

Fawson: The Owl Sits Apart From Its Tree

THE OWL SITS APART FROM ITS TREE

BY

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Fawson

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I'm twenty-five. I meet Steve at my college graduation party. He tells the story of a fire that turns the trees into shadows dancing with many arms. There are animals with bright eyes, who seem to be smiling. He thinks up new adventures for each guest. First he thinks up fog and wind. Then mountains dripping with water. He thinks up a silver owl who speaks. Rain flows into the lake. I shut my eyes and hear, *Jump in!* I feel a fish swimming at my arm.

A week later folding party-chairs still sit on the wooden deck. In my mind I cannot imagine the fish anymore. I don't see the silver owl. But a beak asks me questions: *Can you save yourself?* I cannot save myself. *Will you hide?* There is no place to run.

Each time the beak talks I sit very still. Near dawn it tells me I have answered correctly: I may call myself a woman, have friends in my life, forests, and vases full of flowers. I may live near the sea. I am to search through darkness my whole life, looking for something I insist is missing — looking in the wrong

places, knowing great panic.

I'm twenty-six. On Steve's back is a large freckle shaped like a lake I've been to. A rush of water grows wide and slow. Somebody slips; no one falls. *Stay as calm as you can*, the beak says, and it seems possible without something fearful shouting out.

We marry, and Steve paints like crazy, full of ideas. A portrait of an old woman holding a dragonfly between her thumb and finger. A landscape of a mountain behind Mirror Lake catching clouds at dusk. The scenes are simple, painted on canvas-board. Their light spins with emotion.

In bed Steve pulls me on top of him. There's blue moonlight all across the white sheets. He smooths the shirt open and puts his palms on my waist. He tilts me forward, and I sink over him. I feel it the next day, the echo of it. A memory that makes my skin respond. A hot wind billows over dune-grass and cools. He's on the shore, touching me.

I never knew the pond

in the back yard could gather such warmth. When the days grow long the pond widens as if spreading were more important than flowing.

Our baby sits up. The shelves fill with books about bears, dogs, and trains. He begins to crawl. There are fistfuls of tugs at my skirt's hem.

I look at this man who's my husband, and I'm unable to remember who I was before him. When we're apart I can imagine his body as though I were inside it, seeing what he sees, tasting bread and curries, feeling the bend of his elbows, the impact of his feet when he walks.

I'm twenty-eight. I feel as if Steve's body were moving uncomfortably. In the rocking chair his body slouches, his legs cross. All I feel is his grief and the distance of everything around us: the dormant lake far out in the mountains, the shuddering pines. *How did it happen?* he asks over and over. *Tell me again*, his voice full of sadness. As if words ever make sense, I say, *I left the screen open. I heard a noise. I was*

drying dishes. I turned. He was asleep. I was drying dishes. I was putting them away. It was ten minutes. I turned. He was gone. I ran everywhere. He was floating in the pond. Steve would concentrate with his hands clenched together and clear his throat with soft sounds. But he didn't want to hear my story. My story always drowned his son.

Some days I stay in bed on the edge of sleep resisting wakefulness. Sleep is the only tolerable place, and then dreams invade. *Close your eyes and go to the pond*, the beak says in the middle of the night. Sparrows flock around and teach me to fly totally unafraid. One sparrow carries our boy over rooftops and parks. I see his shadow running across the lawn. I feel his small body press against my chest, his head's sweet sun-smell. Then he is gone. I cannot stop crying. I cannot stop biting my hands.

Steve roams the house. He stands in the yard.

One morning I find him asleep in the hallway, legs drawn up to his chest. He has no language for how he feels. I lie down

next to him and stare at his sleeping face, his slightly parted lips. It was as if the carpet had absorbed him and he fell into some other world where time didn't exist. Maybe some things can't be shared — they carry a kind of secrecy with them that isn't to be violated.

I look at the freckle on Steve's back and remember us rowing on the lake. We know about watery escapes blooming into shrubby magnolias, the duckweed, violets underwater. I lie next to him and remember running until the ground gave way at my feet, and I fell under once, then a second time, my hand outstretched and splashing through the water. I saw our boy's knees at my cheeks, his heels at my chest. I waited for a sound, but none came.

The beak tells me, *Hold your breath as long as you can but you will never die.*

It might go on forever this way.

In the park later that summer Steve says, "Okay, we'll just keep walking." We face each other. "I need to get out," he says.

At first I think he means he has to get off of the pebbled path.

"You mean leave?" I say. "Leave the house?"

"I don't know what I mean," he says.

"I hate that house," I say. My eyes burn. I meant I hate the backyard. "I didn't know where he went."

Steve stops and shakes his head. "Why?" he says. "Why? For God's sake." Tears fall from his eyes. "I can't stand it," he says. "I can't stand it another minute. It's too much. Every day. Too much."

"I know," I say.

"You do." He sucks tears off his lips.

"I was banging dishes around. When I got to him he wasn't moving," I say softly. "I was kneeling and touching his neck and pulling him. I was running then not running. Next to him, but also leaving him and running to the phone. And then I was standing above the EMTs, who lifted his body and shook their heads, and said words I couldn't hear. Then I was kneeling again over his

body or running.”

Steve looks at me, his head tips slightly, and he begins to sob.

I move forward, catch him in my arms. He grips my shoulders and puts his face against my chest. Sunlight glints off the waxy leaves. I feel Steve’s heart beating, his moist skin, our bones fitting together.

“I need to leave,” he says.

I keep asking, “Are you coming back?”

After a year he says, “Yes.”

I try to remember what our lives were like before. I remember Steve across the room at a winter-gallery opening, a party for his paintings. People walked between us or stood in groups, shifting so he came in and out of view. His palm balanced a wassail cup. Behind him frost patterns swirled up the window. Later he said, “I knew exactly where you were at every moment.”

Once when our son was a baby, Steve stopped the stroller in front of that very gallery and held him up to the dark, the stars glittering. Steve swept him up, arms outstretched, down,

then carefully up into the air again.

Each summer we begin again. We turn toward each other but our fingers move away like wounded insects across bed sheets.

It feels as though all these things happen before they happen. As if everything exists all at once, going forward or backward, into the past or future. For a moment I see into the place where the pain blurs. What else could I have said? What question or apology during the embrace of us — who only want to escape from this constant grief — like exhausted wrestlers who lean into each other’s bodies and take a break.

In an act of love, I dip a thin washcloth in warm water and wash Steve’s face. Careful to wash every ear-fold, I remember he’s really the first man I loved. He’s my husband who married me and said things like, *oh jesus, jesus* while nestling his face into my shoulder.

I wake up in the middle of the night. Steve says waking’s a sign. Not for anything bad now, but

maybe later. Like your mind has gone on ahead, glimpsed what's to come and startled you awake. You think you hear noises: a helicopter's blades or a siren's wails. It can't be good. Then no siren. It's quiet, but the sounds are still in your head. The future calls the present, but we're not there yet.

Steve and I box up our son's room. Toys, plastic trains, red, blue, and green. A yellow dump truck with big black wheels. Paper stars hanging from the rafters. I remember the night I lifted my son to my shoulders and moved slowly, showed him the gulls circling overhead, how one after the other would break from the flock. I walked him to where the low branches of trees hung over the pond and dipped into water so he could lift his hand and touch the outline of trees with his fingers. Everything is gone. Everything but one small shoebox and the rocking chair.

I'm thirty. Over the rocking chair Steve throws his pants over my shirt. Pant legs droop over the sleeves. It's a simple thing, but

it makes me feel as if a stream is rushing through my heart. I walk past the rocking chair and stand at the window. I feel the weight of the moon — so heavy it feels ready to come down. I remember all the things to come. But not now.

Steve cooks me my favorite mashed potatoes with mushrooms on the side. We pile the dishes in the sink for tomorrow. I push my hands under his shirt. The future calls for us; fear eats our words.

I used to be mad at Steve. *How can you be afraid of love?* Now I know. Exactly. The truth is nobody goes back in time. You as a couple can't return before anything had happened. For a brief moment you can forget, sometimes you wake in the mornings, and your mind blanks until a dark awareness creeps through you and you must realize it's true all over again.

I'm thirty. At the park, children run around the swings and shriek. Other mothers' high-pitched voices chase their children down from trees, *Ready or not!* Or shout without strain, without that ache for a name

just out of reach, *Found you!*
I despise their antics because
I have a much more serious
notion about this life. But to
get their attention I'd like to
count higher and higher by tens
so deep inside, each number
shatters when it hits the air. I'd
like for those mothers to see my
boy flying over the rooftops, and
to holler out in earnest as his
shadow crosses the lawn.

