



Across the Fence

By Howard Sherpe

Hunter's Moon Encounters

October 17, 2005 – 6:00 p.m.

I arrived in the UW-Madison Arboretum and parked in the lot near the Visitor Center. It was cool, but comfortable as I headed out on a trail through the tall grass of Curtis Prairie. Overhead a flock of geese snaked their way across the sky. One goose had fallen behind and appeared to be frantically trying to catch up to the flock. I stopped to watch and listened to their constant honking until they disappeared over the treetops to the south. I hoped the straggler eventually caught up. It was another of life's unfinished stories. I'll never know what happened, but in my mind it had a happy ending. The formation slowed down, he caught up, and they all lived happily ever after!

With the flock of geese reunited, at least in my mind, I continued on. The sun had set and the darkness of early evening began to descend around me. I took a trail that I knew led to a small pond. A wooden bench, secluded along the edge of the path, beckoned me to come and sit a while. I accepted the invitation. I sat quietly and studied the water... it was smooth as glass, not a ripple. As light began to fade, I watched as individual trees mirrored in the pond, merged into a solid, dark mass. It reminded me that all of life is connected. It was like looking at the earth from outer space... there are no borders to separate people and countries. In the middle of the busy city, I sat peacefully alone, pondering the mysteries of life.

I had encountered only one other person on my evening walk. We acknowledged each other in passing with a smile and friendly greeting, but I still glanced back after passing to make sure he hadn't turned around and followed me. Truth be told, it's probably not the smartest thing to be

walking alone as darkness moves in, especially in the secluded areas where I walk. I know Linda would prefer I not walk in the evening, especially after it gets dark. We live within a mile of Allied Drive, one of the toughest areas in Madison, where early in the morning of the day I took this walk, shots were fired between two opposing factions. Shootings are a weekly occurrence (67 incidents already this year), and they aren't shooting at animals! The Arboretum where I walk is just across the beltline from that area.

That said, the Arboretum is still one of the most peaceful places to walk and explore, especially as the evening darkness begins to surround you, and brings a special magic to the place.

I finally left the peacefulness of the secluded pond behind and continued on my walk. I followed the trail into a heavily wooded area called Gallistel Woods. Even though the moon was rising, the trees still covered with leaves allowed very little light to penetrate, and the darkness enveloped me. I could hear animals scampering through the brush along the trail when I approached. As I neared the main road running through the Arboretum, I was startled by a deer as it ran across the path twenty feet in front of me.

When I reached the road, I followed it up the hill toward the parking lot. I could hear two owls calling to each other in the dark woods to my right. It was a haunting sound.

As I approached the top of the hill, I saw the full moon coming up over the treetops. The October full moon is known as the Hunter's Moon. It was very bright and appeared so large, I expected to see the flag flying on Tranquility Base!

In the sky opposite the moon, was a very bright star. I knew it wasn't a

star, but a planet. Even so, I couldn't help repeat the old saying, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight!"

As I stood and marveled at the Hunter's Moon, I saw the lights of an airplane on its approach to the Madison airport. It was on a collision course with the rising moon. I watched as the distance between them narrowed. "Pull up, pull up," I shouted in my mind, but it was too late, the plane appeared to collide with the moon and disappear. A moment later it emerged safely on the other side as it continued its approach to the airport. The people on the plane had no idea they had just visited the moon.

I continued my walk along the side of the road. It was peaceful and the moonlight bathed everything with shadows, but not scary shadows. I was suddenly aware of a large, winged form gliding silently over me. I looked up as it settled into the branches of a tree just ahead. I walked slowly toward the tree before stopping. I could tell from its dark silhouette against the moonlit sky that it must be a large Barred Owl. I called to it several times before it finally answered back. It sounded like, "Whoop, whoop, who cooks for you?" It was a Barred Owl! We talked to each other for a while. I haven't the slightest idea what we were talking about, and imagine the owl was a little confused too! He finally lifted his great wings and glided off into the darkness in search of better conversation. I continued on my walk feeling richer for having just communicated with an owl.

The Hunter's Moon was rising higher in the sky as I reached the parking lot. I stood for a moment to savor the peacefulness of the evening. I hated to leave.