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BARRED OWL

An excerpt from the collection Out of the Woods.

I headed for the bar, hoping to meet a woman. The problem with dating in a college town is that young women are too young, and the older ones usually have kids. I've dated single mothers, but it's hard to know if you like the woman or the whole package. A ready-made home can look awful good. Women with kids tell me it's just as tricky on them. Men figure they're either hunting a full-time daddy or some overnight action with nothing in between. Still, we all go to the bar, men and women alike, hoping to meet somebody. Occasionally one of us will pair off with a new face.

This night was the usual crowd, my friends of seven years. I drank straight shots and at last call ordered a couple of doubles. I'd started out drinking to feel good but by the end I was drinking not to feel anything. In the morning I woke on my couch. During the drive home I'd had to look away from the road to prevent the center stripe from splitting. I'd fixed that by straddling it.

Four cigarettes and a cup of coffee later I felt alive enough to visit Tarvis, a fellow Kentuckian at large in the West. We had recently met. He'd asked for help skinning an animal, I figured it was a poached deer. He lived below town on a dirt road beside the river. I veered around a dead coyote with a tire trench cut through its guts. There were a couple of trailers with add-ons and a few small houses. Some had outdoor toilets. At Tarvis's house I realized why the area seemed both strangely foreign and familiar. It was a little version of eastern Kentucky, complete with woodpiles, cardboard windows, and a lousy road. The only thing missing was hills.

I'd woke up still drunk and now that I was getting sober, the hangover was coming on. I wished I'd brought some beer. I got nervous that Tarvis had killed his deer in a hard place and needed help dragging it out of the brush. I didn't think I could take it. What I needed was to lie down for a while.

Tarvis came around the house from the rear.

“Hidy,” he said. “Ain’t too awful late, are ye?”

“Is it on the property?”

He led me behind the house to a line of cottonwoods overlooking the river. A large bag lay on a work table. Tarvis reached in the bag and very gently, as if handling eggs, withdrew an owl. The feathers on its chest made a pattern of brown and white—a barred owl. Its broad wings spanned four feet. The head feathers formed a widow’s peak between the giant eyes. It had a curved yellow beak and inch-long talons. Tarvis caressed its chest.

“Beaut, ain’t it?” he said. “Not a mark to her.”

“You kill it?”

“No. Found it on the interstate. It hit a truck or something. Neck’s broke.”

The sun had risen above the trees, streaming heat and light against my face. Owls were protected by the government. Owning a feather was illegal, let alone the whole bird.

“I want this pelt,” Tarvis said.

“Never done a bird.”

“You’ve skinned animals out. Can’t be that big a difference.”

“Why don’t you do it yourself then?”

Tarvis backstepped as an expression close to guilt passed across his face.

“I never skinned nothing,” he said. “Nobody taught me on account of I never pulled the trigger. I was raised to it, but I just wasn’t able.”

I looked away to protect his dignity. His words charged me with a responsibility I couldn’t deny, the responsibility of Tarvis’s shame. Leaving would betray a confidence that had taken a fair share of guts to tell.

I felt dizzy, but I rolled my sleeves up, wishing for a beer. I began with the right leg. Surrounding the claws were feathers so dense and fine that they reminded me of fur. To prevent tearing the papery skin, I massaged it off the meat. Tarvis stood beside me. I held the owl’s body and slowly turned it, working the skin free. My armpits cooled from the breeze, and I realized I’d been sweating. I could smell the liquor in my skin. The hangover was beginning to lift. I snipped the cartilage and tendon surrounding the large wing bone, and carefully exposed the pink muscle. Feath-

ers scraped the plywood like a broom. The owl was giving itself to me, giving its feathered pelt and its greatest gift, that which separated it from us—the wings. In return I'd give it a proper burial.

There is an intensity to skinning, a sense of immediacy. Once you start, you must continue. Many people work fast to get it over with, but I like to take it slow. I hadn't felt this way in a long time and hadn't known I'd missed it.

I eased the skin over the back of the skull. Its right side was caved in pretty bad. The pelt was inside out, connected to the body at the beak. The reversed head still held the shape of the skull, which pushed into the skin of the mouth. It was as if the owl was kissing the shadow of its mate. I passed it to Tarvis. He held the slippery skull in one hand and gently tugged the skin free of the carcass.

"Get a shovel," I said.

Tarvis circled the house for a spade and dug a hole beneath a willow. I examined the bird—both legs, the skull, each wing, its neck and ribs—all were broken. Its head hung from several shattered vertebrae. I'd never seen a creature so clean on the outside and so tore up on the inside. It had died pretty hard.

I built a twig platform and placed the remains in the grave. Tarvis began to spade the dirt in. He tamped it down, mumbling to himself. I reversed the pelt so the feathers were facing out. The body cavity flattened itself. It was an empty skin, a pouch with wings that would never fly.

Hand-shaking is not customary among men in eastern Kentucky. We stood apart from one another and nodded, arms dangling, boots scuffing the dirt, as if our limbs were useless without work.

"Got any whiskey?" I said.

"Way I drank gave it a bad name. Quit when I left Kentucky."

"That's when I took it up."

"I started wearing workshirts after I moved here," he said. "Boots, hat, the whole works. Never did at home. Here they think I'm a tough guy, at home I was far from that."

"What makes you want that owl so bad?"

“It’s pure built to hunt. Got three ear holes. It can open and close each pupil separate from the other one. It flies silent. They ain’t a better hunter.”

“Well,” I said. “Reckon you know your owls.”

I drove to the bar for a few shots and thought about eating, but didn’t want to ruin a ten-dollar drunk with a five-dollar meal. I didn’t meet a woman and didn’t care. When the bar closed, a bunch of us bought six-packs and went to my house. I laid drunk through most of the week, thinking about Tarvis in the blurred space between hangover and the day’s first drink. Though I’d shown him how to skin, I had the feeling he was guiding me into something I’d tried to leave behind.