

And Then There Were None

When my wife and I lived in New Jersey, we both worked at Educational Testing Service (ETS). Our positions posed different working requirements and we drove separate cars. On my part, I liked to vary my route and routine. This liking of mine owed to Ann Orsi, who was an AVP in Operations when I first encountered ETS as a consultant. Over a period of several days during my first consulting engagement there I was feeling frustrated because I was having difficulty connecting with Ann. She never seemed to be where I thought I had reason to expect her to be. I asked about what seemed to me to be her unpredictability and the person I asked told me with a grin, "She likes to vary her routine." And so it was I formed the habit of varying mine

About halfway between ETS and our house, one of my many routes required me to turn right at an intersection where, across from me, was a very short dead-end street, bordered by bushes and woods on the end facing me and on the right side. On the left side of the dead end was the backyard of a house that faced the main street. I doubt that dead-end street was even a quarter of a block long. It had the look of a street that had had its construction interrupted.

One morning as I stopped at the intersection, a family of ducks came out of the bushes on the right side of the dead-end street and started crossing it into the yard of the house on the corner. No cars went in the dead end so the ducks were in no danger of being run over. The family formed a line with an adult duck on the front and a larger adult duck at the back of the line. Six small ducklings were lined up between the two adults. I smiled as they made their way across the street and then went on my way.

A few days later I had occasion to take that same route at about the same time and again saw the ducks coming out of the bushes. But this time there was a difference. There was only one adult duck, the one at the head of the line, and only five ducklings following along. Gone were what I assumed to be the papa duck and one of the ducklings.

Over the next few weeks I encountered mama duck and her babies on a few more occasions. We somehow seemed to be on similar schedules. Each time there was one less baby. This continued to the point where there was only one baby duck following along behind the mother. And then there were none. All the babies were gone and when I saw the mother come out of the bushes without any of her babies she appeared frantic, looking about her and running about crazily as she zig-zagged across the dead-end street, seemingly searching for her lost babies. I never saw her after that, although I continued to travel the same route regularly. Who knows? Perhaps whatever got her mate and her babies got her, too. I will never know.

Every time I think of this little tragedy it makes me sad. It also makes me think not just of mama duck and her babies but also of all the human mothers who lose their mates and their

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babies, the never-ending anguish they must feel and the sense of despair and madness that must eventually engulf them just as it did mama duck.