

Ornithophobia

by JackieJLH

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A persistent fear of birds.

It's been the same routine for years: The five of us, friends from our school days, sitting around the same small table in the corner of the same tiny restaurant Saturday after Saturday, talking and laughing while we try, for just a few hours, to forget that we're now grown women with careers and families and responsibilities. This is the time when we can act silly, gossip horribly, and just be ourselves. I find that really hard sometimes, though; being "myself". There are times when the smallest things make my heart stop and cause tears to form in the corners of my eyes, and I have to quickly change the conversation and hope that no one notices. They usually don't. I've gotten good at hiding my worries.

But sometimes the little things catch me off guard, like right now.... We were sipping our drinks and giggling like teenagers about something utterly unimportant when Cathy admitted, quite accidentally, that she is very much afraid of the dark, and in an effort to make her feel not quite so silly, the others began listing their fears as well. 'Spiders,' Melissa said, laughing softly at herself. Jill said, 'Heights,' and Marie whispered, 'Airplanes,' blushing a bright pink. But now they've turned to look at me, smiling expectantly and awaiting my contribution to the conversation, and I'm frozen. I can't tell them my greatest fear; they would never understand. It would seem *truly* silly... you see, my biggest fear is *owls*.

It's been nearly two years since I was last able to see one of those wretched birds without my breath catching in my throat. When one flies overhead, I cringe, willing it to keep moving away from me, hoping that it is not me it's looking for.

The last time I looked at an owl without being terrified was during my daughter's sixth year of school. She wrote letters about her classes, her friends, her worries and joys. I loved those letters and always anticipated the owls that would bring them. But that summer after her sixth year, when she was just seventeen years old, she sat me and her father down and finally told us the truth she'd been hiding from us for years. Her magical world, the one from her letters filled with good friends and wonderful, harmless adventures, was not nearly as fun or carefree as she'd strived to make us believe.

She was fighting in a war; a war that was raging on around us while those of us without magical powers were left oblivious. She was quitting school to join the fight, to work alongside her friend, that nice Harry boy, who was suddenly much, much more than just a boy. He went from being the messy-haired child that she always ran into in Diagon Alley to being a warrior, a hero, her leader, and that terrified me. Her other friend, a boy named Ron, the one I'd teased her about for years whenever she'd bring up his name, was going too, leaving his own schooling and his own family, breaking his own mother's heart. Their headmaster had been killed by a member of his own staff, and now these boys and my daughter—*my daughter!*—were going to take matters into their own hands and try to end the war.

I begged... I begged, I pleaded, I cried. I think I even threatened her with physical restraint a few times in my frantic insistence that she stay home where she was safe. But

she refused, hugging both her father and me quickly before disappearing from before our very eyes.

The next owl that arrived at my home carried a letter from the new headmistress of my daughter's school, telling her that she'd been named Head Girl. I cried for days after receiving that letter, realising that my daughter, who'd once claimed school as her greatest love, may never even learn of her accomplishment. It also scared me because that letter's existence meant that those in positions of power in her world were unaware of her self-appointed mission, and were just as unable to protect her as I was.

It was nearly a year before another letter arrived, this one addressed to "Mum and Dad", and I frantically took it from the owl, praying that this would be good news from my little girl. Perhaps she'd changed her mind and was coming home, or maybe they'd been victorious after all this time....

Instead, it was a quickly jotted note, barely recognisable as my daughter's usually careful script, telling us that she would be undertaking some new mission, some horrible, dangerous mission, and that she loved us. The unspoken message was clear. This was a goodbye... hopefully a 'just in case' goodbye, but a goodbye nonetheless.

Since that day, nearly three months ago, I haven't been able to stand the sight of owls. What if one brings me bad news? What if she's injured, or has been captured by her enemies? What if she's... what if she's dead? What if some impersonal bloody *owl* is the only acknowledgement I get that my daughter gave her life for a world that I know nothing about and a war that I did nothing—can *still* do nothing—to help her fight? The sight of one of those horrible birds flying in my direction makes my heart stop, makes me feel as though my feet are cemented to the floor, and I dread opening my eyes each morning, wondering if there will be an owl waiting at my window.

So what can I tell these people, my friends, who are looking at me with smirks, waiting for me to divulge my greatest fear? Nothing... I can tell them *nothing* because it all has to stay a secret, even if it means pretending that my world isn't falling apart around me, even if it means lying to those closest to me. So with a shrug of fake embarrassment, I mutter, 'I'm not a big fan of the dark either,' allowing my eyes, for the briefest moment, to drift to the window and the—thankfully—empty sky.

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