

Chapter

Finale Ultimo

"We'll have another Oskar," we told ourselves, like the young couple mourning the death of a child who try to assuage their grief with the thought that they will conceive another, yet knowing all the time that, while they might have another child and love and cherish it, it would never replace the one lost, for while the genes and chromosomes may be the same, the character isn't, and the thing that distinguishes each living thing from all others is its individuality, its separate identity.

We were too old. We should have known better. But we did plan it.

"Phone Henry Wessel," Lil demanded that very first day, "and tell him we'd like to get one of his goslings as soon as it hatches."

"Not with all this snow on the ground, Lil," I demurr^ed. "And let's wait until he has some." In truth, it was too early. The breeding season had not yet started.

But we did talk to Henry, and he did promise. Only, things conspired to prevent it. We could get a gosling easily, but we wanted one the very moment it was born, so that Lil could imprint it, so she would be the first living, moving thing it saw, the one to warm and comfort it, to care for its needs, to mother it.

"Sure," said Henry. "Any time you want it."

While Nature was readying the geese for their annual campaign of self-perpetuation, we talked it over more objectively and decided we would wait until toward the end of the breeding season. We'd get one from a late hatch, when the weather was more congenial, when we could leave it outside sooner, when it could enjoy the sun and the grass and be unconfined at an earlier age, at the first possible safe moment.

In both 1964 and 1965 Henry had his own troubles. The Friday before Easter 1964, while he was off on an errand, the microswitch on his incubator stuck. The heat stayed on constantly instead of cutting off automatically as soon as the temperature reached $98\frac{1}{2}$ degrees. During the several hours he was away, the eggs cooked. He lost several hundred. He had so few goslings that year, he didn't have enough for his own needs.

The next year his loss was more painful. Wild animals got into his flock and killed all the young and some of their parents.

But in 1965 we had good luck. The first ~~staxxxx~~ Canadian geese born on our farm married and settled down to a family. Mr. and Mrs. Meadow Honker, as we called the newlyweds, had five babies. Nervous and inexperienced, the Meadows got off to an uncertain start. Mrs. Meadow Honker laid her first three eggs before deciding to relocate her nest. She was well settled on her new nest and the three eggs in it had started incubating before we discovered the three abandoned ones. We gave them to a friend, who hatched two of them in an incubator. Mrs. Meadow brought forth her three. They began like carbon copies of Oskar.

When they were only two weeks old, they found ways I never discovered for getting underneath the fence into our neighbor's pasture. Daily I had to catch and return them to their worried parents whose anxious presence on our side of the fence was the tocsin that called me to this unconstructive but necessary chore. Daily they would march back behind or escorted by the senior Meadows who, by some devious wild-goose reasoning, were angry with me, as though I were responsible for the deficiencies of their young.

Tiny and weak as they were, the grass was then already higher than their backs. It was a real struggle for them to march through it, for every blade was a barrier they had to knock down. They couldn't walk between them or around them. The grass was thick. Thin as the stems were to large animals, to such small creatures, they were a real obstacle, like a tangle of briars to a person. They couldn't cross the meadow before exhaustion forced them to rest. So, I had to mow the meadow. But we had no tractor, and I had to use the lawnmower. That exhausted me. But every evening I went into the meadow with the lawnmower, cutting a path that widened daily, from the gate into the pasture to the far fence and then along the fence, from one end to the other. Lawnmowers are not designed for

this kind of work. The grass was too tall and too coarse. It choked the mower. I spent half the time cranking it and the rest inching along, raising it in

haste every time it labored.

I got no sympathy from Lil. "Better you poop out than they," she said. "They're babies; it can hurt them."

The three babies rapidly adjusted to life behind our house.

(Picture)

of Meadows

They enjoyed it so much they came to the gate and begged us to open ^{we did.} it. And they responded so beautifully, so willingly and completely, it was as though ordained. It looked like we had three young Oskars, "wild" and of a different color, but a trio with which to replace that one. But as they grew - and they grew very rapidly - it became clear they were not going to be Oskars. They were just too good. Never once did they give us any trouble. They understood every word Lil spoke and obeyed her instantly. Not once did they venture on the pike. They never hurt a single kitten, didn't chase the dog and, in short, were so well mannered they gave not a single problem.

Perhaps there was one exception: they didn't want to go back into the field with the geese, their own parents or the others. They wanted to be with people. But except for that one flattering failing they were the best behaved of all possible youngsters.

Even in eating. Not once did they seek to intimidate the cats. They just sat at the same table. Not as guests, you understand, but as members of the cat family. Greedy members, who ^{gobbled} ~~wel~~fed ^{down} the food faster than the cats could, but the cats did not have to be fed separately. Only Sister of all the cats showed even the slightest apprehension, but she sat at the same table.

well, Not quite "sat". It would be more precise to say she lay at the table, for she'd squeeze between the cats and geese, low to the ground as she could get, hook a morsel and pull it out with a paw, eat it a short distance from the pan, and then return for another.

(Picture)

We soon realized, like those blessed with children, that no two are alike. These were sweet and charming, and we loved them dearly.

They were good, kind and well behaved. They were not Oskars.

We could do almost anything with them. ~~I can't imagine any~~
^{cannot be imagined.}
 living things being more tractable. Aside from the occasional reluctance to return to the goose society for the night, we had no problems at all with them. They were so easily handled I decided to try training them for a possible TV commercial.

Before they had a single feather, they were eating cereal from a bowl. Their preference was for Cheerios and Corn Flakes (the so-called "country" kind); least of all they liked "Rice Krispies". Undeterred by the inherent abuse of Madison Avenue, Lil liked Andrea Kaufman's suggestion and named them "Snap", "Crackle" and "Pop". They grew and prospered, thriving on a variety of foods, human, cat, dog and goose. Hundreds of people fussed over them, but their heads were not turned.

That Memorial Day we had a nice little surprise. In the middle of the day, Ralph Miles's father knocked at the door. They had moved away a year earlier and we hadn't seen Ralph in all that time.

"We're going on a little picnic," he said, "but Ralph really wants to be with you. Do you mind if he visits for an hour or so?"

Of course we didn't. We were fond of the little fellow. He was all smiles as he came into the house, but that wasn't unusual; rather, it was usual, for Ralph was always smiling. His face was made for smiling, and was always twisted into one, varying only for emphasis or to express a happiness greater than normal.

"Wouldja like my picture?" Ralph asked.

"Indeed, I would, Ralph," Lil assured him.

"It's a school picture," he explained as he handed her the

little color photo. "Got one for you, too, if you want it," he told me.

"I'd like it very much, Ralph," I replied, "and we appreciate your thinking of us very much, too. But pictures cost money. I can use my wife's."

"No, I had two extra ones made, one for each of you."

So we each have all of Ralph's countless freckles in full color, enhanced by the joy he always reflected, the sparkle and satisfaction with life he always showed.

He played and visited with Snap, Crackle and Pop. At first, he was very much impressed, for he knew these were wild geese and usually people shot and ate them instead of associating with them. But when they failed to bite or in any way harass him, when they never did anything wrong or mischievous, he grew tired of them and stayed with us. Only once did he mention Oskar. Had we heard anything? Did we have any different notion of what had happened? In his boy's mind the kidnapping of his friend and ours was too heinous a crime to have ever been committed, and he sought assurance no person was capable of such iniquity. We told him nothing had happened to change our minds or that of the police or the insurance company.

"I sure miss him," Ralph said, simply and fully. "Never knew anyone like him." With that he had said it all and for the rest of the day, the hour having already stretched into the darkness of night, before his family returned, he never again uttered that name.

When his family did come back, Ralph said goodbye and ran to the car to join them, to tell all the other kids and his mother about Snap, Crackle and Pop. His father drew us aside and explained that,

for the entire year of their residence in another community, Ralph had been pestering him to bring him to see us. "He just can't forget that goose," Mr. Miles said, with the perplexity of a parent who cannot understand what is bugging his child. Mr. Miles had never known Oskar.

"If you want to know just how much that goose meant to Ralph," he said, "then let me tell you that we all went fishing today, at Ralph's favorite hole at the Mouth of Monocacy," referring to the confluence of that river with the Potomac, a spot much prized by local fishermen. "We planned this trip for a week or so. Much as kids like picnics, and much as Ralph loves fishing, from the first he kept asking could he stay with you since we were coming so close. Of course, I was afraid he'd be in your way."

We assured him Ralph was no bother, that we had missed him and were glad he wanted to see us, too, and that, as a matter of fact, we found it flattering.

Satisfied his son had been no burden, Mr. Miles got into the car and they drove off, Ralph hanging from the window waving violently with both hands. He was, I think, a little wet in the eye.

We were, too. Much as we missed Oskar, we were touched that this little boy, with all the delights and distractions of youth in the country, had never forgotten our goose and found a day walking the haunts of his gone friend more enticing than one on the river.

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Work on another book took me to New York frequently in that period. The next week, while I was gone, Snap disappeared. One morning, when Lil went out to feed them, he just wasn't at the gate