

## THE EYES OF AN OWL

By Robin Moore

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THE DARKNESS came over my grandfather on a rain-drenched Wednesday morning during the first week of April. I was twelve that year. He was 67.

At 6 a.m., in the chill of the dawn, my grandfather opened his eyes and found that he could not see. My grandmother was already in the kitchen when she heard him get up and feel his way to the bathroom. She found him standing at the sink, washing his sightless eyes in the cold water. But the blindness would not wash out.

We got the call at breakfast. My parents left us kids in the house and went right over. By the time our school bus came, my dad and my grandmother had already taken Gramps to the hospital. Everything happened very quickly.

My mother explained that they would take him to the emergency room. From there, they would make an appointment with an ophthalmologist, an eye doctor. But there were many questions left unanswered, question that tugged at me all day as I sat through my classes.

I was shocked, of course. But I can't say I was surprised. We had always known that this day might come. My grandfather had lived with a disease called sugar diabetes for almost forty years. And, as we all knew, diabetes is the number one cause of blindness among adults.

Diabetes. To this day, I can't treat it like any other word. From the first time I heard it spoken, the name of disease was uttered in a hushed, conspiratorial whisper. The syllables were strung out in an exaggerated way, like some strange, death-like chant: Di-a-betes. It was as if merely touching the word with the tongue would make things worse than they already were.

When my school bus pulled into the yard at the end of the day, I could see that my grandmother and my mother were sitting on the front porch of Grandma's house,

wearing shawls against the chill of the afternoon. The rain had let up, but it was still cold enough to see my breath.

I don't remember walking from the road to the yard to the porch. But I do remember how my mother and my Grandma looked up at me from the porch swing, with cold-pinchd faces and red-rimmed eyes.

"How is he?" I asked.

My grandmother patted the wooden slats on the seat beside her.

I put down my book bag and sat.

Grandma took both of my hands into hers. She glanced over at my mother.

"What happened?" I asked. I knew it was bad news, otherwise she wouldn't be taking this long.

"What Grandpa has is a condition called Di-a-betic Retinopathy. It's the most common cause of blindness among people who suffer from di-a-betes."

Blindness? Grandpa?

I felt as if someone had just punched me in the stomach. "He won't be able to see?" I asked.

My mother laid a hand on my arm.

"Now just hold on and listen to your Grandma," she said.

"Grandpa is not the first person who's had this condition," Grandma said, "And the doctor is going to do everything he can for him. He says there are a few treatments he can try. Hopefully we'll see some results in the next couple of weeks."

"What can they do?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "let me explain the problem. For di-a-betics, the blood vessels in the eye can become fragile and burst. That's what happened to Grandpa this morning. The blood leaking from the veins mixes with the fluid of the eye and clouds the vision. When the vessels bleed into the eye tissue, it can cause pressure that the retina detaches the rest of the eye. The central part of the eye can swell and cause complete blindness."

"Can he see anything now?" I asked.

"Not now, honey. The doctor drained off the bloody fluid and covered his eyes with bandages. The bandages will come off in about a week and we'll see how much vision he still has. Until then, we just wait-and pray."

“I might as well tell you, the doctor was painfully honest with us—that’s the way grandpa wanted it.”

“Honest about what?”

Grandma took a deep breath and looked at my mother, as if she needed some extra nudge to utter the words.

“Oh, Robin,” she said wearily, “you might as well know: The doctor says your Grandpa’s eyesight is going to gradually fade away in the next few months. Unless he can find a way to stop the bleeding, serious things can happen. Scar tissue can develop. A hole can appear in the lining, pulling the retina away from the back of the eyeball.

“It doesn’t look good. The doctor says there’s a 90 percent chance he’ll be totally blind by the fall.”

For a moment, I felt sick to my stomach. I closed my eyes to steady myself. The awful darkness was tight around me. It was too hard to imagine.

“But what about hunting season?” I blurted out. Under the circumstances, it was a pretty insensitive question. But they didn’t treat it that way.

My grandmother just shook her head.

“There won’t be any more hunting seasons for Grandpa. He’s probably seen the last one already. But we still got the summer, Robin. He’s going to have to look at the summer for the last time. And we want you to help us.”

“He’ll be missing so much,” I said quietly. I thought of the sight of the leaves turning on the mountainsides and the first dusting of snow on the cornfields.

As if she were reading my thoughts, Grandma squeezed my hand.

“You’re right, Robin, he’ll miss a lot,” she said, “but we’ll have to be contented with the apple blossoms and the poke berries and the corn growing in the fields. We’ll have to make sure he sees all that.”

I nodded.

“Can I talk to him?” I asked.

My mother nodded.

“He’s back in his room,” she said.

I rose and opened the screen door then the big wooden door. I walked through the front room and down the hallway, just like I had done thousands of other times.

But this time was different. This time I was seeing my grandfather in a new and awkward way.

I had never seen him in laid up in bed before.

The bedroom door creaked as I opened it. And there was Grandpa. He looked a little like an Egyptian mummy. His head was swathed in white bandages, with just his mouth and his white-whiskered chin showing below the wraps.

“Howdy, Old-Timer,” he said. His voice was firm, trying to be cheery.

I walked to within a foot of his bedside.

“How’d you know it was me?” I asked.

“Sound of your footsteps,” he said, “Guess I’m gonna hafta start payin’ attention to that kinda thing a lot more.”

“Yeah,” I said weakly.

Grandpa smoothed the covers with his hands. I noticed that he was wearing a white nightshirt with a picture of a wild turkey printed over the right breast. It was a shirt Grandma had gotten him for Christmas one year. But because I had never seen him in bed, I had never seen him wear it.

His chin whiskers were working now. I could see that he was searching for words.

“The doctor says I’ll be up and around in a few days,” he began. “When the bandages come off, there’s a possibility that some of the vision will come back. But we don’t know how long I’ll have my eyes. You know all this, right?”

I nodded.

But then I realized that he couldn’t see, so I said, “Yeah, I know.”

“Did Grandma tell you about the treatments?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s a new kinda therapy. It’s amazin’. They can arrest the bleeding in the retina by sealing it off. And that might give me some vision. Only problem is, the procedure causes a lot of scarring of the eye tissue. There’s a good chance that it’ll do some damage as well.

“It’s a gamble, Robin. But I’m gonna take it. The doctor says I got maybe one chance in ten of keeping away the blindness. So, we’re going to work that ten percent, understand?”

I nodded. Tears were starting up in my eyes and my mouth felt all weak and trembly. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I been layin' here, thinking about all this." Grandpa went on, "and once I'm up and around, I got a project for you and me. I'm gonna go to the hardware store and get a thousand feet of that half-inch nylon boat rope—the stuff they use for tie-lines on rowboats and canoes. That stuff will hold up well in the wet weather."

"And what were gonna do is set some posts into the ground and use some of the existing tree trunks to run some hand-lines from the porch. That way I can go out to the barn and over to the woodpile, just by handing my way along the line. Get the idea?"

"Yeah," I said, "and we could run some lines from the barn up into the woods, to the blackberry patch and down to the pond, to the fishin' spot."

Grandpa grinned. "That's right, Robin. But we don't wanta go overboard or this place will look like a spider's web, with lines running this way and that."

"That'll be all right," I said.

"Yeah," Grandpa said, "I guess that would be all right."

The next day, Grandpa started laser therapy. Every Thursday, Grandma had to drive him to the hospital in Harrisburg, a hundred miles away. They would stay overnight then drive a hundred miles back every Friday.

On the other days, after school was out, I would work with Grandpa on his hand lines. When the bandages came off, his vision did return. It was cloudy, Grandpa said, but it was eyesight all the same, enough to see in the daylight, enough to work by.

During the first week, we set to work with the post hole digger, setting locust wood posts in the yard, about twenty yards apart.

"Always use locust for fence posts," Grandpa said, "They'll last twenty years in the ground, won't rot out like other woods."

My mind leapt ahead twenty years. I would be 22. He would be 87. It was too much to imagine.

One day, during a break in an afternoon rain shower, we were stringing some line up into the woods behind the barn, along a path we had traveled many times before. But this time, we found something new:

Lying in the soggy weeds by the side of the footpath was a baby bird. At first, it just looked like a white puff of feathers, about the size of a softball. But when we got

closer, we could see the tiny yellow face, the black button eyes and the miniature hooked beak of a baby owl.

When the owlet saw us, it started flapping its tiny wings and tried to stand up on its pitiful legs. As we bent closer, it fluffed up its feathers and hissed at us.

“Feisty little devil, isn’t he?” Grandpa said.

Then he spoke to the owl.

“Where’s your mama?” He asked.

The owl hissed back.

We glanced up into the dripping, leafless trees. No mama owl in sight. Just wind and gray clouds through a lattice-work of swaying branches.

“Think he’ll die?” I asked.

Grandpa nodded.

“If his mother doesn’t find him, he will.”

“What should we do?”

“Nothing we can do, Robin. If we touch him, his mother won’t have anything to do with him.”

“But if we just leave him here, he’ll probably die.”

“Probably.”

I stewed on that for a while.

“Listen,” Grandpa said, “I know how you feel. But you know how opposed I am to taking wild critters outta the woods. Sometimes Mother Nature brings us some hard lessons.”

I was angry now. I had no real right to be, but I was.

“I s’pose that baby owl wouldn’t have much chance of living if we took it home and doctored it,” I said, “maybe only one chance out of a hundred.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I was sorry I had said them. I saw a hard look break across my grandfather’s face, as if I had just slapped him, flat-handed.

Without another word, he turned and headed down the trail. Reluctantly, I followed him, glancing back once or twice at the tiny owl with flapping wings.

We walked for a while in silence. Then we heard something coming in our direction, thrashing through the bushes on the trail ahead. A moment later we saw Hogan, the neighbor’s collie, approaching us.

Hogan was famous in our neighborhood. He was your classic troublesome dog. His owners just let him run wild. He got into everyone's trash cans and dug up people's blueberry bushes. Some even said they had seen him running deer up in the woods.

"Hello, Hogan," Grandpa said.

But the collie didn't stop for any greetings. Hogan just brushed past us at a brisk trot, headed up the trail in the direction we had come.

Grandpa and I stopped and looked at each other. We were both thinking the same thing. This was no time for philosophical discussions. We turned around and rushed up the rail, toward Hogan and the owl.

When we reached the spot, Hogan had the owl in his mouth and was swinging it back and forth like a plaything. The owl fought with its tiny talons and beat away with his left wing, trying to pull free from the dog's toothy grip. The ground was littered with a sprinkling of tiny white feathers.

Without missing a step, Grandpa bent and snatched up a good-sized fighting stick from the ground. Two steps later, he was within striking distance. He came on the collie from behind and swung the stick in a wide arc, whacking the dog hard across the ribs. Hogan gave a sharp, surprised bark and left to the side, dropping the owl.

He loped off a few steps then turned to face my grandfather. Hogan drew back his lips and showed his yellow teeth. A menacing growl rumbled up from somewhere deep in the animal's throat. But that didn't faze Grandpa. He stared the dog down and pointed back along the trail with his stick.

Quiet, he said, "Git!"

For a moment, the dog's gaze wavered. Then Hogan lowered his snout and trotted off in the direction he had come. He looked back over his shoulder once, as if he was afraid Grandpa might come after him.

But my grandfather had other things on his mind. We crept to the place where Hogan had dropped the bird.

The owlet lay on his side on the wet ground. He struggled to his feet and flapped his wings. But he was too young for flight.

"What now?" I asked.

"Well," Grandpa said slowly, "I guess we gotta start to work that ten percent."

Before I could recover from my surprise, Grandpa had taken off his broadbrimmed canvas hat and used the tip of the stick to coax the owlet into the hat. The owl hissed and fought, clinging to the hat brim with his talons, but finally Grandpa got him situated.

We carried him back to the house and showed him to my grandmother.

“Poor thing,” she clucked. “You plan to keep him?”

My grandfather nodded.

He glanced over at me. I thought I saw a little smile on his lips.

Grandma nodded.

“Why don’t you call over to Warden Waldren’s office at the Game Commission and see if they can tell us what to do?” she suggested.

So much like my grandmother. In the midst of chaos, she was always thinking ahead to the next thing, always one step ahead of everyone else.

Grandpa nodded and headed right for the phone.

The game warden said that as long as we didn’t confine the owl, we wouldn’t be breaking any laws if we tried to doctor him. Mr. Waldren suggested we take him to a veterinarian for medical advice. In a way, I was relieved that we could keep the owlet. I knew that if we had left him out in the woods either the collie or the cold would have snuffed out his young life.

The next day we took the owl down to the Mr. Silbert, the vet in town. He examined the wing, cleaned up the wound with a swab dipped in rubbing alcohol and said there was no serious damage.

“What should we feed him?” I asked.

“You can start out with ground beef,” the vet said, “but you’ll have to mix it with some hair or the owl won’t be able to digest it. You should also crumble up some bone meal tablets and sprinkle that on the meat. They like bones in their diet.”

We did that, combing some hair off the dogs and feeding the owl a mixture of raw hamburger, hair and bone meal. After a few tentative pecks at the plate, the owl took to its new diet fine.

A few days later, Grandpa got the idea of picking up road-killed animals. In a normal day of driving around the valley, we would see several animals by the road who had been struck by cars—mostly rabbits, groundhogs, and possums. The owl liked that



even better. We got into the habit of carrying a bunch of plastic garbage bags and pair of canvas gloves in the truck. We picked up the choicest road kills each week, passing up the ones who were mashed beyond recognition or bloated up on the hot sun.

The first few weeks of the season passed in a frenzy of activity as we cared for the owl. It was tedious, feeding him small bits of meal. But he grew prodigiously. He was no longer a little puff of feathers. He was now growing strong wings, wings he would soon learn to work in that magical way which produces flight.

Once Snowball got his strength back, he would walk around the porch like a little soldier, marching along on his spindly legs, hunching his shoulders and flaring his wings for balance.

He slept most of the day in a cardboard box we put under the sheltered eave on the porch. At night, he would perch on the edge of his box and give out a low, resonant, “Hoo, hoo-oo, hoo, hoo.”

But no owls answered him. He seemed to be all alone in the world. I often wondered what could have happened to his parents—or his fledgling brothers and sisters. It was as if some mysterious force had dropped him in our woods, then left him to his own devices.

When it seemed that the owl was definitely going to live, I felt safe in giving him a name.

“What should we call him?” I said one day.

Grandpa puzzled on that one. “We could call him by his Latin name,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“*Bubo virginianus*. We could call him Bubby.”

I frowned.

“How about Snowball?” I said.

Gramps laughed.

“Good enough. Snowball it is. But let’s read up a little on the Great Horned’s.”

Grandpa handed me the field guide to birds. It was a blue, handsized book that he had always kept on a shelf by the back window. My grandmother had marked the section on owls with a blue piece of paper.

Grandpa squinted at the page.

“I can see the picture, but I can’t make out the words,” he admitted. “You’re going to have to read it to me, Robin.”

I ran my eye over the page.

The title page said: “Owls.”

Then, further down: “Chiefly nocturnal birds of prey, with large heads, flattened faces and large, forward-facing eyes.”

There were several full-color drawings. The largest and most dramatic was of the Great Horned Owl, with the feathered tufts jutting upwards like graceful, upswept, eyebrows.

“That’s what he’ll look like someday,” Grandpa said.

I read on.

“The Great Horned Owl is sometimes called ‘The Cat Owl’. Yellow eyes with dark centers. A conspicuous white throat bib and prominent, widely-spaced ear tufts.”

I flipped through a page or two of densely-packed information about habitats and morality rates.

“Ah,” I said at last, “here’s what we want to know: ‘Hatching dates are mid-February. Hatchlings are brooded almost constantly by the female for up to three weeks. Nestlings often edge out of the nest by about 32 days but remain near the nest and continue to be cared for by the parents until after full flight is achieved. At about six weeks, young great horned owls begin flapping and learning to fly. Flight may occur by nine weeks but is usually not achieved until twelve weeks.’”

I put the book down and looked up.

“Twelve weeks,” I said, “When would that be?”

Grandpa wrinkled his brow.

“From February 15? That’d be around mid-May wouldn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, counting on my fingers, “that would mean his first flights should be taking place around the end of next week.”

Grandpa shook his head.

“We’ll just have to see,” he said.

He was being cautious, I knew. But underneath it all, I could tell that he was just as anxious as I was to see him try his new wings.

Meanwhile, Grandpa continued his laser treatments. Even though the doctor was able to stop the hemorrhaging, he was not sure of the long-term effects of the treatments. He explained that the process was still quite new and was not as successful as they would like it to be. My grandfather's vision did not improve. But it did not grow worse. Grandpa said that it looked as though he was looking at everything through a thick ground fog.

Snowball was a little late in taking to the air. For most of the month of May, he was a walker. He must have hiked every square inch of our porch railing and even hopped up onto the eave once or twice. Then, one evening, when we were resting on the porch after suppertime, he fluttered down from the railing and landed on the grass a dozen feet away. It wasn't a long flight, just a few seconds. But we knew that Snowball was on his way.

In the days that followed, the owl tumbled and toppled and banged into trees during his attempts at flight. But he kept on trying. By the end of May, he could make short, wobbly glides and awkward, feet-first landings.

Meanwhile, his appearance was changing. He was no longer completely white. The wing and tail feathers were beginning to show their bold black stripes. His talons were becoming massive, almost dinosaur-like. And I could tell by the way he tore into the road kills that his beak had become an efficient tool. He was almost a foot tall by then.

But it was his eyes which changed the most. They became large yellow orbs, like a cat's eye marble, with an impossibly black pupil, dead center.

I realized with a little sadness that he would be hunting on his own soon, then he would no longer need us.

Snowball did hunt. Many times that summer I watched him glide down silently, snatching up field mice or garter snakes in the open fields. But he still came to the porch every evening, for a taste of road kill.

For us, it was like a delightful meeting each summer evening. We would wait on the porch, searching the woods for the fluttering of his white wings in the gathering darkness. At night, his mellow hooting filled the clearing behind my grandfather's house.

"You know," Grandpa said one night as we sat in the dark on the porch, "I think there might be some advantages to being blind."

I had never heard him talk like that before.

“Take right now, for instance,” he said quietly, “We can’t see much. but do you notice how the night sounds seem so alive? And the feel of the night air on your face—I’m noticing that kinda thing more now. They’re little things, you know, things that sighted people miss.”

I didn’t know what to say. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to say anything. I just knew that in the midst of my excitement about the owl, I had not been dealing with the fact that my grandfather was losing his fight with the darkness.

Grandpa didn’t talk much about his treatments or his condition. I think it was partly because he was not the type to complain and partly because he wanted to shield me from what was really going on. Besides, I was so absorbed with the daily trials of the owl that I sometimes forgot altogether about my grandfather’s loss.

We finished the hand lines in late August. As we sunk the last post in the ground, I realized that the summer was almost over. School would start in a few weeks and, just after that, the glorious growing season would be over. Snowball had grown a lot that summer. And so had I, I guess.

One evening, my grandmother drew me aside while Grandpa was out in the barn.

“Honey,” she said, “Tomorrow Grandpa finishes his first round of treatments. The eye doctor is going to give him a dilated eye test to see how much damage has been done. Bu tomorrow afternoon, we should have a pretty good idea of what the future holds for Grandpa and his vision.”

I nodded.

“Will you come down to the hospital with us? I think it would mean a lot to your Grandpa.” She asked.

“Sure, but...”

She gripper my hand. Her eyes looked tired and old. “Will ya pray with me, son?”

I wasn’t much for churches and prayers. But, under the circumstances, how could I refuse?

We knelt there in the kitchen, in the quiet of the evening.

I closed my eyes. Darkness. Silence. Well, almost silence. There was the buzzing of her ancient refrigerator and the sound of water running through the pipes under the linoleum floor.

In the close quiet, I could hear the soft breathing of my grandmother, this woman who had nursed me through the mumps and the feverish chills and had made me pies and helped me with my home-made Halloween costumes. And now, here we were, on the eve of this horrible and hopeful meeting, making a small prayer against the darkness.

I was searching for the words, words to ask God to help us through this. Then I noticed that the darkness behind my eyelids was no longer so dark. It sparkled with sparks of light. Then, emerging from the darkness, I saw two points of yellow light, like cat's eyes. A moment later, I caught a glimpse of swooping white wings and striped tail feathers. The head was adorned with widely-spaced feathery tufts. It could have been a moth. Or an owl. But whatever it was, it had come and gone. And then I was in blackness again.

I heard my grandmother's voice then, saying holy words: "Our Precious Heavenly Father..." I could not hear the rest, she was speaking so quietly. At last, she was quiet.

Then she rose on her creaking knees and made her way to one of the kitchen chairs.

I got to my feet and stood beside her. I was going to tell her about the vision of the owl. But she stopped me.

"Don't do anything now, Robin," she said, "Go home. Your mother will be looking for you. We leave at 7 a.m."

She touched my head with her hand, lightly. It felt like the brush of a bird's wing.

I was at the truck early the next morning, waiting in the foggy yard. The sun came up over the ridge and hit the fog bank, making the air look smokey and mysterious. I saw a flutter of movement in the pines. A moment later, I saw Snowball come winging in, like something out of a dream or a prayer-vision. He landed on the side-view mirror of the truck, gripping the metal with his massive talons. Snowball rotated his head and looked at me. He was fresh from a night of hunting. I noticed a fine coating of small hairs, sticky blood, still clinging to his talons. A good hunter.

Just then, the house door levered open and Grandpa stepped out, squinting in the slanting light. Right behind him, Grandma emerged, closing the door after her.

Grandpa got about half way down the steps when he saw the owl.

He smiled. "I guess Snowball came to wish me good luck," he said.

He walked around to the rider's side of the truck, to within a few feet of the owl. I expected Snowball would flap off then, but he didn't.

Grandma went to the driver's side and opened her door, sliding in behind the wheel. She turned the ignition key. The truck engine roared to life.

"Let's go, boys," she said. "Say good morning to your owl and let's get on the road. Big day today."

But Snowball did not move.

Grandpa reached forward and laid his hand on the chrome handle of the truck door. Slowly, without jarring the owl from his perch, he opened the door. He nodded to me and I slid in beside my Grandmother.

Still the owl did not move.

My Grandfather and the Great Horned Owl regarded each other silently for a moment. The owl's eyes seemed to widen and grow a deeper yellow. My grandfather's eyes widened as well. Their eyes were two deep watery pools, reflecting each other. I felt as if something was passing between them.

Then, without a sound, the owl lifted off and flapped away on those magnificent wings.

Grandpa took a deep breath. He slid in beside me and gently closed the door. Grandma put the truck in gear and we rolled off down the road, listening to the sound of the gravel popping under the wheels. No one said anything for miles, afraid to break the spell. I closed my eyes and listened to the road, thinking of the advantages of being blind.

The hospital examination room was white, brilliantly white. The lights were bright and all the testing equipment was shiny metal. A strange place to send a person going blind, I thought. The place smelled minty and clean.

When the doctor who had been overseeing Grandpa's care came in, I could see that he wore a white coat and had shiny glasses. With him was a petite nurse. She also looked white and very shiny.

"This is our grandson," Grandma said. "Robin, this is Dr. Felderstein."

I stood and shook his hand. It was small and hard. He nodded curtly.

"Is it all right for him to watch?" she asked.

"Of course," the doctor said.

Then he turned to my grandfather, motioning to the padded chair.

“Shall we begin, Mr. Moore?”

Grandpa sat and leaned back in the chair. The nurse put some drops into his eyes.

Dr. Felderstein used a fancy looking flashlight to look into each of my grandfather’s eyes. Then the nurse took him over to testing device and positioned him so that he could peer into something that looks like a submarine’s periscope.

“Just stare straight ahead, Mr. Moore,” the doctor said quietly.

“Keep as still as possible,” the nurse said quietly.

In a few moments, the lights went off and the nurse put a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s fine, Mr. Moore,” she said, “now you and your family can have a seat in the waiting room.”

“How long until we know the results of the test?” Grandpa asked.

“The doctor will read them right now. He will confer with you in a few moments,” she said.

We sat in the empty room and waited, trying to smile bravely at each other now and then. When the doctor appeared at the door, I tried to read his expression, but it was absolutely neutral.

“Please come in,” he said quietly.

Once we were seated in the examination room, he took off his glasses and tucked them into his shirt pocket.

“I am sorry for the delay,” he said, “but I wanted to make sure that I was reading these results properly.”

He looked directly at my grandfather.

“Mr. Moore, I have been an Ophthalmologist in the state of Pennsylvania for twenty years and I must confess, I have rarely seen anyone respond to treatment as well as you have.”

“Quit beatin’ around the bush,” Grandpa said.

The doctor smiled.

“Of course. The good news is that you have 20/30 eyesight without glasses— That’s better than I have. And from what I can see, the laser treatments were very effective. We were able to arrest the leakage and prevent the retina from detaching. That

is very good. I must confess, when I first examined you, I did not hold up much hope. But you have responded very well.”

“So, he’s not going to be blind?” I asked.

The doctor smiled.

“No, son, he’s not.”

“Praise the Lord in Heaven,” Grandma breathed.

“And the bad news?” Grandpa asked.

“Well, the bad news is that we still have a great deal to learn about this new therapy. As you know, one of the drawbacks of this approach is that the laser beam does cause irreversible scarring to the eye tissue. Unfortunately, Mr. Moore, in order to retain your general eyesight, we had to sacrifice your peripheral vision.

“What it means is that you will have very little vision up and down and to the sides. But this is not such a bad trade-off. After all, many animals do very well with what we might call tunnel vision. Owls, for instance, have no peripheral vision. That’s why they turn their heads in that peculiar way.

I felt a chill ripple down my spine. Grandpa and Grandma looked at each other, then at me.

The doctor paused.

“Did I say something strange?”

“No,” Grandpa said, smiling, “go on.”

“Well,” the doctor said briskly. “There is not much more I can say. I will expect you to have a dilated eye exam at least once a year from here on out. We will monitor your progress as time goes on. In any case, there is no reason why you shouldn’t have many years of good vision ahead of you, Mr. Moore.”

We shook hands all around and walked out of the office and down the hallway, out into the open air of the parking lot, grinning like fools.

We sang in the truck all the way home.

But when we pulled up in front of the house, it was dusky dark. I half expected to see Snowball perched nearby to welcome us back. but he was nowhere in sight.

The next day, as we spread the happy news and settled back into the routine of our lives, I looked forward to our evening meeting with Snowball.



But the owl did not show, even though we placed a fresh road kill out on the porch. A week of watching and waiting went by before I would admit to myself that Snowball was gone.

“I guess he felt that he’d done his work,” Grandpa said one night as we scanned the dark trees.

“Do you think that Snowball had anything to do with your cure?” I asked.

Grandpa smiled in the dark. “I’m sure of it, Robin. If it hadn’t have been for that owl, I woulda spent the whole summer worryin’ about my eyesight. But pickin’ him up and bringin’ him home, it was a gift. Or as your Grandma would say, blessing.”

It was a blessing. I will confess that I had mixed feelings about Snowball’s departure. On one hand, I was glad that he was out in the wild, on his own in the woods. On the other, I missed the floating grace of his flight and the comfort of his hoot in the night. At times, I would have given a great deal to see him fly over the house just once more.

A year and a half later, I got my wish. One spring day we were out working in the yard when two Great Horned Owls fluttered in and landed on top of the barn. I knew instantly that it was Snowball and his mate. It did my heart good to see them. They stayed around the place all day. Then, in evening, they flew off together, flapping their huge wings in perfect time, as the darkness closed around them.

That was the last we saw of the birds.

In the end, I came to realize that the gift the owl gave my grandfather was the ability to see in the darkness.

And that may be the greatest gift of all.