

Chapter XV

The Cult of Oskar

[EXTRA SPACE]

Considering his antisocial proclivities, it is difficult to understand how a "Cult of Oskar" could get started. Yet it thrived. Even the intimidated children who wouldn't go near him loved him devotedly, like Mark, who wouldn't leave his own home for a visit without bread. Those who didn't learn immediately that Oskar was a big but perceptive bluffer usually wound up loving him from the distance. Some adults never overcame a lingering distrust, even though I reasoned with them and explained that Oskar respected a brave front. No matter how young or small the child who faced up to him or ignored his attacks - and some did - Oskar thereafter never treated him as less than equal and never bit him aggressively. Some children pretended Oskar didn't hurt. In fact, he never did really hurt a child. He tailored his bites to the size of the child, wee ^{NIP} pinches for the smallest, and never more than a ^{pinch} nip for the older ones.

In order to teach children not to fear him, I would demonstrate how gentle he could be. With a slice of bread in my teeth, I would squat down and let him take it. Oscar never bit the hand or lips that were feeding him.

"Watch how gentle he is," I once told beautiful six-year-old Elizabeth who was visiting us with her father and some of his associates.

"You just hold it in your hand and he takes it from you." Oskar gracefully accepted the bread from my mouth and I handed Elizabeth a slice. Then I turned to the barrel to get some for the grownups.

"Look! look!" I heard her father explain. I turned just in time to see Oskar deftly snatch the bread from between Elizabeth's smiling lips. Elizabeth and her father were both delighted for, as I had often observed, parents got not only their own enjoyment from Oskar, but also the pleasure of their children's happiness. Thus, grownups were twice made

(Picture)

happy, once by Oskar and once by their children's joy.

Was ^{it a good thing} ~~I~~ glad Oskar was on his good behavior that day! Elizabeth's father is an ambassador, and in an instant Oskar might have caused a diplomatic incident! And a real one, too, with proof. The ambassador was snapping away with his automatic "Minox" camera - "My spy camera," ^{seriously} he called it.

Oskar was democratic. He accepted an ambassador as freely as ordinary people. He did not discriminate against military people, either. There are an Air Force General and a Canadian Colonel among the military members of the "cult of Oskar". The colonel regards Oskar as so human that he cannot abide ~~my~~ feeding him stale bread. On his visits the colonel either purchases a loaf of fresh, people bread in Washington or stops at our local grocery for one.

"How can you give him stale bread?" the colonel often complained. And on his departure he would surrender the unconsumed portion of the loaf with the admonition, "Now this is not for you; it's for Oskar."

At least one CIA man was among Oskar's fans. I say "at least" because you never know who is in the CIA or doing what. We will call

this man "Smith" because that is his correct name, and it is one that requires no alteration to preserve his anonymity. Every Thanksgiving season we would see Mr. Smith when he drove up from Washington to get a Thanksgiving goose. Oskar fascinated him, possibly because in his everyday life he *associated with* ~~grew to fancy~~ odd characters. When Christmas came, it was not we who received the Smiths' Christmas card that year. It was addressed to Oskar and bore the message, in a flourishing, elaborate script, "Oskar, you old rascal -".

Even on Hallowe'en Oskar got cards from his devotees. Judy and Darlene Martin, 10 and 12 years old, respectively, are two charming little girls who lived in our tenant-house with their mother, Ella Mae, who helped us. Oskar never could buffalo those girls, and the girls developed a close attachment to him. Once he learned he didn't frighten them, he treated them as equals.

Friday nights we treated the girls to a cookout of their own - no grownups. It was a real, old-time, western-movie type cookout. No fancy grills, no charcoal, the real thing - a wood fire and home-made wire spits. Their cookout was right outside our kitchen window where, with their mother, we ate adult food. I made the fire for the girls and they did the rest.

There was always a streak of pyromaniac in Oskar, as will become clear. Also, the girls were his equals and his friends. So every Friday evening, uninvited, he joined their barbecue. His participation began with a mixture of curiosity at what was going on and fascination with fire. Little by little, he became a moocher, cadging or stealing pieces of hot-dog and scraps of hamburger, even on

one occasion entangling himself with a toasted marshmallow. He never ate much and he was, indeed, the only goose ~~I have ever known~~ who ate meat or any hot food. I believe his wanting to eat with the girls was either a desire for togetherness or a will to establish that equality works two ways, and that he was also the equal of them, since he had already acknowledged they were his equal.

During the second or third of these barbecues, Lil had occasion to pass the window while the girls were shrieking with delight. Because they were always happy at their cook-outs and always expressing their happiness with such girlish exclamations of pleasure, we usually ignored their squeals. ^{This time} Lil backed up, without turning, to look out the window again, as though some ^{power} force had suddenly stopped her and forced her straight back in the same steps she had taken.

"Look at this, would you?" she whispered hoarsely, with such disbelief that Ella Mae and I bounded from the table together. "Unbelievable! Even for Oskar, simply unbelievable!"

Her opinion was not exaggerated. The sight that greeted us was a surprise even after our long experiences with him. ^P Oskar was tending the fire!

Not just make-believe, but like a boy scout, and he knew what he was doing!

As the fire burned down, he grasped the unignited end of a stick of wood in his bill, lifted it and pushed it into the center, over which the girls were cooking, where it would flame up, to his delight and that of the girls. Every time he advanced a piece of wood and relinquished his hold, he would honk in glee and do a little side-to-side dance step, shifting his weight first to one leg and then to

the other. He flapped his wings at the same time, and the flapping fanned the fire, which would then blaze up again and he would be dancingly, honkingly happy all over again.

The strange thing is that he didn't just fool with the fire because of his mania. He tended it only when it needed tending.

"Girls," Ella Mae said sternly, "be careful. Oskar will catch fire."

"Don't worry, Mama," Darlene assured her. "He knows what he's doing. Anyway, we wouldn't want him to get hurt."

"He's always careful," Judy added.

"Always? What do you mean, 'Always'?" Lil asked.

It then turned out that from the very beginning Oskar had appointed himself fireman, once I started it and disappeared into the house for my own meal.

He never did catch fire, either. And Judy and Darlene never forgot him. The family moved to Virginia that fall, in time for the opening of school. Weekly we received chatty letters from the girls, each of which ended with all the blank space at the bottom of the last page filled with rows of "X's" and contained a greeting to Oskar. When the girls got busier in school and with new friends, they wrote less frequently. But each time Ella Mae wrote they asked her to include their greetings to us and always to Oskar.

We didn't let them know when Oskar was kidnapped.

(Card picture)

That fall we got a different mailing from each of the girls. Each was addressed to "Mr. Oskar H. Pump-ernickle, Coq d'Or Farm, Hyattstown, Maryland." Each contained a Hallowe'en card.

The gone Oskar was not forgotten.