

By Any Other Name

Chapter V

Oskar's strong personality traits and the positive aspects of his character manifested themselves from the very first. He did what he wanted to do, like a strong-willed boy whose britches are regularly warmed for the same transgressions. Where he wanted to go he went, what he wanted to take he took, what he desired to do he did, knowing all the time it was wrong and clearly revealing the guilty knowledge, by his appearance, manner and conduct.

The cats' milk was for his footbath. Even after he learned how good it tasted, the milk was for standing in while drinking it. Strings were for pulling and knots for undoing. Cats were for pinching, dogs for biting and anything that would run was for chasing. Whatever he could get his bill over was for chewing, and in some magical way he was able eventually to chew into flat surfaces.

Until we could train him to stay off the road, my wife feared he'd wander onto its paved surface and, with his dogged persistence in perversity, dare the first car that approached to hit him. On nice days, when the sun would warm him and keep him from catching cold in the cool late winter and early Spring, we'd put him outside in a box. Long experience told us it had to be a disposable box, for Nature has endowed her geese with a digestive system that defies regulation of the elimination process. Cats and dogs, in their in-

tense desire to keep their dwelling places clean, may get to the point where they are about to burst before acceding to the demands of nature; but not the birds, who let go wherever they are and whatever they are doing. Defecation in flight is normal, as every auto driver knows.

The goose is one of the most persistent eaters in nature, for that is his design. As he is always eating, he is always eliminating, and it is a part of the process of which he seems to be entirely unaware. It just happens, like breathing. Geese grazing their way across a pasture never even raise their heads as the body wastes shoot out behind them. ~~Even chickens pause briefly in whatever they are doing to perform the function, assisting it a little with a semi-squatting position from which they seem to be helping the body with a downward motion of their cocked wings, as though squeezing the matter out.~~

~~But with geese it just happens,~~ ^{It is} a simultaneous accompaniment to whatever they are doing - eating, sleeping, egg-laying, drinking, walking, running, swimming, flying, or any possible combination. Geese pretend to be entirely unaware of it, as indeed they may be, for there is no reason to presume it is a conscious act. It has to happen, it does happen, and that's it. No reason to let it interfere with anything else, or even to take note of it.

In this the goose is more civilized than some humans, in whom these body necessities become entangled in rituals and fetishes and, ultimately, are a problem. Other creatures have a capacity for storing food and digesting it slowly. Humans have stomachs; ruminants, like the cow, have as many as four. Fowl have a small, round organ, the gizzard, in which the work of the stomach is done. It is a thick

muscle with a thin, tough lining through which acids are released. The gizzard is in constant spasm, contracting and relaxing like a nervous fist, providing a grinding motion in which the food is swished around in the acids and softened into a paste. Even tough seeds are reduced to a paste in it. Fowl eat fine but rough stones which aid the gizzard in its grinding.

Most fowl, like chickens and especially ducks, have a food reservoir, the proventriculus, better known as the crop or craw. These species eat with greed, as though food were going out of style. They pack it away in the crop until they bulge at the bottom of the neck, where it joins the body, the location of the crop. Ducks load it up until they barely clear the ground, and it swings loosely as they walk, a tremendous swelling, like an inflated balloon under the skin, floating from side to side under the restraint of the skin. These birds are gluttons, and their gluttony is visible.

Geese have only the most rudimentary crop, a slightly wider, short length of the esophagus. They cannot lay by a store of food to draw upon as need demands. Instead, they must eat almost constantly, replenishing the meagre contents of the crop as it empties. Their basic food, grass, is bulky and because it is, they consume vast quantities to extract the little nourishment each blade provides. Hence, they void frequently and profusely.

So it wasn't Oskar's fault that he made a sloppy mess when he was confined in a small area.

Wooden boxes were soon out of the question; there just were not enough of them. A wire mesh floor that in warmer weather would be fine was unsafe, for it allowed drafts; and in the house, it created other problems. So we kept him in cardboard boxes.

To protect him from stray dogs or cats that might wander past when we were not watching, we kept his box on a picnic table behind the house. Here he could bathe in the warm and vitamin-yielding rays of the sun, protected from the wind and drafts, from possible predators - from everything but himself. He soon became the greatest hazard to his own survival.

Either from a desire ^{to see what was going on,} to be free, to run loose with the animals that lived behind our house, or just to have something different to do, he began chewing on the top ^{edge} ~~edge~~ of the boxes. From the top, he learned how to chew and tear an opening. At first, he was satisfied with a peephole large enough for him to see what was ^{happening} ~~going on~~; who was coming, and going, whether the cats had a mouse, who had fought over it, who ate it, what birds were hovering around, waiting for the cats to leave so they could pick up what the cats wasted - these and other things of animal interest and importance.

Then he got to enlarging his hole, and once he was about to use it as a door when my wife caught him. His first step would have been a very big one, six times his height, like a grown man taking a 35-foot step, straight down! So we got boxes with sides higher than he could reach. That didn't work for long, either. He attacked the sides anyway. How, with a rounded bill that he could not use for puncturing, he was able to chew his way through the boxes we never learned, but he did. Before he was old enough to grow feathers, there was no cardboard box that would long restrain him. Our search for boxes was unending, for his need for them was without end. Not many lasted more than a single day.

(Picture)

Fortunately, like all geese, he grew rapidly, almost doubling his weight each week. By the time he had exhausted the local supply of boxes, we decided to hazard letting him run loose whenever the weather was fit for him to be out in it. Somehow, he survived his freedom and himself.

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Because of his individuality and because we liked him so much my wife decided he needed a first name. He became "Oskar". If anything in his appearance, character or conduct suggested this name to the exclusion of all others, she ^{says she doesn't} ~~soon didn't~~ recall what it was.

"Oscar?" I asked, horrified when I heard her so addressing him. "My god, Lil, the old man will blow a fuse."

There was then a very nice carpenter, getting along in years, whose name was Oscar and who helped us regularly, whenever his health and the weather permitted. We knew no other Oscar, and I immediately concluded Lil had named the gosling after him.

"Not Oscar," she corrected me. "Oskar."

Someplace in antiquity or literature there may be an Oskar who justified the bestowing of his name on such a creature as we had. If my wife ^{does} recalls who she had in mind, she has never acknowledged it. It seemed strange to me that, of all the many names she could have selected, once she decided our Pumpernickle, like people, needed further identity, she fixed upon Oskar. ^{but doesn't remember why. But} ~~She insists she doesn't re-~~ ^{call why.} I have long since learned both to trust her and not to question her past a clearly demarked point. With my interrogations over the selection of his name, this point came early. Since then I have contented myself with her explanation that she didn't recall.

History will have to be content with the same explanation, for no further elucidation has been forthcoming.

His middle name I gave him, and whether or not Stephen Leacock with his detestation of puns would approve; whether or not my humor is acceptable to those who can tolerate puns, it is well earned.

Oskar was always a "ham", strutting and playing to an audience, seen, unseen or imagined. We had never heard of people named "Ham", though they might exist. But "Hamm's" we had known, and at the time of Oskar's need, as we saw it, there was a popular beer of that name, advertised with impish animal figures. So, his full name became Oskar Hamm Pumpernickle. We never used the middle name in referring to him but, as with people, we thought he ought to have it; and it seemed apt.

Once named, Oskar was never addressed except by name; nor was he ever otherwise referred to by anyone who had met or had only heard of him.

"How's your boy?" people may ask one another; or, "I saw your youngster the other afternoon," or, "How are you, young man." It was never thus with Oskar. His name was always used, to him and to us.

Despite my initial fear that he would take umbrage, Oscar the carpenter seemed to feel honored that the goose we prized so highly was named "Oskar", so close an approximation of and so complete an identification with his. They would always greet each other when their paths crossed, and soon they were eating together.

It was Oscar's habit to park his car along the road near the western end of the lane circling our house. At lunchtime he would return to his car, turn on the radio and get into the back seat where

he'd eat and rest. Oskar was a keen observer and loved the company of people, or, as he looked at it, other people. When first he began to follow Oscar to the car, it was warm, and Oscar kept the door open. Observing his friend eating, Oskar made such a nuisance of himself begging that Oscar, in order to enjoy a few minutes of peace, had to share his lunch with Oskar. It reached the point where Oscar brought a little extra for his feathered name-alike.

(Picture ?) "Why don't you keep a few slices of our stale bread in your car for him?" I once asked, embarrassed at the mooching of the workman's lunch.

"Naw, that's all right," Oscar replied. And he never did, either. It was as though he were reproving me for suggesting that Oskar should eat less well than people.

As time passed and the days got colder, Oscar had to keep the door closed to protect himself from the weather. This provided no problem for Oskar. Unabashed, he knocked at the door with his bill and kept up the rapid tattoo until he got his handout.

He never needed it, for Oskar always had food available to him or could demand it of us and immediately get it. The routine with Oscar had become one of the regular incidents in his life, a source of pleasure and togetherness for him, and he looked forward to it, almost like a compulsive ritual. At the proper time, he was at Oscar's car. If Oscar was doing something he didn't want to leave, like nailing up a sheet of plywood, that took a little more time than he'd expected and remained to finish his work before eating, at precisely noon impatient Oskar was waiting at the car. As the carpenter walked the several hundred feet to the car, he was greeted by Oskar's honked complaints.

"You are late. Let's get going here. I'm hungry."

The old man always smiled. Oskar pranced around, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, until fed.

Oskar was a "ham", a real Hollywood type.