

OWL'S MYTH

RICHIE SWANSON

Owl's horns flew up, and he glared with huge yellow cat-eyes from atop his old-gnarled oak. He heard Blast blast his disc player, blat his muffler, turn off the bridge. Blast drove his truck down the bank on tires as high as horse-withers. He smashed saplings in the bottoms, snapping stems, his tread spinning and sinking through snow and mud. A little oak flew from a tire, Owl gnashed his beak. He had called the wind to blow the acorn from its branch, and Mama Horn had planted it, digging with talons. The sprout had inched up, the velvety red leaves had unfurled each spring. Now the stem and tap root lay mangled.

H.D. — High Drive — got out barking, and Little Blast, skinny-fidgety Willie and dark-eyed Candy straddled ATVs in snow suits, and more trucks came, all awesomely roaring, blazingly-glitteringly bright, idling so broad and tall that Little Blast drove donuts beneath them, ducking his helmet.

"Fucking A! Saturday!" Blast yelled at fathers who rolled ATVs from trailers for kids. "You boneheads want to run some mud, or you still twiddling your dicks?"

Fumes rolled inside Owl's bill, stinging his throat. He flew down to his nest in the fork of the old oak's trunk. "The stumps on Stump Island!"

Mama Horn rose up, her chicks squeaking beneath her. "Ho-o-o, the stumps!" she cried.

The drivers crashed through shrubs and jumped deadfalls, fishtailing, and H.D sprinted beside them, his fur rippling black and shiny. The drivers stopped, idled, sized up the oak. H.D. quieted. He crept along a narrow neck of land around the oak and crouched at the edge of a frozen slough.

"Keep that dog off the ice!" said Blast.

"Stay!" cried Willie, and H.D. sniffed after fox-tracks. The ice cracked, H.D. went under. He popped up and dog-paddled in icy water. He pawed ice-edges, slipped. His chin sank. His eyes got oily, urgent.



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Willie called, stepped onto the ice, and Blast swatted him sideways, cuffing his helmet, lifting a pistol. He shot into the sky, and H.D. crawled out panting beside the oak. Blast shot again, and the dog staggered to him and shivered against his shins.

Willie yanked off his helmet, rubbed his head. He stood on his footrests, pissed off. He threw his helmet ringing against Blast's truck. He spun his ATV around, gunned it straight across the ice, and Candy straightened her chinstrap, watching him speed through the woods past the oak, and Owl felt her thoughts. *You can tear-ass through the bottoms toward the holy-ass channel and bust crazy-ass through those rotten-brown stumps, and the island will end, and the Mississippi will be about as whole-fucking big as the sky, and you can launch your wheels right onto a fucking ice floe and float your way to the dam and go through the roller gates, and Blast will about hemorrhage and cream in his briefs.*

Blast came over and pulled her key from the ignition. "You fetch that blabbermouth, I'll have one half-drowned bitch and one full-frozen idiot."

"Daddy!"

"Don't drive on that ice, I said."

She took off her helmet, flicked her hair across her nape, gleamed at him. He grinned at the oak blocking his way. He hardened his face, smiled at Candy. "You think I can't do this?"

"Your chainsaw's at home, Daddy."

Blast bear-hugged a stump, broke it from its base, hoisted it two-handed above his head, hurled it against another, poured on gas.

Candy towed H.D. by the fire, and Blast looped a chain around the Owl's oak, hooked it to his truck's hitch, got in the cab's door. The truck lunged, the chain tightened. Owl flew down and beat his beak against the windshield, and Mama Horn clung to a rear tire, clawing tread. The truck boomed, the oak screamed. It split, thundered down, and then there were gunshots, whoops, big-belly laughs and shreds of chicks on shattered nest sticks, and H.D. rolled across Mama Horn — her bib raw-bloody flesh, an ear tuft pasted against a nearby tree.

Owl hooted mournfully down, and the oak thudded against trunks and stumps, dragged by Blast's truck. Blast revved across the crater, and everyone — in pickups, ATVs, SUVs, UTVs, dirt motorcycles — followed, and Stump Island thrummed like a twenty-lane freeway at rush hour, stumps flying from tires and fenders, splitting like tinder, rolling and lying smashed like worthless trash.

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A coyote licked and chewed at her breast and lapped up the chicks. He slunk into dusk, and then that scavenger-dog winked high in the dark, sniffing the heels of the Insatiable Archer who raised a hickory war-club, wore a hot-pulsing belt and carried a turtle-shell shield that spat incisors snapping after the Seven Ancient Owl Sisters who swirled the voices of the dead in a funnel until the departing howls rose through the sky-hole

and blew across the featherless buzzards and eagles gnawing meatless bones in the next world.

Moon climbed out of the river black and steaming and thickening. The stars blurred blue, hazed yellow above town.

The lights went out at the house, and Blast kicked open the storm door, squeezing Willie's nape. He pushed Willie to the driveway, muscled his face against the dent in the truck's door and then the windshield cracks. "Bend over." Blast thrust Willie's helmet into his hands. "Hold it down against the ground." Blast pulled a rubber strap from the pickup's bed, swung it huffing and grunting, and finally its s-hook flew off, plinking against the garage. He went in, and Willie cooled his ass and thighs against the cold-crusting lawn. He lay prone, arms sprawled, helmet on, tinted visor drawn down, its ear-speakers pounding his kick-ass band, Vicious Rage, vengeful lyrics.

Owl glared down from the yard's flagpole and burned his wind-howls onto the Vicious Rage disc. Willie melted. He left only a grease spot, and H.D. pawed beneath the fence of his pen, whining, whimpering, and Blast got hard, waking beside his wife. *Chrissie was making high little moans? Squirring? About what? Willie's pay-up? The slime-ball looks from her boss?*

Chrissie's eyes popped open — Owl leaned forward from a bedpost, squeezing Kitty limp and bleeding in a talon. He tossed the cat at Blast's feet and flapped at Blast's lap. He bit down and then spat Blast's thing like a pellet upon the mattress. He slit open Kitty's belly — a bluebird, robin, chickadees, cardinals flew out. Mice, squirrels, rabbits jumped out — meals meant for owls, not kitties. Owl boomed at Blast, "I do as you to us!" Blast lunged for his thing, Owl pecked and gulped it again. He ripped open a pillow, beat wings through a sudden storm of down. He plunged into the toilet, a merganser diving deep, and he flew up through a sewer grate. He shook himself clean, and High Drive jumped against his pen, barking, and Owl lit upon him, ran a claw across his throat, raked fur.

Oh, a piece of her heart.

Owl blew his mournful hoots into it, Mama Horn pushed out. Owl spat the thing again, Mama Horn swallowed it. They flew above town into a blue glow, Heart City Hard Motor. They strutted atop a neon sign, bowing and bobbing in a throbbing buzz. He preened her. They locked bills and clacked, but she plummeted from him. She pressed her belly against a pickup's tire and bit the air valve. It tore easily. Every truck in the lot sank on flats.

Mama Owl clawed open a gas cap, spat the thing in. "DIS-SOLVE!" she yelled. "DIS-SOLVE-A-HA-HOO-HA!"

They flew into a red glow, Heart City Hardware, rows of four wheelers outside on double-decker trailers. They bit off those valves and flew to the carport's roof at River View Inn, and they fucked in front of horrified guests, slapping, spinning and flapping like common English sparrows.

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They perched on the backside of Stump Island, and Owl hoo-hooed softly, soothingly at the Dipper. He besought the Dipper, and Mama Horn blinked in assent — the ice-echoes from River Sun Slough sounded nearly as cold as when The Freeze had gripped all things, and darkness had pinned silence against Earth as unflinchingly as talons hold rats.

And, oh, the slough had thundered! It had shifted, ice-shards had flown high. The Dipper had glittered in place, had fallen, had bounced up again. The bucket had smashed the North Country flat, and the handle had left the Mississippi's long-curving valley to the Gulf. Ice-shards had scattered across the sky, a stump had risen on the bank beneath the stars. The slough had boomed, and the owls had flown out, coming into being. The ice had knocked, and a woodpecker had flown out and had clung to the stump, hammering an icicle. He peered through a crack and shrieked deliriously — a tiny curve of sun glowed inside the stump! Two burning-black eyes! A song came out! "Heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat!"

River Sun Warbler! The one that God's nation would call the protho-notary! Sitting on a nest in there!

She poured out her warmth, and a fiery ball rose from the stump. Sky Warbler whispered a breeze, brushing the air with wings. The firmament turned blue, the slough smelled of mud, catfish, turtle flesh. Duckweed bloomed. Teal with crescent-moon cheeks came, and grebes pumped horny-blond heads, skidding across the melt.

Owl tore open a rabbit. Mama Horn bent to their chicks with the meat, and they sank suddenly, peering with lion-sized gawks over the nest's rim — a brown head rose from the slough — a man. He fisted a mallard's neck, and a woman plucked the duck on the bank of River Sun Slough, her ribs too big-looking. Their girl squalled, her stomach thinner than her waist. The man carried a hickory club toward a marsh, smelling muskrats, and the woman saw a wet-gray splotch on a maple trunk. She and her girl licked it hungrily. It tasted sweet, and they peeled bark from river birch, folded it into boxes. Sewed them with bone-awls and nettle-fibers, hung them on maples each year, caught the sap, and always the men hunted the thawing marshes, and the women stayed behind, boiling syrup on the bank.

The women molded sugar in duckbills. . . reeds. . . rawhide. . . brass. . . tin, and one morning shouts came from the channel, commands. A keelboat moved up the current. A crew of white men pushed poles from their shoulders, hunching like apes. Their captain quieted, the women knew his stare. They ran through the bottoms, and River Sun fell, the girl's ankle throbbing in a groundhog-hole. The crew hoisted her, new breasts wiggling against her dress. The men got her down in the sugarhouse, the captain spread her on a bearskin. River Sun shrank beneath him, screamed, "Heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat-cheat!" She grew luminous gold feathers, flew to a stump, hid inside like the warbler on eggs. The men brought axes from the cargo box, swung them against the stump, and splashes sprayed their ankles.

The river jumped up their thighs, gushing cold, stinging and shrinking their things. The river pushed the men under, pummeled faces with ice-shards, and the captain climbed a tree. He jumped from trunk to trunk, heading for his boat, and Mama Horn called a gust. He fell in, Owl felt the captain's last thought, and it took many reservations, many brown mutilations and killings. But the Noisy Things finally came, downing trees, loading logs onto rail cars, dumping rock, pouring cement, and then the river backed up behind hard iron gates and long white walls. The river flooded and ran only through a channel between dikes, and when it dropped, dams held back the flow all the way from the middle of the continent to her headwaters. The water turned scummy and brown, full of sewage from cities, field fertilizer, sawdust from mills. It backed up over the stumps in River Sun Slough, and Mama Horn hissed at Raccoon, Snake, Skunk and Mink, "The River Suns! Leave their eggs! Don't eat their chicks, not any!" She looked distraught at little oaks and cottonwoods barely sticking out above the silty water. Their leaves shriveled. The saplings floated up dead, roots bloated.

And so the big old oaks and cottonwoods dwindled, and Sky Warbler hardly whispered in their towering crowns at all — every spring, that little bird used to brush the air the deep cerulean of the south, yet in God's nation the blue of the day paled to smog, and hardly anyone heard that soft song — nor River Sun Warbler calling plaintively while he flashed his stunning white tail spots at his hole, looking for love.

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Blast drove his truck home, balanced himself on the cab's step, swung his legs ably across the side panel. He spread his feet on the bed and unbuckled his belt, and a gas hose flopped out — tough like his strap, thick as if the hospital had sewn it on from a fuel tanker. Pinkish and orange, it hung off the tailgate, and Candy cupped palms beneath its nozzle, lifting it from asphalt, and Chrissie fingered its trigger, stretching it out the driveway. Blast wiped a tear. "Remember my —" He gulped pain in front of cousins, neighbors, dad-buddies. "Remember my — WILLIE!" He cocked his big-boned chin, glared unflinchingly at cameramen, voters, senators, representatives. "We drive WHATEVER WHEREVER HOWEVER WE WANT!"

Invasion-tanks, armored fighting vehicles, multiple missile carriers, multiple rocket launchers, transporter erector launchers, commando four-wheelers, armored reconnaissance vehicles, feather-smeller transporters, Skyhawks, Seahawks, Eagles, Harriers, Blackhawks, Fighting Falcons, Sea Stallions, Hornets, Dragonflies, Sidewinders, Diamondbacks, Cayuses, Chinooks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Apaches lined up, and everyone wore crisp fatigues, saluting and stroking Blast's hose, and gas holes sucked and sucked and sucked it, and he hummed, vibrated, hoisted his boy to his shoulders.

Little Blast straddled Dad's neck, kicked his feet, discovered his little-hairless thing was a hose too. He thrust it secretly into Blast's nape, and

his hand-held monitor showed a hole high up an oak, Owl's new nest. He saw a stump beneath the tree, a helmet gleaming inside. "Dad!" he said. "Willie!"

Blast rolled in his hose, zippered up, called the brass.

Amphibious assault vehicles landed where the old-gnarled oak had fallen. Tanks and hummers sped through the bottoms. Lasers shone dots against stumps. Earthmovers crushed them. Robotic mites swarmed the debris.

"Heat-heat-heat-heat! Cheat-cheat-cheat!" The golden glow spread through the bottoms, melted snow, softened mud. Machinery sank. Nettles swarmed up, and the razor-hairs cut through steel, honeycombed armor, anti-radiation liners.

Poison ivy vines dangled suddenly from greening trees, and Mama Horn spun inside her hole, blowing, and mist swirled like dust devils. Drivers and gunners blistered beneath body gear, bled from bumps and rashes, felt traces of wood roaches scurry through ears. They wailed as if woodpeckers were inside their heads, pounding to get out. Herons taller than Bradley tanks smashed hatches with bills, squeezed bodies down their throats, flew above the command bunker and shot whitewash on the roof.

"Cream shitters?" Blast barked at the brass. "You couldn't see cream shitters coming?"

Chrissie clicked through infrared images, and the computer screens went black—an intelligence drone corkscrewed down through the sky, tumbling in flames—wild grapes and Virginia creeper were racing up towers, darkening satellite dishes.

"We didn't really see Willie's helmet," said Chrissie. "He must be—"

"I still feel Willie alive on my fingertips," said Blast.

"Willie's as dead as everything else you touch."

"You don't know owls." Blast gripped Chrissie's mouth and pushed her teeth crooked. "Owls are wicked. They got bullshit spines held up with nothing but hot air."

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The weather stayed warm. Candy dove in from the levee and swam brazen strokes to the backside of Stump Island. She climbed onto a log in River Sun Slough, arched a thigh in a blaze of light. Her breasts thickened beneath bikini-cups, her hair fuzzed beneath her navel. An old soft-shelled turtle climbed beside her, raising a fleshy throat-pouch, a shy-curving smile, little crocodile eyes.

She lay back for his web-fingers, and the turtle grew man-like. She kissed him, leaving a tiny gold disc on his tongue. "Just crawl-ass to Owl's tree and drop it there." She fondled the soft-shell man like an oil hose. "Just squeeze it ass-out like an egg."

"To aim your father's missile?" He wrinkled his nose at a cottonwood-top, and Sky Warbler flew down, landed beside Candy, puffed his mantle, bowed his head before her. Candy caught her breath. *The fuck-ass*

blue on his crown! His nape! His wings! A kick-ass dark-ass necklace! A cool-ass white-ass breast!

“He flew out of the dense-dark color of the first dawn.” The man’s hard-on turned sky-blue. “He warbled the first lovely breeze. He feathers your beautiful breath.”

The bird let go a rushing whisper, the man’s mood flew into Candy. She flung the gold disc away, not caring where. She wiggled, panted, moaned, crooned. The log bobbed. A snapper bit the man’s neck and then fell upon Candy, clawing everywhere. He rocked upon her. She sprayed apart, and the snapper stood, Blast slipping from the shell, a howitzer smoking from his loins.

“No fucking traitors, none what-so-fucking-ever.” He wiped his howitzer clean, hoots murmured behind him. He turned, and vines snagged the howitzer, wild cucumbers. They roped his arms and legs, pulled him down. He fired deep into the ground – punch and recoil. The vines stretched and spread. They sank tubers into him, leaking brown slime like rotten potatoes. He sputtered, his howitzer a tuber, tubers in his organs, and then he was gone. The cucumber flowers bloomed starry and white. Their fruits swelled. Their prickles dripped pus. The pus seeped through acorns in the dirt, and oaks blasted up – twice as tall as redwoods. They sank tap roots through buried turrets, clenched limbs like fists. They thrust out burls like angry chins, uppercut one another. They blasted themselves ten-stories high, and Mama Horn blew termites from her hole, and they seethed across a drift log that lay rotting on the ground. They darkened it, boring in, and a big uncle oak turned from his boxing, saw Owl and Mama Horn on the forest floor, fluffing wings, hopping up from detritus. A stem snapped up – stained by blood drops. It pushed out catkins. They smelled sweet, whispered a blue breeze. Uncle Oak nearly melted through his bark, lifted and tickled Candy. She squealed. He and Granddaddy Oak swung her by crown and roots, she got big as Uncle. They hurled her across the river, she blasted down on anti-aircraft and anti-heron missiles. They collapsed like little-balsam replicas.

Scads of oaks flew across, thrown from the island, all awesomely giggling, leaves blazingly-glitteringly bright. They smashed down on town and rolled so broad and heavy that tanks, hummers, buildings, even the gas-hose hospital squashed flat.

“We sprout! Walk! Sing! Fly HOWEVER WHEREVER WHENEVER WE WANT!” cried Candy.

Tomahawk missiles streaked toward her. Mama Horn coughed out fuzzy-cottony wads, egg cases. Spiders hatched on Candy, webs shrouded her. The missiles flew in and jerked about like birds in mist nets. The tiny gold warbler zoomed around reentry vehicles, his heat cut them open. Uncle hurled the warheads against the turtle-shell shield. They mushroomed into blinding blasts up there. They dimmed the Insatiable Archer, the hickory war-club swung down. The dams’ long white walls and red roller-gates burst like surf-spray, the Dipper dipped down. It scooped floodwater, dipped up and circled North Star, and dumped east of the river, then

west, and everyone in Blast’s nation, all their cars and buildings, washed into oceans.

The river sank, slipping down the oaks’ trunks. It dropped below the stumps, and Mama Horn saw all the way to the river’s mouth and heard the wakes of warships and even the shush-sounds of Candy, a live oak now, her shroud suffused with moss, her limbs draping the tide from a bank.

“You’ll be the death of all owls, Candy!” Chrissie shouted through quadraphonic dentures from an aircraft carrier. “Of all oaks, all islands, all your vines!”

Little Blast came out the bridge to the deck, raising a bullhorn to a chemical protected hood. “Get off our land!”

“W-h-hoooo-whooooo-whoooooose land?” Owl blurred duskily in the oak, blowing Candy’s voice out to the ship. “W-h-hooooooooooooooooo-hooooooooooooooooooooose?”

“Blast left in my hands secret blasts to blast away all blasts blasted against us!” blasted Little Blast.

The live oak straightened, and Candy squeezed out from a bark-furrow, her body green and gold, wiggly and wobbly like a frog’s. She hip-hopped.

The miracle. . .
 The miracle. . .
 The miracle of green

Receive it, believe it
 Do not deceive it
 Or dare besiege it

The miracle. . .
 The miracle. . .
 The oracle of breath.

She steadied webbed talons on a branch and spread a rubbery chin against a violin. Her hair flopped down, shiny strands of pondweed. Her nipples sweated algal drips as she tensed droopy-crooked fingers on her bow.

Owl and Mama Horn hooted and hummed time, and Candy played with aplomb weeping concertos for the gifts of the sun.



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