Barnaby Wafflequack was not an ordinary duck.

For one thing, he was the only duck on Quackenbush Pond who wore a hat. It was a small knitted hat, slightly too big, bright orange with a pom-pom on top, which he had found on a park bench in March and refused to give up. For another, he believed with his whole heart that he was destined to become the world's greatest pudding chef.

This was a problem, because ducks do not have access to pudding.

"It's all about the texture," Barnaby told his friend Gloria, a thoughtful goose who had learned long ago to nod without listening. "A good pudding must jiggle with confidence."

"Mm-hm," said Gloria, nibbling a dandelion.

"But what is confidence, Gloria? What is jiggle? These are the questions I ask myself at night."

"You ask yourself them very loudly," Gloria said. "The turtles filed a complaint."

Barnaby ignored this. He had a plan. Every Thursday, the Hendersons held a picnic by the pond, and every Thursday, Mrs. Henderson brought a large, wobbling, glorious chocolate pudding in a glass bowl. Barnaby had watched it for six weeks from the reeds, taking notes in the mud with a stick. His notes were mostly drawings of pudding. Some of them looked like pudding. Others looked like a frightened potato.

"Today," Barnaby announced, adjusting his hat, "I learn the secret."

"Please don't," said Gloria.

"Today," Barnaby repeated, "I infiltrate the picnic."

Gloria sighed and went back to her dandelion. She had seen this sort of thing before. Last spring, Barnaby had tried to join the local rowing club by sitting very still in a canoe until someone asked him to leave. Someone had. It had been awkward.

At noon, the Hendersons arrived with their checkered blanket, their wicker basket, and their enormous, overexcited dog named Mr. Biscuits, who was approximately ninety percent ears.

Barnaby crept through the grass. He moved with the stealth of a duck who believed himself to be a ninja, which is to say he waddled very slowly and whispered "hup" to himself every few steps.

Mr. Biscuits noticed him immediately.

"DUCK," said Mr. Biscuits, who was not a subtle dog.

"I am not a duck," Barnaby whispered. "I am a bush."

Mr. Biscuits tilted his head. The bush was wearing an orange hat.

"BUSH WITH HAT," Mr. Biscuits agreed, deeply satisfied, and went back to chewing a sandwich that did not belong to him.

Barnaby reached the blanket. There it was: the pudding, shimmering in the sunlight like a dark, delicious lake. Mrs. Henderson had stepped away to find a spoon. Mr. Henderson was asleep under his newspaper. The children were chasing a butterfly with great determination and no chance of success.

Barnaby leaned in close. He studied the pudding. He sniffed the pudding. He whispered to the pudding, "Teach me your ways."

The pudding, being pudding, said nothing. But it did jiggle slightly, because Mr. Biscuits had bumped the blanket.

"The jiggle," breathed Barnaby. "It speaks."

And that is when everything went wrong.

Barnaby leaned a little too far. His hat slipped over his eyes. He flapped to steady himself, which is the worst thing a duck can do near a bowl of pudding, and his left wing caught the edge of the glass bowl.

The bowl tipped. The pudding slid.

For one long, shimmering moment, a chocolate pudding hung in the air, defying gravity, like a tiny brown moon. Then it landed directly on Mr. Henderson's newspaper, which was directly on Mr. Henderson's face.

Splorp.

Mr. Henderson sat up. He was now wearing a pudding mask. A tasteful one, really, with two small eyeholes where the newspaper had torn.

"Wha?" he said.

"BUSH WITH HAT DID IT," shouted Mr. Biscuits, who was a loyal dog but a poor liar, and had accidentally told the truth.

Mrs. Henderson returned with the spoon, saw her husband, and stopped. The children stopped. The butterfly, sensing its moment, escaped.

Barnaby stood frozen in the middle of the blanket, his hat sideways, a smear of chocolate on his beak. Slowly, carefully, he raised one wing.

"Quack," he said, with great dignity.

There was a long silence.

Then Mrs. Henderson began to laugh. It started as a small snort and grew into a full, helpless wheeze, and soon the children were laughing too, and even Mr. Henderson, still wearing his pudding mask, began to chuckle, which made the pudding crack in a way that only made everyone laugh harder.

Barnaby, who had expected to be chased away, did not know what to do. So he did the only thing he could think of. He bowed.

This was a mistake, because the pudding on his beak dripped onto the blanket, and Mr. Biscuits, overcome with joy, tackled him with a hug.

That evening, Barnaby sat by the pond, clean at last, thanks to a vigorous rinse by the turtles, who had been rather less annoyed once they heard the story.

Gloria settled beside him. "Well? Did you learn the secret?"

Barnaby thought about it. He thought about the jiggle, and the texture, and the confidence of a good pudding.

"I think," he said slowly, "the secret is that nobody can resist a pudding that lands on someone's face."

"That is not a recipe."

"It's a technique."

Gloria shook her head, but she was smiling, in the way geese do, which is mostly in the eyes and slightly in the neck.

The next Thursday, the Hendersons returned. Mrs. Henderson set down a new pudding on the blanket, then paused, looked toward the reeds, and carefully placed a small saucer beside it. In the saucer was a single spoonful of chocolate pudding, perfectly jiggling.

Barnaby, watching from the grass, felt something swell in his chest. It was pride, or gratitude, or possibly gas.

He waddled over, adjusted his orange hat, and ate the pudding with the grace of a duck who knew, at last, that he had finally become a chef.

Or at least a very well-fed critic.

"Mm," he said. "Confident."

And from the bushes, Mr. Biscuits whispered, "BUSH WITH HAT," and wagged his tail so hard that he knocked over the picnic basket.

But that, dear reader, is another story.