

The Barn
by Jackson Reilly

The church had been painted white, but it was flecking off now. I assumed most churches were made of wood, but this one seemed like it couldn't have been made in any other way. It was too shorn in its dilapidation. A home made of splinters. The field it had died in was composed of waist-high yellow tallgrass that touched a horizon of forest canopy. I assumed the coastline wasn't too far from the trees.

To enter the church, I could not afford decorum, and the withered pieces of wood fell beneath the weight of my boots. I whispered apologies to anyone who listened and crossed the threshold of this broken building. It was dark, naturally, but even for a church there was little natural light. I supposed the architect couldn't afford the stained-glass windows I had witnessed in the churches of the cities. Instead, stripes of dull light cast small rectangles against the right side of pews.

I heard the commonplace skittering of church mice, which didn't sound too different than any other type of mouse. I didn't know if there ever was a real difference, but books always seemed to make the distinction. These mice didn't seem any more or less religious than the ones in the street. I caught a glimpse of one flashing across a square of light from the thin paneless windows. It seemed more of a church opossum, the beast. What a fat rat.

I tossed my bags onto the front pew, took out my BB gun and knife, placed them beside me on the floor, took off each boot, positioned my backpack as a pillow, wound my kitchen timer, and fell asleep to the ticking.

I woke up two hours later to the ringing of what would have signified a cooked dinner. Instead, I left to find one. I thought of the rat, but I tired of rodent. I grabbed my gun, BBs included, my knife, shoved my feet back into my boots, and trudged through the hole I had created where the door had been. It was night outside, the yellow grass now blue in the moonlight, and the sky was filled with stars. I pushed past the grass and made my way toward the forest. I really wanted to see a fox, but I had never been so lucky.

I had my mind dead set on approaching the forest eastbound, but my plans for dinner were sidelined by a screech. I whipped around toward the church and was quite taken aback. You don't hear much anymore. You forget talking is a two-way street. I took a second to think and stalked back to the church.

I racked my brain for the noise made. It was most likely a rodent dying, but what had killed it? Something big enough to eat, hopefully. As I crept back through the makeshift door, I checked the pockets of light from the gracious moon. As I searched for whether my fat friend was still among the living, a shadow flashed across the floor, and I shot up to see a stark white face in the rafters. It belonged to an owl, which after making and maintaining eye contact stretched its neck and ruffled its feathers.

A barn owl. Awesome in the night. I lowered my gun, walked to the front pew, packed my things, and left. I didn't know I had intruded.