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OWL-WOMAN

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The brush moved purposefully, colours and tones shifted on the canvas. Rows of milk cartons, suburbs of them, proceeded in a masterful control of perspective. And overhanging this dreary scene was a besuited man arched, like a Minoan bull fighter, across the sky.

"It's like one of those mad yoga postures." Mike mused absently as he built up the light on the man's cheek. A tie fell over the leviathan's shoulder and became a road while a factory chimney issued malevolently from his loins. "A little heavy," Mike thought, "but to hell with subtlety!"

The brush went to the man's hands which were inordinately white and clawed at the earth. Then, quite suddenly, Mike lowered his arm and, taking a deep breath, stepped back a little.

His clear blue eyes narrowed as here refracted his concentration to take in both detail and broad scope. This painter's concentration had etched itself into his brow, creased by the years of effort to see the beyond that made sense of the images shaping themselves in front of him. This concentrated gaze seemed to be focused by his strong hooked nose and his richly sensual lips which always assumed a pursed puckered stance at such times.

Here was a face accustomed to both pain and joy, and it reflected the soulfulness which so often consumed Mike's spirit. On that day as he stood before the canvas, his cheeks were smudged with paint and shaggy with stubble and his strong features struggled with this disorderly mass that in some way represented the chaos his inner eye sought to penetrate.

"Not bad," he thought. The finer rendering of the carton houses contrasted well with the more expressive handling of the arched figure. Above the man was a luminous field of stars which seemed to have escaped from the human devilry below them. "But," Mike grinned, "the tower threatens them." Soon he would have it pouring out a deadly vapour which would begin to erode their celestial splendour.

And with that sanguine thought, the brush returned to the shadows around the feet. In this way, hand flitting here and there, an hour passed and then another.

It grew late and Mike's mood deepened.

He would have to start the corrosion of the stars soon but he was reluctant. A nameless fear hung around the fringes of his mind whenever he tried to focus on this fact. He knew that it was a logical extension of this modern myth of male dominion and destructiveness. The stars had to be touched. But not yet: he must wait.

This triumphal arch of humanity was to be his testament to the misery and depravity that he saw whenever he unveiled his artist's eye to the raw world that surround the his studio sanctuary. For Mike it was an artist's duty to capture what the heart saw and not allow romantic delusions to taint his images. As a realist he did not want to change the world, rather he sought merely to inform it and, as such, he saw romanticism as a soporific. It prevented people from experiencing the full intensity of their despair.

He, as one of those to have arrived at this sobering realisation, must proclaim it in images to the world. And he, as artist, must mould and shape this message into modern icons that would not allow his fellows, trapped in the same hell, to overlook or underestimate the fact that hope lay in the recognition of a stark now, not a starry tomorrow.

He must not flinch in this duty because it was the only duty left to the artist born in an age when everything had been done. Sometimes Mike cursed the modern giants who had usurped his chance to do something different. "Now," he thought sourly, "all that is left are the crumbs of a greatness that is measured in dollars and born of a lust for novelty rather than vision."

Well he had his vision and he was going to stick to it whether it fed him or not, and he was going to paint it whether he liked it or not.

"By Christ it's cold and here!" Frank bellowed as he exploded into the studio and broke Mike's solemn reverie. Frank, the sculptor of things beautiful, had a beard like Tolstoy and arms like Vulcan and an appetite for life worthy of both.

His eyes twinkled as he surveyed Mike's scruffy self. He noted his scowl but brushed it aside as he turned his gaze on the canvas. He let out a raunchy whistle and shook his head. "A real mother of a thing that is. I don't know how you survive in this world when you see everything so darkly. Well I've come to save you. Let's go down to Mario's for a plate of spag."

Mike suddenly acknowledged his hunger and the fatigue in his shoulders, but his heart was reluctant to break the bubble that surrounded him. Frank stepped closer. "Come on Mike, you'll never finish this work if you starve yourself to death. It's all very well to die for your art but you don't need to suicide."

"Your acrobatic corporate raider here will screw the heavens more lustily if you have a belly of grub," he added. The bubble popped and Mike slumped down into his large, old, and equally scruffy, lounge chair. "You're right," he said, "I'm starving and Jesus I'm stuck on his" and he jabbed his thumb at the arched figure, "screwing those starry skies. I need a break."

Outside the air was chill and a little smoggy but being free from the turpsiness of the studio it immediately cleared Mike's head. He strode down the street, hands shoved deeply into his pockets, eyes roaming the shadows and glancing at the gibbous moon that seemed to chase the clouds and vie with the street lamps for glory.

Frank was waxing eloquent about his latest escapade with a model and the way sexuality was an integral part of his artistic inspiration. "When I can smell and taste her, I know these hands," waving his big fists in Mike's face, "which have so lovingly caressed her flesh can turn their powers on the form as a plastic expression of...of...well, of whatever it is she has unlocked within me."

Frank suddenly stopped and grabbed Mike's arm. "And this one. Monique. Yes, Monique...." Frank sighed deeply and for a moment his eyes became distant, then they lit up and flashed at Mike, "She has that craziness that tears the veils from the heart. Christ she's raw fire. My bronze melts for her." Just as suddenly as he had stopped Frank was walking again, cutting across the park. He moved so quickly Mike almost had to run to catch him.

Mike's mind had momentarily been caught by Frank's words. He never ceased to marvel at how his friend could draw such hope and inspiration from a gender so given to the follies of the mundane.

Frank resumed his banter and Mike suddenly shifted focus to his arched leviathan. He looked up above the tree line of the park to see him thrusting up at the stars. Defying them. Threatening them with his manliness. Suddenly the stars seemed like the souls of countless women and then a cloud flew across their face. He shook himself and grimaced at his own romantic folly. "So hard," he observed inwardly, "to shake off conditioning."

During the meal the conversation turned to the future of art. "Where to from now?" Frank asked. Mike shrugged as he sucked on his spaghetti.

"Well if we throw Darwinism on the scrap heap where it belongs," Mike frowned, "and look at a fellow like le Marc we can get a few clues." He swallowed hard and then continued.

"An organism's desires determine its likely development. If this be true, and I think he's right, then most of use--the collectivity of humanity--are in deep shit." He wiped his mouth.

"As a tribe, we want for so little. And the artist, as a kind of tribal priest gives form to the hope, the aspiration of his tribe. But this lack of want, of real hope, brings us up against a wall." Mike raised his open palm and slapped his forehead twice. "I can see the superficiality of our collective aspiration, and I can detect the glosses that the collective have contrived for its maintenance. What we are faced with is a drive towards mediocrity in which the common denominator is glorified and our desires trivialized. This process is insidious and involves us all."

Mike drew a star on the table by dragging splashed wine about with his forefinger.

"Our secret hopes," he continued, "have all been tainted by the market place where we both trade in one another's dreams and create them. In this trade we find the collective mechanism by which we are prevented from fully seeing and giving voice. And it shames me to admit it but we, my friend," he concluded giving Frank a doleful stare, "being intimately engaged in this traffic, have become blind shamans."

"Come on Mike, don't be so hard on us," Frank protested. "I grant all that but surely the artist has a greater chance of breaking a little from the collective and saying something for tomorrow so that le Marc doesn't have us all living in milk cartons."

Both men grinned, "Maybe, but the artist has to use his own heart as the alchemist's pot. He has to flick the switch somehow." Mike fell silent.

"Well women flick my switch and Vicki Vaslo reckons that men flick her's." Frank stopped and gulped on his wine so Mike took up the thread. "Though she gets her sustenance solely from her loving Johnno instead of the carnival that constantly renews your fire."

Frank pretended to be shocked, "That be true, lad. That be true." He drawled in an imitation of Captain Kidd.

The clatter of restaurant exuberance rose up around Mike at this point and he became lost in a sense of warm rosiness through which he perceived Frank only enough to feign attention.

The waitress presented the bill with a strong espresso and Mike noted with appreciation the line of her throat and the swell of her bosom as she laughed off Frank's invitation to model for him some time. "Women," Frank offered confidentially over his coffee, "women are to be adored. And you my friend need some of their softness in your life. Giovanna won't come back and you know it, so stop sulking in your garret and taste the freedom you have so justly earned."

"Maybe you're right Frank, but I need just one. She who can see more of my soul than I, and whom I can adore not from afar...but from close quarters and on a daily basis." Mike skulled his hot coffee and laughed at himself. "I'm not asking for much am I?" he concluded as he stood and grabbed the bill from Frank and headed for the cashier.

Outside the cool air hit his head and the stars seemed to grow brighter with the fresh intensity of his ambience. Frank lurched into the street behind him and gasped and coughed as the cold exploded in his lungs. "By Satan I need to be near some beauty tonight." he declared. "I'm going to see Monique. A bientot, mon ami." His affected French was credible in its exaggeration. "And you, mon frere, would be doing yourself a favour if you found yourself une femme pour le night also." Frank pulled himself up to his full height and swelled his chest and without further ado marched off down the road leaving Mike to survey the park.

Mike set out for the studio. He walked mechanically while his mind returned to his main concern. How to treat the stars in his painting? No solution seemed to

be right so he stopped trying to handle it analytically. "Something will come up," he mused.

A few minutes later he stopped by the park's fountain and listened to the splash and play of the water. A light welled up from the central column and turned the falling drops into diamonds. Suddenly an owl shattered the cascade as it exploded through the water. Mike jumped with fright and almost fell over. The bird's wings clipped his head as it swerved to miss him and he was sprayed with the fine drops of liquid that followed the hunter's path like the tail of a comet.

The bird pulled up short and perched on the top of a lamp post. It was clearly intent on the insects that hung about the lights of the fountain, but it took some time out to examine this human being who had interrupted its nightly feed.

Having regained his composure Mike stood in his turn, with water glittering in his hair, and studied the bird. He was no expert but it looked like some kind of small barn owl. "Funny to meet you like this", he said. The creature moved its head from side to side as if it agreed. Mike felt as if the bird knew him in some way, as if it were trying to give him a message. "Don't be stupid," he muttered.

He turned about, and without looking back, he marched so quickly to his room that he was breathing heavily by the time he got there. "Owls, and stars, and phallic chimneys...what to do? What to do?" This question turned over and over in his head as he slammed the door behind him. He went and turned the heater up and then stood absolutely still, defiantly still, in front of the painting.

"I can wait you out, you bugger. I'm not going anywhere until this is solved," he declared.

He then slumped down into his big chair and glared at the work. "The problem," he mused, "is that I'm trying too hard. Slow down a bit and let it come. I always get too worked up when I get stuck and the answer is always there just beneath the surface of my consciousness. "Patience," he murmured, "patience and soon I'll start painting and the answer will come from the brush and the paint and not my stupid head."

He fell silent and just looked through half closed eyes at the image in front of him. Elbows resting on the thread bare arms of the chair, hands together under his nose, he emptied himself of thoughts and feelings. He became the chair and the stars and the arched figure and the people in the carton houses. Then he slept.

He woke to the gentle touch of a hand on thigh. He opened his eyes and saw large green eyes returning his gaze. Women's eyes, yet strangely wild. She had a heart shaped face and high cheek bones, a warm full smile and tussled brown hair falling from beneath a grey feathered hood: owl feathers, own beak resting between her brows, owl eyes gazing fixedly up at him. He smiled sleepily and the woman stretched forward and lightly kissed him on the mouth. His arms moved to bring her to him but she was gone.

Tears immediately sprang to his eyes. They coursed down his cheeks and the more he struggled for control the more this grief raged through his body. He

doubled over, a silent howl caught in his throat. He began to rock himself slowly as sob after sob burst from his chest. He stopped fighting and just let the emotions run their course. As the storm of tears began to subside, he was overwhelmed by the greatest feeling of elation ever experienced. He was in love with those eyes. He always had been. His heart beat fast and his body began to tingle as if charged with electricity.

He laughed aloud. He was in love with a dream phantom! "Now I am losing it," he muttered. Yet she was so real and his lips still throbbed with that parting kiss. She had been so real. He shook his head and looked over at the clock. Three in the morning. "Bed time, Mike," he said to himself, and he staggered over and fell into the bunk which lay carelessly in a corner of the room, and without even turning off the light he was immediately and deeply asleep.

Mid-morning light was streaming through the skylight when he opened his eyes. He was surprised that he had lost none of the elation from the night before. He felt somehow larger than life. He smiled broadly. "I can tackle those stars today," he thought aloud.

Over breakfast, he reconstructed the form of his dream visitor. The face with its owl hood was clear, but although he knew that apart from the hood, and its feathered cloak, she had been naked, he had no direct apperception of her form. "I should get someone to analyse it for me", he thought.

He quickly cleared the table and left the dishes in the sink. "They can keep," he said as he walked purposefully to the easel. He contemplated the work which had a harshness about it that sat uneasily with the lightness in his heart but the stars were joyous. "To the stars then," he said as his brush mixed a pale translucent grey.

He built the paint up thickly as it issued from the tower but soon allowed it to dissipate as it spread into the sky. He had it swirling and eddying like a van Gogh but the effect and application were lighter, more etheric.

His brush stopped and he stepped back to review his work and was shocked to see the form of a winged woman appearing from amongst the dashes and lines. "Well I'll be...", was all he could say. He felt excited. Something different was happening here. He wasn't going to deny this woman her right to be in the painting, but her lightness and subtlety seemed to contrast grotesquely with the scene beneath her.

The brush was soon back at its labour and the form took shape before his surprised eyes. Wings arched back and she looked out of the painting with such an expression of love and pain that he was abashed and for a time found it hard to look directly at her. Yet the brush worked on and she seemed to change her focus from him to the arched figure below her.

Anger seemed to flicker in her movements now. Her taloned feet struck at the exposed chest and the man's face seemed to howl with pain and rage.

Mike was sweating and breathing deeply. He threw the brush down on the floor.

What was he doing? He was destroying the whole balance and concept of the painting. His uninvited guest was taking over. He felt anger well up inside him and he marched up and down the room waving his fist at the canvas and shouting.

"If you're going to invade my painting, at least have the decency to tell me what's going on." He yelled. "I'm not a puppet on a string, nor am I some young lad who can be seduced so easily by a kiss." He raged. "It's my painting." He screamed. And he paced vehemently up and down.

Someone banged on the door during this outburst. Mike immediately fell silent and ran to the canvas and turned it to the wall. "Come in," he shouted. Frank's head appeared around the door and he smiled warily as he looked about the room.

"You know I hate scenes," he said, "so I don't want to intrude but..." his voice trailed off as he registered that no one was in the room except Mike.

"Don't be a fool Frank," Mike said tensely. "I'm alone."

"I can see that," laughed Frank nervously. "It would appear, my friend, that you have finally lost it."

"It would seem so," came Mike's acid response.

"Well, I'll tell you what. You can yell at me and that will help you regain some credibility," Frank offered cheerfully.

"I don't give a stuff about credibility," said Mike. "All I want is to be able to paint without interference."

"Well who'd want to interfere with you Mike?" asked Frank.

Mike didn't answer. It was plain to see that the conservation was doomed from the outset. He just stalked up and down. "Calm down man," said Frank.

"I don't want to bloody well calm down," hissed Mike.

"Well then, I think I'll bow out gracefully and leave you to your artiste's mood," said Frank. "And I'm not going to ask why your painting is facing the wall..." he continued as he walked towards the door. "You know, if you had a woman to keep you warm these excesses of yours might well be prevented. But don't worry, I still love you Mike. Give me a ring when you've got over this...eh...this manic behaviour." And with that he closed the door behind him.

"A woman..." Mike snorted, "That's the problem." He resumed his pacing until he wore himself out and lay down on his bed. The painting and the owl-woman swam before his eyes as he drifted in and out of sleep.

Then very softly, very gently he felt fingers on his forehead, caressing his eyelids and stroking his hair. He slowly opened his eyes and met the same quiet gaze of the night before. The face smiled at him and he looked up at the owl hood above her head. She bent over him and kissed him full on the mouth...a long, slow,

deep kissing.

Her fingers ran over his face and caressed his neck, tugging the buttons undone on his shirt, they found their way to his chest and gently, teasingly they played upon his skin, pulling at the hairs and slowly running down to his belly.

Mike was breathing hard. He began to move his fingers to touch her hand. "No. Lie still," she whispered. Her voice was like a flute with the timbre of a distant owl call carried through the trees by an autumn wind.

His heart was beating as if to explode and tears were welling up in his eyes. An explosive agony of love gripped his body and tossed it about like a toy. His eyes strove to penetrate the tears to see this woman. He saw the smooth curve of her breast and the twist and arch of her neck. "Ah, such beauty," he sighed.

As he lay there she undressed him. Stroking and kissing his skin. Letting her hair fall on him and occasionally brushing him with the feathers of her cape or the tips of her breasts. Mike only moved as she gently pulled the clothes from him. He was like a child in her hands and she seemed to be immensely strong. She lifted him and moved him as if he were like an infant. At last he lay naked and tingling on the bunk.

Her eyes returned to his. And she smiled again and then rose off the floor like a wisp of smoke caught in the folds of her feathered cape. It seemed to Mike that he could almost see through her. But her form became solid as it hovered above him. He could feel the warmth of her skin and smell the sweetness of forests about her. Slowly, ever so slowly, her body descended upon his. She began to move about him, above him, around him and his skin lost its sense of separateness and fused with hers in a delight of cellular joy.

The women kissed him urgently, fiercely and he felt his own desire leap up inside him like a raging fire. As he entered her body she gasped and arched back but his arms moved up and held her close to him and this time she did not stop him and she did not disappear. Their movements now became one long paean of love making and as they loved they floated above the bed wrapt in the feathers of the owl cloak.

As their love making intensified, they became like a rainbow of shadowed colour that flowed and pulsed to their erotic play until at last it exploded into a nothingness that left Mike lying limply once again on the bed, hands cupped above his face as he kissed his shadowy lover farewell.

Mike closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on getting his breath and pulse back to a more acceptable rate. He felt alive with love, alive to love and for the moment quite accepting of the strangeness and uniqueness of his experience.

He fell asleep and when he woke it was night and lying next to him was the owl-woman. He leant over and kissed her on the cheek and stroked her hair and she smiled at him. Then he sat up and pulled on his trousers. He felt compelled to work on the painting again. When he looked down at the bunk the owl-woman had gone.

"Was she real?" he wondered. He walked to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. There, on his neck, were three purpling bruises. He raised his hand to his neck and lightly stroked them and smiled at himself.

His eyes moved from his shadowy features to some lines from Rilke that he had painted above the mirror a few weeks before. His mouth went dry with fear as he read them again, the bravado he had experienced when he put them there was consumed now by the great poet's words: "Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, where no one can go any further."

He sensed danger in his studio. He tasted his fear as tiny icicles clinging to the roof of his mouth and stabbing at his fat leathery tongue as he gasped at his own paralysis. What did he fear? Perhaps loss of control, loss of self. The tension of creating and existing tore at his flesh and his legs gave out beneath him and he sagged to the floor.

A loud screech and the flapping of wings broke his stupor and he flushed with anger. He pulled himself up and flung the door of the bathroom open and stormed into the studio. Fear or not, owls and mystery and lovers aside, he was going to finish that painting. His shaking hands grabbed the tubes of paint and he brutally squeezed great daubs of colour onto the plate serving as his pallet.

He stood silent a moment. Drawing deep breaths of turpsy air into his lungs. He closed his eyes and felt the painting stir within him. His anger focused on the affected mannerisms of his cartooned city and the foolish parody arched so elegantly above it. No wonder the owl-woman had attacked it.

"You bastard," he muttered. "How dare you turn me into a mannered eunuch basking in his own smug cynicism." He glared at the painting which seemed to be wrestling with itself. Owl-woman clawing at the arched figure. He closed his eyes again and felt the touch of his lover and the rainbow light flowing in his veins and beating in his heart.

"I am alive," he asserted as he thrust his brush into the paints before him. He began painting fierily and with the absolute purpose of one who has seen the universe from within and no longer needs to check the reality of the subject, as all relativity has been erased by the easy light of shed illusion.

Bushes sprouted from the torn chest of the unhappy leviathan and trees grew in his joints. Quickly the figure succumbed to the transforming strokes of the brush while the owl-woman flew in delight above the changing scene. The carton city became the broken and craggy face of an ancient cathedral, a single wall was all that remained and set in it, high up, was a glittering rose window.

Cutting into the paint with spatula and the reverse end of his brush he created luminous and eerie owl shapes sitting in niches in the walls or flying about the hillside. He worked until his arms shook with fatigue and then he was pulled to the bed by his silent companion.

She rubbed his body with handfuls of thyme and lavender. Then she closed his

eyes with kisses and he slept a little only to rise from the bed again and paint more energetically than before. Sometimes she would bring him a drink tasting of memories and honey and forests in spring and he would work as if his blood were a flame with wild sparkling visions.

The cathedral wall collapsed and the hill grew forests and rivers and people; strange shimmering figures, danced between the trees. Once a wedding procession moved across the scene. At another time a meteor shower caused a great blaze and levelled the land and the owl-woman seemed to be nothing but a shimmer in the night sky.

He stabbed, prodded, scraped, clawed and stroked the canvas and its shifting sea of colour and form until it seemed to convey all and nothing of his story. He stood before it no longer an artist and it stood before him no longer the artwork, and it was finished.

The owl-woman came and took him softly by the hand and led him to the window where they stood for a long time looking out at the night sky and the city lights. The moon was new and he was old. But he laughed at last and took the woman in his arms and kissed her roundly and then opened the window.

The cold night air rushed in and stung his cheeks but he felt a wintry wildness enter his heart. His body stood motionless but his soul flew into the night sky with his grey lover and they hovered high above the sleeping land and danced a long time until the dawn began to glow and he returned to the studio and the painting.