

Lonny, his weak chin coated in the perpetual scruff, rubbed at his narrow face, then knuckled his eyes. "Why're you here to tell me this?"

"I just felt bad and I was wondering if I could make it up to you..."

"What? I..." Lonny shook his head, then stepped aside, waving for Randen to enter.

His heart thumped with excitement. He hadn't expected this. He thought he'd have to shove past him, take advantage of the disorientation of seeing an employee outside his apartment. But, no, Lonny--good ol' Lonny!--had made it easy enough for him. Randen stepped inside, shutting the door--and locking it--before facing Lonny, who was padding through his narrow apartment to the kitchen.

"May as well make some coffee, now that I'm up."

"Sorry for bugging you," said Randen, looking around. Lonny lived alone, but it didn't look like it. He kept the place neat and well filled with Big Lots furniture. There were framed pictures of him out fishing and hunting with someone who looked like a brother. The Blu-ray rack was filled with superhero movies and what looked like foreign films. There was an entire section dedicated to Criterion Collection titles. His flat screen TV had a place of honor on the wall in the space of a good eighty-five inches on the diagonal. The one thing it lacked, in his critical view, was a bit of color. It was, in other words, the perfect place for Randen to start his career.

"You want sugar or anything?" asked Lonny from the kitchen.

"Yes, two, if you please."

"Two?"

"Two sugars?"

Lonny held up a carafe-shaped bottle of granulated sugar. "You just wanna tell me when?"

"Right...um, when. Thanks."

Lonny grunted and began to sip his own coffee--black, Randen noted with disgust--and said as he sat at the barstool beneath the counter, "So, tell me again why you bothered me so early on a Sunday morning?"

Randen thought for a moment, wondering if he had finally arrived. He had, he knew he had. As he gripped the mug's porcelain handle, he knew it was time. There wasn't anything left to do--

"Why are you wearing surgical gloves?" asked Lonny, which happened to be the last thing he ever asked.

With as much strength as he could, Randen smashed the mug into Lonny's face, sending a cascade of scalding coffee over the man's brows and into his hair. The broken porcelain carved shallow trenches through his cheek and loosened some teeth on the right side of his head.

Lonny spilled from his seat, thumping to the carpeted floor with an ignominious thud. The blow was so sudden that the store manager didn't even cry out--at least, not at first. As his voice stumbled back into his mouth, Randen pushed a knee into the small of the man's back. Slingshotting the camera behind him so as not to interfere with his work, Randen pulled out his best friend. At last, he thumbed the nub-button; six inches of razor steel *snicked* out. Before Lonny could fully process what was happening, before he even got a chance to fill his lungs for a scream, Randen set to work on Lonny's neck. Hot coffee and hot blood flowed together, spilling over Randen's hands.

He didn't mind.

Even before Lonny had bled out, Randen had started the laborious process of cutting. He had a quota to meet, after all, and two hundred eighty-one slashes would take some time. He moved efficiently, without wasting a lot of time on second guessing himself. He let the muse move in him, mangling the body with his best friend until there were enough gashes to satisfy the rubber duckie.

Then came the art.

Setting the duckie just so, Randen took picture after picture, rearranging things so that his tableaux were as clear in the viewfinder as they were in his mind. He remembered his childhood, how happy and quiet it was. He snapped another picture, moved Lonny's mutilated corpse to pose with the toy in a different angle, all the while thinking of his own father's body after the accident. Randen had seen his father go through the window--the elder Randen had never believed in seatbelts and thought it was a violation of his Constitutional rights to have the state force him to wear one--and ever since then, he'd wondered how it would feel to have that much of one's body carved out.

This was as close as he would get to answering that question.

The shutter clicked. He adjusted the viewfinder. That was good. He now had two hundred-eighty one photos.

It was all coming together.

From his backpack, he stripped off his blood-sodden clothes and carried them to the bathroom. There, he changed, leaving the ruined clothing behind in a puddle of bleach he'd poured into the bathtub. Taking care not to touch anything until he had fresh gloves on, he headed to the apartment door. One final glance over the blood-streaked room, a satisfied smile, and then he was gone. This was the first of his pieces, he knew, but it would not be the last. This was simply too good of a motif for him to let it go with just one iteration. Besides, he already had plans for what he could do better the next time.

The last thing he saw before the door closed was his calling card, the thing that would make him notorious, noticeable, unforgettable.

It was the carefully arranged bath toy, perched on the cold forehead--impossible to miss, as he had set Lonny on the couch, as if he'd simply fallen asleep while binge-watching Netflix when his throat opened up spontaneously--and facing the door. When the police came in, they would see that rubber duckie. That, and its number...

...281.