



Ron Riecki

“I Can’t Explain”

The hawk went after our neighbor’s dog.

It got its talons into the fur, but only had a good grip on one side, so that the dog went up in the air, swinging, and, luckily, weighed too much for the hawk to hold with one claw. It dropped the dog, but not at enough of a height to hurt it, just scare it half-to-death. After landing, the dog just stood there, dazed, not running to the owner, not barking at the hawk, just afraid. There’s nothing sadder than a fearful dog, except maybe a fearful mother.

And my mother saw all this happen.

She’s a PETA freak, a hard-core vegetarian who loves eggs, milk, cheese, honey, basically everything that ensures she’ll never be a vegan, but she gets sick at just the smell of meat. Any meat. Even \$25,000 Grand Velas tacos or a \$5,000 Fleur Burger, which she couldn’t smell through the TV, but still asked me to turn off the Food Network.

As soon as she got home, she started Internet searching for what to do with hawks. One video said to shoot them, but she’d never hurt an animal, even an animal that hurts animals. An article said to get a guard dog, but we already have two, although they’re even smaller than the neighbor’s dog; she was worried the hawk would steal our guard dogs. You can’t really call them guard dogs, though, because the only thing they guard is their food dish. One’s a poodle, the other, a Pom. My mother only likes dogs that start with the letter p. Actually, she doesn’t like

them; she loves them. She makes them dog-bone cakes for their birthdays and cuddles them like bits of angel will come into her body through osmosis. So she was on a mission. I asked her a question and she waved me away. She had dogs' lives to save.

Finally, she slammed her laptop shut and told us we were going to the store.

"Which?"

"One that sells owls."

"Owls?"

"Owls."

"Real owls?"

"No."

"Fake owls?"

"Owls that scare hawks."

We went to the store. Lowe's. Which has 'owls' hidden in its name.

They didn't have any.

She said she might have to buy them online. She hates buying online, mostly because Jeff Bezos is worth 136 billion dollars and he probably eats a \$25 grand velas taco with extra Kobe beef for breakfast and throws half of it away. "Plus," she said, "they're trying to sell a sterling handcrafted owl on Amazon for \$42,000 and that's just disgusting."

"So did you buy one?"

"Two," she said, joking.

We went to another store, where, luck of luck, they did have a giant lifelike stuffed owl for \$48.99. It was the size of a kindergartener. She bought two. She put them in the windows. One for the back of the house and one up front, where the neighbors could see its haunted house eyes. I realized that the owls might not keep away hawks, but they could be pretty successful at keeping away neighbors.

Except a few days later one came to the house, told us how she was swimming at the pool, relaxing, looking up at the moon.

"The moon?"

"The moon. I snuck in." The pool closes at dusk.

"Oh, Carol, you are such a character."

"And I brought my dog." Which is against the rules according to the multiple signs at the pool.

"Don't tell me that hawk came for Ebby." Ebby's the neighbor's dog.

"No," Carol said, "It came for me. Just my face was sticking out of the water and it divebombed for me, thinking I was a trout or something, but then when it got close it must have saw the rest of my body in the water, because it shot straight back up in the air. But it came close."

"What about Ebby?"

"It didn't see Ebby. It wanted my nose."

“Could you imagine if it’d grabbed your face?”

“Don’t say that. I just botoxed. I’d’ve sued that bird if it’d touched me.”

They laughed.

My mother started internet searching again once she’d closed the door.

We went to more stores. Bought more owls. She needed some for outside. The child-size stuffed owls couldn’t be rained on.

She got some friendly suggestions from clerks and ended up at an antique shop.

We left carrying every owl they had, arms filled.

A year went by.

In that time, one neighbor’s dog actually got taken. What the hawks do is grab them and then fly as high as possible and let go. My mother couldn’t fathom this. She had a nightmare where this happened.

“To who?” I said.

“You sound like an owl.”

“But to who? To the dogs? To you? Who did the owl pick up?”

My mother wouldn’t say.

Maybe it was me.

All I knew is it was turning into an owl obsession. Owls in the kitchen. Owls in the living room. Owls lining the walk to the front door. Owls in the car. Owls in the bathroom. I asked my Mom if she thought an owl might break into our house and decide it needed to pee, if we’d all be saved by the owl in the bathroom.

“You never know,” she said.

I told her to just stand outside when the dogs go to the bathroom. The thing hawks most fear is humans. That’s safer than relying on ceramics. “Owl sculptures tend to fall asleep on the job,” I said. “They’re not going to actually do anything if a hawk comes, other than just stare blankly.”

She said we hadn’t had a problem so far. We still owned two dogs, which is what we started with, so something must be working.

I asked why she didn’t just buy a real owl.

“As a pet?”

“Sure.”

“They’re destructive.”

“How?”

“For one thing, they’ve been known to attack small dogs.”

“That defeats the purpose.”

“And I read that they like to tear up pillows.”

“So a definite no to real owls.”

“I like the fake ones. They leave the pillows intact.”

Finally, after an eternity, I met someone. It's hard for me to meet anyone. I'm 6'8" tall, which, yes, you hear that women like tall guys, but not if too tall. I'm too tall. I've went on blind dates and the girl has told me, "I have to be honest, it's just a little too weird."

"What's too weird?"

"I'd need a ladder to kiss you."

I think maybe God made me so large so that I could scare away hawks every time I visit my mother.

The dogs love me, though, could care less about my height.

But I finally met a girl where it'd advanced to the point of our meeting our parents. And she was coming over.

I asked my mother if she could tone down the owls a bit.

"How so?"

"Like lose a few of them."

"For good?"

"For a few hours. While she's here."

"She hates owls?"

"No. It's just that, they sort of control the room."

"What does that mean?"

"They're everywhere."

"If they're everywhere, what's the point of putting a few away?"

"How about just the living room? Can we have an owl-free living room?"

She said we could.

There were—I counted—twenty-four owls in the living room. We put them in the closet.

Then we heard her car outside.

My mother asked, "What's her name again?"

"Sarika."

"Oh, that's perfect."

"In what way?"

"Owls ends with an 's.' And 'Sarka' starts with an 'S.'"

"Sarika. Not Sharka. Sa-ri-ka."

"Sorry-ka."

"Please, don't ever say her name. And don't talk about owls."

The doorbell rang.

My mother opened the door and greeted her with a hug, yelling out, "Sarika! Such a beautiful name."

"Thank you."

"It means 'princess.'"

"Yes," Sarika said, "It does."

We sat in the living room.

“We have a hawk going around killing dogs, so we took the owls out of the room.”

I just about fainted.

“You missed one,” Sarika said.

“Where?”

Sarika pointed.

“Well, my goodness, you’re right. How did we miss that?”

It was a little owl, the size of a mouse. My mother doesn’t like trinkets. Those don’t scare hawks. The owls in the house are mostly owl-size, which she says is more realistic, because it is, so, at times, it feels like there are actually a hundred live owls in the place.

We all gabbed, all four of us—Sarika, myself, my mother, and the silent owl.

At one point, Sarika asked to use the bathroom.

We pointed where it was.

She left, came back, sat, and said, “I mistook the closet for the bathroom. There were a lot of owls in the closet.”

“Twenty-four. We tried to hide them,” my mother said, “He thought the owls would scare you off.”

“Can I have one?”

“An owl?”

Sarika nodded yes, shyly.

“Of course! How many would you like? Do you have dogs?”

“I do have a dog.”

“What kind?”

“A poodle.”

“You have a poodle?”

“Yes.”

My Mom looked at me. “Did you know this?”

“No.”

“Oh, marry her,” my mother said, “So you like poodles?”

“I love poodles.”

“Oh, you must have an owl. We need to keep that poodle alive. What’s his name?”

“Sally.”

“Sally the poodle.”

“From *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.”

“There was a poodle named Sally in *A Nightmare Before Christmas*?”

“No. But Sally’s my favorite character.”

“I don’t know that movie.”

“She’s a ragdoll. A very cute ragdoll.”

“Well, that’s my favorite kind of ragdoll,” my mother said.

They kept talking. I found myself refilling hors-d'oeuvres, and listening, often from the kitchen. Their talk felt like celebration.

The night ended.

I walked Sarika out to her car, her holding a poodle-size owl in her arms.

"I love your mother," she said.

"How about me?"

She stepped up onto the bumper of her car, leaned into me, and we kissed, an owl pressed up against my chest. It would always be there to protect us.

Ron Riecki's books include *Blood/Not Blood Then the Gates* (Middle West Press, poetry), *My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction* (Loyola University Maryland's Apprentice House Press, hybrid), *Posttraumatic* (Hoot 'n' Waddle, nonfiction), and *U.P.* (Ghost Road Press, fiction). Right now, Riecki's listening to Kyle Preston's "Solar Winds I & II."