

Owls

By Zach Smith

“Nope, I have no idea.”

“You do realize that she’s been missing for 36 hours, and you were the last person seen with her? It’s also been reported that you had a nasty break up, which doesn’t look good as far as allegations.”

“Yes, I’m aware. Trust me. We got angry. We said some things. But I never touched her. Listen, have you searched Pohick Bay? Clerissa always visited the rookery there. In fact, before we broke up, she wanted me to go with her.”

The officer raised his eyebrows. “We’ll stop there tonight.”

“Wilson Spring Trail,” I added. “That was our trail.”

“Alright, Mr. Silvester. If we find her, you’ll be the first to know.”

I left the station with my hood up; it concealed my face better, my cheeks already sore from the cold. Of course I was worried. For the past two days, my brain had been nothing but unhinged. It felt like an out-of-body experience, where every word from Saturday night’s break up whirled by on a carousel, while everything else in my life was noise. Just noise.

When I had awoken on Sunday morning, I wanted to send Clerissa a text with my list of unvoiced grievances. I even wrote them down, filed each to a point, and organized them accordingly. But thankfully, I never sent them. The police would have hounded me for that, even claimed it to be circumstantial evidence, and I might not be walking home right now were that the case. Each step felt cleansing, like venom shed from my blood. The more I walked, the less angry I became. How can anyone stay mad after something like this?

My eyes, blurry as I stared at the pavement, were quick to find movement in the trees. I stopped, and when I saw her at the edge of the forest, my heart beat faster. I don’t know what made

me think she was female. There, with opal eyes in the semi-darkness, was a barn owl. She ruffled her feathers and hooted loudly. She didn't seem preoccupied with much, only me. Perhaps she was enjoying the twilight, readying herself for the appearance of an unsuspecting vole. I imagined how the rodent would feel, trapped in her claws, but then again, maybe that was a good thing. The vole would cease to worry after its eyes went blank; I, on the other hand, would carry a scar for the rest of my life if something happened to Clerissa.

The following morning, I buttered my toast and ran out the door. The bus was nearly at the stop, and I wasn't going to steal my mom's Volvo again. I slammed the door, and turning to run, my foot crunched on something beneath. I lifted my heel to find owl pellets, round and furry with a mixture of broken bones. Totally nasty. I didn't think much of it until that night, when I found the culprit right outside my window. She was beautiful, the same owl as before, but hey, there was an entire forest that wouldn't mind her upchuck. She didn't have to slam my porch.

I took some Nyquil and waited for sleep to come. Her eyes were yellow now. They reminded me of a lighthouse as she turned her head clockwise, counterclockwise, and back again. At one point during the night, I awoke to find that she was gone. The branch was empty, but my subconscious wasn't. Nightmares invaded my dreams, each of them ending with claws, violent screams, and my bones piled on the porch.

My eyes opened. The clock read 3 am. I shuddered beneath my blankets, and as my head turned, turned slowly, I caught sight of her outside the window. Her eyes were golden brown, just as I remembered, highlighted by the blond of her hair. Her knuckles were white against the wood. She was human enough, though her lips revealed the sharpness of her teeth; feathers seemed to protrude from her legs and fingers.

I got to the window just as she did. I managed to keep it closed, though her hands were pressed to the glass, forcing it upward. Suddenly, when I thought she would overpower me, Clerissa

hissed and flew away. I watched as she sailed above the trees, disappearing into the bracken. She was headed for Pohick Bay.

I jumped a mile high at the sound of the phone. I grabbed it without hesitation, my voice terse as I said, "This is Robert."

"Mr. Silvester," came the bleak reply. "We need you down at the station. We've just found a body, though it's disfigured. We need you to identify whether or not it belonged to Clerissa."

My thoughts abandoned all claim to reason. I turned the key in my mom's Volvo, and off I went, speeding down the highway as my mind turned endlessly. On and on it went, the phone call and harpy woman spinning around endlessly, while everything else was noise. Just noise.