

Chapter XIV

How Oskar Found the Needle in the Haystack

[Extra Space]

Some people don't learn and won't listen. They say, "Uh-huh," when you explain something to them, but they do not mean it. It is merely a semi-polite way of saying, "A few words went through my head from ear to ear. I don't suppose they were important or they would have stayed behind." This was not a painless attitude when Oskar was around.

One day there arrived at our farm a smiling stranger of rather generous proportions, wearing loose-fitting clothing that hung in large wrinkled folds, like the underskin of a large elephant. In short, a big fat slob. His teeth had left him in a haphazard sequence, giving him, with his very large, round head, the suggestion of a Hallowe'en lantern. He was driving a taxicab; or, more likely, what had once been a taxicab. There were two women with him. One was quite old, and ^{presumably} ~~I assumed her to be~~ the mother of either this man or the other woman, whom I took to be his wife. Both women were thin but wore clothing cut for larger bodies. Even their stockings were loose and limp.

Lil and I were lounging outside, for it was a pleasant autumn Sunday afternoon. Oskar, we knew, was not too far behind us. We had

become accustomed to recalling, automatically and without conscious effort, where last we had seen him when strangers came, for we never knew what fright might seize them. Oskar was capable of anything. His crafty mind nimbly created new people-panickers on the spur of the moment. He had a creative gift that way.

"Got any eggs?" the stranger inquired.

I told him we had. I recall thinking at that moment how odd it was that people saw a sign advertising eggs, stopped ^{start} to buy them, and always assumed we didn't have them because we advertised them. Rarely did a stranger announce his intention to purchase eggs or say he'd like so many dozen or inquire about the sizes or prices to begin with. He always, as though preparing himself for a pleasant surprise, began by asking if we had any. ~~I doubt if~~ ^{don't} they go to a grocery store and ask if they have groceries, or to a gas station and ask if they have gas. But at a farm that sells eggs, they always ask, "Got any eggs?"

I had arisen to serve him and Lil was still reclining and smiling when one of the women, both of whom were standing a short distance behind the man, querulously asked, "what's that?"

That was Oskar, and I introduced them.

"A real goose?" the man asked.

We assured him we had no other kind.

"What d'ya do with him?"

"Nothing. He's a pet."

"D'ya pet 'im on the head?"

"no, we sort of play games with him. We watch him and enjoy him and the things he does."

"Like what?"

Oskar was maneuvering himself for the drive to the barrel, so I got some bread and explained how Oskar liked to eat it from people's hands.

"G'wawn!" the stranger ^{demurred} told me, at the same time committing the fatal error of ignoring Oskar's directions. I held the bread out for the man to take, but he just stood there, transfixed in his unbelief, his eyes unmoving and looking at nothing and his jaw hanging half open. To this day I cannot understand why he just would not believe this simple thing, that a goose liked to eat bread. About the time Oskar reached a point where a plumb-bob dropped from the most forward point of the stranger's abdominal projections - I think it was the one below the belt which, fortunately, was drawn tightly - would have touched his head, a distance about a good reach of his neck or about 15 inches from the stranger's feet, I was able to thrust a piece of rye into the stranger's flabby, thick-fingered hand and persuade him to hold it down to Oskar. Mute and like an automaton, he did. *Oskar grabbed and started eating the bread.*

The women were clearly apprehensive and in thin, shrill and querulous voices uttered childish warnings of vicious animals, rabies and other outlandish fears. The man was as though hypnotized. He said nothing and did nothing. His arm was frozen in space, bent at the elbow, with the hand extended as it had been when he held the bread. He just stood there and watched Oskar break the hard bread into pieces and swallow them. Before Oskar finished, I tried to persuade this silent one to take another slice from me. There was no response. He stood silently, with his jaw agape, regarding the goose as though he were a creature from outer space. My effort to force the

bread into his hand failed, for his muscles were taut. His fingers were pressed hard against his thumb as though they were already holding a slice of bread.

This tableau had an eerie effect upon me. It was as though I were emerging from a heavy dream, or from anesthesia. I knew what was going on, but it seemed unreal, as though wrapped in a film that was not quite transparent, like a very light early morning fog over a moist meadow. My own voice sounded somehow a little hollow as I quietly informed this man that Oskar was unpredictable if he didn't get his way, to please offer him the piece of bread because, clearly, Oskar wanted it from him and not from me. I warned, importuned and explained in a voice that I even now recall as a somewhat slow, flat monotone. I guess we were both zombies at that dangerous moment. My efforts were to no avail. The mesmerized, droopy tub of silence stood immobile, his eyes glazed, tiny droplets of saliva oozing out of the corners of his open mouth, his head pointed at Oskar.

A weary impotence took possession of me when this person would not respond, neither feed nor move away, as though I had emotionally adjusted to an imminent disaster and had surrendered my mind and control of my body to it. I, too, became speechless and spellbound, with my head, too, pointed at Oskar. Lil came out of the house with the three dozen eggs one of the women had ordered and, as though she had walked into a paralyzing gas, stood a short distance away, also apparently bewitched, and also motionless when she saw what was happening.

Slowly, almost pretending to graze the area between his own feet and those of the stranger, Oskar eased his head just clear of

the ground toward those big feet in the runover shoes, only partly tied with broken laces, shoes over the tops of which flesh was distended in an ample bulge, restrained by nondescript stockings that slumped toward the shoes but were restrained by the encompassed mass of flesh. Meeting the toe of the left shoe with his bill, Oskar nibbled along it, more like a loving cat pretending to bite in a show of affection, for he didn't bite at all. It was more as though he were tapping it while opening and closing his bill, accompanying his motions with a singsong, like he was humming into the roof of his mouth in a falsetto, a sound the like of which I have heard from no other animal.

Beginning at the toe, he worked his way along the inner edge of the shoe to the instep, nibbling and humming that shrill song that belied his seeming air of contentment. Up the side of the shoe from the arch to the top he tapped, skipping the bulge that extended over it, and fastening on to the trouser leg at the inseam. He gave it a slight downward tug and apparently decided that was not interesting, for he ever so slowly, in quick little nibbles, like the mincing walk of a tall woman trying to hurry while inhibited by tight skirts, he pecked his way up the inseam. Relentlessly, persistently, almost studiously, ^{nip}bit, tug, ^{nip}bit, upward, upward, upward he nibbled, until he had to ease forward a little to keep his hold.

The shocking potentialities of his undeviating direction was not lost upon me, but I was powerless to do or say anything. I have heard of the trance certain snakes seem to weave around their intended victims; I was impotent, as though seized by such a spell. No, I told myself, it could not possibly be that, for that was totally foreign

to his knowledge and experience. He had no way of knowing, even of divining. Yet the impossible seemed more inevitable with each passing moment as Oskar made not a single nibbling detour from the in seam, which was like a track he could not leave once he had entered upon it.

In those few brief seconds I sought to assure myself that what was then clearly inevitable just could not possibly happen, like a perverse child reaching a second time for a hot iron, refusing to heed the certainty of his experience. I knew that there was nothing of which Oskar was not capable, nothing impossible for him, yet, with my body paralyzed, my mind kept repeating, "He won't do it."

He did!

The spell that had settled upon all of us, including those two women, shattered like a dropped glass when Oskar laid hold of the only projection in the stranger's abdominal anatomy that his bill could encompass and bit hard. This was the first time he hadn't been confronted by a flat surface, the first time he could really bite. That bite sent the large man straight upward into the air, Oskar dangling for a fraction of an instant before he let go. The women shrieked, the man "Ow, ow, ow!" as he awkwardly danced an up-and-down and side-to-side step while holding his aching part, Lil gasped, and I bellowed, "Oskar!"

Proud as though he had done something wonderful, gloating, loud in bragging about it and careless in his exultation as he flailed his mighty wings forward and backward in accompaniment to his shrill honking, Oskar waited an instant too long before heeding the impulse to flee. All of the strength and will that welled back into my muscles with the sudden breaking of the spell poured into my right leg.

Just as Oskar started to run away from the retribution he knew would follow, for the first and only time, I kicked him. Fortunately, my toe went under him, between his legs from the back, and the effect of the kick was that of a catapult. It lifted him high into the air, perhaps seven or eight feet, launching him forward at the same time. Then, and then only, did Oskar fly. He went almost fifty feet before he touched the ground again. As his great wings stopped flapping and he attempted to land, never having done so before, he was unskilled and he belly-flopped. But he was unhurt and up in a flash and disappeared from our sight to the west, honking lustily as he moved, his tempo gradually lowering as he told the story of his new adventure to the red barrel near the western end of the land.

Nobody shared Oskar's merriment at that moment. The three intended customers left without the eggs, all three yelling unrepeatable things about vicious beasts and the people who harbor them. Until the roar of the motor and the angry grinding of the hastily engaged gears as their car lunged forward drowned them out, we blushed at their unrestrained imprecations.

When the surprise and embarrassment wore off, I ^{we} realized that the stranger's pain was transitory and the real injury, if any, was only to his pride and sensibilities. The permanent harm Oskar might have done was to lose us an egg customer before he became one. Then the implausibility and ridiculousness of the amazing situation drove home with a force that doubled me ^{up} in uninhibited laughter at which I was only a little ashamed. Lil's dignity could not hold out against her inclination to laugh, ^{either} although she made a visible effort, as becomes a lady. We laughed for a long time as we relaxed after the ordeal

of the uncertainty. Every time we again thought of what had happened, something that could never possibly have happened, we broke out laughing all over again.

Nobody but Oskar could have conceived and executed such an imaginative punishment to the person who would not drive like a goose is supposed to. No goose but Oskar could arrange and carry out such a transposition of roles.