Owl Moon by Jane Yolen

It was late one winter night, long past my bedtime, when Pa and I went owling. There was no wind. The trees stood still as giant statues. And the moon was so bright the sky seemed to shine. Somewhere behind us a train whistle blew, long and low, like a sad, sad song.

I could hear it through the woolen cap Pa had pulled down over my ears. A farm dog answered the train, and then a second dog joined in. They sang out, trains and dogs, for a real long time. And when their voices faded away it was as quiet as a dream. We walked on toward the woods, Pa and I.

Our feet crunched over the crisp snow and little gray footprints followed us.

Pa made a long shadow, but mine was short and round. I had to run after him every now and then to keep up, and my short, round shadow bumped after me.

But I never called out. If you go owling you have to be quiet, that's what Pa always says.

I had been waiting to go owling with Pa for a long, long time.

We reached the line of pine trees, black and pointy against the sky, and Pa held up his hand. I stopped right where I was and waited. He looked up, as if searching the stars, as if reading a map up there. The moon made his face into a silver mask. Then he called: "Whoo-whoo-who-who-whowhoooooooo," the sound of a Great Horned Owl. "Whoo-whoo-who-who-whowhoooooooo."

Again he called out. And then again. After each call he was silent and for a moment we both listened. But there was no answer. Pa shrugged and I shrugged. I was not disappointed. My brothers all said sometimes there's an owl and sometimes there isn't.

We walked on. I could feel the cold, as if someone's icy hand was palm-down on my back, and my nose and the tops of my cheeks felt cold and hot at the same time. But I never said a word. If you go owling you have to be quiet and make your own heat.

We went into the woods. The shadows were the blackest things I had ever seen. They stained the white snow. My mouth felt furry, for the scarf over it was wet and warm. I didn't ask what kinds of things hide behind black trees in the middle of the night. When you go owling you have to be brave.

Then we came to a clearing in the dark woods. The moon was high above us. It seemed to fit exactly over the center of the clearing and the snow below it was whiter than the milk in a cereal bowl.

I sighed and Pa held up his hand at the sound. I put my mittens over the scarf over my mouth and listened hard. And then Pa called: "Whoo-whoowho-who-who-whoooooooo."

"Whoo-whoo-who-who-who-whoooooooo." I listened and looked so hard my ears hurt and my eyes got cloudy with the cold. Pa raised his face to call out again, but before he could open his mouth an echo came threading its way through the trees. "Whoo-whoo-who-whowho-whoooooooo."

Pa almost smiled. Then he called back: "Whoo-whoo-who-who-whowhoooooooo," just as if he and the owl were talking about supper or about the woods or the moon or the cold. I took my mitten off the scarf off my mouth, and I almost smiled, too.

The owl's call came closer, from high up in the trees on the edge of the meadow. Nothing in the meadow moved. All of a sudden an owl shadow, part of the big tree shadow, lifted off and flew right over us. We watched silently with heat in our mouths, the heat of all those words we had not spoken. The shadow hooted again.

Pa turned on his big flashlight and caught the owl just as it was landing on a branch.

For one minute, three minutes, maybe even a hundred minutes, we stared at one another.

Then the owl pumped its great wings and lifted off the branch like a shadow without sound. It flew back into the forest. "Time to go home," Pa said to me. I knew then I could talk, I could even laugh out loud. But I was a shadow as we walked home.

When you go owling you don't need words or warm or anything but hope.

That's what Pa says. The kind of hope that flies on silent wings under a shining Owl Moon.