

What the Owl Sees  
(1960)

This car was a convertible, a big blue Buick, and although it was October and chilly, the leaves beginning to turn all along the highway, Barry insisted on having the top down. Girls like Ella, they always complained he handled the cars like big toys, one hand loose on the wheel, taking the turns at full so they grasped at the edges of their seats. It was the pleasure of driving the garage cars and of being driven in them – as if they *were* toys, an endless supply of them back home. On this day, Ella could hardly help herself sliding up against Barry at every turn. After Wednesday afternoon, she wasn't sure she had the right to object.

The redhead sat in the backseat, her face turned in profile. Ella caught Barry eyeing her in the rearview as they left the Wellesley gates and skirted Boston, headed north. She tried to peek and see if Sadie returned his attention, but she never caught her looking. Still, Ella had the feeling that the redhead's eyelashes came down just before Ella's own gaze flashed up.

She closed her eyes, shutting out Sadie, Barry and the whipping trees. More than anything, Ella was determined to be artful. To maintain her appearance. Now that they were well out of the city, Ella did feel calm. Calmer. If only Barry would swing his arm around her shoulders, save her from being dashed up against the door every time they went around a curve. If only he would keep his eyes on the road.

When she opened her eyes, Barry was looking at her. He reached over to chuck her under the chin. "What's the story, morning glory? You're missing the view."

Hills rose along the highway, reds and yellows and oranges flaring up around them. In the back Sadie pressed her face into the wind and clutched her fur wrap closer. It was a strange thing to wear into the woods, but Ella was not surprised. The redhead was known on campus. She seemed to have ideas.

“Do you smell it?” Ella said, poking at the owl with one toe. “Celia wouldn’t let me keep him in the freezer for even one night. She’s such a goody-goody sometimes I could spit.” Instead, she giggled.

“As long as the skin isn’t damaged, he’ll be alright.” Sadie’s voice wavered out of the back. She spoke without turning her head. Loud into the rushing air.

“How do you know?” Ella stuck her hand out and let the cigarette go.

“I mean the guy doesn’t use the insides, just the skin. Jodie told me. This guy, his taxidermy is like sculpture. He does more than rearrange the remains. He can coax your owl up out of the ashes.” Jodie was the sculpture professor at Wellesley. She was their connection to the man they were going to see.

“There you go, kiddo.” Barry twisted his head to wink at her. Ella stared hard at the road. “Frankenstein owl, no sweat.”

“Ha.” She turned away and pulled her foot out of range of the blue lump under the dash. She helped herself to another one of Barry’s cigarettes and leaned against the door, one foot up on the dash and the other tucked beneath her. Pants were freeing in a way. She touched the wine colored beret she wore with her finger tips to be sure it wouldn’t fly off and then tucked the length of her honey brown hair into the collar of her blouse. This was the redhead’s scheme. To turn the owl into a statue. Ella knew nothing about it, but she knew it couldn’t have ended there in the woods, couldn’t end with the small cracking sounds between her hands afterwards in the lightless closet.

“Ha ha.” She said again, the sound swallowed by the wind.

“Tell me about it again,” Barry said, grinning straight ahead at the road. “Tell me how you killed it.”

The farther they drove from the city, the bigger he seemed to have become, his limbs loosening, lengthening in the open sun. If only he would reach out for her now. She rolled her shoulders back and let her head loll to one side.

“You know the story,” she snapped. She felt stiff, like she needed to spread her body all over to be sure she was taking up plenty of space. His space. Maybe the redhead’s space, too.

“With your own bare hands,” he said, and whistled.

She glanced back and Sadie met her eye, smiled.

“You like that, don’t you,” Ella turned back to Barry. “This hand?” She placed her hand on the top of his thigh, the denim soft and worn, and he whistled again and licked his lips.

They drove past a clump of one-story houses, yards ragged with loosestrife and milkweed. The road took a few curves and they were in the woods again.

“Here,” the redhead said and pointed. Barry hit the breaks, and Ella clutched at the door.

The number on the box was right, and Barry eased the car off the road onto the rutted drive. It was narrow and went on for ages, the undercarriage scraping and pinging over the uneven ground, before the car rolled to a stop at the edge of a clearing.

“Goddamn, princess.” Barry turned the engine off. “Goddam.”

Closest to the car was a doe, her neck arched so far back that her nose pointed straight behind her. Her body curved unnaturally, her back legs raised so that her tail tipped forward and nearly brushed her nose. The back legs, Ella noted, were sheared off around the knee and what looked like two large pistons continued down, holding her in that pained curve. She was bent in a ring, nose to tail, and part of a circular saw blade rose out of the bared white fur at her neck like a strange bit of ornamentation – a flashy waddle or the inflated neck sack of a frog.

Behind the doe she could see what looked like a porcupine, its quills at full thrust, shining dull metal grey and rust in the sun, several of them fat on the ends, the flat heads of old nails and industrial screws.

And beyond the porcupine?

There were more and more of them. Monsters everywhere, even swinging from the underside of the porch roof that ran the length of the small log cabin where it sat, partially hidden in the trees.

No one moved at first. The sun had dipped low in the sky and where it fell on them the light had a palpable weight to it, like a newly grown coat of fur, and the three of them ran their hands over their arms and scratched at their necks.

It was the redhead who broke the still. She scrambled over the side of the car and skipped straight up to the doe. She stood before the thing, tracing its shape, hands hovering just inches from its brown coat.

Ella had never seen the girl move so quickly, with such obvious lack of self-consciousness. Her skirt askew from clambering out of the car and her fur stole in a heap on the ground by her feet.

“It’s the natural evolution of beauty,” she was saying. “The end of . . .” And then Ella wasn’t listening anymore. In one motion Barry had catapulted himself over the driver’s door. Off to catch Sadie by the elbow, to play at protector. He bent and retrieved her stole, wrapping it around her shoulders. Ella thought she should follow but couldn’t bear the feeling of following. She saw herself standing there behind them like an awkward child. Instead she took the bundle of owl up in her arms and began to unwrap it. Just a little. Just enough to see.

It was the owl they had come for, she reminded herself. Not for herself, for the owl. To put him back the way he was.

*Taxidermy Sadie had explained to her is the art of preserving an animal in its true form. The taxidermist she had explained is, in a sense, a sculptor. He doesn’t use the whole animal, embalm it or harden it with some chemical like people think. He doesn’t “stuff” the animal with something. Rather, he will take your owl’s measurements, make calculations, take pictures and then create a model. Probably out of wood. Then he’ll use only the preserved skin with all of its feathers. That is stretched over the mold. The eyes will be glass. Even its legs will be false. They make things like tongues out of ceramic. All of the things that rot will be gone. But you would hardly ever guess at the process he goes through, because the owl will look perfect. Even better than he does now. He’ll look alive.*

Barry's lips moved against the redhead's hair. His hand on her shoulder, the middle of her back. Then her waist. The girl cocked her head at him. Ella couldn't hear what they said, but she could sense the tone the girl was taking. Snippy, but amused. With his free hand, Barry indicated the other creatures. He moved his left hand around to the outside of Sadie's hip, sheltering her now in an half-embrace. She shook her head, leaning away from him, but her face was turned to his. Then she was laughing.

Ella placed the owl on the seat, peeled back the blue cashmere wrap and picked at the layers of Saran wrap binding his head. She wanted again to see its eyes.

"Ella." Barry was standing over her, a look of mild disgust on his face. She snatched her hand back. She could still feel the cold give of the owl's eye beneath the pad of her finger. "Get it off the seat."

"He's not here," the redhead said, appearing at Barry's elbow. Ella hugged the owl to her chest. "We should wait."

"Can you smell him now?" she asked. She squinted around the other two at the creatures scattered over the lawn. She shifted the owl so that she cradled him like a baby in her arms. She could smell him for sure. The memory of that time her mother had given the cook off for a week, determined to *try something real*. That cut of meat she had taken out onto the patio off the kitchen to defrost and then forgotten. Ella came upon the large Dutch oven sitting on the patio table and lifted the lid. Inside, there was a writhing mass of maggots and the smell was so strong she had thrown up right there in the patch of Tiger Lilies beside the French doors.

The owl felt firm enough between her arms. He was alright, yet, she thought. Nothing she had done was irreversible.

They waited. They waited quietly after Barry had tried to find some tunes on the radio but nothing had come in. They were well outside of the city now.

Barry started to ask Sadie about her classes and Ella answered for her. The redhead nodded and shrugged.

“I’m just gonna take some sketches,” she said and clambered out of the car again, sketchbook in one hand. Barry drummed on the wheel with his hands. Ella could feel the weight of his eyes on her as they moved from knees to hips to breasts to neck and down again.

“You ladies mind?” he asked, although Sadie was certainly out of earshot. He slid a small white twist of a cigarette from his breast pocket, but did not wait for Ella’s reply.

The air was very still between the trees and Ella watched the smoke rise from the tip in a thin, straight line. The smell of it was different. Maybe floral. Maybe deeper, meatier. Like something baking in the oven. She had smelled it before – at a party in Cambridge that had started out collegiate, but as it went on past midnight, lost its focus. Townies had begun to show. Guys with shaggy hair and rough skin. Girls with bare shoulders and legs and lips shining slick and tempting as the skin of red apples.

She and the Wellesley girls had left soon after. Only Nancy and Susan had stayed. They were seniors and everyone knew they’d both been jilted by high school sweethearts over the summer. There was good reason for them to be slumming.

Her face must have given her away, because the next time he glanced over he laughed himself into a coughing fit so severe Sadie dropped her sketchpad and ran over to make sure they were alright.

“Golly. Well, *gee-whiz!*” He snorted, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “What is this? Bible studies? It’s just grass. Won’t hurt you, I promise. Scouts honor.” He gave Sadie his winning-est grin.

“Let me,” Ella said, reaching for the joint.

“Oh yeah?” He moved his hand away from her. “You sure you can handle,” he gestured at the scene on the lawn, the redhead, the two of them sitting there squeezed together, “all this. If you smell the owl now.” He shrugged.

“I’m sure.” She bounced on the seat. “I want to.”

The smoke tasted strange, too. Herbal. A little like lavender. It burned the back of her throat and she coughed once, twice and then let go and coughed and coughed until dark spots began to crowd her vision.

“Careful, princess,” Barry said. “I don’t want any situation on my hands.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. Already she felt lighter, only the stiff weight of the owl she held in her lap holding her in the seat. Barry let her take one more hit before lifting the cigarette from her fingers.

“Sit tight,” he said. “I’ve gotta go see my Aunt Tilly, as my mother’d say.”

She watched him cross in front of the car and pad off into the woods.

Her skin tingled and there was a strange pressure in her ears. She gathered the owl up and held him out in front of her at arms’ length. He was still wrapped in Saran wrap except for where she’d slit it with her nail over his eyes. It pressed the tufts of feathers that hid his beak aside so that she could see the way it curved toward his own neck. And there were the feathers – smooth and fluffy over his breast, then stiff and cleverly arranged along his wings, regularly striped in browns and creams. His expression, too. Like angels, she thought. Fierce. What real angels would look like, were she to continue to believe in them.

“I know you eat blood,” she whispered to the owl. “I know what angels really are.”

Carefully, reverently, she placed the owl back on the floorboard. She looked to where Barry had entered the woods but he didn’t reappear. The quality of the silence – the depth of it marked by all of the little forest noises that had nothing to do with her – awed her. She sat listening for what felt like ages before snapping to and wondering how much time had passed. Nothing seemed to have changed. The redhead sat on the grass in front of a foxlike creature, her pad propped on her knees. In that moment, Ella hated her. How easy things were for her. She wore her strangeness like a flirty little cape. She was unafraid.

Ella fidgeted with the pack of cigarettes Barry had left on the dash, but she didn’t want to smoke. Instead, she banged out of the car and strode right into the woods, right after him.

She found him moments later, leaning against a tree with his eyes closed.

He would have looked awkward – tall, gangling, dressed in dungarees and an untucked button-up with that ragged camel hair jacket he’d picked up for a couple bucks

at the pawn shop – had she seen him on campus or at a mixer, but here he was cool, expansive. Almost majestic in the slanted afternoon sun. Ella watched him for a moment, trapped by the slow motion of his hand. He raised the joint to his lips and inhaled, his dust-brown hair flashed golden over his forehead. He was so beautiful, so remote. He reminded her of something. An indistinct something that rubbed in her chest and made her want to shake something. Or maybe to scream.

Throwing herself forward she stumbled and fell against Barry, hard.

“Jesus, El. You want somethin’ just call next time.”

“I want something,” she said, pressing herself against his chest. He always smelled like the garage, despite the fact that it was mostly for parking and they only occasionally did small repairs. Not to mention he was rather fastidious about his hygiene, his hands only sometimes betraying the faintest traces of grease around the nail beds. She wished he was dirtier. She loved the smell of him and she wanted it. She wanted him to press those black hairline traces all across her skin.

He met her mouth with the force she expected, with a sort of crushing urgency that she had dreamed about nearly every day for the past two months, since the first time. This time she also came head on, didn’t even pretend to demure. Her arms locked around the back of his neck, locked to her as well as him, for she found she couldn’t unwind them, not even as he struggled out of his jacket, when he fumbled open the buttons on her pants, not even to push away the spiny sticks and pine cones that stuck her through the shoulders of her blouse where the jacket didn’t reach.

“Look, would you?”

“There.” He pulled a scrap of brown leaf from her hair.

“Are you coming?”

“I’m coming.”

“Was it. Alright?”

He lit a cigarette. “You’re a peach,” he said. “A prize. A princess.” He winked at her and she shivered a little in the cool air.



There was no lawn in back of the cabin, but there was a sort of opening in the trees. The ground was crowded with creatures much like those in front. At first glance they appeared unfinished, but when one looked longer, rotting fur revealed water-stained wood beneath. Metal, rusted through, sagged at strange angles. Legs gnawed at by something dangled by strips of old skin or bloomed green-black patches of mold. A large wildcat lay on its side, half melted into the ground. Eyes sliding down cheeks. Mouths open and tongueless.

Ella did not understand how he could have let them get that way. She had thought the whole point was to preserve them perfectly forever.

Up against the house, beneath a sort of open lean-to, was a workbench. Tools hung along the back wall, large pieces of metal scrap arranged on shelves, a table saw. Ella marched up to the wall and collected a few tools – a screwdriver, a small saw, a handful of metal bits, some stiff pieces of wire.

She lay the owl down on the packed earth and knelt over it. She was going to fix things.

There was a jumble of sound behind her and Ella looked up. Sadie stood beside the shelves, one hand up to steady them. “What are you doing?” she asked. Her red hair was brilliant in the sun.

“I’ll take care of it,” Ella said.

She turned back to the owl.

There was some rustling at her back. “Don’t touch me,” Ella hissed, without looking. She raised the screwdriver above her head and then it was Barry there behind her, pulling her back.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. “Hey. Cool it.”

His voice was flat, easy. Ella saw how her hand fit easily inside his large one. He looked down at her with mild amusement, as if she were a naughty child.

“C’mon now. That’s just the dope talking.”

“Fuck you,” she replied, matter-of-factly. It was the only thing that came to mind. Barry’s mouth twisted in a smirk.

“That’s not very nice,” he said, and Ella felt his fingers tighten over her fist, a pain in her shoulder as he tried to drag her to her feet. “I thought you were a nice girl.”

She tried to pull away and he reached for her other shoulder, accidentally caught her by the collar. The fabric dug into her neck making her eyes water. “Get off,” she yelled, panicking a little. “*Get off!*”

Barry laughed, but he didn’t let go. He yanked her arm a little. “The guy’s not here, El. It’s time to go. I’m not gettin’ in trouble over you. I been square.”

She tried to break his grip, throwing her whole body away from him, but he held her without difficulty.

Suddenly the redhead was there between them, prying at his fingers where they curled around Ella’s hand. He tried to shake her off without letting Ella go, but the girl hung on and right as he released Ella’s collar, she lunged forward and bit his hand.

He grunted, ripping his right hand away and swiping at the redhead with his left. He connected with the side of her face and knocked her back. She fell hard, one hand flying up to her cheek.

Ella crawled back. Observing that she still held the screwdriver in her hand, she pushed to her feet and turned the point of it toward him.

“Get away,” she said. The smell of the owl was everywhere now. Like rotten fruit. Barry grinned and advanced toward her, still with a bit of swagger, but he was breathing hard. For a moment she saw him again as she wanted to – tall, lanky, majestic in the slanted afternoon sun. Coming toward her. Always coming at her. Both dangerous and desirable.

“Like all the other college girls,” he said, one hand out to grab her shoulder. “Hysterical bitch.”

She felt a pressure on her upper arm and Sadie’s red hair flared in her peripheral vision.

Without thinking, Ella stabbed at Barry with the screwdriver, grazing his arm. He yelped and reversed his step. The two girls moved forward together.

“Get away from us,” Sadie said.

“That’s right,” Ella pointed at him with the screwdriver. “Get away from us.”

“You crazy?” A thin line of blood rose along the scratch on his arm. “I’ll leave you,” he threatened, but for the first time since she’d met him, he seemed uncertain.

“No,” Ella replied. “No situation.”

Barry did not leave. When she knelt and gently fitted the screwdriver into the owl’s left eye socket, he watched. The blade slid in easily. She scooped out most of the little jelly blot of an eye in one twist. There was very little blood.

Behind her, Barry threw up. He retreated around the side of the house. Ella wiped the blade on a patch of grass as Sadie knelt down beside her.

“Can I help?” she whispered.

“Hold him.”

And she did. Ella removed the other eye.

“Those,” she pointed to the little pile of metal she had made and Sadie scooped up a handful and held them where Ella could see.

She selected a nut and fitted it into the owl’s left eye. It was just the right size, big enough to stay put, but she had to work it into the hard socket, pushing and turning it in her slick fingers. The bolt screwed part way in so it protruded from the owl’s face. It just felt right. She selected another of similar same size and did the other eye.

When it was done, she scoured her fingers with a handful of pine needles and gathered the owl gently in her hands.

Sadie helped her to her feet. When they came back around the house Barry was sitting on the front bumper of the Buick, bent forward, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

They walked around him without a word and he didn’t move, not until he heard two doors slam and then the engine gun and he stood up, the cigarette falling away. The redhead was in the driver’s seat, absorbed in the task of making the car go.

“And where the hell are you off to?” he asked them.

The car lurched backwards in a tight arc, slamming against the statue of a large, thin-necked, white bird. Its wings were outstretched and doubled. White, feathered wings above, long, rough-toothed saw blades below.

“Goddamn it, Ella!” Barry ran at them, about to take a leap into the backseat, realizing he’d never clear it.

They sped off down the driveway, the car bucking over the hard ruts, and Ella turned back and waved. *Good-bye* she thought. The redhead looked easy beside her, despite her awkwardness with the car. She was smiling and tossing her hair around as they picked up speed.

“Good-bye!” Ella yelled. “Good-bye! Good-bye!” They were yelling it together. Screaming. And as they crested a small hill, Ella took the owl in two hands and heaved it out of the car into the fast dusk.

“Good-bye! Good-bye!”

For the first time in days she didn’t care a whit where she was headed, what the plan was or who had come up with it. It felt so good to be the ones leaving.