

APEX PREDATOR

By Rachael Carnes

CHARACTERS

MARGARET	A field biologist, fresh out of grad school, in her 30's, she wears new, relatively expensive outdoorsy clothing and shoes.
DAN	A local, in his 40's, he's heavysset, with a greasy t-shirt and jeans, work boots
BOB	DAN's friend, in his 20's, wears a flannel shirt, workpants, steel-toed boots, and a beanie cap with an eagle on it.

SETTING

At a small campground — with just 15 sites, one central water pump, no electricity and vault toilets — along the Oregon coast, a short distance from the California state line. The campground is located along the shores of the Winchuck River, famous for its cutthroat trout. The nearest services are available in Brookings, 13 miles north.

TIME
Dusk

At rise: The lights come up to a glow — not fully — on three campsites. On one side of the stage, a small wooden sign reads, “Park Hosts”, and behind that an Astroturf rug is set with two folding chairs. On the opposite side of the stage, MARGARET is reading in a low camp chair, in front of the fire. She wears a headlamp, which is not turned on, and has a small, modern one-person tent set up behind her. In the middle, DAN and BOB sit, respectively, on a large plastic cooler and a case of beer, warming their hands. (They don’t have a tent pitched.)

DAN

We should get out here more often, man.

BOB

You want another one?

DAN

(Drinks.) Why didn’t we put these in the river? It’s all warm now.

BOB

We *should’ve* put ice in the cooler, dumbass! *(He laughs.)* Still tastes damn good.

DAN

Fire’s almost out.

BOB

I’m on it.

BOB gets up to retrieve more wood, walking in front of MARGARET’s space as he does.

BOB (con’t)

Ma’am.

MARGARET acknowledges BOB with a quick nod and returns to her book.

DAN (To MARGARET)

Evening.

MARGARET nods, returns to reading.

DAN (con’t)

Sorry, don’t mean to intrude. I’m just curious. What’re you reading?

MARGARET turns on her headlamp.

MARGARET

Oh, it's about conservation — biology.

DAN walks over to MARGARET 's space.

DAN

Uh huh. You do that?

MARGARET

Yes, I'm here studying the — *(She looks around)*

DAN

Trees?

MARGARET

Yes, yes, the forest. I study the forest.

DAN

My buddy and me studied a bunch of fish today, didn't catch a one.

BOB returns, carrying with him a bundle of fresh green boughs.

BOB

Alright, pour me another beer!

MARGARET

I don't think you're supposed to —

BOB

Huh?

MARGARET

I mean, this is federal land. I think the host sells firewood?

BOB

Yeah, I can spend ten bucks or I can cut it myself.

DAN

We're local.

BOB and DAN nod at each other.

So sorry. DAN

Really, just — BOB

We got off on the wrong foot. I'm DAN. DAN

And I'm BOB. BOB

Nice to meet you. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get up early — MARGARET

She heads to her tent, pulls her toothbrush kit out of a tent pocket.

Why d'ya need to get up early? DAN

Yeah, come join us! BOB

(Brushing her teeth) Sorry, I can't, I have work in the morning. MARGARET

What kind of work? DAN

Yeah, what'dya do? BOB

MARGARET spits in a cup.

I count owls. MARGARET

And why the fuck would you want to do that? *(They both laugh.)* DAN

(Miming looking up into the trees.) One, two, three! *(They laugh again.)* BOB

MARGARET

Well, um, goodnight.

BOB

No, no, really. We wanna know how you do it.

DAN

Yeah, please tell us. How do you count the damn owls?

MARGARET

Well, I get up early —

DAN

Uh-huh.

MARGARET

That's when they're most active.

BOB

Active, sure.

MARGARET

And I walk through the forest, and I call for them.

DAN

You're all like, "Hello-o, Mister Owl! Where are you?"

BOB

And then the owl goes, "Yoohoo! I'm here!"

MARGARET

Well, no, not exactly. I hoot for them.

DAN

You hoot for them?

BOB

You're a hooter?! Like those girls with the t-shirts and the, what is that? —

DAN

The onion rings!

BOB

The onion rings and the boobs! *(They laugh again.)* Well, it must be hard for you to

earn tips out here in the forest!

MARGARET

I speak their language, I —

DAN

“Mister Bear, can I bring you another round?” *(He laughs.)*

BOB

And then the wolf is like, “Are there any drink specials tonight? I think I’ll have the chicken wings!”

MARGARET

I don’t —

DAN

We don’t bite. We’re just being assholes. Here, have a seat.

MARGARET

Thank you, I appreciate the invitation. But —

BOB

So you hoot at these owls, and then what?

MARGARET

They call back. That’s how I count them.

DAN

Oh, this we gotta hear. Do it!

BOB

Yeah, do it! Pretend me and Dan are a mama owl and a wittle baby owl —

DAN

And we’re up in our tree all like, “I’m a mama owl and I’m gonna shit on your head!”

MARGARET

Um, they don’t really do that —

DAN

Just play along, okay?

BOB

I mean, my good friend and I were up to our balls in that river *all day*.

DAN

Have your testicles descended again, amigo?

BOB

Why no my good man, they have not.

DAN

(Sharply, to MARGARET.) So hoot like a fucking owl. Now.

MARGARET looks at her tent, and back at BOB and DAN. She's calculating the time it would take her to break camp, or whether she should just get in her car and drive.

MARGARET

Is the park host here?

BOB

They drove off hours ago. Beer?

DAN

I might like to be a park host one day — it would really highlight my people skills.

MARGARET

But aren't they supposed to be here all the time?

BOB

Well, this isn't the Sheraton!

DAN

(Pretends to call on the phone.) "Hello room service? Please send a bottle of your finest champagne!"

BOB

And a working toilet! *(They both laugh again.)*

DAN

(Stepping closer to Margaret.) We're still waiting to hear this hoot.

MARGARET takes a breath in and out.

MARGARET

I am not going to fucking hoot for you.

DAN

Oh ho!

BOB

Check out the mouth on the Science Lady! Okay, okay — Dan, come on. That's enough.

DAN

But we're friends now! Let's have a drink. I think we even have one fag beer left. (*He rummages through the cooler.*)

DAN (con't)

Apricot Ale? Well, fuck me. (*He tries to hand the beer to Margaret.*) Here ya go —

BOB

What? I happen to enjoy the sweet and lightly tart citrus notes in lighter beer styles.

MARGARET looks at her phone.

MARGARET

Oh, will you look at that. I just got a text. My boyfriend is —

DAN

There's no reception out here.

BOB

(*Miming getting a signal.*) She's all walking around hooting like —

MARGARET

(*Points phone towards them, displaying the screen.*) My boyfriend is asking me to call him, we're making plans for the weekend.

DAN

Why do you gotta break our hearts, darlin'?

BOB

I'm sorry my friend's such a —

DAN

Oh, she knows we're just kidding around.

BOB

We're seriously just messin' with ya.

DAN

Here, 'cuz we've been acting like bonafide jerks, you can have one of these.

DAN digs in his front pocket, pulls out a Ziploc bag containing two bloody eagle talons.

DAN (con't)

I was gonna keep one and my colleague was gonna keep one, but —

BOB

Generosity! You continually surprise me, friend.

DAN

Sorry, it's still a little bloody. *(He hands one curled, stiff talon to MARGARET .)*

DAN (con't)

I rinsed it off in the river.

MARGARET

What is this?

She shines her headlamp light closely on the talon for a beat, and then looks up.

MARGARET (con't)

(Incredulous) It's from an eagle.

DAN

Our nation's symbol!

BOB

Pretty right? You should have it, with our most sincere apologies.

MARGARET

But they use their feet for —

DAN

This guy's not using his feet for anything now!

MARGARET

They grip, they carry, their talons are like our hands, and —

BOB

(Suddenly quite serious.) He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

MARGARET

Where did you get these?

DAN

We didn't catch shit today, but at least we got that fucking bird.

BOB

Fucking bird.

MARGARET

Where's the rest of it? Where's the body?

DAN

We threw it in the river.

BOB

Fed it to the fish, circle of life shit!

DAN

Just wanted the feet – you know, souvenir.

BOB

You and your sentimentality. God, I love you, buddy!

MARGARET

But killing them is —

BOB

You see anyone around here? We're 13 miles from town, sweetheart.

DAN

That's what I enjoy about it — Feels so good to get away from it all.

BOB

The daily grind, I know just what you mean, friend.

DAN

They're fuckin' finally getting rid of all these damn predators.

BOB

That's right! Bears, wolves — These stupid fucking birds, they're the competition!

MARGARET

It doesn't work that way —

BOB

For a college lady, you sure are stupid.

DAN

(Approaching MARGARET) Maybe we can help you understand better.

MARGARET

Leave me the fuck alone.

DAN

(He comes in closer.) Again, I reiterate. We're the only humans for miles.

BOB

Okay, that's enough. Leave her —

DAN

Try hooting. Maybe the owls will come to your rescue.

BOB

(BOB weighs the moment, then hisses.) Like a goddamn Disney movie.

MARGARET pats down her pockets and finds her car keys. She slides the biggest one between her knuckles, and attempts to walk past BOB and DAN's camp.

DAN

(To MARGARET) Where do you think you're going?

DAN takes MARGARET's shoulder in hand and looks at BOB. There's a short pause, as BOB decides what to do next. BOB takes MARGARET by the wrist, holding up the hand with the car key protruding.

DAN

Hey, look. She's got claws, too.

MARGARET freezes.

The sound of a diesel passenger truck on a gravel road intrudes, with headlights beaming from offstage onto the scene. A truck door opens, then another. A loud beeping signal from the car's interior is heard, then the headlights turn off. The sound of one passenger getting out of the

*car, then another. The sound of one door closing, then another.
Blackout.*