

*Bernard*

"Cm'on, we're going to go clean the owl cage," says the program director, hefting the big shovel and handing me two empty gallon milk cartons. We set off across the farm, ducking through the barn to get a big bag of wood shavings. Kristen climbs up the ladder into the loft and pitches a brown paper bag, quite heavy and about as half as tall as me, down onto the clean cement floor. Birds flit around the hay bales, and the turkeys cluck in response to the cow's moos. It's only nine o'clock, and the farmers are stamping their feet and rubbing their arms in the early morning cold. I'm grateful for my three sizes too big thermal lined sweatshirt, and I zip it up a bit farther.

The two of us exit the barn, carrying the bag of shavings awkwardly between us. As we walk through the dewy grass, she advises me to pull the hood of my sweatshirt up. Smiling, she remarks: "He can be a little feisty, so it's a good precaution." Kristen tells me about the time that he flew at her, hooting, when she moved out of his line of vision, but assures me that he doesn't usually do things like that. She then tells me another story about the time that he almost got away during feeding time. "That doesn't happen very often either," she says. I nod. I'm not *that* worried.

We skirt the director's residence, duck under some trees, and finally come up on a little shack just a few hundred feet from the back door of the house. The owl's cage is about the size of a gardening shed, and built with double doors so that the person going in won't let him out by accident. The entire structure is covered with construction plastic to keep the worst of the wind out, and the top is open with only stapled chicken wire between the owl and the sky. Two

bikes, a lacrosse goal, a couple of lawn chairs, and the hard-top to a jeep surround the structure. Rotting leaves blanket the ground. It's a true New England forest, after all, and the familiar smells of nature fill my nose.

The door is closed with several barrel locks and a heavy dial-padlock. Once they're undone, we step into the first room, a musty, closet-sized area where Kristen grabs a bright yellow plastic bucket with the name of the director's now teenage son written on it in swirling blue letters. Mice have been in it, and the shredded contents have been their bedding. Even in the darkness, we both know the smell. We groan, knowing that everything will have to be bleached later, but it's a farm, so we're used to mice. "Just duck if he flies at you," Kristen remarks cheerfully, and opens the door. I step inside ahead of her, dragging the bag of shavings, and she quickly follows me with the bucket and shovel latching it behind us.

It's light and airy inside the second room. Wood shavings line the floor, a twine-wrapped perch stands in one corner with a step-ladder below it, and a large platform with two doors in front of it takes up the top third of the wall in front of us. An empty grey water bowl lies on the woodchip covered floor. Kristen expertly flips one of the doors open, exposing a hyperventilating owl sitting on a rotten tree stump, glaring at us. He's about a foot tall and absolutely gorgeous. His tummy and heaving chest are light caramel colored with flecks of dark brown. His outer feathers are a deep earthy color with flecks of grey. In between his huge black eyes is a dark, cross-shaped mark. "You're a handsome boy, Bernard," Kristen soothes. I follow suit, and his breathing slowly evens, but he's still blinking fast. It's a sign of stress,

Kristen tells me. Keeping a nonthreatening eye contact and speaking in low, gentle voices helps him, she says.

Bernard wasn't always this wild. He used to belong to a woman who owned a pet store. He was the shop owl, and quite domesticated. When the farm first acquired Bernard (the shop went out of business and she couldn't keep him) he had regular social contact. As time went on, and people visited him less and less, he became more and more wild until he finally reverted to his natural state. As Chaucer brings up in the Manciple's tale no creature, no matter how domesticated, ever loses all of its wild ways. In Bernard's case it's especially true. He cannot, however, ever be released into nature because he does not know how to hunt. Every night, late, the director or her older son goes out to feed him mice. Sometimes I have this responsibility. The entire farm staff, including me, is working on getting him a bit more used to people, and this cage-cleaning, despite being necessary for his health, is an important social step. It's the first time that he's ever met me, and we want to see how he reacts to new people.

Kristen and I work slowly, but efficiently, murmuring gentle words to the slowly calming owl. I grab the shovel and scrape the wood shavings lining the platform into the bucket, while she collects grey, fuzzy pellets to use for a class. She gets some good ones, maybe five or six, and lines them up on the step-ladder so we don't forget them. Kristen takes a moment to show me some tiny mouse bones poking out of the largest ones. The shovel is heavy, and maneuvering it gently so as not to disturb him is hard work!

About halfway through, we switch, and she sends me to the director's kitchen with the milk jugs to get water to fill Bernard's dish. My shoes and the hems of my jeans are soaked with dew by the time I reach the house. I duck inside the back door, dodging Abby and Maggie, the two enthusiastic, wriggling labs who greet me with sloppy kisses, tennis balls, and bones wanting to play. The farmhouse is cozy with rugs lining all of the floors, and filled with tools, boots, lacrosse gear, and homey warmth. The cat gracefully winds around the chairs and meows at me to be let out. Once free, he darts off towards the barn, a blur of black. I fill the jugs in the kitchen sink, and, careful not to spill too much, make my way back to Kristen and Bernard.

When I reenter his cage, slowly and quietly, he ruffles his feathers, and tenses. We are able to soothe him, but his mistrust reminds us both that he is, essentially, a wild animal. I fill his water bowl slowly and dump the bag of shavings on his shelf, spreading them around with a shovel. Kristen and I then close the door of his platform just the way that he likes it. We pick up our things, and slowly walk out, telling him that he's a good boy and that we'll be back soon. Once back at the main building, Kristen and I go off to bleach the things that the mice have been in, and update the director on Bernard's status.

A few days later, I am back. I tiptoe into his cage, alone this time, and open the door on his shelf. Bernard is sitting on his stump like he usually is. He sees me and begins to blink rapidly and breathe heavily. He quiets when I remind him of who I am, and I bolster his ego with praise. By the time I leave, he is sitting peacefully, blinking only occasionally and breathing almost normally. It is not much, but it is progress.