

# Owlbeard and Me

by Jeannie Haughton, 2023

'A fox went out on a chilly night, prayed for the moon to give him light,' we sing in class. 'It is an old English folk song from the 15th century and is now sung by folksingers all over the world,' says our teacher. 'He didn't mind their quack! Quack! Quack!' the others bellow, 'and the legs all dangling down-o, down-o, down-o.' I hide the tears in my eyes. The big red fox dug into our chicken coop last night.

Moeder is very cross with me.

'We should honour the chicken,' she says, 'it survived the fox-'

'But died of shock and sadness,' I yell, 'I'm never eating chicken again. They were my friends. Now Owlbeard is all alone.'

'We cannot afford to waste food,' says Papa grabbing the meat off my plate and stuffing it into his mouth. I am hoping he chokes on it.

Staring out the window I see the distant shape of my little green boat against the shed. After the meal I go to check on my bantam. Inside a cage inside another big cage, poor Owlbeard is huddling in one corner and looking miserable. He lets out a cackly squawk whenever the gate outside slams back against the fence and it is windy. I take him out and put him on my lap- his feathers and warmth under my fingers settle me. We both know how long and dark the night ahead will be.

I'm not going back into the house again. It smells of roast chicken.

'Dip the paddle.' Last summer my Opa had handed it to me very carefully, holding my green canoe close to his boat with his other hand. 'One hand over the ball on the end, and one hand down near the blade. Hold tight because that mischievous water sprite will whisk it out of your grasp, and then- THEN you will be in very hot water.'

His eyes twinkled as he watched my every move. Opa always sees me. He sees into me better than anyone else. I hoped he thought my jittery breaths were because it was freezing. I was wearing my new jacket that Moeder had saved so hard for. She even stitched Papa's old woollen cardigan inside it to make it warmer. I remember I was more worried that day about ruining the jacket by falling into the lake, than I was about actually capsizing the canoe.

'Remember the paddle is not an oar. It is not a part of the vessel. A paddle is an extension of your arm. Now you have a long, strong arm.'

A long red arm, that I learned to dip on both sides of the boat, so it didn't go round in circles on the calm lake. My Opa's boat had two oars and he sat facing the wrong way, so I was pleased to be in the stubby green canoe that used to belong to my Papa, with only one paddle to worry about. Later that year the lake froze over, and we skated onto the ice mirror that I had once paddled around.

Today my Opa's words are filling my head. 'My house is only two towns down the trekvaart, Jan.' I am in his boat, and he is rowing us in the canal. 'It is a long way to walk along the towpath, but when you are older and stronger you will paddle your canoe to the landing near my house. I will row beside you. What an adventure that will be!'

'Dangle your hand into the water. Feel the swirl and the push and the flow. It wants to play with you. It is gentle but very determined; the eddies will carry you into whirling spirals; the current will carry you through the locks and past the ships and out to sea if you let it, Jan.'

I am not on the lake; I am not with my Opa; I am alone. Unless you count a chicken. Usually, chickens are very important to me. I have decided Owlbeard will stay on the little island near Opa- it has no foxes. I will set Owlbeard free. I feel very light and certain this is the best thing to do. But he isn't giving me good advice like Opa so I'm not sure if chickens do count.

My bantam is tied into a flour sack and is stuffed near my feet. Sometimes he squawks so loudly I nearly tip out of the canoe. Sometimes he is so quiet I poke him with my foot to see if he is alive. It is still very early, still a bit misty and I am already getting a blister from paddling. I am holding the paddle too tightly, but I grip it even tighter. Using my long red arm as a rudder behind the canoe, I let the current carry us along.

Looking back to where we've come from, I can see the smaller canal has joined a much larger one. There are bridges and boats and houses on both sides and the canoe is out in the middle. It's just Owlbeard and me.