

The Owl

“How many species do we reckon we’ll be able to spot today?” Colleen said animatedly from the driver’s seat of the Prius. “Don’t forget that this is breeding season, and Cathedral Pines is a known birding hotspot!”

“Well, last time we were here we didn’t do too well, but that was November, so this is likely to be different,” replied Daniel, fiddling with his binoculars in the front passenger seat. “I haven’t seen any Lazuli Buntings yet this season, so that would be my dream scenario.”

Harriet overheard this exchange with limited interest from the rear middle seat. As the car wound through farmland towards the state park, she couldn’t help thinking that this was not her preferred way to spend a Saturday morning. Baseball spring training had just begun, and it would have been very agreeable to her to spend the day in her recliner in front of the television, watching the teams train and choosing her favorites from among the rookie players. However, at the age of 80, opportunities for suitable outdoor activities were few-and-far-between, and a birding trip with her daughter and grandson was likely to be the best offer she would have in a while.

A crunching sound beneath the tires announced that they had just made the turn onto the long gravel road that led to the park entrance. As they pulled up to the toll gate, Daniel turned around in his seat, phone in hand, a picture of a bird on the screen. “There should be tons of these guys here.” Harriet looked at the phone puzzled. “Spotted Towhees are common in this part of the state. If you keep an eye out, I bet you’ll see one.” As Daniel continued talking, Harriet noticed Colleen emptying the contents of her purse into her lap. “Honey,” Colleen interrupted. “Do you have any cash? It looks like the card reader’s down.” “Ah, shoot. No, I don’t,” Daniel replied. Harriet reached over the center console with a crisp five-dollar bill. “Here you go dear,” she said simply. As she fastened the clasp of her wallet, she was amused that her avid bird-lovers weren’t more prepared for their adventures.

Moments later, they were parked, and Colleen and Daniel eagerly stepped out. Daniel reached Harriet’s door before she had the chance, and he held out his hand to help her out of the car. From the parking lot, you could see the various landscapes the park provided. Behind her was a large field of grass stretching towards the sun. As she turned, the trees began to dot the fields until they turned into a perfect woodland. Harriet was pleased. Meanwhile, Colleen and Daniel had found a map and were beginning to chart their course, theorizing the best spots to one another. “Does anyone need to tinkle?” Colleen asked. Harriet realized that both her daughter and grandson were looking at her.

After pushing open the bathroom door with what felt like all her weight, she could see that her counterparts were already pointing at the sky and holding their binoculars to their faces. The hike was nothing like Harriet had expected. The trails were mostly paved, and the brush seemed to know not to grow into the path. If Harriet had been alone, it would have been a splendid

walk with good exercise, but Daniel and Colleen had an approach to walking that she had never seen. At first, each of them would walk with great urgency, legs straight and quick, as if they were in an airport walking to their gate. Then suddenly, one of them would stop and gasp excitedly, causing the other to swiftly brake. Harriet at first tried to keep this strange pace, but soon realized if she managed her normal pace, she was able to keep up, which was quite an achievement at her age.

After a handful of stops in only 200 yards, the trees became denser. Daniel and Colleen's braking became incessant at this point, and Daniel began holding his phone up in the air above his head. Suddenly, a piercing noise erupted nearby, and Daniel gasped to Colleen "This says it's a Western Wood-Pee-wee," without looking up from his phone. In a flash, Colleen had her binoculars to her eyes and began scanning the evergreen tree while Daniel pointed his phone at the tree like the microphone of a newscaster. "Oh, I thought it was a willow fly catcher." Colleen seemed to be constantly looking between her binoculars, phone, and her bird guidebook. To the casual observer, the two of them might appear like a couple of novice hikers, desperately lost and trying to get cell phone service from their frantic excitement.

It was proving harder to get a stroll in so Harriet decided to walk ahead. With her leisurely steps, she would see the winged creatures dance among the bushes and trees. She had to admit that she did enjoy the round looking ones. Then, partially for her own amusement, she would point to one and ask them, "What's this one?" and immediately Colleen and Daniel would be at her side, identifying the bird and giving her abundant facts on the species.

A shriek cut through the bird's chatter. Colleen signaled for everyone to be still as she stared at her phone. "It might be an accident. Sometimes it picks up on..." But the screech caused the phone to light up again and they spun to face a small grove of trees. Daniel ventured into the grove, shuddering as he stepped on every twig. "What are you going on about?" Harriet mumbled. Colleen took no notice of the agitation in her mom's tone and whispered, "It's a barred owl." as if it was a great secret. Daniel then began to wave his arms, trying to get their attention. He began pointing to the trees above him and Colleen started, taking long strides and placing each foot purposefully to avoid every twig and leaf possible. On the other hand, Harriet continued her usual slow stride, and was at the grove in no time.

"I know he's gotta be up there. I saw its call light up my phone, but it hasn't made a noise since I got here." Daniel breathed. It was then that Harriet realized that there must be an app on their phones that was able to identify bird sounds. "Did people used to memorize all these sounds? What did bird people do before all this technology," she wondered to herself. Daniel and Colleen held their binoculars up, scanning every branch of the trees unaware of anything else. It was because of this, they didn't catch the sound of something large rustling in the trees. Harriet peered through the curtain of pines and met its eyes. The body was round with soft edges of fluff from its pale cream and brown feathers. Around it, the oak leaves shone from the sun, giving the creature an ethereal quality. But, it was the eyes that took Harriet by surprise. Deep black velvet eyes gazed into hers, as if holding a knowledge she could never attain. Then, Harriet

began to laugh as the baby owl began to bob its head curiously. "Mom, what are you..." Colleen began before seeing the young bird. Quickly, grabbing her son's arm, she pointed up the oak tree. Daniel exhaled, eyes wide. They all stood together, gazing at the owl, and Daniel put his arms around them. Even with its youth, the owl held each of their stares, its curiosity apparent as its head shifted around, causing them all to laugh this time. "Grandma, you have to see him up close. Look through here." Daniel gently whispered and held out his binoculars to her. Harriet nodded took and brought them up to her eyes. She watched as the young owl began climbing along the branch, brushing each leaf as it went. Occasionally it would pause to flap its wings, but it didn't seem that flying was an ability it had learned quite yet. Harriet handed the binoculars back to Daniel, stared up at the creature and felt her body warm as if she had just finished a cup of tea.

Back in the car, they passed the rows of crops decorating the hills. Colleen turned her head slightly and said, "I can't believe you spotted that owl Mom." "Yeah, how did you see him Grandma?" Daniel jumped in. "I don't know. I was just walking and there he was." Harriet replied. Harriet thought about the soulful eyes and wondered if the owl had seen her instead; seen that this unexpected moment would be something that they could all share? "I'm glad we did though," Harriet sighed. She laid back in her seat as she listened to Colleen and Daniel chatter animatedly, telling the whole experience over again, letting her loved one's voices send her off to sleep.