

# Night Owl

by Barry R. Taylor

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**Characters:** The Narrator

**Scene:** A single stuffed chair, upstage centre, facing the audience. The chair is flanked by a night stand, bearing a couple of heavy books, and a brass lamp. The Narrator is sitting in the chair, reading a book. He is dressed in pajamas, a bathrobe and slippers.

[**Cue 1:** Stage black]

[**Cue 2:** Lights up. Interior, night. A wide pool of light centred on the Narrator's chair]

Narrator: Rory MacPherson was sitting in the comfortable chair in his bedroom, reading a book, when an owl hooted outside the window: "Whooo". Rory ignored it, at first.

It was June and the night was warm. The old casement window beside Rory's bed was open; wispy white curtains shimmered and shifted with each breath of breeze. The room was dark but for the light from a brass reading lamp beside Rory's chair.

Rory lived by himself on the top floor of a rambling old house on Pearson Street, near the edge of town. Big rooms, high ceilings, creaking hardwood floors. A middle-aged couple, the McDermits, owned the house and lived on the ground floor.

Rory lived a curiously simple and circumscribed life. He had no hobbies other than reading. He didn't play hockey, or go to movies or pop down to the pub for a drink. He rarely went out with friends, though he had friends enough. Rory worked at a regular job and in the evenings he watched a little television and read a lot of books and tried not to think too much. Thinking was something to be avoided, or at least to be taken in small doses, like bad-tasting medicine.

The books helped. He got them from the local library, mostly, trading in two or three every Friday for a new batch to see him through the next week. In the evening, when dinner was done and television was no longer interesting, he would sit in the big chair in the bedroom and read, long into the night. There was no point in going to bed until sleep was inevitable, and immediate. Otherwise he would stare into the darkness, awake and desolate, while his mind wandered into places he did not want it to go.

Less than a minute later, Rory heard the owl call again. Three deep, uninflected notes with a trace of tremolo, like a musician testing an oboe: Who – Who – Who. Rory stopped reading and listened. The round hollowness of the owl's call sounded mournful, like a grieving ghost, far away in the dark.

When the owl hooted the third time, Rory set down his book. Curious now, he approached the open window. One didn't often hear an owl here, in town. He flipped aside a curling curtain and poked his head out into the darkness.

A grand old maple tree with branches like a giant's arms dominated the back yard. Night-darkened leaves rustled in the breeze, defining shifting patterns of deep grey and black against the aubergine sky. It was past midnight. The neighbourhood was quiet. The only sound was the high whine of gnats swarming above the trees.

The owl was sitting on a wide branch, no farther away than the width of Rory's bedroom. It gripped the branch beneath with talons like knives. It gazed back at Rory through round yellow eyes set within giant disks of black feathers. It seemed to Rory like a bird born of the night itself, a kind of compression of the darkness into a solidified shadow. Only those burning yellow eyes revealed the hot life inside.

Rory had never seen an owl so close before. Nor one this big. At last he said: "Hello, owl. What brings you here, so close to town? Aren't you a bird of the primal forest and shadowed glade? Not much food for you here, I would think."

The owl gazed back at him, steady as a lighthouse. It said: "Who – who – who,"

Rory said: "You gotta work on your vocabulary. Still, I'm glad you dropped by. You are one very cool bird." He considered trying to take a picture of it, but the night was dark. He said, "I'm going back to my book now. Good hunting."

The owl didn't move. It said: "Who – who – who."

Rory returned to his book. From time to time the owl hooted out in the yard. After a while it became distracting. When Rory finally turned in for the night, hoping, as usual, that sleep would come swiftly, the owl was still there.

The owl came back the next night. It had been a difficult day for Rory. There had been problems at work, and more problems keeping his mind from wandering where he did not want it to go. He had trouble concentrating on his book.

Sometime after midnight, he heard the owl again: three atonal notes, at once near at hand and far away: “Who – Who – Who”. Rory paused for a heartbeat to listen. The hushed and furtive call of the owl well suited the mystery of the dark.

When the owl hooted a second time, Rory set down his book. He approached the open window and leaned out into the darkness with both hands on the frame. The owl was perched where it had been the night before, gripping the branch with those great talons. It stared back at him. The dark feathered rings magnified its eyes until they dominated its face, like volcanic craters with hot yellow lava roiling at their centres.

“Now look,” Rory said. “What are you doing here? Do you have a nest nearby? Am I too close to your mate and your eggs?” He waved his arms at the bird. “Go away! Get! Go on, shoo!” The owl didn’t move. It fluffed one wing for a moment, then returned to silently staring.

Rory looked around for something to throw at it. There was nothing near at hand worth sacrificing, or worth the trouble of retrieving in the morning. “Go away, you bothersome bird!” he shouted at it. “Get lost! Go catch a mouse or something! I’m trying to read!”

The owl only stared. It said, “Who – Who.”

“Oh, go fly into a wall,” Rory snarled. He slammed down the window and yanked the curtains closed. He flopped down in his chair and returned to his book.

But his tranquillity had been shattered. He couldn’t lose himself in the story any longer. Reluctantly, he climbed into bed, though he knew it was too early and sleep would not come. He lifted one corner of the curtain to peek outside. The owl was still sitting on the branch, staring at his window with the unhurried patience of a nocturnal predator waiting for its prey.

When the owl returned on the third night, Rory was ready for it. He was in a foul mood: he had suffered through a sleepless night, followed by a very bad day. After the first hoot he threw open the window and leaned out aggressively into the darkness. The owl was sitting in the same place, on a horizontal branch of the great maple tree. It stared back at him, as implacable as time.

“Now listen, feathered fiend of the night,” Rory shouted. “I want no more of you. Go away! If you are a bird of prey, go prey on someone else. If you are a messenger, consider the message delivered. If you are a bearer of wisdom, I don’t want to hear it. No one’s tidy aphorisms or comfortable philosophies have done anything for me. Do you think I haven’t heard enough words of wisdom from friends and family, priests and pall-bearers, counsellors and co-workers?”

Be gone then! Get out of my yard, out of my sight, and out of my life. Fly away and leave me in peace.”

Yet still the owl didn't move. It regarded Rory with the calmness of a monk. It blinked its great yellow eyes. It said, “Who – Who”.

“I'll show you who,” said Rory, “and what and how besides! I'll have done with you once and forever. I'll shake you out of your damned tree if I have to!”

**[Cue 3: light shift to downstage, leaving the chair in shadow]**

He was already in his night clothes. In a rage he stomped down the stairs from his rooms, past the stillness of the ground floor where the McDermits were sleeping, and out the door into the dew-damp darkness of the back yard. He strode across the grass to stand beside the trunk of the maple tree. He glared up at the great owl, which in turn peered down on him from the branch above. “I said, be gone!” he shouted at it. “Get lost! Bearer of truth or companion of the gods, I don't care. Go away!” He picked up a stick and hurled it at the owl.

He missed, but the attack was enough, finally, to stir the owl to flight. It spread its wings and lifted into the night air as if it were weightless. Yet it didn't fly away. It glided silently to another tree, at the edge of the yard. In the uncanny way of owls, it turned its head far around to look back at Rory.

Rory didn't keep it waiting. “Keep going, irksome bird,” he shouted at it. He marched across the yard, retrieved the stick, and made another throw, less angry but more accurate, which again propelled the owl into flight. Still it didn't leave. Again it drifted on outstretched wings until it reached the next tree, a few metres farther away. It settled there, blinking its yellow eyes at Rory. “Whooooo,” it said.

Rory approached the owl again, stick in hand. His anger was waning, replaced by a growing sense of unease. Something of the owl's behaviour seemed unexpected, less random and more purposeful than wildness would predict. The tree it perched in now was smaller, at the edge of the yard, near the street.

“Not far enough,” Rory said. “Keep going. You are not welcome here. I need silence; I need solitude; I don't need solace, nor succour, nor the company of hooting birds.” He lifted his arm to throw again. The owl was already in flight. It flew soundlessly out of the back yard, past the house, toward the street. It landed this time, not in a tree, but on the cross bar of a street lamp.

Rory followed it. The street was eerily quiet this late at night, free of any traffic. It felt like an unnatural place, weirdly empty, steeped in harsh light and sharp shadows. The street lamps stood like sentinels arrayed against the besieging dark.

The owl was perched on a cross bar designed to hold flower baskets and flags. A colourful banner hanging from this one announced the annual village fair. Rory knew all about the fair. It was one of many places where he did not want his mind to go.

He met her at the annual village fair, a few years earlier: a fateful, chance encounter among the crowds, the carnival rides and the concession stands. Although they had grown up not far apart, until that magic night they had never truly met each other. He had taken to calling her “my fair lady”. It was at once their private joke and a special term of affection.

“All right, you ominous and obnoxious bird,” Rory said, when he caught up with it. “What are you doing? What kind of owl perches on a street light?” It occurred to him then that he really didn’t know what kind of owl it was. Although to be honest, he hardly knew how many kinds of owl there could be. This one was big, with feathers like a judge’s robes, and yellow eyes bearing down on him like searchlights. It hooted, “Who – Who”.

Rory was still carrying the stick. He cocked his arm. “From this distance, I can hardly miss,” he said. The owl flew off. It landed again on a small tree half a block away. It watched patiently as Rory approached. Before he got close enough to threaten a throw, the owl took flight again, only to land in another tree, near the next intersection.

Rory followed behind. His mind was in turmoil. He was abruptly aware that he was walking down a public street in the deep of a moonless night, dressed in bathrobe and slippers. He realized also that something was happening, something occult and elusive, like a whisper in a darkened room. Something that he did not understand. He dropped the stick.

Tree to tree, street light to street light to tree again, the owl led him along. Every time Rory approached where the owl was sitting, it would fly off, rising with a few quick beats of its wings to land somewhere farther up the street. At an intersection it perched on a street sign. It made no sound but the occasional hoot: “Who – who.”

What did that call mean, Rory wondered, as he slapped down the sidewalk in the warm summer night. Was it a warning? A mock? An invocation to hurry? Rory had no idea. “Fold your wings, you plague of the plutonian night, I’m coming, I’m coming,” he told the owl. They

were by now several blocks from Rory's rooms. The street slanted uphill. Rory followed the owl.

At the next intersection the owl changed course. Rory found it sitting in a tree, not far up a short side-street, near the edge of town. This street had no lamps. The darkness seemed heavier here, almost tangible, as if the night were about to take on physical substance. Black, two-storey houses loomed in the darkness on either side, like ranks of giants from some hadean realm, eyeless and mute, who nevertheless sensed an intruder. Reluctance slowed Rory's steps. The owl moved in silent, saltating flight up the street.

After a block and a half, Rory stopped. The owl waited. It perched on a low branch of the next tree, looking back at him. The pupils centring those great yellow eyes were blacker than the night itself. "No!" Rory cried, suddenly resolute. "I see where you are leading me. I won't go. It's too soon. I won't – I won't go there."

A light flicked on in the upper floor of the nearest house. A middle-aged woman in a nightgown thrust her head out the open window. "Quit that racket down there!" she shouted. "It's after one! Some of us are trying to sleep!"

Rory recognized the irritated woman. She worked at the library. He trusted her to give him the right books every Friday. "Mrs. Cooper!" he shouted back. "I'm sorry. It's me, Rory. Rory McPherson. I'm sorry to wake you."

The woman squinted down at him. She paused to put on a pair of glasses that must have been lying on a bedside table. "Rory?" she demanded, "is that you? What are you doing out here in the dead of night?"

Rory gestured toward the tree. "I'm following that damned and damning owl," he said. "It won't leave me alone."

Mrs. Cooper transferred her attention to the grim, grey bird, still perched on a low branch, inscrutable and implacable. It seemed to Rory as if an understanding passed between them. At last Mrs. Cooper said, "Then I think you should keep going, Rory. I think it's for the best." She disappeared back into her bedroom. The light went out, like a candle snuffed by the pervasive darkness.

Yet Rory stayed where he was. He said to the owl: "No. Can't you see I can't do this?" But the bird had already risen on quick-beating wings to fly another half block up the street. Rory felt the rise of the hill beneath his feet as he trudged along behind it. He repeated: "I can't

do this.” The darkness around him, vast and uncaring, swallowed his protests, and returned only silence.

After another block the row of houses ended. So too did the sidewalk. The owl followed the narrowing road up the hill, floating from one tree to the next. When Rory finally caught up, the bird was perched like a royal crest atop a listing, wrought-iron archway. The open gates beneath were rusted and half-unhinged, overgrown with long grass growing upward like tendrils from the underworld.

Rory passed through the archway into the grey-black expanse beyond. Gravel crunched beneath his slippers. Headstones thrust from the ground around him in menacing rows of dark oblongs, as if the earth had grown teeth. The owl flew ahead, but Rory was hardly watching. He knew where they were going now.

He left the gravel and made his way across the dewy grass. At length he came to a grave near the end of a row. The owl perched nearby. It sat atop a narrow marble cenotaph that rose above the newer headstones below it like the spire of an ancient village church.

The graveyard was without sound, and very dark. Stars sprinkled the sky between drifting clouds. The grave where Rory stood was newer than the rest, yet old enough that the earth had settled and grass was moving in. In the moonless dark, Rory could hardly read the name, “Laura” inscribed on the headstone, and beneath it, the inscription, “All who knew her were touched by light.” Rory had chosen the epitaph himself.

He stood for a long time without speaking or moving. For a while he wondered what it would be like to become one with the night, to somehow spread himself so thin that he became incorporeal, a deeper shadow in the endless darkness, and so disappear. The owl waited. It hooted, one more time: “Who – who.”

Rory turned on it. “That’s enough!” he shouted. “Have done! Pull your tearing beak from my heart and leave me in peace. Look, I know. I know, and I’m sorry. I know I wasn’t strong. I wasn’t always there for her when she needed me. But I swear I tried. It all happened so fast, there was no time, no time for anything, and the doctors said there was nothing anyone could do.

“And suddenly you were gone. So fast, so soon. And I realized there was so much more I should have done, so many things I should have said, so much life I wanted to press into those last few days.”

He was speaking now to the grave, to the air, to the night sky above. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I let you down, if I made it harder, if I was sand when you needed a rock. It was just – I didn’t know what to do. And it hurts. It hurts all the time.”

He looked past the grave to the ghostly owl perched on the narrow marble spire, watching with all-seeing yellow eyes. “You have done your job, you hellish apparition,” he told it. “You have dragged me down into the abyss. Right here, right here on the top of this hill is the bed of the ocean.”

The owl regarded him evenly. It opened its down-hooked beak but made no sound. Rory said, “All right. All right, I see it now. I was treading water. Maybe there was no other way but to dive in and sink to the depth. But I’ve touched bottom now. Even grief doesn’t go any deeper than this.” He drew a long breath. “Please, tell me I won’t drown here. Tell me I can swim upward again, someday, up to the air and the light?”

The owl said, “Whoooooo.” It lifted into the air with a few strong, sharp beats of its outstretched wings. It climbed steeply until it was high above the graveyard, a swiftly moving shadow above the trees. It circled once, and again. Then it soared away until it blended into the darkness and was gone.

And then there was nothing but the stars, and the stillness, and the quiet sobs of one lonely man crying in the night.

[**Cue 3:** Three second pause, then stage black]

