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RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Homophobia, racial prejudice, intolerance

The Blue Swan

by: *Matias Travieso-Diaz*

"But don't you remember what happened ... when a goose built her nest in the swan's territory? She thought she was enough like them that they wouldn't mind her. Only her neck was too short, and her legs were too long, and she didn't have the right sort of feathers, so the swans kept attacking and chasing the poor thing until finally she was driven off."

"You're not a goose."

Pandora's mouth twisted. "I'm an awfully deficient swan, then."

Lisa Kleypas, Devil in Spring

Delwyn, a male mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) was hatched a cool spring morning, by the waters of the cape at the south end of the island of Öland, in the Ottenby Nature Reserve ("the Reserve"), a haven for many species of migratory birds and other forms wildlife. He was the middle cygnet in a clutch of seven eggs laid by his mother (Elara), the pen, in a nest built on a large mound that she and her male spouse (Orin, the cob) had built with waterside vegetation in a protected location approved by Delwin's mother after rejecting three less defensible others suggested by Orin for in the Reserve there were several hundred swan families surviving cheek by jowl, fiercely competing for breeding grounds and living space.

Delwyn was unremarkable at birth. He was of average size and weight and, like all mute swan cygnets, had a dull greyish-black bill; his body was covered in a gray/buff down. One year later, the down on Delwyn's wings had been replaced by flight feathers, and regular feathers were appearing throughout his neck and chest; his beak had turned bright orange, with black around the nostrils and a black knob at the base of the bill.

Delwyn's parents and siblings always traveled together on the waters of the Reserve, a tiny armada that swam as a group, feeding on submerged aquatic plants which they reached with their long necks, as well as aquatic insects, fish, and frogs. They supplemented this marine diet by grazing the vegetation that was available on the land near the shore. Thus, their left throughout the area the imprint of their passing in various ways.

During one of their foraging trips Elara noticed something peculiar about one of her offspring. By that time, the cygnets had developed proper feathers in the wing region, the shoulders, and the tail, to be followed soon by new feathers on their bellies and sides. Delwyn's new feathers were, little by little, taking on a light blue-gray hue.

Elara sought to pluck one of the unusual feathers off Delwyn's side, and Delwyn suffered the bites from his mother's serrated beak stoically. She succeeded in removing two feathers, and looked closely at them: except for their unusual color, they were identical to those she and every other swan had. She let the anomaly pass unremarked.

As summer turned to fall, the coloring of Delwyn's feathers deepened, becoming blue green, a color that rendered him unmistakable among the hundreds of snow-white birds swimming in the Reserve. His oddity had not gone unnoticed; the family's rounds were often greeted by grunts, hoarse whistles, and derisive snorts from other swans. Further challenges were only forestalled by the aggressive stance of Orin, who swam at the front of the entourage with both feet noisily paddling in unison, neck curved back and wings half raised. There were no overt confrontations, but tension mounted on the waters with each passing day.

As autumn marched in, the time for migration arrived. The cygnets had matured enough to be able to fly long distances and the family readied to move south before waters froze over. Thus, one morning in October, the nine swans took off in a vee formation headed by Orin, flying southwest in a journey that would take them to some island in a warm sea, weeks of hard flying away.

The trip, however, had to cross the expanse of water that they had known as home for the last months. The area was teeming with other swans, many of which were also getting ready to migrate. Before long, Delwyn's group was confronted by other birds who had become aware of their territory being trespassed upon and had risen to the air to challenge the interlopers.

One cob, and then another, got close enough to Delwyn's family to intercept them. They started throbbing their wings rapidly and issuing peremptory vocal challenges (mute swans are not mute; they just do not screech loudly, as other swans do). Orin faced one of the aggressors in what became a prolonged air encounter that lingered on until the combatants disengaged and the attacking cob fled away.

Meanwhile, the second cob went after Elara and lunged at the much weaker female. Both swans dropped onto the water; there, Elara sought to defend herself and her brood by swinging at the threat with the bony spurs in her wings, and attempting to bite at the cob with her bill; her larger opponent retaliated in kind and, taking advantage of his greater size and weight, climbed onto Selwyn's mother and pecked the back of the head, pushing her onto the water and then beneath it, seeking to put her to death.

Delwyn and his siblings were for the most part spectators to the fights in which their parents were participants; they attempted to assist their mother, but were swatted away by powerful sweeps of the attacking cob's wings. They were left unprotected and soon found themselves on the water, surrounded by over a dozen or more hostile swans of all sizes, all hissing and spreading their wings threateningly. It soon became evident, however, that the other birds' hostility was directly solely at Delwyn, who was corralled away from his siblings and herded some distance away. There, he was set upon simultaneously by several cobs and pens, who pecked at him viciously, beat him with their wings, and forced him beneath the surface of the water. Delwyn fought bravely but, after a few moments, was overcome and drowned.

Orin, fresh from the victory over his opponent, broke like a flash of lightning among the swans that still idled around the spot where Delwyn had been submerged. The cob twirled around furiously, but none of the other swans dared confront him; the angry crowd that had victimized Delwyn dispersed rapidly, leaving only a few bubbles rising from the depths and three royal blue feathers to mark the spot of the assault. Delwyn's corpse had dropped to the murky depths of the Reserve and never had reemerged.

Orin turned his attention to the area, a short distance away, where Elara had been subjected to a parallel attack. There, however, the final outcome had been less dire: Elara was injured and almost drowned, but had survived her encounter. Orin joined her, rounded up their surviving offspring, and together they retreated to their original nesting area, seeking to recover from their injuries and grieving for a long time for Delwyn's loss.

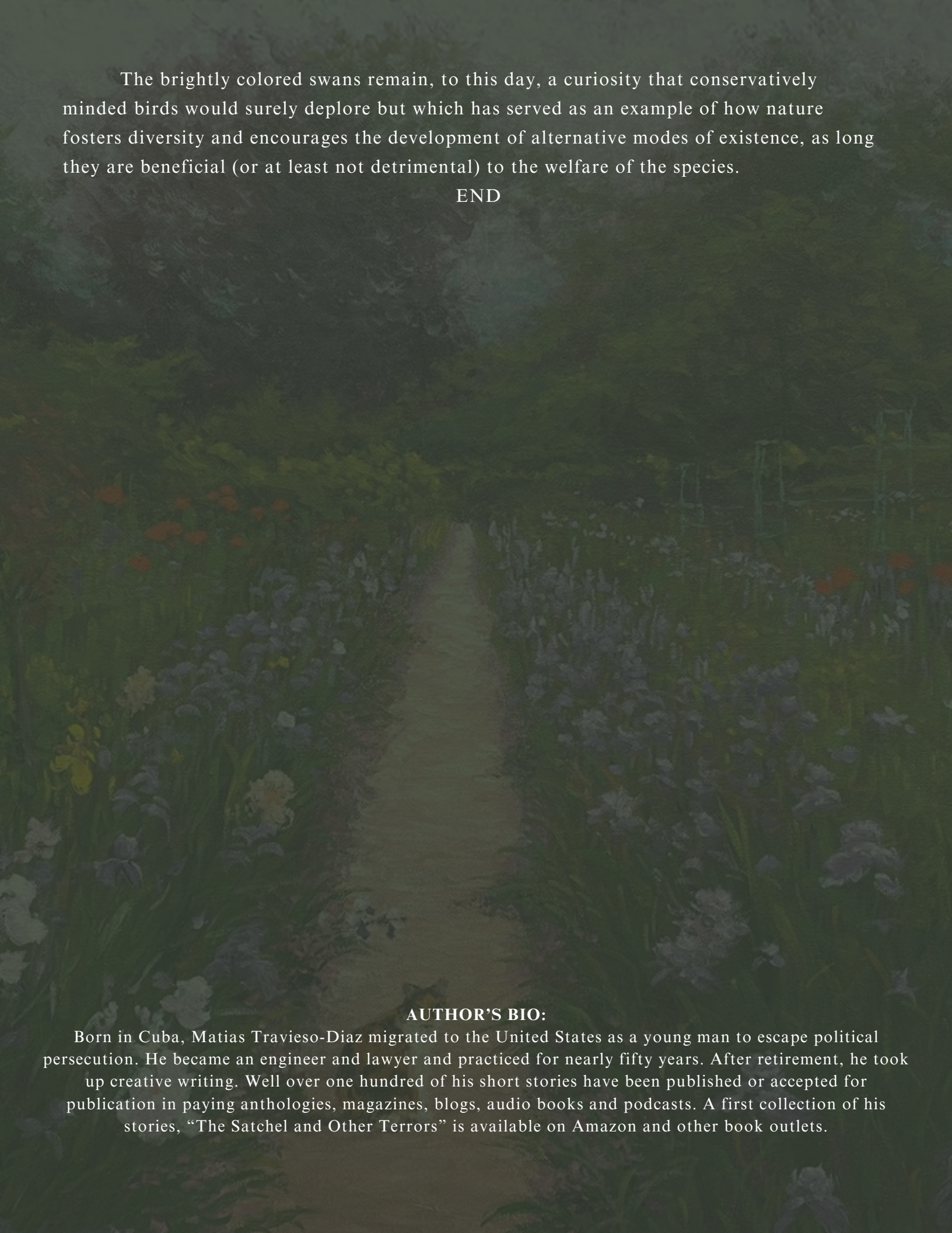
Delwyn had been an unexceptional young swan, neither stronger nor smarter nor in any way more enviable than any of his siblings. His lack of distinction made his demise most regrettable: what happened to him could, but for good fortune, have happened to anyone.

The family's understanding of what had transpired was very dim, but one thing was abundantly clear: Delwyn had been attacked and killed because his feathers exhibited a coloring that was different from everyone else's.

Time went by, and Orin and Elara bred more clutches of perfectly white, unremarkable cygnets. They had moved to another pond in one of the many islands that dot the waters of Denmark, a country where swans are revered. They never returned to their early haven in the Ottenby Nature Reserve, and would have been forgotten as if they had never set their grey feet there. But...

The vicious swans that had slain Delwyn had performed, unwittingly, a minor miracle. The blood of the slain young swan had filtered through the waters of the Reserve and had been absorbed by a myriad of plants and miniscule animals. His flesh, as it decomposed, had nurtured many of the life forms that thrived in the sheltered marine environment. Delwyn was gone, but his essence remained in a stationary habitat where changes occurred slowly, if ever.

Two springs after the fatal autumn that brought martyrdom to an innocent young swan, five pens in the Reserve laid clutches that included one or more eggs that, in the course of time, would develop into cygnets displaying all shades of blue, from blue-gray to almost indigo, including the royal blue that had led to Delwyn's demise. Because these abnormal births took place almost simultaneously, the offending birds could not be sacrificed and were able to grow to maturity, and bred with other cobs and pens in the general population, leading to a gradual increase in the number of multicolored swans that are found in the Reserve and, increasingly, in other points in the Baltic area.



The brightly colored swans remain, to this day, a curiosity that conservatively minded birds would surely deplore but which has served as an example of how nature fosters diversity and encourages the development of alternative modes of existence, as long they are beneficial (or at least not detrimental) to the welfare of the species.

END

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man to escape political persecution. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Well over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets.