

Chapter XVII

The Abominating-Snow Man

Like other people, Oskar had phobias. We discovered his fear phobia early one morning.

The earth was mantled with a sheet of white, broken by the rounded outlines of all the objects smothered by the foot of snow that had fallen during the long night. Near the back of the house, only the lee side of the trash barrel and the legs of the picnic table showed any color. The wires of the fence were not visible, for the snow had piled on them, and only the knowledge of the existence of the fence told me it was there for even the posts were obliterated by the white blanket which was the background whatever way the eye turned. Tree-trunks were invisible, for the sticky snow, driven by the wind, clung to and hid the rough bark.

Not even the track of a cat marred the blinding white smoothness. It was a beautiful, bone-cold winter morning, as perfect in every detail as if an artist had created it; as, indeed, the greatest artist had. The frosty early sun had barely passed the limit of the treeline to the east and was shining with a brilliant white incandescence. It was totally without warmth where it struck the face, supplying merely light to the landscape, light to blind my eye with brilliant flashes of reds and blues, as though in an unwise moment I

had stared at a closeby electric bulb. Each breath cut the lungs with a sharpness that ^{stung} permeated the entire chest. My nostrils were beginning to tingle from the intense cold when the total absence of any kind of track informed me that Oskar was nowhere to be seen.

"Is it because he, too, is so white?" I at first wondered, for all of him, except the beautiful pale blue eye of unvarying hue that characterizes his breed, the orange ring around it, and his bill, feet and legs of similar orange shade, was snow-like. Had he been there/^{but} pointed away from me, I'd never have seen him.

The cold made me fear for him. It was his first snow. There had been cold nights and days when the wind ^{knifed} cut through clothes and skin to the bone, ~~days~~ when the ends of his insulating feathers had fluttered as the wind blew. These days he had never minded. He was as happy in the cold weather as in the warm. But the snow was icy and his legs were protected only by the heat of the blood that circulated through them.

"Oskar," I called. "Oskar, come here, boy!"

Then it dawned on me that he could never walk in that snow, so much deeper than the length of his legs.

With each crunching step as I searched for him, snow came over my boot-tops and, as it melted, trickled down to my feet, which were already too cold. I got a shovel and made a path wherever I went, calling his name as I worked.

When I/^{had} toiled past the west end of the house and, except for my frozen feet, was warmed by the exertion, I thought I heard a faint whimper.

"Aha!" I told myself. "At least I know where the cats holed up!"

So I turned at right angles, toward the sound, and dug a path directly to our trailer, which was about ten feet off the lane. In a short time there was a clear path for the cats from the trailer to the back step. Although they detest snow, which packs in the pads of their feet, this was a good path for the cats, and I was surprised that they hadn't rushed out as I had moved the last shovelful of snow barring their exit from under the sheltering floor of the trailer.

"C'mon, kitty, kitty, kitty," I called, but none came. Instead, there came again that piteous whine, unlike any I had ever heard, from even an injured or sick cat. It was almost a cry, thin and weak, ^{like} ~~as~~ ^{agony} though it were the final gasping effort of an expiring creature. Down on all fours I went. The snow drifting around but not under the body of the trailer, which was almost level because of the support under the tongue, had made a sealed cave. It was a good shelter. No wind could blow into it, and because it was closed, top, bottom and sides, like an igloo, it conserved body heat.

All the cats we then had were black, either completely or mostly, and there was no black to be seen in the snow-cave. My eyes adjusted to the dimness and again I heard that mysterious, frightened lament. Looking in the direction from which it seemed to come, I could just make out the orange of Oskar's bill. I was astounded! He had stayed there all night and allowed himself to be snowed in!

"Let's go," I encouraged him, grateful he was alive. "Come on out and I'll feed you."

Nothing but a repetition of that most ungoose-like sound came from him. Then I remembered the time Mr. Orchard had given him his "bloody nose". The cry he had uttered then and this one were similar.

I should have identified it. Recognition told me he was afraid, not hurt. I felt better.

By whatever way and word I could conceive, I tried to entice the terrified goose out of his cave, but all he'd do was whine. He wasn't in pain. He wasn't shivering. He wasn't even lifting one foot at a time to remove it from the snow and warm it against his body, as I had seen other geese do. He just remained absolutely immobile, not even the end of a feather stirring, reiterating his strange confession of bewilderment.

As I rose to try a new tack, snow from the sides of the trench I had dug filled my ears, fell inside all my collars, and left me wetter than before.

Bread was his special goodie, so I got a half-dozen slices, figuring one or two near him would be enough to trigger his gluttony, an overwhelming emotion with Oskar. Down on my belly in the deep snow I went again. Neatly, I skimmed the bread a foot or two in front of him. He didn't budge.

By this time I was angry, and the damp chill of the snow, now also through my trousers and cotton gloves, didn't lengthen my patience.

"You damn sissy, come out here!" I commanded, but in vain.

Fighting to control my temper, I lay there in the snow and thought. Maybe the sight of more bread would make his mouth water, I thought, considering myself cunning. So I carefully laid a path of bread under and from the trailer to the step of the house, each neatly planted in the middle of the path. It was a complete waste of time. He was so frightened, he was literally paralyzed by fear.

When all of my temptations failed, I tried losing my temper, which, already at the exploding point, required no effort at all. It blew. It followed no logical thought process. It just burst out, its heartiness inspired by my anger and frustration. I yelled, cursed, threw snowballs at him as best I could from a prone position, cursed again, waved at him, and finally gave up, limp with frustration. He just stayed there, not even blinking an eye, terror-stricken and motionless.

A Hobson's choice confronted me: he could stay there and freeze or I'd have to flatten myself even further in that cold snow and snake in after him. My mind told me to let the stubborn rascal stay there and, if he ^{were} was suffering, to just suffer more until that, if not temptation, overcame his silly fear. Imagine! A goose whose entire ancestry is steeped in cold, whose progenitors had flown thousands of miles from the comfort of subtropical climes and abundant feed to have their young in the Arctic, immobilized - paralyzed by his first sight of snow! But my heart would not allow me to return to the tempting comfort of our home. There was no choice, for I'd have shivered and chilled every time I thought of him, and I knew my mind would have not a moment's peace. So I flattened myself in the snow and, my clothing becoming even more sodden, I wriggled in after him.

Not until I grabbed him by the neck and started backing out did he move. And then all he did was resist. Honking loudly in protest, he braced his feet and tried to use his wings to back up. Each time he raised them to power the downstroke which supplies the power for flight, he hit the floor of the trailer, but the pain didn't deter

him. I had to fight him all the way out. Meanwhile, my pants legs ^{scooped up} became snow collectors as I withdrew. When finally I could stand again, really wet and cold all over, I disgustedly deposited him ahead of me in the path I had dug. He had no place to go but to the back step, where warm food was waiting for him and the cats. But he didn't go. He would not budge. He just stood there. It was all I could do to keep from booting him, but I didn't. By this time I was apoplectic with rage, but I was also beginning to feel a little sorry for him. Never had I seen a creature who could but wouldn't move at all in snow, not even to seek food or shelter. But that was Oskar. There was no other like him, of whatever kind. Impatiently, I again seized his neck, probably more vigorously than necessary, and carried him to the step, which was entirely clear of snow.

As though none of this had happened, he joyously abandoned himself to the warm food, chortling small guttural honks of joy to himself as he wolfed it down. Before removing my wet clothing, I dug a path to the outbuilding closest to our house, the former goatbarn, which had been converted to storage and ^{so} appointed, ^{that} so we now call it, the "cat house". Baskets and boxes ^{with} peatmoss and sawdust bedding, are scattered in it for the cats. So out the lane and down the steps I dug, my occasional flashes of ill temper helping to warm me every time I thought of Oskar's total and unreasoning fear of the snow.

All day long he remained on the step. The snow didn't melt and he didn't move. He was neither uncomfortable nor unhappy. There was food and water, a door to knock on, and occasionally he'd see us. That seemed to be all he wanted. He didn't even bother to torment the cats who joined him as soon as the path reached their ^{sanctuary} ~~hiding~~ place.

Oskar was content, as long as he wasn't forced into more intimate association with the snow. He could live with it, but not in it.

Sometime during the night he screwed up enough courage to move around a bit. Between him and the cats and dog, all the bread I had scattered was gone, and he was again under the trailer.

"This time you'll come out yourself," I told him as I walked past on other chores.

Soon Dick Johnson came past on his tractor, with his snow-blade on the front. Without even asking, he plowed a neighborly roadway for us, wide enough for the car. Hearing him, I came out of the house and started the motor. When he had cleared the snow away from behind it, I backed up, and he plowed out the front. Happy not to have all this ^{additional} shoveling to do, I thanked Dick and returned to the warmth of the house.

Only later did I realize that again Oskar was snowed in! Out I went and shoveled away the heap pushed into the path ~~I had dug~~ by the tractor's blade. All day Oskar stayed there, and I let him. Again I threw bread to him. That night it was gone, but Oskar wasn't. Knowing that the snow didn't hurt him, I let him work out his own psychiatric problem. It took two days, but when he wanted water, he overcame his fear and waddled slowly out, as though still fearing that somehow the snow would hurt him. He wasn't at all ~~un~~happy about it. Each step was a wary one, as though when he put his foot down, there'd be nothing solid underneath it. Once that foot was planted, he moved the other in the same fashion. It was a ridiculous sight, as only Oskar could be ridiculous, to see that big goose pick his way around as though each step threatened a disaster, never learning when disaster didn't ^{strike} occur that there was no danger.

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He never really adjusted to snow. That storm thawed and disappeared into the earth and creeks and another, much lighter, came a week or two later. He again holed up under the trailer, but this time he made his own path. To the door of our house, to the step, or at least to the lane leading there, you might think, knowing how smart Oskar could be. But he didn't. His path was not the ten feet to the lane. It was four or five times as long and lead to nowhere! He trod out his path during the night as the snow fell. By his engineering, it was parallel to the lane, parallel to the back of the house, and ended against a fence.

Disgusted as I thought he could never again disgust me, I determined that if the snow piled up to the height of his back I'd do no shoveling for him. He'd come out alone or starve. There was too much snow I had to shovel without wasting time on him. I shoveled paths to the buildings and for the car. Hours later, when I finished, he was still under the trailer, and he was making no complaint.

Softening just a little, I tossed a trail of bread from the edge of the trailer to the lane and left him alone. It was almost nightfall before he screwed up enough courage to wade through the eight-inch snow to seek nourishment.

He never learned to like the snow, as our other waterfowl had. Especially the ducks, who play and mess in it like happy little boys setting up a mud-pie factory. When one would think their feet would freeze in the wet cold, ducks will flap and scratch their way through a heavy snow to where instinct tells them water lies. They will then putter, scratch, root with their bills and squirm their bodies and

rotate their wings in it until they make a regular wallow. Unlike hogs, who are content to lie in comfort in their wallows, ducks play in theirs, with little regard for temperature or seeming discomfort. Cold seems to trouble them but little. They are so happy in water that they will float on a pond until, with the cold of the winter night, they are securely frozen into its surface.

Our geese have always been more sedate about their winters. Never as playful as ducks, they nonetheless always shunned protection in the winter. Given a choice between entering a building to eat and going without food, they have always gone hungry when the first snow covered the ground, hid their natural food, and prevented our feeding them outdoors. We finally had to pave a concrete feeding strip under the overhang of the barn, for we could not abide the patient waiting of the geese for the snow to melt. Although they are creatures of habit and recalled from year to year that pens in the barn were always open to them, and that there were always troughs of grain awaiting them in the dry warmth of the building, they never entered it voluntarily. Driving them in each time it snowed was a nasty chore that raised my blood pressure, wasted my time and usually ended with my clothing wet from falling in the snow as I slithered around trying to head them into the doorway they, with seeming stupidity, ran past.

I have never deemed geese silly, and even to myself I never called them that. But each winter as I slipped and slid, fell in the muck and got myself filthy and wet in the always frustrating effort to drive them to the food they would not seek voluntarily, I often and aloud cursed them as "stupid geese". Yet they were not.

Their heritage is one of unfettered freedom. Their progenitors had roamed the northern and southern hemispheres from the Arctic and Antarctic regions to the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn as instinct urged them, always living in the open, never nesting in caves or tree hollows. They are birds of the open air and were true to those instincts by which they had, through the countless eons of evolution, survived and prospered. Stolid and substantial creatures that they are, the philosophy of "what was good for my father is good enough for me" is the unarticulated but practiced way of their life and the key to a survival over which they sometimes, as on our farm, no longer had control.

Oskar, however, who never believed he was a goose anyway, was untrue to his heritage. He began with a great fear of the snow that was not part of his inherited instincts. Grudgingly, under my pushing, he gradually got to where he didn't fear it until it was as high as his back. But he never got to like it or to where he would just ignore it. Later I was to regret overcoming his fear and dislike, for it was to prove his undoing.