

## Cathedral Of Light

Short Story: Young Adult

7 Pages

I carried the dishes from the table to the sink. I was helping my grandmother clear the table after supper, but I was watching for Mickey to drive up any minute. It was Friday evening and the school week was over. I was looking forward to the weekend. I was just putting the last dish in the soapy water when I heard Mickey's wheels skid to a stop on the gravel drive. I didn't even have to say anything to my gran'. Our eyes met and she smiled and nodded towards the door. I lit out, letting the screen slam behind me. I knew that gran' was probably yelling at me for letting it slam, but I was already too far away to hear her by the time it banged shut.

I pulled the handle on the door to Mickey's dodge truck and stepped up into the cab and pulled the door shut. Mickey punched me in the arm as I settled in. "Oww, shit Mickey, that hurt."

"Oh damn, you don't say."

I tried to punch him back, but he blocked my attempt and said, "Ok, Ok I'm sorry man, just foolin' around."

I settled back in my seat and we backed out of the drive. As we headed up Summer Street towards main, I could see that the sun was casting the blue sky in an orange-pink hue. "Damn, it's getting dark earlier and earlier."

Mickey mumbled something I couldn't understand and pulled suddenly to the side of the road. "Look," he pointed to the sky off to the right and hundreds of pigeons were gliding in a straight line with the horizon, their white undersides highlighted by the setting sun. "They are going to roost." We watched for what seemed a good five minutes, but it was probably no more than a minute, as the last pigeon disappeared over a row of trees along a ditch bank. Mickey said, "Lets go, I know where they're going."

"What ya' mean, you know where they are going?"

"Just that. I know where they roost. I saw 'em fly into the loft of that old barn out on highway 55 where the gravel road leading to the levee intersects the highway."

"Yeah, I seen that barn plenty. So what are we gonna do?"

Mickey pulled his truck onto the blacktop of highway 55 and reached behind him to a rifle hanging on a rack in his back window. He patted the rifle and said, "We're gonna shoot some sittin' pigeons," and he laughed.

I laughed a nervous laugh, not because I had never shot a gun, but because I had never shot anything living. Actually, I was a pretty good shot. My grandpa had taught me how to set the stock of the rifle firmly into the crook of my shoulder and how to breathe and how to squeeze the trigger, not jerk.

When we reached the spot where the gravel road intersected the highway, Mickey turned right, his wheels sliding a little on the gravel before he corrected the truck.

"Yeehaw! We're gonna shoot us some pigeons."

It was already dark by now and we could barely make out the barn nestled between a field of cotton and a grove of pecan trees. Mickey stopped before he reached the barn and shut off the engine. He quietly opened his door and reached under his seat

and pulled out a light attached to a headband, with wires that led to a battery that you could hold in your hand. I recognized it as a frog light that we used when we went out on the river at night to gig frogs. He reached over to me, handing me the light. Then he lifted the rifle down from the rack and grabbed a box of 22 shells from the dash. He began to load the rifle. It was a Winchester automatic. After filling the clip, he dumped the rest of the bullets into his jacket pocket.

We strode up the dirt path leading to the barn and just before we reached the door, Mickey grabbed my arm and stopped. "Ok, Jay here's what we do. When I pull open the door, you flip on the light and shine it towards the rafters. Pigeons is like frogs when you first shine a light in their eyes. They just freeze up. Once I start to shootin' then they will begin to flyin' and it will be all feathers and flappin'."

Mickey threw open the door and I stepped into the cool, damp barn. The pungent smell of hay and manure met my nostrils, but something else was in the air, something fouler. It was the smell of pigeon shit. I flipped on the light and directed it towards the ceiling. Sure enough, hundreds of pigeons lined the rafters reminding me of the way turtles will spread out in a row across a log. It seemed very peaceful and you could hear a gentle cooing every now and then as if they were talking in their sleep.

I heard the first pop and saw feathers rock back and forth as they drifted towards the ground. The pigeon snapped backwards and fell with a thump at my feet. "Shine the light back up," Mickey snapped at me. I tilted my head towards the rafters again and strangely there was only a slight stirring as the pigeons already seemed to be settling back in. Pop, Pop! Two more pigeons fell and now there was more rustling of wings as they were startled from their sleep. Mickey continued to shoot and now birds were flying

everywhere, in every direction. Some just flew to another rafter, while others began to find the open loft door.

I kept my light pointed to the roof, but I could hear pigeons falling in soft thumps all around me. Not all shots hit their target and I could hear a “ping!” as those wayward bullets penetrated the tin roof of the barn. The flapping of all those wings created an exhilarating sound somewhere between rushing water and wind through pine needles. I suddenly exhaled loudly realizing that I had been holding my breath. It was a surreal moment.

“Here!” I turned to Mickey. “Give me the gun.” He handed the rifle over and at the same time I gave him the light, which he held in his hand, directing the beam upwards. He shined the light into the corners and near the walls of the barn where the rafters joined. He figured any remaining pigeons would be scrunched into the corners or any cubby-hole they could find.

“There!” He exclaimed. The light fell on a single pigeon, tucked up under an opening where the roof and wall met. I took careful aim and could feel my heart race. As I placed my finger on the trigger I was surprised that I could feel my pulse beating against the cold steel. It seemed all my senses were heightened, so much so that I could hear the silence in the barn, with the exception being only Mickey’s slight breathing. There was no scope on the rifle, but it felt as though there were, as my vision seemed suddenly more acute and contained in focus. I slowly breathed in and as I slowly exhaled, I squeezed the trigger. I didn’t so much hear the sound of the gun as it went off, but more that I remembered the sound. That is how it came to my ears, like a memory, something distant and removed from the moment. I saw the pigeon’s wings pop out, as

though startled and then slowly relax, but still outstretched. I wondered if I had missed, then the pigeon tumbled forward landing on a bale of hay directly in front of me.

“Damn! Nice shot buddy. You got his ass.”

I lowered the gun and felt triumphant.

Mickey slapped me on the back, “Good going!”

He took the rifle from my hands and I walked over to the pigeon, its wings still partially spread. It was not moving, but its eyes were still open. I felt a sudden rush of nausea and placed my hand over my mouth, but it subsided quickly and instead I felt as though the contents of my stomach had suddenly turned to concrete leaving little room to breathe. My grandfather’s words came to me, “son, don’t kill anything you are not going to eat.” The implications of what I had done were sinking in. I had taken a life for no good reason.

I had my back to Mickey, so he was completely unaware of the wrestling of emotions I was going through. “C’mon Jay, let’s split.” He turned towards the door and exited. I slowly followed him out into the night air, the pungent smell of the barn falling away as I moved towards Mickey’s truck. Breathing was still difficult and I was painfully aware of what had just taken place. I had committed a sin, of that I was certain. It had been exciting at first, but now only dread remained. *Dread of what?* I thought, stepping up into the truck.

Raised Southern Baptist, dread was an all too familiar feeling I had learned long before I ever heard about grace. Mickey was still pumped up from the experience. He plopped into the seat and struck the steering wheel with the palm of his hand, “Hot Damn! That was fun.” He shot a look over to me. “You ok buddy?”

My face must have betrayed my feelings, but I quickly shook myself back to the present. “Yeah sure, I’m great.” Knowing I wasn’t very convincing I quickly added, “Fan..damn..tastic!”

Mickey reached to crank the engine, but then I remembered, “hold on a minute, my cap must’ve fallen out of my pocket in the barn. I put it in my jacket pocket when I slipped the light on my head.”

“It’s just an old stocking cap, surely you got more than one.”

“This one belongs to my grandpa, he’s partial to it.”

“Ok, move your ass, I’ll wait here.”

As I got out of the truck the dirt path now was illuminated by the biggest, fullest, full moon I’d ever seen, and it seemed to be shining right over the barn. All the farm equipment around the barn that previously had been in shadow were now casting shadows. It was creepy and intensified my feelings of dread.

I forgot all about the light I was holding in my hand and flinging open the barn door, I was met by small shafts of bluish light, crisscrossing and slashing the darkness of the barn. Tiny feathers and particles of dust moved in and out of the beams and the whole barn took on an otherworldly look. It was a cathedral of light. Regret lifted and something else took its place. I didn’t understand this something else, but later, when I was older, I came to know it as grace.

I looked down, and at my feet was my cap. Picking it up, I shoved it deep in my jacket pocket, exited the barn, closed the door and made my way down the path to the truck.

“What took so long?”

“I wasn’t long.

“See any more pigeons?”

“Not that I noticed.”

The engine was already running, Mickey turned his wheels onto the gravel road and headed for highway 55 and the road back to town.

It was Friday night and the night was young, we were young and the road stretched out before us.