

The Owl

By Michael Fine

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A man got up.

“See-ya Thursday,” he mumbled, his eyes half closed from a night of drinking, his speech slurred. He stumbled, almost knocking over his chair. and staggered out the door. There was a blast of cold wind.

An old man was left alone in the tavern, sitting by himself at a Formica table. Water rushed and gurgled behind him. Myrna, the tavern-owner’s widow, was running the night’s mugs through the dishwasher.

The tavern was dark now. Bright colors whisked across the screen of the television over the bar, the pictures moving but the sound turned off. Then Myrna turned the TV off as well. No music either. The old juke box was unplugged.

The old man took a long drink of flat ale and dropped his mug onto the table with a thud. He felt bloated, even gaseous. Too much beer. It was eleven fifteen. Almost time.

Seventy. *Seventy*. Hard to believe. All those fucking years, and now it was too goddamn late to do anything about it. All those years of just letting it fester. He used to think about killing himself. Or her. Or her friend. Or maybe all of them, himself included. Seventy. Forty stinking years, every Tuesday and Thursday night wasted, stuck in the same chair, in the same bar. Some guys had it worse, but not many. Some guys spent their lives in a bowling alley or riding around on a firetruck. At least Jake had a couple of buddies at the bar, a couple of guys he could talk to. At least he wasn’t alone.

If someone had asked him about it beforehand, he would have said, what do you mean? Are you crazy? You don't take something like that lying down. You do something about it. Or you leave. He was no pussy.

But that wasn't what he did. Not even close. Somehow, he accepted it, dealt with it, learned to live with it. Accepted it? Not. Not ever. Not even close. How do you accept something that is destroying you, that attacks the man in you, the center of who you are, the fiber of your being? You never accept it. But you live with it anyway. You don't mean to. You didn't plan to. You never want to. But one day turns into the next day, and you just get carried along.

Life seems endless sometimes. It had gone on for forty years. *He* had to be what, in at least his late fifties now, or maybe in his early sixties. Jake had always figured him to be a young guy, or at least younger. But Jake didn't know for sure. There was a man at Jake's house right now, probably still in bed with Elena, Jake's wife, and Jake had no idea what the guy looked like. He didn't know the guy's name, what he did, or where he lived. Nothing. Not that knowing would have helped. Life is painful enough without unnecessary knowledge. Jake could stand it better as long as the guy didn't have a face. That way there wasn't any one bastard, any one particular person to blame. It was just fate, the character of the universe, the flow of things that was doing this to Jake. Bad karma.

Amazing. All those years and he still hung on to her. You think that he'd learned his lesson after all this time? That he learned to fight back? Or that he'd had his fill years ago, and left her, left her to rot with her little friend? You'd imagine, after all these years, that she'd gotten old and bitchy, and so withered that a normal man couldn't stand to look at her anymore. That forty years of being number two made Jake hate her, made her repulsive. All wrong. She was better than ever. Smarter. Brighter. Still good enough, even too good for him.

He still loved her, despite everything. He wasn't the type to cry into his beer – he was old now but he wasn't punchy yet, not by a long shot. Still, it was as simple

as that. He loved her. Worshipped the ground she walked on. Not that he wanted to know, not anymore, but that was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Every time he wanted to end it, every time he wanted to walk out or throw her out, to end their life together and this whole sordid ritual, he ran into that fact like a wall. Go directly to jail. Do not collect \$200. She was everything to him. His whole world. You never think they do, never think a woman could matter so much, but there it was, the mountain he kept coming back to, the sword stuck in a rock. He was no pussy. You think he liked living like this, think he liked putting up with all her bullshit? Not a chance. But even so, he hadn't been able to leave her. Didn't even really want to, truth be told. God knows he tried, but he just couldn't do it. Which is how he discovered what love was, this stupid feeling that is bigger than you are, that makes you do what you never thought you would, that makes you less of a man.

He should have found a woman for himself, he thought. God knows there was plenty of opportunity. Nothing serious, just company for those Tuesday and Thursday nights. There were women who came into the bar. And sometimes women who drank alone. But women, women in general, didn't matter very much to Jake. She was all he wanted. Needed, to tell the truth. Wanted. All of her. For himself.

"Drink up Jake, gotta close soon," said Myrna from behind the bar. Myrna was in her mid fifties. She wore a brown wig and was built like a tank.

Jake jumped a little at the sound of her voice. He knocked over the glass budvase with the little plastic rose in it that stood on the table. It was something he had done a hundred times before.

"Thanks, Myrna. Sorry you had to stay on account of me."

Jake finished his beer in one long and slow swallow.

Myrna watched him emptily, as though she knew everything about him it was possible to know.

He looked up at the clock again. Twelve-fifteen. The coast was clear. It was safe now.

Jake stood, put on his coat, and brought his mug over to the bar.

“Night,” he said, letting the mug drop through his fingers. “See ya Thursday.”

“Night,” Myrna said without looking up. She picked up the mug as soon as he put it down and wiped the ring of moisture it left off the counter.

Jake turned and walked out. The door closed in a whoosh behind him, sending another blast of cold air into the tavern behind Jake to fill the space he had just emptied.

The night was clear and cold. There were hardly any cars on the road. The bar sign went out suddenly, leaving the parking lot as dark as a cave. From the woods just beyond the parking lot came a rushing sound, the thump of wings, a rustling and a crackling like the sound of seawater being sucked from a field of rocks by the undertow on a rocky shore.

Jake opened the door of his car.

All at once, Jake felt a weakness in his knees. His head started to spin. The world disappeared. His legs buckled and he started to fall.

It was just for a second, just a momentary loss of control. He came to before he dropped, caught the car door, and swung himself into the front seat. The springs of the car whispered as his weight was distributed over the chassis.

He sat in his seat for a moment, afraid to move, trembling. *Seventy*, he thought, and waited for something else, for what was coming next, some pain or another collapse.

But nothing happened.

He closed the car door, started the engine, and drove home.

A car pulled up outside the house. The woman curled up in her bed and pretended she was sleeping. It was twelve-twenty. The orange electric clock showed the time even though it was dark in the room. He was right on schedule and the woman relaxed. Even after all these years, every night he was gone, she was afraid that he wouldn't come home at all. Forty years of Tuesdays and Thursdays. Even during the war.

She worried about him regardless. She couldn't help herself. Accidents happen. People get hurt. Cars run off the road. You never expect it but sometimes tragedy strikes out of the blue. And he was getting older. So was she.

You never think of yourself as living through these things, as tolerating them. You think of yourself as a person with a certain pride, a certain dignity, a certain sense of propriety. She thought, forty years ago, that it was just a fling after ten years of marriage, a passing fancy, and that it would soon end. Men do these things. She waited patiently for it to end. And was still waiting from one week to the next, forty years after that first Tuesday night. But she wasn't bitter. Disappointed to be sure, but never bitter. He was still good to her. He still acted like she was important to him, and they were happy enough when they were together, hand in glove, a good fit. She could stand...sharing him...if she had to. She didn't understand this, and sometimes, when she was alone, it made her angry, but she loved him nonetheless. Yes, that's what it was. That's what you call it. Simple minded love. Trust. Fidelity, even. Of a sort.

How had it started? She thought back. Forty years is a long time. Almost didn't matter anymore. One night, one Tuesday, Jake said he was going out for a drink. He was gone a long time, until after midnight. Elena waited for him, listening for his car. Then she worried about what might have happened to him. Then she became a little suspicious, even a little jealous. Something told her to be careful, to tread lightly. Maybe, she thought, he has a good explanation. Finally she heard his car pull up. And then a twinge of fear hit her as she heard his footsteps on the porch and she panicked.

What would he think of her, waiting up like this? He had a right to his privacy. She had no call to be telling him what to do with his life. She didn't own him. What if he didn't like the idea of her waiting up for him. It was like checking on him. What if he thought she was trying to run his life?

Terrified, she ran upstairs leaving all the lights in the house ablaze and settled into bed just as he was coming through the door. There was a strange silence below her, as if he were listening to see if she was still awake, or for voices. Then the opening and closing of doors, as if he was looking for something.

She knew, suddenly, from the silence on the floor below.

Later he came to bed, drunk, clattering and coughing, not worried for one second about disturbing her, obviously proud of what he'd done. She pretended to be asleep, and he lay on his back on his side of the bed, not touching her, just gazing at the ceiling until he fell asleep.

That was how it started. If she had any doubts, they disappeared when he went out again that Thursday night, and came home again about twenty after twelve, making enough noise as he came in to wake the dead, like he wanted her to know what he was up to. Every Tuesday and Thursday night after that. For forty years. When he came in, she always pretended to be sleeping. That saved the necessity of any explanations. He needed his space. They both knew and knew the other knew. Talking about it,

arguing about it, that would only make their lives more difficult. If Jake felt the need to live his life this way, she had no right to interfere.

Who was the other woman? Elena wondered. This woman had lasted a long time. Elena's idle curiosity, which she'd suppressed for forty years, was now getting to her, and growing like a hunger. How hard it was to pretend not to know. Where was that pretense getting her? No, now she really wondered. Who *was* this woman? What made Jake stay loyal to her all these years? Maybe it wouldn't hurt to find out. Maybe Elena could just look at her face, just for an instant, just to know this one thing before Jake died or she died or the woman herself died. To know, before it was too late. Sometimes Elena secretly looked in the mirror when Jake came up behind her and held her, just to see what they looked like when *they* were together. What did it look like when Jake held *her*? Forty years. She would have been just as interested if Jake was her son, her brother, or even just a boarder.

Doors slammed. There was stamping downstairs. Coughing. Yawning. Jake was home, making enough noise to wake the devil, and he was still alive. Thank God. In a few minutes he'd be in the dark room with her. She fell asleep.

Thursday came and Jake found himself in the bar once more. There were a few other men in the bar with him, some at the bar itself, some standing in a lit corner, playing pool, and others in the booths or at the tables, drinking with their buddies. No one talked much. People smoked and watched a basketball game on the television. The volume was turned way up so you couldn't help but listen to it. Smoke drifted in the room. Now and then the heavy metal door whooshed open as someone entered or left, and then a blast of cold air blew through the room, but for the most part the place was good and warm. You could sit there with a brew for a goodly part of your life and never notice the passage of time.

Jake stretched out his hand and examined his fingers. Translucent white skin. Loose flesh. Blue veins. Wrinkled and old. Some things, like getting old you just live with. But you never get used to them, no matter how old you get.

Suddenly Jake had a thought. Maybe it would be possible to get a look at the guy. Maybe even without being seen. Just a look, like from a distance. It had been going on for such a long time. Who'd know? Nobody. Just for his own, well, peace of mind, if you want to call it that. Or maybe just curiosity, which he had earned a right to. You live with something like this for forty years and you damned well have a right to be curious, and more than that. Hiding from it hadn't done Jake any good. It hadn't just faded away or even ended yet. Forty blinking years. It wasn't going to disappear by itself. The guy had been, well, almost a part of him for such a long time. Stupid to keep hiding it from yourself, Jake thought. Stupid to think that if you don't look at him, he'll just go away. Maybe there was something more to it than he expected, or less, some quirk or weird twist he hadn't thought of.

Jake knew himself pretty well. He knew he wasn't going to be overcome by bloodlust or rage at this stage and take off after the guy. Nothing like that. It was too late for anything like that.

The more Jake thought about it, the more he felt that seeing the guy for himself was something he ought to do, something he owed himself. Just once. From a distance. That would do it. Look him in the face while he still could. You figure that half the town already knows what he looks like or even who he is. It's no secret anymore. It's almost legitimate. Maybe it was someone familiar, someone he'd known for a long time.

He went to the bar and bought himself another beer. On the other hand, why tempt fate? What difference is it going to make now? Nothing was going to change. What if it *was* someone he knew? What then? Start playing games with yourself about facing the guy? About confronting him? Why? What good would it do? He realized he was better off sitting back, watching the game on TV and finishing his beer.

Still, a voice inside him said, it's stupid to go on without knowing. It's like having a car you've paid for but haven't ever driven. It wouldn't be that hard. They must have given up hiding a long time ago – they knew he was willing to play along, so they had to be pretty much in the open by now. You just leave a half-hour earlier than usual, park the car down the street, and wait. He comes out of the house. You start the car and get a look at his face as you drive by, as he's getting into his car. Then you never have to see him again, and you can stop thinking about him. And all of this.

Jake put down his mug and stared off into space, thinking.

Elena walked in the cold air. The air was sharp as ice. The woods were full of rustling sounds, even though it was winter and late, so she walked quickly, as quickly as she could, along the side of the highway. Cars passed, their headlights blinding her. Dogs barked in the distance and a pack of coyotes howled. Good it wasn't more than a mile.

Her plan was simple enough. She'd wait outside the bar, in the shadows, until they came out. People tactfully mentioned seeing Jake at the bar, so Elena was sure they met there. The rest was a gamble. There was a good chance they met at the bar and then went someplace else, but it was a chance she'd have to take. Maybe they left one car at the bar and came back there after. Just to see the woman once, just quickly, was worth the effort. If not, no problem. No one would see her, and she'd just walk home in the dark. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

In case Jake got home before Elena did, she left a few pillows under the blankets on her side of the bed. If he came in before her, he'd think she was in bed, asleep. He never turned on the light, and never touched her on those Tuesday and Thursday nights. He always fell asleep right away, from exhaustion, she figured. She'd sneak back into the house after all the lights were out and come to bed as if she was coming back from the bathroom. He'd never notice.

She stopped and rested. She heard something rustling in the bushes behind her and the hoot of an owl, and she turned to look. The moon was out but the trees overhead made the night dark again, too dark for her to see anything among those trees. It was probably only her heart beating and her breathing that she was hearing because the night was so quiet. She felt dizzy and floating, as if suspended in a great body of water, and a little lost, although she knew exactly where she was. Leaves rustled once more. She started walking again, a little more quickly now.

The door opened and an old man stepped into the light. Standing there, looking at him, was an old woman. Elena. His wife. She was shivering.

Jake and Elena looked straight at one another. They each drew a breath, and each stood their ground, expecting something else to happen or someone else to appear. Nothing changed. They kept looking at one another as if they had just met for the first time, as if they were strangers.

This old woman looks familiar, Jake thought. But why is she standing there alone.

Where's Jake? Elena thought, slowly recognizing him but also not seeing him, both at the same time. Why is he just standing there? What is he doing here? Now? Alone? Why is he looking at me?

What does it mean? they thought, together.

Suddenly Jake began to see Elena, just as Elena saw Jake and their lives for what they were and for the first time. It doesn't make sense, they both thought, also together. Nothing fits.

And suddenly things, the world, everything and everyone in it became profoundly different.

The cold night was silent yet rustling with life and possibility.

What does it mean?

The two old people approached one another slowly, as if the ground under their feet was unstable or treacherous, as if it might give way with each step. Then, without saying a word, ashamed, they walked together to their car.

The night was so clear you could see through it for miles. The air was still cold. The car door creaked when Jake opened it and Elena got in beside him. They heard the hoot of an owl, Minerva's bird. There was a rush of wings as the owl alighted.

The car door closed.

It was midnight.

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