

The Little Owl

Lene Mayer-Skumanz / Salvatore Sciascia
Karen White (translation Great Britain)



A long time ago, when animals and people spoke the same language, a little owl lived in the woods behind the dream mountains. He was the youngest of six brothers and sisters and was the last to leave the nest in the old tree. His parents taught him to fly, to catch mice and to bathe in the sun. Afterwards, they said, “Be courageous, little owl! Take a look at the world!” “But aren’t I too small?” asked the little owl. The parents of the owl snapped their beaks together and sighed patiently. “The Great-Owl-Which-Made-Everything will watch over you on your journey. And you know the rules: Kill your prey so quickly that it doesn’t feel any pain. Then it also tastes better. Enjoy every ray of light, however weak it is. And as regards flying longer stretches ... well, you practise flying by flying. There’s nothing more to say than that.”

The little owl tilted his head in all directions in order to take a last look at his parents and at the tree which had been his home. He squawked and screeched and hooted goodbye. Then he spread his wings and flew away.

The wood behind the dream mountains was big and full of animals.

After the owl had flown for some time, he found a clearing on a rocky hill. He perched on the mossy top, blinked into the deeply setting sun and felt happy. Beneath him, lay a wild cat on a stone, which was still warm from the sun. Four black stripes ran from his nose to his forehead. His bushy curly tail twitched slightly as he raised his head and looked at the little owl. “An owl! You’ve come just at the right time. Please answer me. How can the Great-Wild-Cat-Which-Made-Everything allow some cats to be tamed?”

“What, what?”, hooted the little owl in surprise.

“Yesterday evening I ran further than I’ve ever run before, to the stream which roars down from the dream mountains. There I saw a building built by people from wood and stone and round about it was a good smell of fat clucking birds. But I was full and only wanted to look from a distance... A man was sitting in front of the building and he had a cat on his lap and was stroking her. She didn’t bite or scratch but purred. I shuddered.

To let oneself be touched – grrr! How is that possible?”

The little owl looked down, moved his head and cheeped, “How should I know?”

The wild cat stood up, his curly tail swelled out and his hackles rose.

His eyes flashed green and yellow.

“What do you mean?”, he hissed. “You are an owl! Owls are wise and know all the answers to all the questions in the world!” “I didn’t know that”, said the little owl shocked. “Why do you exist then?” spat the wild cat. “Be ashamed of yourself and see that you learn more!”

The little owl was so puzzled that he spread his wings and flew off. He found a tree with a hollow trunk and a wide tree-top which sparkled in the sinking sun.

The little owl sat on the bottom branch and tried to think.

A rustling of heavy wings came from the undergrowth. Something crackled and flapped loudly and suddenly a peacock landed by the little owl. The branch swayed under his weight. "Succeeded again!" snarled the peacock. "It's the same every evening before I go to sleep! Why can't I fly as well as I can run? Hey, who is squatting here? Little one, listen, this is my tree where I sleep!" "Sorry!" groaned the little owl. The peacock shook his beautiful feathers and said, "Oh! An owl, if the voice is anything to go by. That's convenient". He arranged his feathers and let them hang down.

Then he continued, "I have a question that won't leave me in peace. Why did the Great-Peacock-Which-Made-Everything make so few trees for us to sleep in?"

"Uh, uh, what?", hooted the little owl.

"You can see what a long tail I have", said the peacock. "I can make a fan with it. But when I want to sleep in safety, it gives me trouble. Only very high trees with branches that are high and horizontal are suitable for me. There are not enough in this wood!"

"You have got this one", whispered the little owl.

"I would like to have three or four to choose from", shouted the peacock. "Answer me. Why wasn't provision made?" "I don't know", answered the little owl.

The peacock bent his head, so that his blue feather tips nearly touched the breast feathers of the little owl. "You don't know? Why don't you know? Owls know all the answers to all the questions in the world!" "I didn't know that was an important question", confessed the little owl. "You little fool. Then you are not a proper owl!", cackled the peacock. "You should be ashamed of yourself. See that you fly away".

The little owl flew away totally shocked.

He found a rock with a small cave and sat in a niche in order to rest and think. "Why should I be ashamed of myself?" he said to himself. "Why should I know the answers to all the questions in the world? How can the wild cat speak about the Great-Wild-Cat-Which-Made-Everything and the peacock speak about the Great-Peacock-Which-Made-Everything, when it was the Great-Owl which made everything?"

The sun had set behind the dream mountains. In the sky towards the west, the evening star twinkled and the moon rose slowly over the tops of the trees.

Its rays also reached the cave in the rock and the owl rejoiced over the silver light.

"Time to fly away!" cheeped a voice from behind. "It's a mild night! Thanks to the Great-Bat-Which-Made-Everything!"

The little owl turned his head around and discovered a bat that was hanging upside down on the wall. With the claws of its feet and its thumbs, it had firmly dug itself into the rock. Now it spread its wings a little in order to grease them. It caught the oily substance that came out from an opening above its nostrils, with its tongue and spread it quickly over the whole skin. The little owl suddenly said, "Phew! That smells!"

"It smells strong", agreed the bat. "That's why I'm not a good prey for you, my dear. You are an owl, aren't you?" "Yes, but only a small one and maybe not a real one ...!"

"Bah, bah, bah! Owls are owls and owls know the answers to all the questions in the world", said the bat. "I have a question, my dear".

The bat let itself down from the edge of the niche and hung in front of the face of the little owl. "Look how cleverly I am made", it chirped. "Well-equipped for everything. I

can find my insects even in the darkest night. I shout at them and when the echo comes back, I flutter to them and snap them up. However, one thing disturbs me. I can only have one child a year. Butterflies and moths lay many, many eggs, a long row of baby hedgehogs toddle behind a hedgehog mother and foxes have at least three babies. Why does the Great-Bat-Which-Made-Everything only allow me to have one child?"

"I don't know", replied the little owl. The bat rocked backwards and forwards in surprise. "You don't know? Why should I believe you?" "I don't know", repeated the little owl and groaned abysmally from grief. "Who will know, if you don't know?" asked the bat sadly. "Maybe you don't try enough when you think. Right?"

Will you come back when you can remember the answer?" The little owl nodded energetically. "Good", chirped the bat.

It spread its wings and fluttered out into the night. Its shrill, high-pitched cries cut through the air. Many other bats followed it out of the depths of the cave. The little owl watched how they flew zigzag in the moonlight.

In spite of his worries, the little owl noticed how hungry he had become. He spent the night hunting and caught his mice as quickly as lightning. When he was so full that he couldn't eat another mouthful, he said to a mouse, that he heard pattering over the ground, "Mouse, answer me. Which great thing made you and me?"

After a while a squeak came from a hole in the ground. "The Great-Mouse, who else? You surely know that, you old know-all! Why do you ask so slyly? Do you want to entice me out of my hole? Your type are always guilty when one of us is missing.

If I only knew why you owls weren't made as grass-eaters!" "Or corn eaters", hooted the little owl. "No, the corn belongs to us", squeaked the mouse much quieter. Then it was completely quiet.

The little owl flew on and looked for a high tree-top, where he could rest. "Hu-hu-hu, I don't know everything", he cried. "I only know that I don't know anything." A long way under him a grey shadow with a fat curly tail slid by. "Well I never", growled a voice.

"A little bit of knowledge is already there, thin as a hair on a beard".

The little owl tilted his head in all directions. "I will learn", he squawked and fell asleep.

When the early morning sun sparkled through the leaves, the little owl was already awake and was enjoying the reddish glow.

"What will I find and experience today?" he asked himself.

He spread his wings and flew silently and quickly over the awakening wood in the direction of the dream mountains. He saw a stream underneath him which bubbled and sparkled. He flew lower and noticed the house built by people which the wild cat had spoken about. It was quiet all around, except for a few hens who were looking for worms. Further down by the stream a human voice was singing. The little owl flew in the direction of the sound and found a woman who was fetching water.

The owl perched on a berry bush and squawked. "You have a pretty voice, much prettier than mine". The woman looked up and laughed. Then she spoke to the little owl, "Imagine if everything in nature had the same characteristics. Wouldn't the world be boring? For example, you can see and hear better than I can, apart from being able to fly". "And why are you singing?" asked the little owl. "Do you want to defend your feeding-ground like a blackbird?" "I sing in order to help me work", said the woman, "And sometimes I sing in honour of the Great-Mother-Who-Made-Everything".

"Where does she live?" asked the little owl. "Everywhere", said the woman.

"Human eyes cannot see her. Sun, moon and stars are the jewels on her clothes ..."

“And if I told you”, whispered the little owl, “that the fish in this stream know of a Great-Fish-Which-Made-Everything?” “The Great-Mother wouldn’t be angry”, said the woman. “She loves all her creatures”. The little owl moved his head this way and that and thought. “Does she enjoy it when you sing in her honour?” “I hope so”, said the woman. “I also ask her for many things: That the roof of my hut will last many years, that my hens will have many chicks and that we, my child and I, will stay healthy...”

“Do you worry about things that will happen tomorrow?”

“Everyone does”, said the woman. “Do you know if it will rain today? I want to get my washing dry”. “The air doesn’t smell of rain”, said the little owl.

He hooted before leaving and then flew upstream.

The sun shone the whole day and the little owl bathed himself several times in the sun. He could think clearly at the same time. In the evening he flew to the slopes of the dream mountains. As night was falling, he saw something shining between the trees like a golden star. He flew towards the gleam and discovered a small wooden hut. The ray of light came from an opening in the wall and enticed the moths. The little owl also felt bewitched by the light. He ventured nearer and nearer until he sat on a small step in front of the opening. He enjoyed the warm glow so much that he began to sing an owl love song. He hooted and squawked and screeched. “An owl on my window sill”, said a deep voice. “Welcome!” The little owl blinked in order to see the man on the other side of the light. It was an old man.

The little owl asked the old man, “What are you doing?”

“I am reading”, he said and gently shooed the moth away from a white piece of paper.

“The day was too short so I am continuing to read by the light of my lamp. It is a book about the Great-Father-Who-Made-Everything.” “Where does he live?”, asked the little owl. “Everywhere”, answered the old man. “In the heavenly realm which my eyes can’t see yet and in the hearts of people.” “Do you ask him about tomorrow?” asked the little owl. “Yes, of course”, said the old man. “But even more I ask him about the past. There were so many things in my life that can’t escape his examining eyes. That concerns me a lot.” “If only I told you”, whispered the little owl, “that the moth knows of a Great-

Moth-Which-Made-Everything ...” The old man smiled pityingly. “How can they imagine the Great-Father as anything else?” “Maybe as the Great-Mother, just like the woman by the stream?” The old man frowned.

“I’ve already told her a lot about the Great-Father but certainly without success, as your remark tells me. I hope that one day she will know what is right.”

“Is the Great-Father hurt when this woman calls him the Great-Mother?” asked the little owl. The old man thought for a long time. “That is an interesting question ... I don’t think so. The Great-Father is kind. I’m afraid it hurts me, his true servant, a little bit ...” “Don’t let it get you down”, said the little owl.

He hooted a goodbye and flew away.

Next morning the little owl flew back to the stream. This time he didn’t find the woman but instead he found a child. The child sat on the bank with a cat in his lap letting his feet dangle into the water. He looked at the fish. The sun shone on the child, cat, water, stones and grass. Quietly the little owl landed on a tree stump. His sharp eyes could see everything from a good way off. He saw how the child stroked the cat. How the cat enjoyed being stroked, so that it forgot about the fish. How the ripples sparkled.

Everything gave him a lot of pleasure.

I wonder whether the child also has his own name for that wonderful being that made everything and lets the sun shine on everything? Maybe the child doesn't know a name but he is sitting in his presence. The little owl could feel that quite clearly. Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow were not there and were not important. Yesterday and the day before yesterday were a long way away, somewhere in the past and weren't important. The little owl tilted his head in all directions and remembered all the names that had been given to the wonderful being. "The Great-Owl-Which-Made-Everything, the Great-Wild-Cat, the Great-Peacock, the Great-Bat, the Great-Mouse, the Great-Mother, the Great-Father. He could also be called the Great-Secret-That-Is-Always-Present", hooted the little owl. The cat opened an eye and winked at the owl.

"Why not", she miaowed lazily.

After sunset, the little owl flew back to the woods. She looked for the mouse hole, found it and shouted into it, "Tu-whit-tu-who. All living things live from living things. Even your corn is alive!"

As she flew on, she met the bat. "You can fly so well", said the little owl. "If you had to carry more than one child, you would be too heavy to fly."

"You may well be right", agreed the bat.

The little owl flew over the tree where the peacock was sleeping. "Poor, vain creature", he thought. "He belongs to the cackling group of birds, just like the hens and he wants to have more than one tree to sleep in."

He flew on and saw the wild cat lying in wait on a wide branch. His eyes glowed as he saw the little owl. "Have you become wiser?" he hissed. "Not very much because I am small and I am still learning", hooted the little owl cheerfully. "By the way, I have also seen a cat that let herself be stroked. Not even the fish in the stream could make her leave the child's lap." "Outrageous", snorted the wild cat. "If all creatures were the same and felt the same, wouldn't that be boring?" asked the little owl. "Isn't it good that the Great-Secret, that you call the Great-Wild-Cat, allows many alternatives?"

At last he visited his parents in his home tree. The parents of the little owl hooted a welcome, "Did the Great-Owl-Which-Made-Everything let you experience a lot?" "Yes, he did", answered the little owl peacefully. "And from now on I will tell you and all the world about it." "Tell everyone, my child", hooted the mother owl. And father owl said, "However, with people it will be difficult. They will hardly believe you." The little owl tilted his head.

"I will fly so long until I find someone who believes me", he screeched.