

## CATHOLIC SERMON

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### “Eulogy of an Owl”

His name was Walter Elias, a city boy by birth, the son of a building contractor.

Before Walter was five, his parents moved from Chicago to a farm near Marceline, Missouri. And it was there on the farm that Walter would have his first encounter with death.

Walter was only seven that particular lazy summer afternoon, an afternoon not much different from others. Dad was tending to farm chores; mother was in the house.

It was the perfect day for a young fellow to go exploring.

Now just beyond a grove of graceful willows lay an apple orchard. There Walter could make believe to this heart's content that he was lost, which he never was, or that he had captured a wild animal, which he never had. But today was different. Directly in front of him, about thirty feet away, perched in the low-drooping branch of an apple tree apparently sound asleep – was an owl.

The boy froze. He remembered his father telling him that owls rested during the day so they could hunt by night. What a wonderful pet that funny little bird would make. If only Walter could approach it without awakening it and snatch it from the tree.

With each step, the lad winced to hear dry leaves and twigs crackle beneath his feet. The owl did not stir. Closer...closer...and at last young Walter was standing under the limb just within range of his quarry. Slowly he reached up with one hand and grabbed the bird by its legs. He had captured it! But the owl, waking suddenly, came alive like no other animal Walter had ever seen. In a flurry of beating wings, wild eyes and frightened cries, it struggled against the boy's grasp. Walter, stunned, held on.

Now it's difficult to imagine how what happened next, happened. Perhaps the response was sparked by gouging talons or by fear itself. But at some point the terrified by, still clinging to the terrified bird, flung it to the ground and stomped it to death.

When it was over, a disbelieving Walter gazed down at the broken heap of bronze feathers and blood. And he cried. Walter ran from the orchard but later returned to bury the owl, the little pet he would never know. Each shovelful of earth from the shallow grave was moistened with tears of deep regret. And for months thereafter, the owl visited Walter's dreams.

Ashamed, he would tell no one of the incident until many years later. By then, the world forgave him. For that sad and lonely summer's day in the early spring of Walter Elias' life brought with it an awakening of the meaning of life. Walter never, ever again, killed a living creature. Although all the boyhood promises could not bring that one little owl back to life, through its death a whole world of animals came into being.

For it was then that a grieving seven-year-old boy, attempting to atone for the thoughtless misdeed, first sought to possess the animals of the forest while allowing them to run free – by drawing them.

Now the boy, too, is gone, but his drawings live on in the incomparable, undying art of Walter Elias...Disney. Walt Disney. And now you know the rest of the story.