



**NIGHT  
OWL**

E. L. O. O.

## Night Owl

By E.P. Hubbs

“Your move,” I said to the scruffy looking young man standing behind the counter with me. Tim wore the same shirt as I did—a gray polo with the logo of an oil company over the left breast. He stared downwards at the small wooden chess board on the counter, pinching and rubbing his thick brown chin hair between his thumb and fingers. I was slightly envious of him for being able to grow such a thick beard at age twenty. Here I was, four years older than him and I couldn’t fill in my cheeks or sideburns at all, save for a few scarce gnarly wires. I think I had him beat in the mustache department though. That counted for something.

He bounced on his heels on the thick rubber mat below our feet. “Really, Greg? That’s where you’re gonna move? Is it amateur hour or what?” he said defensively. I smiled—which quickly vanished as I turned toward the sound of a customer placing two bags of Doritos and a liter of Mountain Dew on the counter behind me. I started scanning the items as if each of them weighed twenty pounds.

The customers were a faceless stream of depression which flowed over me every day. I said as little as possible to them. By the time I had been working there for a year, I had grown to despise them. Every day they forced me to do work because they needed junk food, or cigarettes, or goddamned lottery tickets. I also feared them slightly due to the fact that we worked in the sketchiest part of town at a profession with the highest probability of getting robbed at gunpoint.

Tim and I worked at the gas station for one reason: because we were lazy as all hell. The job was so easy that it almost made up for dealing with the customers. I had always hoped I

would be able to go to school later in life and actually become someone. That was proving to be more difficult than I thought it would be.

This was the only job that I could find due to my refusal to work construction or in restaurants and my general lack of qualifications in all other fields. It was proving to be impossible to save up for school with the meager wages I was provided. I always thought to myself that I was taking the job of a simpleton in order to free up most of my mind to ponder the great questions of the universe, as Einstein had done when he took a job at a clerk's office. But that was bullshit.

This asshole customer tried to start with small talk as they often did. "Ooh y'all playin' some games tonight?" He said in a jolly voice, staring at Tim. "Are ya workin' hard or hardly workin'?" Tim and I didn't react to his comment. That unbearable joke was repeated by every plebeian that came through the gas station doors. They all thought they were so original, witty, and funny, but to us they were derivative, dim-witted, and vapid. They were husks of their former selves, wandering aimlessly across the planet attempting to cope with their failures by trying to befriend gas station employees. I refused to entertain these futile aspirations.

"Anything else for you?" I said plainly while scanning the junk food, completely ignoring his statement. His toothless smile disappeared behind a yellow stained mustache. His wrinkled face did not show any anger, but there was a sort of desperation behind his sunken eyes.

"Gimme a pack of dem Pall Mall's. The uh... Ultra Light 100's," he stammered. I spun around, ripped the pack of smokes out of the spring-loaded plastic shelving which clapped loudly against the front of the rack and scanned the item to the register which beeped agreeably.

“\$5.25” I demanded, just barely masking my annoyance. Almost all of our customers bought smokes when they came in, and that was fine. They were spending all of their money on cigarettes when they needed money for food. I’d sell packs to the same guys three or four times a day sometimes. I always hoped that none of these guys had families, but they probably had more than one. I also feared that I would end up like them. I didn’t think I could live with myself were that the case.

He snorted his stuffy nose and swallowed, clearly disappointed that I wasn’t going to talk to him. He paid me in money that was so dirty I could smell it. It was a warm and damp wad of ones that were so blackened with filth that I could barely tell if it was U.S. currency. This too was the norm. The register popped open, I gave him his change in a flash, made sure he saw me pump hand sanitizer onto my hands and rub it in, and was back to the chess board instantly.

Tim hadn’t moved. He didn’t look like he had even blinked. “Hurry up and move,” I said.

The bell at the entrance rang, announcing the customer had left.

“I’m thinking still. You got me pretty good here.” Tim said.

“You know it,” I said. I began playing with the glass beads that held the pens next to the register in place. I liked the soft clicking sounds they made when I moved my fingers through them, and their smooth texture was relaxing. They were my equivalent to a stress ball.

“How are your classes going?” I asked.

“Fine. It’s easy, all you have to get is a C anyways.”

“You’re such an overachiever.”

“Compared to you I am. Why don’t you go to college?” Tim asked.

I laughed and said “My parents won’t pay for it like yours will. Can’t afford it.”

“Just take out student loans then. That’s what I’d do if I had to.”

I rolled my eyes. “The student loan system is totally fucked. I’m not getting into some mountain of debt for it.”

“It is fucked. But when something is systemically fucked, why not just fuck it even harder?”

I smirked and replied, “That will always end well.”

“Didn’t you want to be a writer?”

“Yeah. I suppose so.”

“Well go do it, man.”

I thought about what Tim said for a moment, then became aware of how arrestingly bright it was in the store and glanced up at the ceiling with squinted eyes. The entire ceiling was striped with softly humming fluorescent lights and rows of shitty fiber paneling stained with water damage. One of the light bulbs was flashing erratically as if it had been stricken with disease. We were like prisoners, being kept under fluorescent lights all the time.

The place was decently sized for a gas station and was filled with all types of horrible food that any human could desire. The small kitchen area at the east of the building was littered with straw wrappers and empty mustard packets and was painted with splashes of soda here and there. The ice machine in the corner was loudly complaining and the plastic food case was still

proudly displaying the brown, wrinkled hot dogs that were “fresh” when they had started cooking ten hours ago. The air smelled of chemicals that the morning crew had used to mop the floors earlier in the day.

The gas station sagged on a street corner in the modest downtown area of Miles City, Montana. It was a city that held a mere eight thousand souls, and none of them were doing anything remotely interesting with their lives. The only people out and about at the time were homeless, or “transients” as the Miles City Star called them. Everyone else had already gone to bed by then.

“This whole town is dead and frozen.” I said aloud.

Tim grunted in agreement. “It’s just a fucking field. Why anyone would think this is a good place for a town is beyond me.”

I began to read the newspaper to pass the time. Inside were typical articles about national politics, civil projects, opinion articles written by bored housewives, and the movies that were showing at the run-down theater on the east end of town. After I read through some articles, my sleepy gaze left the paper and found one of the many small black cameras fastened to the ceiling.

“Do you think Stephanie watches us play chess? Do you think it pisses her off?” I asked without concern.

“Probably. She can watch from home, you know. Probably does every night. Probably watching us right now. That’s why I take my breaks outside around the corner. No cameras out there.”

“She can’t have a problem with chess, can she? It makes us smarter.”

“She might fire you, but not me. I’m pretty sure she wants me.” Tim said as he finally moved one of his pieces. Then he started playing with the glass beads next to the register. He suddenly reeled back and threw one of them across the store, which hit the back wall and exploded, leaving small glass pieces scattered along the path to the ATM.

“Yeah right. She thinks I’m the best employee of all time because my drawer is always exact. She is just thankful she has an employee that can do simple math and doesn’t throw glass all over the store in a tantrum because he sucks at chess,” I said.

“I don’t suck at chess. I just took your horsey. Check it out,” he said as he began wandering around the aisles kicking the lowest row of candy boxes with his feet. The front of the Reese’s box tore off and spilled a few of them onto the floor but he kept walking. Then he burst into a song of notes without lyrics as if to complain about his boredom.

Then I zoned out completely, drifting into my imagination as I often did. When it was this slow I couldn’t help it. I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and glanced out the front window. Snowflakes had started to lightly fall to the ground, disappearing into the wet asphalt as they landed. I looked back to the board.

Tim had taken from my white army rook, both bishops, four pawns, and now my gallant white knight. I had taken both rooks, one of his bishops and one of his knights. Five black pawns joined their fallen soldiers as well. I was leading but both queens were still alive. I had been executing a plan to eliminate his black Queen by baiting him. I had moved my knight up and over to join the other knight in a position where they were protecting each other. Just as I hoped, he was bold enough to attack my knight with his Queen. My knight had fallen, but the Queen

was wide open and right where I wanted her to be. I slid my white knight up three and over one space, knocking the black Queen to the ground.

Tim was walking up towards the front counter now, still wailing an off-key song. He had foraged a package of sour straws and was throwing them up at the ceiling and catching them on the way back down. As he rounded the corner to enter the cashier pit he stopped and said, “Wow! It’s really coming down out there.” The snow had evolved into thick waves of white, spiraling to the ground in a slow accumulation. My old ’89 Chevy was parked out front and already had a few inches on top of it.

“Yes, coming down like your queen I just took out,” I said arrogantly.

Tim rushed over to the board, stood for a moment, and yelled “God damn it!” while slamming his fists on the plastic countertop. “I give up man, it’s over now. No coming back from that.” He flicked his king onto its side and it started rolling in circles on the countertop.

Tim was typically a sore loser. I tried to change the subject. “That drive home is gonna suck,” I said while turning back to the window.

I squinted my eyes and saw what looked like someone standing outside. They were passed the pumps in the far corner of the lot. It looked like they were dressed in white, or were wearing a big white hooded parka at least. But there were no cars at the pumps or anywhere else. The person was facing away from us—towards the Custer County Justice Court building across the street and stood completely motionless as the snow swirled around them.



“I like driving on ice. It’s more intense that way,” Tim said. “Now get out there and change the gas pump trash cans before they are buried,” he said while ripping open the sour straws. I looked towards the fresh candy and my stomach growled.

“Okay. I’ll do it for some straws,” I said.

“You will do it for one straw,” he said and peeled a blue gummy straw from the cluster and handed it to me.

I took it and put one end in my mouth while turning back towards the window. The person was gone.

The snow was pouring down all around me and at least six inches had piled up. The trash cans were underneath the canopy above the pumps which gave me some shelter while I changed the bags. Water had run under it and had mixed with the gasoline, outlining the reflections of the fluorescent lights above with waves of every color in the spectrum. The trash can between pump three and four was a disaster.

As usual, someone had completely cleaned out their car. It was overstuffed with fast food trash, receipts, beer cans and dog hair. Some trash had spilled out of the bin onto the ground. The forgotten yellowed receipts were stained with oil from the pools that had formed in the cracked concrete surrounding the pump. It took me several minutes to pick up every piece, and I cursed under my breath the whole time because this was actually what I had chosen to do with my life. I pulled the heavy bag out of the can, tied it off, and threw it into the wheelbarrow I had taken from the shed behind the store.

After fussing with the new trash bag for a few minutes I finally got the opening started. Overhead I heard a faint flapping sound, muffled by the falling snow. I glanced around to see what might have caused it. All I could see were millions of white streaks from the snow flooding into the colored lights below the gas pump canopy, and the clouds of vapor I was exhaling.

I looked back into the store and saw Tim reading a magazine. Then I saw another cloud of vapor floating downwards above the door. I glanced up at the roof of the store and saw something perched on the peak of the roof above the front doors. It looked like the silhouette of a giant bird, with only its glowing yellow eyes staring down at me. It was masked completely in shadow and kept spouting hot, foggy breaths in the bitter chill. I shivered and stared right back at the bird. It seemed to be watching me, studying me, calculating some scheme it would soon execute, just as a person would. The snow slowly fell in the space between us, and I felt it was going to swoop down on me at any moment.

I decided to slowly back away, but I stumbled into the wheelbarrow behind me. The bird immediately took off and flew high into the storm, disappearing into the silent snowfall. I stood there motionless and dumbfounded by what I had just seen. Whatever it was had been black as darkness; a foul creature of the night. The beast stood as tall as a person at least, and when it spread its wings, it became enormous. I didn't get a good enough look at it, but it seemed otherworldly; a monstrous abomination prowling the night sky. No mere bird could have been that large. But nothing that I have ever learned about in all of biology explains what I saw.

I hastily put the new trash bag into the can and wheeled the full bags towards the front door as quickly as I could. I abandoned them there and rushed to the store. I leapt through the

front doors causing the bell to chime. Tim looked up from his magazine and his face turned to concern.

“What’s up with you man?” he inquired.

I tried to slow my breathing and regain my composure. “It’s just really damned cold out there,” I said, shaking out my hands. His gaze slowly fell back to his magazine.

“Such a baby,” he said.

I turned around to look out the front windows to make sure there was nothing there. Through the snow, from the opposite side of the lot, the figure in the white parka was walking past the pumps, approaching the store. I watched the figure draw nearer, expecting at any moment the winged creature to snatch them up by the shoulders and carry them off into the darkness, never to return. But the figure made it to the door, and the bell chimed, and there was a girl standing before me. She pulled the hood of her parka back revealing her white-blonde hair, hugged herself, and shivered.

“There is so much snow out there,” she said, stomping her feet on the rug in front of the entrance. She looked up and studied me. “Hey, why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“Maybe because you are a little blonde girl walking around at night through a blizzard, and then come in here looking all nonchalant. Where were you walking from?” I asked.

She smiled and beamed her bright golden eyes at me. “Don’t worry about me, I can hold my own.”

“I can see that.”

“I’ve been walking around this crazy snowstorm for a while now,” she said as she walked past me towards the kitchen area. I joined Tim behind the counter as she walked across the store and filled up a cup of coffee. He hadn’t even looked up from his magazine.

She came up to the counter holding a small cup of coffee in both hands. “Is this coffee any good?”

I chuckled and said, “Not in the slightest. It’s old, from this morning. But it’s free now if that helps.”

She nodded. “Great. Well, I guess I’m not buying anything then. So, what’s your name?”

“Greg. Greg Darrow.”

“Hi Greg,” she said while sipping her coffee. She grimaced and said, “You were not kidding. This is awful.”

“What’s yours?”

“Belaya Sova. You can call me Sova.”

“Sova? Strange name. I didn’t think you were from around here. Where are you from?”

“Some place very far away,” she said as she sipped her coffee again and flashed her enormous yellow eyes at me. “I’ve been looking for someone tonight. I think I am getting close to finding them. Have you seen anyone around here tonight? Or perhaps anything out of the norm?” she asked.

I wanted to tell her about the bird I saw, but quickly dismissed the idea. I wasn’t even sure I actually saw it. Surely I couldn’t have.

“Just this crazy storm. And you,” I said with a smirk.

She smiled and said, “I’m looking for this boy.” She held out a photograph of a boy with long, dark hair that flowed out in points. He was standing next to a fireplace and wore garments that looked like they were from a century long past. He had yellow eyes just like Sova did.

“No. I haven’t seen anyone like that around here. Sorry.”

She had trouble looking at me for a moment. “He’s my brother.”

“You’re looking for your brother out here in the snowstorm?”

“Yes—he ran away from home. I’m just trying to get him to come back.”

“Oh okay. I’ll keep an eye out for him.”

She sighed and stuck out her bottom lip. “Alright. It’s been nice chatting with you Greg. I better keep looking.” Then she turned and left, walking out into the storm again with the chime of the door.

By then I had convinced myself that the monster I saw had been nothing. Perhaps it was just a big raven that I had turned into something else because I was scared. Something about that picture she had—it gave me the creeps.

I decided if that girl could walk around outside with nothing to worry about then I could too. I told Tim I was going to finish wheeling the trash back to the dumpster and walked outside. The snow had piled up another few inches, and the trash bags in the wheelbarrow had turned into white hills. It was colder still, and the wind had picked up. Snow drifts had begun to creep up the walls of the store side like foamy ocean waves, as if trying to pull it underwater.

The snowflakes moved erratically now, darting through the air like mindless insects. I clumsily pushed the wheelbarrow around the edge of the building and was suddenly facing pitch blackness. I could feel the fear creeping into my chest, but I pushed onwards towards the rear of the store with my feet slipping and sliding as they tried to find traction. I noticed the footprints of tiny converse shoes leading off to the East and knew they were Sova's.

I abandoned the trash once again and followed the tracks. I'm not sure why I followed them, I kind of felt like a stalker. Thinking of her walking around by herself just gave me a bad feeling. I followed the footprints around a couple of semi-trailers parked on the east side of the store and up the sidewalk of the street to the north. Suddenly the tracks stopped, as if she had suddenly vanished into thin air. Surrounding the area where the footprints ended were large designs flaying outwards in the snow as if something had sliced into the snow in a pattern. I suddenly remembered an image that I had seen from National Geographic. In the picture were rabbit tracks leading through a snowy meadow. The tracks suddenly stopped, and a pattern created by feathers marked the point in time when a bird of prey had swooped down and taken the rabbit.

My heart began pounding as I tried to process what was happening. The creature must have swooped down and carried her off into the night! I could have warned her—I could have saved her life. I was too scared and I let her die. Too scared to act like I always was. What a terrible death she must have faced! Being clawed, ripped apart, and eaten alive by that beast of the night—that devil! Then I knew what I saw had been real. I collapsed to my knees, which sunk deep into the cold, wet snow.

“Sova!” I called out. Nothing but deathly silence replied. The only sounds were the snowflakes hitting the top of my jacket hood as if they were scraping against my skull. “Sova,” I said bleakly.

“What are you doing?” said a voice behind me.

“Tim! That girl she—something has happened to her!” I said, turning my head back towards him. I stood up and pointed to the footprint trail. “Look! They just end here and don’t continue!” I shouted, pointing erratically at the markings on the ground. I couldn’t tell him about the bird, he would never believe me.

“What are you on about?” He asked. “Let’s go back in the store, it’s freezing out here. Who cares about some girl?”

I turned around and began to walk towards him. At that moment, something came out of the sky and hit him on the right side in a whirlwind of darkness. Tim was launched into the snowy street, enveloped in a cloak of rolling dark feathers like a tumbleweed.

“Tim!” I shouted. I ran toward him but couldn’t find the traction and fell to my hands and knees. Tim screamed quietly as the wind had been knocked out of him.

The beast loomed over him and pinned him to the ground. It was an enormous, winged creature like a black eagle. Yet, it had human-like features as well. The way it had him pinned was like an older brother holding down his weaker sibling—sitting atop him and holding his arms to the ground. It was covered in thick black feathers, longer ones in the wings and tail but shorter spiky feathers along the top of its head. It had an enormous black hooked beak and

piercing yellow eyes that stared down at its victim with an evil hunger and determination. And then—it actually spoke.

“Prey, hopeless in my clutches,” it rumbled in a deep slithery voice. I was so puzzled and in shock that I stayed crouched in the snow, clenching my fists in hopelessness. There was nothing I could do against this beast. That’s when the bird reared back and bit into him with its sharp beak, cleaving him in half diagonally through the torso. Tim cried out for just a short burst before his lungs held no more breath. The creature kept attacking, tearing him with his large talons on his enormous black feet and cutting through his body with its beak again and again. The entire street was painted red.

I had to move while he was busy with what was left of Tim. I rose to my feet and began walking stealthily towards the store, with my back against the semi-trailer. I was inching sideways and getting more and more behind the creature as I walked. The snow was cold; it was crunching loudly as each of my steps compacted it. A couple of feet before the end of the trailer, while I was almost directly behind the monster, I noticed a hunk of flesh was stuck to the edge of the trailer. Steam was pouring off of it as it cooled in the chill of the night, and a red blood stream ran down the trailer, dripping into a hole it had formed in the snow. When I thought about what part of his body it could have been I felt a wave of sickness come over me and dropped to the ground. I could not pass between the beast and the piece of my friend, so I crawled under the trailer. I could still hear the beast cracking bones as it fed.

I came out the other side and sprung to my feet. I sprinted out between the two trailers and rounded the corner towards the store. I shot a look over my shoulder just in time to see the creature do the same thing. The beast turned and leapt through the air towards me, soaring with



wings spread like a cloaked specter delivering me to hell. It shrieked a demonic scream as it swooped downwards towards its prey. It landed a few feet behind me and slid through the snow, swinging at me with his winged arm. The creature slipped, and only swept me by my right leg. This made me cartwheel several times through the air before landing in a drift of snow.

I sat up to watch the monster crash into my Chevy, shattering the right window and caving in the rear passenger wheel well. I rose slowly, as it angrily got to its feet—but instead of striking—it stood before me as a man would, with wings draped by its side and feathers flayed out over the snow. It was absolutely drenched in Tim’s blood, which was dripping off its feathers on the front side of its body and running out of its beak like a muddy faucet. It puffed out its chest feathers and held its wings high in the air.

“You cannot escape me. I will taste you like the other.” The creature said with sepulchral inflection.

“What—are you?” I said, breathing sharply in a panic.

“I am superior to you, boy. You are merely sustenance,” it croaked. The creature then crouched on all fours to spring towards me for its final attack. But something above was descending, the hunter was being hunted. A whirl of white feathers spiraled downwards toward the creature. Talons sunk into its shoulders, pinning it to the ground. It cried out in a shriek of pain. Then the great white bird dug the back of the beast’s head out with its razor-sharp beak, pecking it relentlessly.

The white bird had its enormous wingspan stretched out in a proud angelic display of absolute victory over its prey. It kept pecking at the back of the black eagle’s neck until its head was mostly detached and pivoting around in the red snow. The white bird slowly lowered its

wings—also into a human-like position—bobbing its head as it did. I should have been scared for my life, but I felt such a relief that the black eagle was slain that nothing could spoil it.

This new creature was facing me now. It suddenly tilted its head to the side as if it was curious about my presence. This bird was beautiful. It was snow white with brown feathers on the tips of its wings and stood at least eight feet tall. It resembled an owl but was more slender and taller. It gazed at me with enormous yellow eyes that showed sadness and kindness.

“Can you talk too?” I asked, still catching my breath. The bird released its clutch on its victim and took a few steps away from the carcass. Then, in a flash of white light, it spun around and started to become smaller in stature. Its wings shrank inwards towards its body in a miraculous transformation. A moment later, the noble great white owl had disappeared. There before me stood Sova, the blonde girl in the white parka. She stared at me with those same yellow eyes, but they were touched with melancholy now.

“I am sorry that you had to become a part of this Greg,” she said softly.

I almost laughed out loud. I was relieved, to be sure. But I could not believe that she just transformed from a bird into a person. This was just too ridiculous, like a terrible young adult novel from my childhood about people turning into different animals at will.

Suddenly, Tim slapped me across the face with a blue sour straw.

“What the hell are you grinning about?” he asked with a mouth full of candy. “You’ve been standing there thinking of your next move for the last half hour. Make it already.”

“Sorry, I was just thinking about an idea for a story,” I replied, brushing the sugar dust off my cheek.

“A story? So are you thinking of enrolling?”

I nodded and said, “Yeah. I’ll go,” and swapped the places of my king and rook. “Give it the ol’ college try. Your move.”