

Peter Huggins

In the Company
of Owls



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1

SHOOTING PIGLET

When Mr. Nate Cash stepped off the front porch into the yard of his farmhouse near Troy, Tennessee, he squatted and ran his hand through the wet blades of grass. Finding a bare spot, he picked up moist dirt and rubbed it between his fingers. After the spring rain, the dirt smelled good and new and fresh.

Mr. Cash stood up. The warmer weather agreed with him as it did with the two hundred and thirty-seven dairy cows on Mr. Cash's farm, which had produced more milk in the last two weeks than in the previous three. Pleased, Mr. Cash thought that if his cows kept producing at that rate, then perhaps he could pay off his truck earlier than he'd hoped.

In front of him, in the lengthening shadows thrown by the sugar maples and the blackjack oaks, a robin moved in

the grass. Hunting a worm, the robin picked at the ground. Suddenly, the robin stopped and rushed skyward in a flutter of wings. Rising through a shaft of sunlight, its breast flashed fiery orange.

The robin settled on a branch at the top of a sugar maple, then darted upward across the yard and toward the Deer River where it disappeared in the deepening shadows of the sycamores.

Cuck.

Pachoo.

Cuck.

Pachoo.

At first Mr. Cash thought the sound was someone driving on the old wooden bridge across the Deer River. He walked around the edge of the porch and saw his eleven-year-old son Aaron in the side yard lying on a blue blanket and shooting his BB gun.

Cuck.

Pachoo.

Mr. Cash walked closer and saw his daughter Shelley's Piglet doll propped against the crab apple tree by the mud hole.

Cuck.

Pachoo.

"Why are you shooting at that doll, son?" Mr. Cash asked.

"It's just old Piglet," Aaron said, turning his head and looking up at his father.

“Where did you get it?” his lanky, brown-eyed father said, putting his hand on his hip.

“Found it,” Aaron said, sensing trouble.

“Where did you find it?” his father persisted.

“Shelley didn’t need it,” Aaron said. “She’s got plenty of dolls.”

“Aaron,” his father said, “did you ask your sister if she didn’t want Piglet?”

“She never even missed it,” Aaron said.

“But did you ask her?” his father said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“No, sir, I didn’t ask her,” Aaron confessed, feeling the blood rush to his freckled face.

“You mean you took Piglet without asking her and you brought it out here and started shooting at it?” his father said, both hands on his hips now.

“Yes, sir,” said Aaron, beginning to feel that what he had done was not such a good idea after all and closing his hazel eyes.

“I’m surprised at you,” his father said. “You know that Piglet is Shelley’s favorite doll. Besides, you know you don’t take something that doesn’t belong to you and treat it like this. How do you think your sister is going to feel?”

“I don’t guess she’d like it,” Aaron said.

“Of course she won’t,” his father said. “You didn’t like it when she started coloring in your books, did you?”

Aaron shook his head.

“All right, son,” his father said, “I don’t want you to use

that gun for three days. You hear? Now you just leave that gun on the blanket and go inside. You wait for me in the bathroom. Understand?”

“Are you going to give me a spanking?” Aaron asked.

“Inside,” his father said.

“Yes, sir,” Aaron said.

As Aaron went inside, he felt sick, like he'd eaten too much candy. He walked into the cool, still bathroom and shut the door. Aaron leaned over the sink and looked at himself in the heavy, gilt-framed mirror. He seemed calm enough, but he was really worried. Was his father actually going to spank him? It was just too ridiculous. Aaron blinked his eyes and ran his tongue over his dry lips. Then he ran his hand through his sandy hair and thought briefly of taking the precaution of stuffing the seat of his jeans with a bath rag or a towel but dismissed that idea. He backed away from the sink, sat on the toilet seat top with its green fuzzy cover, and waited for his father. He hated the waiting.

Aaron heard his father come inside the house, walk down the hall, and stop in front of the bathroom door. His father didn't come in, but went into his bedroom. Aaron wondered why his father was so slow, like a turtle. He wanted the whole thing over with. Please, please, come, he thought. Finally, his father opened the door and stood tall and stark against the darkness of the hall.

Aaron's father shut the door and leaned his tall, lanky frame against the sink, looking down at his son. Staring at the brown belt on his father's khaki pants, Aaron thought

it looked like a snout with its jaws open, ready to bite him. Aaron felt hot and his stomach hurt.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” his father asked.

“I’m thirsty,” Aaron said, standing up. “Could I please have a glass of water?”

Mr. Cash sighed. “Sure,” he said. “Help yourself.”

Aaron picked up the glass by the sink, ran the water until it was cold, and filled the glass. Without stopping, he drank the water straight down, set the glass back on the sink, and sat once more on the toilet seat top. He put his head in his hand and tried to look thoughtful.

“Well?” his father asked.

“I’m thinking,” Aaron said.

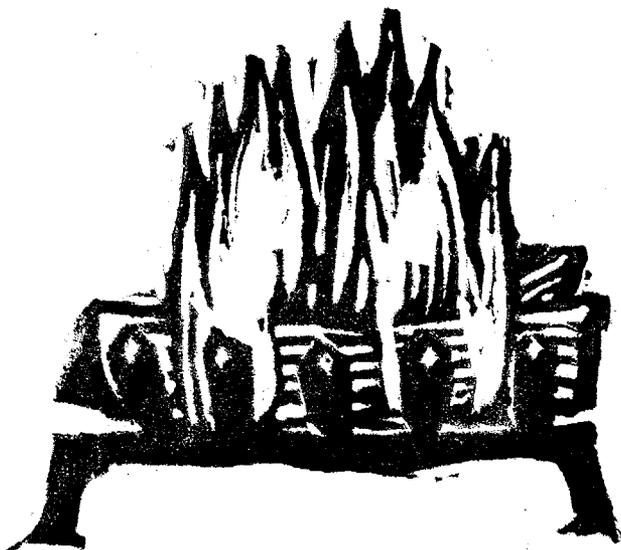
“Good,” his father said, starting to leave. “Maybe you should stay in here and think some more.”

“I think I’ve thought enough,” Aaron said quickly. “I was wrong, Dad. I won’t do it again. Could I please get out of the bathroom? It makes me real nervous, like I was a little kid or something.”

“All right, son,” his father said. “But you’re in your room until supper, and I want you to tell your sister you’re sorry for what you did to Piglet.”

“Okay, Dad,” Aaron said, relieved and no longer feeling sick to his stomach. In fact, he realized he was suddenly very hungry as the smell of ham and scalloped potatoes drifted in from the kitchen.

Aaron’s father opened the bathroom door and walked



down the shadowy hall. He disappeared around the corner and went into the dining room. Aaron flew down the hall and sped upstairs, taking the steps two at a time, yelling to Shelley that he was sorry for shooting Piglet.

After supper Aaron and his father made a fire. Aaron sat on the sofa, hugging a pillow and listening to the crack and pop of the cedar as it glowed and burned in the stone fireplace. His father sat in his leather armchair, crossing and uncrossing his legs.