The Owl at First Light
By Charlie Hoffs
The New York Public Library system boasts a large night staff. Naturally, that includes the crew of the renowned Schwartzman Building on Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. The nocturnal army is composed of 246 staffers, who manage the library from 8 PM to 2 AM.

Several librarians have devoted their lives to the night shift. In her 32 years on Fifth and 42nd, Marge Lansetter has watched the library change. When she started work in the mid 80’s, she shelved aerobic dance videos, and watched a growing homeless population congregate in the reading room. A computerized search index was installed in the 90’s. In favor of eBooks, the new millennium’s generation gradually stopped coming to the library.

The ancient establishment has changed over time more than she has, though she has aged. Her skin sags in the customary way, her back hunches, she moves with fragile bones and retains a ghostly pale complexion. She’s been frail since childhood (and pale as ivory of course), as she hasn’t felt an ounce of sunlight in seventy-six years.

Erythropoeitic Protophyria can inflict any range of symptoms, from bothersome itching to swelling and blistering. Marge had first visited the hospital for an innocent blister at age seven, and was dismissed with some ointment. She came home from school several days later with boils on her nose and cheeks. By the time she and her parents arrived at the ER, her fingers had swelled to the size of sausages.

The doctors were baffled by her condition and ran several frenzied tests. In the hospital room, her parents eyed the girl’s bloated limbs. They joked nervously with an inflated latex doctor’s glove. The doctors returned with a grave diagnosis, explaining Marge’s rare condition. Any exposure to sunlight would result in third degree burns, liver failure, and eventually, death.
She started homeschooling and adjusted to a nocturnal sleep schedule. The blinds were perpetually drawn. She could still visit the playground at night, but her friends were seldom allowed to play after sunset. Naturally, she took a liking to books.

Marge isn’t bitter with the world. She knows she got short shrift, but has accepted her condition with abiding forbearance. Just as an aquarium fish stops nudging the glass, Marge has tolerated her affliction.

She taught night school for a time, and later settled as a librarian. The library was Marge’s beacon in a shadowy world.

She clocks in, dons a “STAFF” lanyard with her name, and sits at a checkout out desk in the General Research Division. So begins a seemingly average night, though she knows the following hours are to be wildly different. The regulars arrive: overworked students and scholars, outcasts, the homeless. The night progresses at the speed of earth’s rotation.

The hourly bell announces closing time. Marge puts up a “Checkout Closed” sign and gingerly pushes in her chair. The staffers trickle out the revolving doors, while Marge, rooted stolidly to the ground, watches the last of them leave. A lever is pulled and the lights black out. The computer monitors remain on, illuminating the hall with an iridescent glow.

She walks resolutely to the back of the great atrium, an unfamiliar section of the library. Marge takes several minutes in locating the fire escape. Slowly, steadily, she climbs. The ladder leads to a platform, then a stairwell. The stairs give way to a door, which opens to the night. She stands on the rooftop, resolved in her decision and comforted by the city lights. New York is the only friend who has always stayed awake with her.
Finding a spot near the ledge, Marge crouches down to lie on her back. She blinks her eyes in the dark, and the starless night stares back at her.

Several hours pass, during which she listens to the snippets of sirens, music, and drunken conversation from the streets below. She’s only known the city after sunset, when thieves emerge from alleyways and happy couples from restaurants. Shifty women collude under streetlights, and stockbrokers drone on in buildings that never go dark. She can make out the Met in the distance, which closes at night and is hence unattainable. Farther still lies Central Park, which to her is nothing more than a silent, dark blotch on a buzzing canvas.

Gradually, the horizon reveals a bleary red. Yellow and orange bleed through the buildings, and the long shadows of skyscrapers extend across the city. Marge stares heavenward with wide eyes; it’s been a lifetime since she’s seen color in the sky. As the angle of the sun increases, rays of sunlight creep higher and higher up the building. Marge looks down past her shoes as the light peaks over the edge, nearing her motionless body.

The dewy sunlight meets her feet. The warmth feels so alien but her skin drinks it in like parched soil. She waits breathlessly, and is soon engulfed in light.

The great celestial conductor gears up for the grand finale, and the sun peaks over the skyline. Blinding rays splay out over the rooftop, bathing her in golden warmth. Her mouth hangs open and her eyes roll back; she feels her body float from the ground and drift towards the heavens. Rising—ascending—every ounce of sunlight that she’s ever missed floods her cells and glows within them. The moment is endless. She radiates for an eternity.

She takes a deep inhale, and lets out a full-throated laugh. The laughter rises through the air, light and airy, its own spirit. She gleefully embraces her glorious demise.
Marge is overcome with raucous laughter, writhing her body with each bellow. Her eyes bulge from their sockets, and she hacks and howls until she’s suddenly out of breath. She gasps for air and coughs in a violent fit. Marge is suddenly sore from lying on the rooftop plaster, and props herself up to massage her neck and back.

She squints up at the sun from an awkward slump. The doctors hadn’t offered any specifics on how long the reaction would take to set in. She examines her hands, touches her face and neck, and squints up again.

Marge stands to dust herself off, and takes her time walking the perimeter of the rooftop.

Two hours pass.

By 8 AM the library opens, and Marge still stands confused, and waiting. She takes out her cellphone after an indecisive minute.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“I have... a fatal allergy”

“Are you in pain, ma’am?”

“Ah, no... not yet, but I’d like to be taken to the hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am right away. What’s the address?”

“The Schwartzman Building, north entrance.”

“Hold strong, we’ll be there in about seven minutes.”

“Oh that’s quite alright... You don’t need to rush.”
She clicks off the phone and makes her way to the door. She descends the stairwell then the ladder, and emerges in the library.

Dappled light streams in through the vaulted windows, and Marge stalls for a moment. The atrium breathes with life. She knows this building better than anyone, yet appears to see it now for the first time. Moving on to the great hall and through the main corridors, she exits out onto the front steps. The famed London plane trees show bright green leaves in the height of summer.

The ambulance arrives, and three neon-clad men help her inside. She answers their questions as the vehicle starts:

“Well, I’m severely allergic to sunlight.”

“About three hours. No, I haven’t felt anything yet.”

“I decided I was ready to die, I suppose. But I thought it would happen much faster, I certainly didn’t think I’d have to trouble the hospital.”

As she arrives, a doctor is soon with her. He eyes her searchingly as she explains the circumstances.

He questions, after a pause, “When were you diagnosed?”

“1939, sir.”

“Where, do you remember?”

“Morristown Medical Center, in New Jersey.”

The doctor jots some notes, contemplates, and slowly stands. “And you’ve never been out in the sunlight, since that day you were diagnosed.”
“That’s correct,” Marge affirms.

The doctor takes a blood test, and moves swiftly out to process the results in the lab. He returns in a half hour with several papers.

He takes a chair and chooses his words.

“Mrs. Lansetter,” he begins at length, “You are not allergic to sunlight.”

Marge looks through him without comprehension.

“Your blood work shows a very severe allergy, to tree nuts. I can only presume—,” he speaks with great difficulty as Marge’s mind slowly wheels, “you were misdiagnosed.”

The air in the room is still, the world seems muted. Marge’s eyes glass over as she stares out the small window.

The hospital overlooks Central Park, and the large lake near its west entrance. Small canoes sit dormant in the shade and little ripples reflect the sunlight. She’d passed that gate before, always closed after dusk. The wrought iron bars now stand open, shaded on either side by those glowing London plane trees.