

The Most Important Thing in the World



Prologue

A pair of owls flew side by side through the clear night sky. Reflected by the slick water of the lake, the stars twinkled above and below as though the birds were soaring through space. Their movements were harmonious, a few flaps then a long glide, and few more flaps and another long glide. They had been flying for hours, and the fledgling was struggling to keep pace with her grandfather. Nearing the far side of the lake, the old owl arced his body and drifted towards a silhouette of trees.

Through heavy breaths, the fledgling asked, "Is that where it is?"

Silently her grandfather flared his wings and descended upon a weathered slash pine that was draped with long beards of Spanish moss.

The fledgling landed beside her grandfather and again asked, "Is this where it is?"

Without answering, the grandfather lumbered along the branch.

From a neighboring tree, the young owl could have sworn she heard someone say, "What's up?" but quickly dismissed it as her imagination. "Grandpa?" she asked.

The bark covering the top of the branch had been trodden smooth by the steady flow of creatures who had made this pilgrimage before them. The fledgling trailed behind her grandfather as they traversed the worn scaffold branch to the point where it met the upward leader.

In a whisper, the grandfather said, "This is the place."

The fledgling followed her grandfather's gaze to the crook of the tree where there was a flat surface perfectly illuminated in the light of the moon. Centered in that space was a drawing, a bizarre drawing. There were waves and fireballs and strange creatures that were unrecognizable yet at the same time oddly familiar.

With a huff, the young owl said, "This is it? This is what we came all this way to see?"

Mesmerized, the grandfather answered, "Yes."

"Grandpa, I don't get it. This is it?"

The old owl did not break his gaze. He said, "If you look closely, it is all here."

The fledgling leaned in closer, twisting her face and squinting before letting out a heavy sigh and shrugging, "I don't see it. It just looks like chaos."

The grandfather's head spun. He clicked his beak loudly, and his voice became hot as he said, "There cannot be clarity without chaos." He put extra emphasis on the t when he said, "withou-t," and a speck of spittle hit the fledgling in the eye. Startled, she wiped the recipient eye and drew her head back blinking repetitively.

Quickly regaining his composure, her grandfather turned back to the drawing and said, "All the creatures from the southern watershed to the central highlands and beyond know of her. The frogs have written songs about her, and all manner of creatures tell her tale to their young. She came to the wild knowing nothing, utterly lost. The creatures of the wild spaces had never seen her kind before, but they

believed they knew her kind. She was a pet, and as such, they expected she would probably die.”

He slowly rotated his head, fixing his large yellow eyes on his granddaughter, and said, “Obviously, she did not die. She changed everything we thought we knew. That is why I brought you here today.”

Still nervously blinking, the young owl settled onto the branch, her attention focused on her grandfather and the timeworn illustration. Her grandfather again turned to the drawing tracing the tip of his wing over its edge as he said, “Her story began long before it truly began and many miles from where I came to know her. It began with a half-grown child in an ordinary house until the day everything went out the window. *Her* story began with a boy.”