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### White Owl

*After all, you were a wound,  
Or at best, the breath of Absence.*

— Henri Coulette

Alma was heading for the main entrance, watching stars tremble in the moonless winter sky above the buildings, when the old blind man caught her eye. Perched on a wooden crate, hugging a battered accordion with lover-like verve, he throws his whiskery face back and forth in time with the tune; little jets of breath billow from his mouth and unravel into the darkness. Passing him, Alma felt a peculiar notion flicker through her . . . that he might be her father . . . and her lips formed a sharp, dismissive smile. What crazy ideas, she told herself, but slowed down.

She knew where such odd thoughts came from. Her father had been on her mind for weeks now, although she'd given up brooding about him years ago, when it finally sank in that her mother planned to never let the man's name cross her lips. But ever since a tenacious, corrosive illness had forced her to place herself in Alma's care, Nora had started to speak of him — though her references were always vague. Alma savored every morsel of information Nora doled out, but tried not to let her mother know

how hard she listened; her questions, in the past, had caused all kinds of heartache between them, so Alma never pressed for more facts. Besides, it wasn't exactly facts she was after. The one thing she'd been told for certain — that her parents had never been married — seemed trivial. What obsessed her instead were the qualities of his personality, the landmarks in the geography of his spirit she might use to map out her own. Still, the more Nora mentioned him, the more Alma had come to feel that some sort of revelation might be at hand, and secretly she waited for it.

These thoughts brought Alma to a halt down the block from the blind man, whose rough music drifted toward her like the moaning of lovers, echoing faintly off the facades of the few stores remaining open past six. As if awakened by it, she raised her eyes to the lit window before her (behind which pert-nosed manikins were posed in jackets, mittened and booted for snow), and discreetly glanced back.

The grizzled musician, profiled in the bleak light of a streetlamp, does seem to resemble her father, or the sketchy image of him she's created over the years. For a long time she stares at him, spellbound, until the discordant feeling strikes her that he is watching . . . his low, reedy strain drawing slowly across her throat like a long feather. . . .

She turned back to the manikins with a shudder. Had she offended him somehow? It was possible. She *had* walked by without dropping a coin into the open cigarbox at his feet.

Now wait a minute, she told herself, this is ridiculous. And looking back she could see at once that the man's eyes were rolling aimlessly, milky pupils vanishing now and then under raw lids. Something began to replace her agitation, something like pity; if she'd had a spare dime she would have given it to him on the spot. But now that she'd dropped out of college and taken up her mother's old standby, waitressing, in order to support them both, there was nothing extra. Still, the beggar's harsh

music seems to accuse her. And so she had to turn, hugging herself against the chill, and walk a few yards to the revolving door, which pulled her on into the store.

Sadler's was one of the oldest buildings in town, built in an age before the word "façade" had come to mean the false fronts of Hollywood sets. Alma had set foot in it only a few times, and it always awed her. The ceiling was vaulted like some ancient temple's, composed of large convex sky-blue squares bordered by white scrollwork; where the borders intersected chandeliers hung from thick brass chains; the main aisle was polished marble; and on all sides were oak-framed glass cases loaded with goods . . . scarves and gloves, small flasks of perfume, purses and wallets and empty key-cases, gem-studded pins and bracelets. It was not the sort of place where Nora usually shopped. In fact, Nora had scolded her one Christmas morning a few years back for buying her a gift there.

"It's too damned expensive," she'd snapped, shaking the silk blouse at her until a pin came loose and the thing half unfolded like a crippled flag.

Confused tears sprang into Alma's eyes, which made her mother bite her lip and slump back into the sofa, her own eyes glistening.

"I'm sorry, honey," she sighed. "I am. It's really a pretty blouse, I . . . I'm glad you got it. It's just . . . that place. . . ."

Nora wore the blouse only once, and to this day, whenever Alma saw it in her mother's closet, it made her think that Sadler's was somehow connected to her father . . . and from that intuition all kinds of romantic plots branched out. She let her gaze float above the racks and tables, let it flit from mirror to mirror in wonder. Then she shook her head. Forget it, she told herself. She knew she could spend the rest of her life inventing the past, without even grazing the truth of it.

As if sleepwalking in the moonlit streets of some foreign city, she wandered into a narrow side aisle. Her mind felt more unfocused than usual. What is it? she asked herself. What are you here for? Her hand, as if on its own, unbuttoned her coat and touched the pocket of her mint green uniform, and through its cloth she could feel the money: \$35.56, the exact amount (by Nora's reckoning), including tax. Alma's eyes widened slightly. "Sweater," she murmured with relief. "Mama's sweater."

A mild resentment welled suddenly in Alma's throat at the thought of being sent on this particular errand — a thin bitterness laced with the citric tang of pity. She could see the sallow, bony face her mother no longer would look at in the mirror, watched its pale lips uttering commands.

"All your tips, Alma. Now."

Alma stared down at the skinny palm her mother held out. "I have to have something to spend on my own."

"Spending money! Obviously you don't have the head for tight budget."

"But Mama — "

"Look," Nora interrupted, closing her eyes for moment. "Say I let you keep the money. Can you promise me the lights'll go on next month whenever we flick a switch? Or that the furnace'll heat up when the thermostat clicks?" Alma started to answer but Nora cut her off. "I seem to remember somebody who nearly got kicked out of her dormitory a few months back. Seems she didn't have enough left of her scholarship to pay her Spring Quarter's rent."

Alma gave in, as she always did. It wasn't so much that her mother was right (she was; money had seemed trivial to Alma), but that there were certain painful moments, like when her mother's ashen eyelids would suddenly droop with weariness, that made Alma's resolve simply vanish. How old her mother seemed now! It hadn't been long ago that she'd been pretty, carrying her forty-some years with

verve and dignity. Alma had often marveled at how little Nora's nearly thirty years of menial labor had affected her. She'd waitressed in diners, bars, hotel restaurants and cocktail lounges, all the while taking in laundry for the little cash she'd designated "extra" and which, after Alma's birth, had gone into toys and ice cream cones and all the other necessities of childhood. "Menial" was Nora's word, not Alma's. She'd always thought her mother's work as hard and complex as most people's (in her freshman year, Alma had suffered certain highly paid professors whose work proved more essentially "mean" than anything Nora had ever done). What made her mother's career seem so fruitless now was the fact that, on top of her lingering pleuritic fatigue, there were no sick-leave checks to soften her convalescence. Of course, the owner of The Plainview had agreed to replace her with Alma, but her daughter's inexperience — coupled with a solemn, introspective demeanor that struck a lot of customers as careless — earned skimpy tips. But Alma sensed that her mother's recent melancholia, which only talk seemed to relieve, grew out of something deeper than lassitude and lack of money: the realization that her body would completely fail her one day, and maybe very soon.

"May I help you?"

Alma started. "What?"

"Do you need — " the clerk, who was standing too close to her, began.

Alma stopped her with a quick smile. "Oh, no. I — I'm just browsing."

With a swift eye movement the woman noted Alma's gravy-stained uniform, then gave her a faintly incredulous look. "Well, if you need me I'm Carol." She pushed her pointed chest forward slightly so that Alma could read her badge:

SADLER'S  
*Carol*  
Book Department

Deep in her closed mouth a bitten gum-wad snapped.

“Carol,” Alma said, squinting. “Yes, well . . . thank you.”

The woman aimed her own brief smile at Alma’s chin, then marched off, spiked heels firing shots at no one in particular.

Wonder who she’d be if I didn’t need her, Alma thought.

Quickly turning away, she picked up the first book her hands could find and began distractedly flipping the pages. Why did salespeople always make her so nervous? As far back as she could remember they’d threatened her. If one would approach when she had money, Alma would frantically search for something inexpensive to buy, then feel embarrassed afterward for getting something so cheap; if the clerk caught her without any money, her cheeks would burn and she’d apologize at length, leaving the indifferent shopkeeper baffled. Yet with or without money, shopping was one of Alma’s favorite pastimes, as if putting herself at the mercy of her own weakness were a kind of adventure, an experience of complex possibilities.

Glancing down, for the first time Alma becomes aware of the book in her hands: *Greece and Italy; A Voyage to Antiquity*. It is heavy, the glossy pages crowded with photographs of jagged islands afloat in cerulean waters, sparse hillsides, and people the color of stick cinnamon. And ruins! Ruins in the morning, ruins at sunset, ruins at night with stars hanging hypnotized above them. Fascinated, she begins to leaf through the volume slowly, from page one.

It reminds her of some books on Greece and Rome she found as a child, in the trash her mother had cleaned out of the cellar. Their covers were grey, brown, and faded green, the pages rippled and foxed; when she opened them, a dusty bitter smell pinched her throat, and she had to stand them on the sill by her open window to air. She wondered only briefly why they’d been thrown out, since Nora had

been after her to finish the books on the school's summer list; still, she would have thought her mother could have held them for her, at least until she had read through her list. Eleven years old at the time, Alma had already graduated from the horse stories and gothic romances that so entranced her friends at school to the dense, primal horror of Poe, whose tales, while leading her always to the precipitous edge of boredom, succeeded in giving her exotic nightmares of exquisite richness. The old books she'd retrieved from the trash, standing open to the dry August breeze, seemed to her just as mysterious, as thrilling. Finally, though, when she did look into them, she found they contained mainly colorless paragraphs on politics and war, interspersed with brief accounts from mythology. But she read them anyway, seldom mustering enough concentration to follow the numerous narrative threads, but drawn on by the intuition that in them something important was hidden.

It was halfway through the second volume that she came upon two fragments of translated poetry, typed on onionskin and corrected with a blue pencil in a cramped but careful script: one, "from Ovid," was part of a tale about Tiresias' becoming a seer; the second was a portion of a play, "from Aeschylus," in which someone named Prometheus was chained to a rock. At the bottom of each sheet were scribbled a pair of indecipherable initials. With growing excitement, Alma read and re-read the verses, not only because she found their language swift and affecting, but because she sensed that here were pages her father had touched. For reasons she never clearly thought through, Alma kept the poems hidden in her Chest of Secrets — an old White Owl cigarbox — along with tightly folded love-notes from boys at school, Indian-head nickels and lucky pennies, plastic rings out of bubblegum machines, and her friends' school pictures (each inscribed with a comical message and signed, with intense sincerity, "Luv Ya").

One day, as Alma sat cross-legged amidst the books on her bed, reading the poems for perhaps the hundredth time, Nora appeared in the doorway.

“I’ve already called ‘Supper’ three times,” she began, halting as Alma whipped the crackly pages behind her back.

“Be right there, Mama.”

But Nora’s face had tightened, her eyes gone small in concentration. “You look just like your father,” she said with deliberate articulation. “The spit and image.” She stepped forward slowly, watching Alma stuff the papers into her Chest of Secrets and hug it against her breast. Leaning over her daughter, Nora glanced around at the books and said, “Thought I threw these out.”

“You did, but . . . I found ’em and they’re real interesting, Mama.”

Nora’s face reddened. “When I throw something out,” she said, “you leave it out. Hear?” She scooped up the books. “Remember when you stole that Viewmaster at Woolworth’s? Yeah well this is the same thing. I thought you learned your lesson on thievery. I thought you knew better.”

“I didn’t think it was — ”

“You didn’t *think*, that’s your problem,” she went on, cradling the books in one arm without apparent effort, as if they were a few dirty dinner plates. Then she paused and squinted at the box Alma held so tightly. “And that. What’s in it?”

“Nothing, Mama. Just some private things.”

“So you’re hiding things from me now.”

“No, Mama, it’s just — ”

“Don’t you ‘mama’ me. Now give it here. “She thrust her free hand out, but Alma just lowered her head, pressing the box with her chin and hugging it even tighter. “I said give it here!” Nora cried, snatching at it. The books tumbled off her arm. “What’re you hiding in here, damn it!”

She tore the lid off and the contents dropped to the floor. It seemed to Alma that before the poems could even touch the carpet her mother had grabbed them. She skimmed first one, then the other, and began to tremble. When she finally managed to speak, her voice was ragged.

“You know, don’t you. They were his.” Avoiding Alma’s eyes, she made a circular gesture that seemed to take the whole room in. “All this was his. These books . . . he wanted me to read ’em. Oh, he had no use for his educated wife. But me . . . well I was just too dumb. ‘Browse through them, so we’ll have something to talk about *after*,’ that’s what he told me. Yeah,” she added, gritting her teeth, “I was dumb.”

“Well,” piped the saleswoman brightly, “did you find something?”

Confused, Alma turns to face her, unable to recall the name but shooting her a smile nevertheless.

“Oh well, yes I . . . this is really a beautiful — “

“How nice.” She plucked the book from Alma’s hands and headed for the cashier’s counter, calling back at her, “Will there be anything else?”

“No . . . Carol?” The name comes weakly to Alma’s lips. “I’m not sure . . .”

“Let’s see.” Her fingernails, painted a kind of peony pink, rattled over the keys. “Will that be cash or plastic?”

“Oh, I don’t have a credit card, I — ”

“Cash, then! That’s twenty-nine ninety-five,” the register whirred, “plus tax,” green digital numbers jumped in the black display window, and the drawer rang out. “That’ll be thirty-two twenty-three.” The machine spat out a receipt, which Carol tore off and stuck in the book. Then she whipped open an over-large sack and thrust the book inside. “There.”

Alma stares a moment at Carol’s smile, the white teeth smudged with lipstick, then down at the bag. And with blood rising hotly to her cheeks, she slowly counts out 32 dollars and 23 cents.

“Thank you,” Carol chirped as she slammed the drawer shut. “Come back and see us!”

Embracing her package, Alma dazedly walked away, the big book solid against her. Lightly, three dollars and change swung and chinked against her leg until the message got through: she couldn’t buy the sweater. A mixture of guilt and fear whirled up inside her like a feather blizzard. What’ll you do now? she asked herself, biting her lower lip to keep it from quivering.

Overhead, a muted bell ponged three times, summoning some clerk from one department to another. The chandeliers threw brilliance everywhere, so that nothing in the store seemed to cast a shadow. Alma kept considering returning the book, but the image of Carol’s scowl unnerved her, and that unnerving made her furious with herself. When the SALE rack of Italian mohair specials finally rose up before her, she could only step up to it and begin to dejectedly finger one of the sleeves, thick and as orange as woven fire.

Immediately another clerk was on her.

“May I help you?”

“No,” Alma snapped softly. “No. Please.”

The woman retreated as if she’d been struck.

Over the sweater's intricate weave Alma let her shimmering eyes wander. She recalled the recent November nights when the temperature had dropped so brutally, making her mother moan towards midnight and call for an extra blanket. The days this past week had also been freezing. "Damn drafty apartment," Nora would gripe, huddled under a worn quilt in her threadbare cardigan. The cold seemed to fill her with an even greater urgency to talk, to bring up anything, not to fall silent.

"First met your father on a day like this," she'd said the other day over breakfast." I remember him standing in the doorway of Kelley's Café and how his breath turned white. It was so early even the garbage men hadn't come in for sweetrolls yet. 'Don't just stand there, we're tryin' to heat the place up,' that's what I told him. 'How's your food?' he says. I can tell from his voice and his stubbly cheeks that he's been out all night, but from the cut of his clothes I know he's got a home somewhere, and a big one probably, so I tell him, 'It'll ease your hunger.' Then he gave me a real long look and said, 'I doubt it.' But he came on in."

For a long while she'd sat there, staring down with a distant smile at the last half-inch of instant coffee in her cup.

Then this morning, out of the blue, she'd looked up from her eggs and said, "I got to have a good sweater, honey. I feel like a used-up old woman wrapped in this horse blanket. I want you to go to Sadler's tonight and buy me one on sale. You come straight home after work and we'll see how much we have to add to your tips." She'd paused, then gone on in a measured voice. "Is there anything you need?"

Alma had answered no, the word barely squeezing through the fist in her throat. And now, standing at the sweater rack with only three dollars in change in her pocket, she could feel tears threatening to boil up into her eyes.

Three more times the muted bell overhead poned, quick and insistent. Looking up, Alma noticed a crowd of shoppers gathered down the aisle near the jewelry counter. They were mostly women, but even the men jostled for a better view of something Alma couldn't see.

"S'cuse me," muttered the clerk Alma had turned away a few minutes before, shouldering past.

She watched the woman trot on into the crowd, which opened for her, revealing a rather tall, well-dressed man pounding the glass top of a case full of watches.

"Whadya mean y'don carry Omega?" he breathes into the grimacing face of the Jewelry clerk.

"Sir — "

"Look," he says, squinting now at the Women's Wear clerk who's just grabbed his arm. "Says she doesn't carry Omega."

His peppery beard is neatly trimmed and his red, bleary eyes sparkle like twin stars. Staring at him, Alma feels a tremor of recognition arc through her. She could swear that he would pass for the blind beggar's respectable brother.

"Here," the soused customer announces to the crowd, pulling back the sleeve of his trenchcoat to show a bare wrist. "Y'see, that's where I've always worn it." Then he turns back to the Jewelry clerk. "I use t'come here once a year an' — an' hard cash . . . I got hard cash here. . . ."

Suddenly, Alma's mind is utterly lucid.

"Sir!" barked a burly man who'd just appeared out of nowhere. "I'm the Manager, Sir. Now just . . . just come along," he said, hauling the man toward a side exit. "We haven't carried Omega for several years now. Now come on."

Alma glances around Women's Wear. No one.

"But look! Look," the stumbling man protests, "I got the real green stuff. . . ."

Alma's hands are trembling as she slips the burnt-orange sweater off its hanger and stuffs it into the sack with her book. Down the aisle the crowd was breaking up, the lady from Women's Wear remaining to comfort the shaken Jewelry clerk. As casually as she can, Alma moves toward the exit. She stops briefly here and there to examine a blouse, a purse a box of stationery . . . each time nervously glancing back. Finally, she takes to the middle of the aisle and continues passing racks and glass cases and people so slowly . . . like floating. Some part of her mind keeps expecting the Manager to wrench her elbows back, the way the clerk at Woolworth's did years ago, or that somewhere an alarm will go off. But nothing happens as she nears the door, beside which a sign displaying a pair of handcuffs reads: *Shoplifting Is A Crime*. Then, catching sight of Carol off to her left, she swallows hard.

"Drunk, yes drunk!" Carol announced to the clerk from Notions. She shifted excitedly from one foot to the other. "And so distinguished-looking, I mean . . . you'd never guess. . . ."

With her heart hammering one rib over and over, Alma leans against a heavy revolving-door panel and shoulders through into the night.

On the sidewalk she pauses for a moment, tensed — but no hand clamps her arm. Then tentatively, but more springily as the windows full of paralyzed manikins begin drifting by, she walks away.

"I'm a thief, a thief, a thief," she half-sang under her breath. She wanted to tell herself they'd never miss it, but knew that wasn't so. It was a big store, the owners were rich, their profits were probably . . . so the excuses came and went. Yet something still nagged — not guilt, exactly, but a feeling of incompleteness, as if she'd not accomplished something that urgently needed doing. In this exultant, contrary mood, Alma nearly passed the blind man by once more. But the music catches her up, makes her stop before him and listen.

For a long time she stands in one spot, swaying almost imperceptibly back and forth. Her heart seems to echo his music's rhythm, her breath matching the accordion's sig. Several minutes pass before she looks down, her eyes focusing on the box at his feet and the scattering of dimes and nickels inside.

Then a shock ripples through her. There, on the flipped-back lid, a staring snowy bird is perched beneath two words: *White Owl*.

"Cold!" hoots the old man over the music.

Alma jumps.

"How — " her throat caught. "How did you know I was . . ."

The playing stopped.

"You were humming along."

"Oh. I see." She watched his eyes randomly wandering above the black cavity of his mouth, and felt both repelled and enthralled. "I didn't realize."

"Yeah. Humming right along."

He begins again, arms like two snakes squeezing the bellows between them.

Alma wanted to walk away, but couldn't. Don't just stand there, stupid, she told herself. Then she raised her voice over the music.

"What song is that?"

"No song at all!" he calls out, grinning and nodding in time. "Improvisation!"

Suddenly the full force of his music strikes her . . . the pure, errant sound of it like wind over broken stones. And looking down at the old man's stubbly face, bright as if the moon lives in it, she feels her father's image blown free of her . . . the way snow flies out of a tree and leaves the branches

bare but clear against the sky. Surrounded now by her father's real absence, she feels that clear. Clear as the music in its landscape of silence.

“How 'bout a gift?” the beggar croaks. With his toe he taps the White Owl lid, making the bird seem to inhale and shuffle its feathers. “F'r the Treasure Chest!”

Without hesitation, Alma unpockets all her money and tosses it into the box: an offering.

“Thank ya!” he calls above the wheezy tune.”

Alma aims a grin at his grizzled face and calls back, “You're welcome!”

Then she turns toward home. The sparsely peopled streets of her native town seem somehow foreign now, mysteriously fresh, as if seen for the first time. Keep awake, she tells herself, hugging her full sack tightly. Then aloud: “Keep awake, Alma!”

Her steps become brisk, close to dancing. She wants to bounce a loud laugh off the façades, but instead holds it in, choosing simply to savor the urge. Now she can see that the sky above the buildings is black and clear, like the past or the future, and the stars are still shaking — but not with cold.