

Birds These Days

by Nicholas Bridgman

Charles was a great horned owl who lived in a forest near a suburb. Occasionally, he would venture into town in search of food, different company, or sometimes just adventure. He often flew to the roof of a mechanic's garage that bordered several empty fields, since mice, his favorite food, were plentiful in the area. A number of pigeons usually sat on the roof, much to the mechanic's annoyance. One day when Charles flew there, he noticed something different: the pigeons were gone, and instead on the roof sat a stony-looking great horned owl.

Charles felt amazed, as he had seldom run into other owls in this neighborhood. He instantly desired to make a bond and flew right up to the owl, landing a couple feet to his right. Charles said in owl-language, "Hello, friend. What brings you to these parts?"

But the owl did not respond, he just sat silently, stone-faced.

Charles repeated, louder, "FRIEND, what brings you here?"

Still, the owl said nothing. This irritated Charles significantly, and he began to feel rebuffed and disrespected. So he walked up to the owl and said into his ear, "If you will not respect me when I am polite to you, then I challenge you to respect me as the result of a duel."

With that, Charles pecked at the owl's wing with ferocity. To his surprise, his beak hit what felt like hard rock. The owl's feathers were like armor, defending valiantly against his attack. He could not believe it, he thought the owl must have special powers he activated just at that time, to repel Charles' beak.

Charles backed up, asking, "What sort of bird are you, anyway? You don't answer my congenial greetings, and yet when I fight you, you show the bravery of a superbird. I have never pecked a bird as solid and steadfast as you. Nor a mouse, nor a squirrel, nor a rabbit, for that

matter. Indeed, your strength surpasses that of any mortal animal, except possibly a human, but I've never pecked a human so I cannot say that for sure.

"As you appear determined to repel my advances, be they friendly or adversarial, I am no bird to insist on ritual. If you do not wish to interact with me, I am no bird to force you."

With that, Charles spread his wings and began to fly away. But before he went very far, he felt once again overcome with rage at the owl's aloof disrespect, so he flew back overhead and laid a big poop on the owl's head. To his surprise, the poop landed on the owl as though it had hit plastic or concrete. It did not diffuse, it simply ran lightly into a couple streams down the side of the owl's head.

Charles suddenly realized his mistake, how could he not have recognized it earlier? The owl was clearly a victim of unrequited love. Charles now felt able to spot the obvious signs, the owl was paralyzed with sorrow for his lost lover. He did not speak because his sadness made words meaningless. He did not reciprocate friendship because he was so depressed, a friend appeared like nothing compared to a lover. He could not be moved to do battle, because his loneliness made fighting feel pointless, no matter how noble its end. Even poop on his head failed to permeate his woe, its merely rolling down his cheek symbolized how he barely noticed day-to-day problems, the loss of his love weighed on him so much more.

Charles landed once again a few feet from the owl, a changed bird. He no longer attempted to force friendship or adversariness on the owl. Instead he felt overcome with empathy and wanted to do whatever he could to ease the owl's emotional burden.

"Dear brother," Charles said, "I acknowledge your pain, and I beg you to forgive my earlier forwardness. I was blind, I did not realize you were suffering romantically. I would like to help you. I have a second cousin twice removed who is in need of a boyfriend, and she

additionally has very fine wing feathers. I guarantee if you would just allow me to introduce you to her, you will appreciate her beauty and be freed once and for all from your loveless stupor.

Will you allow me to do that, for you, please?"

The owl still said nothing. Charles said again, "Please?"

When the owl did not respond, Charles said, "It's okay, I understand, I'm just some strange owl you met on the roof of a garage. You don't have to answer me, I'll take your silence as consent that you wish to meet my cousin, Becky. I won't let you down, my good bird. I'll be back soon."

Charles flew back to the forest he lived in. He went from tree to tree, looking for Becky. He knew she liked one tall tree because it afforded a good view of the nearby large suburban backyards, where she could spot rodents for dinner. Sure enough, she was there. He flew up to her quickly and said, "Becky, I'm so glad you're here. I've found a bird you are really going to like. He's the strong, hard-willed, silent type, just what you're always looking for. From the looks of him, he could be two and a half, three years old, but I know you like mature birds. So, what do you say? Could I introduce you?"

Becky was enthusiastic, having been in a long dry spell since her last boyfriend. She said, "Yeah! I'd love that. Come, fly with me and show me this magnificent bird you speak of."

"Great," Charles said with excitement.

The two flew back to the garage, and they landed on the roof a few feet from the owl. The owl still sat stoically, not moving, not even acknowledging their landing. Charles said, "Friend, see that I've kept my word. I have brought you my second cousin I told you about. Now that you see her in the feathers, can you deny what I told you of her beauty?"

The owl remained silent. Charles felt very surprised. "Friend, my friend? What do you think of her? Is she not more beautiful than your lost love?"

Becky was not amused, as she was smarter than Charles and could see instantly that the owl was a stone dummy made to scare pigeons. "Charles, you idiot," she said, "That's a dummy."

"How dare you speak of him that way? He may be silent, but that does not excuse calling him mentally handicapped."

"I'm not calling him anything, you squirrel-brain, he's not even alive. Can't you see he's made of stone, not skin and feathers like you and me?"

"Really? So that's why he wasn't talking?"

"Yes."

"That's why he didn't respond to my advances?"

"Oh God, Charles, for Christ's sake, yes, he's inanimate."

"Oh, that makes me really angry. No stone owl is going to get the better of me. This owl must then be my archenemy, I vow to destroy him before he dishonors my reputation any further."

"Give me a break, what reputation? Since when do you have a reputation for anything but stealing mice from your senile Uncle Jim?"

"That's enough, Becky. I already have this owl to do battle with, I don't need your idle prattling."

"I give up, I'm leaving. Good luck in your duel," Becky said and flew away.

At that moment, Charles became overcome with fury and flew straight at the owl with his claws outstretched, as if grabbing prey. He flew so hard, he knocked the owl off the roof, and it

fell onto the concrete below and cracked into dozens of stone pieces. “Ha,” he said, “I see my strong claws have reduced you to bits. That’s what you get for disrespecting me. Never has there been such an epic duel, never has one displayed such victoriousness over an enemy, never have deception and treachery been so soundly defeated by righteous anger.”

With that, Charles flew off over the suburbs towards his forest. But as he flew over a neighborhood, he was struck by something in one house’s front lawn, something with pink feathers and a bending neck. He felt instantly full of curiosity at this bird who did not normally live in this habitat. He flew down and said, “Hello, pardon my forwardness, but are you in fact a flamingo? I haven’t seen your kind here before.”

But the flamingo did not respond. Charles became so enraged, he did not even bother to continue the conversation. He merely flew off in a huff and said with anger, “No respect—I tell you, birds these days.”