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Athena's Owl

*For sure, she's a bird; but her guilty conscience drives her
to shun the eyes of men and the glare of the daylight.*

—Ovid

Owl can see what others cannot, which is the essence of true wisdom. Athena—the Greek goddess of wisdom—had a companion owl on her shoulder which revealed unseen truths to her. Owl had the ability to light up Athena's blind side, enabling her to speak the whole truth, as opposed to only a half truth. Here's hoping Owl will do the same for me.

Truth is, I've been struggling with health issues for the past few weeks. I wake up at night, worried. I'm hoping Owl can help me see the full truth of the situation.

Because I was not feeling well, I was unable to get out on my land. The land does something for me that nothing else can. I'm usually locked up tight inside, as if I'm wrapped in chains. But when I'm out on the land, those chains begin to break.

So, this morning I went out on my land and took the spirit of Owl with me. I thought perhaps the land might partner with Owl to try to help me heal. The first thing I noticed was a feeling of fear. I often feel fear when it's dark and there are no day sounds around me. One night I heard an owl outside my bedroom window. The owl made an eerie sound. It felt like the sound was winding its way around me, trying to pull me to the ground. That is exactly how I feel now. Only this time the sound comes from deep inside my body.

What am I in the dark about? How am I being deceived? Have I lied to myself about someone or something? Remember that owl is always asking—who?

Who is rummaging around inside me? It used to be easy for me to look outward for an explanation. Now I can't get away with that. I must see the darkness I carry within.

Suddenly I am thrust into a memory:

I sit cross-legged on the linoleum floor. My mother stands at the kitchen sink. I am absolutely frozen in place. I couldn't move if I wanted to. My mother bangs dishes, swears, turns and glares at me. I have no defense.

Actually, I do have a defense—a defense of my own design. I feel this defense atop my shoulders, sort of like wings. The wings hold me up. Without them I would collapse. I carried these wings all of my life. Why the darkness and illness now?

Maybe the grandparent trees can help me. The grandparent trees are tall, so much taller than my mother, but they do not scare me. They are kind. They love and support me. I feel it every time I'm out on the land.

I hold up the little girl inside me to the grandparent trees. This girl is cut off from the forest, encased in what feels to her like plastic. The plastic is the same as her mother's skin—untouchable, unknowable, rejecting. The trees bow to the little girl in respect. They cherish her. But her plastic does not breathe; it allows for no connection. No breeze can flow across this little girl's shoulders.

I sit atop my mother's dresser. A bottle of perfume leans against my leg. I pick up the bottle and put it to my nose. My mother swoops down and rips the bottle from my hands. She moves so forcefully I topple backward off the dresser and onto the floor. My mother laughs, douses herself with perfume, then walks away.

This memory has been wrapped in plastic inside me for such a long time. But I'm sure the trees know how to handle it. I'm with a different tree this time—the large pine at the south end of my property. I always imagine this pine wears a long dress that drapes to the ground. The pine sees the plastic bundle inside me. It feels how heavy the bundle is, how alien. I brush my hands across the pine's bough and a calm energy flows through me. I am so used to defending myself against my mother, I rarely take time to feel the simple grace of a tree.

Suddenly I notice an owl sitting in a dead tree beside us. The tree is gray. The owl is gray. My feet freeze and my toes begin to curl. Owl does not waver. She does not blink. My toes curl even more.

"Who are you? Who? Who?" My mother does not pay attention. But she easily could, so I have to be still. The floor is like ice. It hurts my legs. But I mustn't move. I mustn't move.

Owl sweeps me back to the land and I take a breath, then let it out slowly.

"Just a bit of the plastic today," says Owl, "we don't want to open too much."

Owl flies to me and sits on my shoulder, sending her energy through me. She looks at my curled toes.

"You see how much tension you create by holding your body like that?" she says.

Of course I do.

"There is no need to be rigid. You're not holding a perfume bottle. Your mother is not here. The forest is here. I am here. We all want you to heal."

I tumble off the dresser, hitting my head as I fall to the floor. The carpet is rough and hurts my skin. I wait for my mother's shadow to fall on me. Once the shadow hits, I must swallow myself. It's a law I made. Wings sprout from my shoulders. It's my only way out. My mother has so much perfume on, I can smell her from across the room. She's coming. I have to get away.

Crack! Owl drops something from the top of the tall dead tree. The sound pulls me up and over, and I bend down to see what Owl dropped. It's the skeleton of a mouse. Owl is unapologetic. This is how she learned to save herself.

"You must do the same. You must save yourself. I will teach you," Owl says.

I stand in front of the dresser, perfume bottle in hand. I raise my arms, then smash the bottle down. Glass cracks. Liquid sprays. I smell just like my mother.

I look around to see if my mother is there. She is not. Owl is there. Owl smiles.

"This is what we do with mice," she says, "Don't apologize for it. You must be a predator or you will be prey."

I run my hands along my arms, spreading perfume and glass. Small cuts pop up all over my skin. The perfume makes the cuts sting. Owl grabs the mouse skeleton and throws it at the mirror. The mirror cracks and I see myself in pieces. An owl is sitting on my shoulder.

I remember the story of Athena. Owl nods majestically.

My mother walks by in a girdle so tight she's like a soldier. That's the way she likes it. Then I am next to my mother's bath. Her skin is like plastic; it doesn't connect with the water. I wish I could just drown. Actually, I already have.

Owl swoops down from the ceiling and into the water. She splashes, cutting my mother with her talons. Owl is angry, so angry. Just like I should be.

"Who are you? Who are you?"

No reaction from my mother. She cannot hear Owl. She cannot hear me. She never hears me. My toes curl.

"Who are you? Who are you?"

I don't know who I am, but I have someone inside who wants to come out now.

Owl grabs the mouse skeleton with her sharp talons and tosses it from the room. Then she tells me to follow. I am out in the forest, and I can take a breath. I stand in front of the old, dead tree, holding the mouse skeleton in my hands as an offering. Owl sits quietly on my shoulder. We stay that way for a very long time.



Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author's.

