

Chapter XXI

In Memoriam

We have not forgotten Oskar, and we cannot. But there was a beam of brightness that came back to our existence beginning several days later: we were not alone in missing him. Many people stopped off and asked where he was, having missed him as they drove or walked past.

Only hours after the police were here, snow began again to fall. Added to what remained of the previous storm, there was a foot of snow on the ground the morning after we reported his kidnapping. Nonetheless, that day four of Oskar's friends struggled through the snow to our house. In succeeding days, many more stopped off. Two were children. All asked the same question in almost the same words: "Where is Oskar? We don't see him." Almost all added either, "He used to watch us as we drove past, as though he were custodian of your property," or "He walked out to meet us as we walked past. He seemed to be saying 'Hello'."

Eight-year-old Ralph Miles was the first to miss Oskar and the first to stop. Ralph lived about a half-mile to the west of us. He usually went by at least once daily on his way to the grocery for his mother. Often when he did, he visited with us. He liked animals and played with the cats and dog and visited socially with Oskar, with

whom he was fascinated, for never had he seen such a human animal. Ralph was the most befreckled boy in the area, almost a caricature of the movie version of the growing-boy imp. Only Ralph was no imp. He was a very fine, warm and sensitive young man whose face was always creased in a smile that got broader when he talked, a little one-sided, as though he had a chew of tobacco in his little mouth, which, of course, he didn't. He had raised and loved his own animals, including some of our ducks, and as happens, some had wandered off and some had been killed by predators. Naturally, each loss was a blow to him, a pain he long felt. But he said, and I believe him, that he missed Oskar, who was not his but was his friend, more than any of his own.

Ralph asked daily, "Have you heard anything from Oskar?" He was always hopeful when he arrived. When we told him we had not were the only times we ever saw the little fellow stop smiling. Then he would smile again and with forced faith announce, "You will."

A few weeks later Ralph visited us after dark. He asked where I was and my wife told him I was catching ducks. He found me just as I had crated the last of that shipment. It was going to Elizabeth's country, where I hoped boys and girls would get as much pleasure from them as I had when, as a boy, I saw the strange and wonderful animals from her Africa in our own zoos. There were only a half-dozen ducks in the crate, but with the snow still making walking difficult, I welcomed the youngster's offer of help. We walked back toward the house slowly, so as not to drop the ^{crated} ducks and shake them up.

After the boyish small talk, Ralph again asked, "Heard anything

'bout Oskar?" I told him we hadn't, and he acknowledged, "That's what your wife said." He must have hoped against hope that I had some secret knowledge Lil didn't have, in a boy's way refusing to believe what it pained him to believe.

I cleared my throat and tried to tell him the truth as we saw it, about this and countless other unpleasantnesses yet ahead of him.

"Not much chance we'll ever see Oskar again, Ralph," I said. "As you know, we are both very unhappy about it, especially my wife. But that's the way we think it is. We think whoever stole him stole him for keeps. They're not going to give him back, and they're not going to let us know who they are because they'd go to jail if we find out. Now there are two things we can do in this kind of a situation. We can face the facts, look at things as they really are, and sooner or later get over it, or we can keep hoping some morning we'll get up and there will be Oskar, just like he was never gone. But if you make believe, sooner or later the time comes when you know you can't make believe any more. Meanwhile, all the time you're pretending, you're hurting, because deep down inside you know the truth, and when you keep hoping for something that will not happen, when you finally can't fool yourself anymore and have to admit to yourself that whatever it is that you want to happen just is not going to happen, then it hurts, and it hurts worse. That's the way we feel about Oskar. We know, and we're going to forget as much as we can forget, and in the end it will hurt less."

We walked in silence, except for the crunching of the snow compacted under our feet and an occasional quack or hiss from the ducks as they tried to push through the stout welded wire of which

their crate was made. We got to the house without exchanging another word and put the duck crate on top of Trash to keep the bottom out of the snow and dry. Almost at that very moment the car from the Embassy arrived, took the ducks and left. Ralph came ^{into} the house with me for a cup of hot chocolate. He had been silent except for the minimum requirements of politeness when I introduced him to the men from the Embassy. He made no comment, only opened his eyes wider, when I told him these men were from Africa, for real.

He had kicked off his boots and was sitting at the table when he broke his silence. He had his own formula for solving the problem.

"You know, they're not gonna kill him." We knew he meant Oskar.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Cause nobody could kill Oskar. Nobody could ever eat 'im."

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My own conviction is less firm and unshakable than Ralph's, but I do believe that if Oskar was not slaughtered, somebody was sorry for a long time that he wasn't. Until that somebody came to realize that Oskar was a human goose, the punishment undoubtedly more than fit the crime. The crime bore its own built-in punishment, as the kidnapper already knows.