

THE TROUBLE WITH SMITTY

June 1998, Phoenix. I'm having my first cup of coffee. Thoreau's notion of morning and moral renewal goes down hard when you look at the front page of *The Arizona Republic*: HESTON HAS GUN FOES IN SIGHTS AS NRA CHIEF. The article makes reference to some of Charlton Heston's film leads (Moses, El Cid, Thomas Jefferson) then describes his acceptance speech as president of the National Rifle Association. Near the end of the story, he tells the interviewing journalist that he keeps a loaded shotgun next to his bed and wouldn't hesitate to use it.

But wait. Two local gun stories also appear on the front page: SUPERVISOR WRESTLES GUN FROM WORKER and TEEN ARRESTED IN DOUBLE SLAYING. The latter tells us that one Bobby Purcell, 16, was arrested after having bragged to a friend that he wasted two kids with a sawed-off shotgun. The two victims were honors students at Apollo High School: Renelyn Simmons and André Bradley. Purcell and a buddy stopped in front of a popular teen hangout. Purcell got out of the car and fired into a crowd of ten or fifteen students.

Let's not be geographically smug: the dateline could be Any City, USA.

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Growing up in New London, Connecticut, I regularly went to the Saturday matinee at the Garde Theater, usually a biff-pow double-header where a black-hatted bad guy finally winced at the hot lead, grabbed his gut, and crumpled thunderously to the floor of the saloon, or fell from a roof, a high cliff, or a galloping horse. But no blood. Sometimes it was a Tarzan movie, or something about Romans, Christians, gladiators, and chariot races. The matinee was a ritual. Once, in July, after a double feature with Tarzan and Jane, we hiked home as usual but with a detour that took us through the woods to the back of Bottinelli Monument Company. My friend Gary knew where thick hemp ropes (hemp wouldn't scratch the polished tombstones) were often discarded—just the thing to mimic vines that carried Tarzan in great long arcs from tree to tree. Benny, a fearless climber, tied the rope to the top of a tall oak that leaned over Lake Brandagee where, at the end of long outward arcs, we dove toward imagined crocodiles, just like Johnny Weissmuller.

Another time, after seeing *The Three Musketeers*, we found curtain rods poking from a trash can on Broad Street and—forgetting “All for one and one for all”—slashed away at each other, using stairs and parking meters for advantage, the swashbuckling coming to an end when David's forearm turned red with rivulets of blood.

Fort Apache and an endless series of cowboy-and-Indian movies had us making bows and arrows. The arrows (dowels pilfered from my father's shop and fletched with chicken feathers) we tipped with a piece of hacksaw blade (shaped and sharpened on a

grinding wheel) so that they would stick into trees and sheds as they did into prairie schooners, homesteader's shacks, and the backs of cavalymen.

In our woody neighborhood, there seemed an inevitable progression from rock-throwing (to sink floating cans and bottles) to snowball and crab apple fights, to slingshots and wild cherries (ripe cherries exploded nicely against white T-shirts, a pre-echo of Hollywood blood squibs), to BB-gun fights with a rule against head-shots. (Yuppie paintball with pads and visored helmets seems tame by comparison.) The rules said that, when hit, you had to fall and die the way they did in the movies. You could say you hadn't been hit, but the shooter could demand to check under your shirt, and an angry red welt was hard to blame on anything but a sizzling BB.

Where were our parents? Most were at home, but skillfully placed in the dark, as many parents are, by clever, deceiving children.

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My niece's husband, John, somehow refused to be molded. He told me about growing up in Oregon, about his memories of grandfathers and uncles posing with bloody trophies of the hunt. A lover of animals, he could never understand the family obsession with guns and hunting. A few years ago John's grandfather, in his 80s, went into the basement with a shotgun because his wife had seen a snake coiled up near the washing machine. She begged her husband to let it alone or to use shovel to deal with it. But the grandfather had been a stubborn man. John said, "When my grandfather pulled the trigger of his favorite twelve gauge that morning, he put an end to three things: the snake, the hot water heater, and what little hearing he had left."

But cut to a more lethal Oregon tale: After successfully badgering his father to buy him a hunting rifle, Kiplind Kinkel (only weeks ago at this writing) killed both of his parents and opened fire on his high-school classmates in Springfield, killing two and injuring dozens.

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My wife Phyllis and I are house-sitting for a few weeks at the Phoenix home of my brother-in-law, a pediatric surgeon, and I'm using his desk. At the top of a stack of his papers and medical journals are stapled articles he has collected on gun-related injuries and deaths. A grim picture quickly sketches itself. In a ten year period, slightly over 8000 deaths in Arizona alone. 5,158 suicides. 2,415 homicides. 249 accidental deaths. 109 fatal injuries inflicted by police. In 1995, according to the Centers for Disease Control, firearms were the ninth leading cause of death (35,957), just behind AIDS (43,155). The CDC also reports that the United States leads the world's 26 richest countries in firearm deaths by 14.24% per 100,000 people. Northern Ireland is second at 6.63%. Japan is last on the list at 0.05%. Among European countries, England, with strict gun laws, is lowest: 0.41%.

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There is a follow-up in this morning's *Arizona Republic* about Bobby Purcell, the teenager who killed the two high school honors students. Asked why he did it, he told the police the students had dissed him.

Ah, so that was it. But he didn't even know them. And what constitutes being dissed? Perhaps the students were guilty of the unforgivable: eye contact.

The fuck you lookin at? Blam! Blam!

I'm trying to understand why the gun has replaced the fist to settle scores among teenagers. Easy access? The old equalizing factor?

Also in this morning's newspaper is another piece about Charlton Heston. It's not about his films, but that's what I'm thinking about. I'm also thinking about an essay by a scuba diver who claims to be transformed morally and spiritually by his experiences in the counterworld of water. It makes me wonder if actors are in any way transformed by immersion in their roles in the counterworld of film? Heston, in interviews, is quite proud of his role in *Ben-Hur*, a film in which his character drops an agenda of hatred and revenge and becomes a kinder, gentler person after meeting face to face with Christ along the *via dolorosa*. But this was just one of Heston's many roles. If the actor has learned anything, it seems to be Western-style revenge with Old Testament overtones from movies like *Will Penny* and *The Last Hard Men*. But why he would now choose to play Moses descending from Mt. Sinai with a golden assault rifle is perhaps a mystery that lies deep beneath the planet of the apes, or is maybe no mystery at all.

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In Utah in the early 90s, I became the one-year colleague of a prof I'll call Paul Brady, an ex-gunnery sergeant, also a rancher, hunter, and horseman. A poet too, but we didn't talk much about poetry or literature, at least not at first. I had lots of questions about the mountains and deserts. Paul was a man with answers, and a fine storyteller. Soon we were talking about hawks and eagles, bear and elk, and that led to hunting and guns.

I told him that a Daisy BB gun was my first rifle, a lever action, the kind favored by cowboys like John Wayne's Hondo. But I discovered that a pump action model was more powerful and could put a hole in a beer can, so I traded up. I had also heard that you could kill a squirrel with pump. A blood-thirsty teenager, I was hot to shoot anything that moved: bumble bees on flowers, butterflies, birds, frogs, snakes, squirrels, rabbits, stray cats and dogs. But getting my first BB gun was not easy.

My mother, raised in the city, hated guns, and admirably resisted my endless pleas. She said that a gun was dangerous to have around, good for only one thing, killing, and worse, it always begged to be fired. (Did I smile years later when reading an essay by Robert Penn Warren who makes a similar point about the crossbow in Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*?) But it was almost inevitable that I would graduate from a bow and arrow to BB guns because they were already in the family: my cousins had them. And my grandfather used a .22 on foxes and hawks that carried off his chickens at the farm. Like Kipland Kinkel, I begged and badgered until I was given an air rifle, a Daisy Defender, for my 11th birthday.

Paul Brady was amused by my mother's strong negative feelings about a mere hunk of machined steel. You didn't even have to ask for a rifle if you were born on a ranch in the Utah outback as Paul had been. In any case, after my Daisy Defender came two more BB guns, a pump and a Red Ryder model, a single shot Crossman pellet pistol, a single shot bolt-action Remington .22, a three-shot Mossberg 16 gauge shotgun, and a Ruger semi-automatic .22 rifle. There were also pistols, a .22 Colt and a .32 Smith & Wesson. This mad acquisitiveness lasted only a short time, four years max, whereupon I sold everything in order to buy a Corvette engine for my customized '49 Ford, thereby ending one dubious obsession in favor of another. The prophetic and painfully ironic line

from a John Lennon tune really applied to a teenager like me: "Happiness is a warm gun."

I haven't owned a gun since high school but, during the time I was afflicted with a love-sickness for firearms, if available and affordable, I'd probably have convinced myself I needed a flame-thrower, a bazooka, and a few Stinger missiles. A friend from my teen years is still a collector and on Sundays goes out to a range in Connecticut and fires his Thompson .45 caliber submachine gun with a 50-round drum clip. (The weapon is also known as a "Tommy Gun"; the military version, a "grease gun") Ammo is quite expensive but the rush, I've been assured, is "incredible." Who needs Viagra?

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The connection between gun and penis, of course, has been written about, nonsensically I've often thought, but it doesn't take long to make a list of connections. Think of Sally Struthers fellating Al Letieri's big Magnum in *The Getaway*, or consider the size of Clint Eastwood's piece in *Dirty Harry* (another .44 Magnum), or Hugh O'Brien's long-barreled Buntlime Special in the old *Wyatt Earp*. Law and Order depends on the lawman being able to speak softly and wag a big stick. Or think of the old Marine marching chant: "This is my rifle, this is my gun. One is for fighting, one is for fun." Once when I congratulated a friend on his wife's being pregnant for the first time, he said, "What, did you think I was firing blanks?"

I was a graduate student at Kent State University when four students were killed on May 4, 1970. James Michener, in his book on Kent State, observes that, politics of the Vietnam War aside, the college-aged guardsmen were obsessed with the sexual freedom and long-hair of the student protesters and their sexually explicit language. In that tragic confrontation, institutional penis power prevailed. It became quickly apparent the young guardsmen, proxies of the old generals and Dick Nixon, weren't firing blanks.

In Ernest Hemingway's posthumous *Islands in the Stream*, we read: "'How long have you been my girl,' he said to the pistol. 'Don't answer. Lie there good and I'll see you get to kill something better than land crabs when the time comes'." Such an utterance, of course, is the stuff of conference papers and textbooks. But in his very first novel, in the persona of impotent Jake Barnes, Hemingway was already worrying about manhood, emotional death, and firing blanks. As we know, he went out firing the real stuff.

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But back to Paul Brady, my Utah colleague. One day I was talking to Paul about where Phyllis and I might do some hiking. A recent convert to house cats, I'd become fascinated by them and wanted to see a big wild one, a cougar. I had heard stories about how deep snow would drive them from the high mountains down into the valley where they would sometimes show up in backyards looking for food in the form of a small dog or a cat. Paul wanted to introduce me to a friend who hunted mountain lions so I could go along. Could I ride a horse? I said yes, but hedged. I didn't want to tell him I had been upset by an article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* reporting that in Utah alone 127 big cats had been legally killed the previous year. How many illegally? No wonder mule deer were thick as grasshoppers and often jumped in front of your car.

"Paul, I'm not—"

As if reading my mind, he said, "No, they just let the dogs run them up a tree. Then they take a picture."

Still, I begged off, saying that Phyllis didn't ride.

"Okay," he said. "I'll tell you where to go, but you have to promise me something."

"What?"

"You've got to take a pistol with you."

"Paul, I don't want to kill one of these animals."

"You won't have to," he said. "Just a shot in the air will be enough to discourage one from coming at you."

"But—"

"Peter, you get way back in one of these narrow sand rock canyons where I'm sending you, and you meet up with a mama and kittens, you're going to wish you never saw a cougar."

"Okay," I said, "but I really don't want to go through all the trouble and expense of getting a permit or buying a weapon."

"Number one, you don't need a permit," he said, "Number two, I've got just the thing for you."

I simply nodded, thinking Paul would invite me to his house, show me his sizeable collection, then pick out something suitable for a loaner. Next week, or the week after. I could put him off. He'd forget and I'd be off the hook. I faded briefly into another moment.

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West Virginia, 1976. I was teaching at a small state college in the woods. Just after Easter break, the weather had broken, and four of us were in Kenny's Volvo wagon, headed down the road to play some doubles on the clay courts at Oglebay Park. Talk in the car was of a sweep through the dorms by campus security while the students were on spring break. The cops had confiscated something like twenty weapons: handguns, rifles, and shotguns.

My friend Mike was outraged. "You're kidding, right?"

Dave said no. "It was in the newspaper this morning."

Kenny said, "Hell, these kids are West Virginians."

Mike asked if that was supposed to mean something.

Kenny said, "Look around. This is hunting country."

I said that if a survey were taken, we would probably find out that more than half the faculty was armed.

"Come off it," said Mike.

"I've got a 30.06," said Kenny. "And a Beretta nine mil, a beauty—15 in the mag, one in the pipe."

I laughed.

"What!" said Mike, disbelief in his voice. "*Why?*"

"I used to hunt," said Kenny.

"With a Beretta?" I asked, laughing.

"Beretta?" said Mike.

"A pistol. For protection," said Kenny.

"From what?" asked Mike, "Farmers, aggressive co-eds?"

Dave laughed, then said sheepishly, "I've got .45 automatic, Colt, Army issue."

I was cackling. I couldn't help myself. Mike shook his head gloomily and said, "Not funny."

"Maybe not, but I was right. Half the faculty, in this car at least, is armed."

Mike asked Dave why he had a gun. For a number of reasons he was an unlikely candidate. Dave said, "I forgot to turn it in when I was discharged from the Army."

"Forgot?"

Dave finished it all with a line I've heard many times since: "Better to have a gun and not need it, than to need it and not have one." He delivered the line with all the wooden gravity of a Charlton Heston.

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Paul Brady, from behind his desk, brought me back to the present. "Here you go," he said, removing a pistol from its holster, and handing it to me.

".38 Smith & Wesson," I said, trying to appear casual, as if it were perfectly normal for a university prof to pull a holstered .38 out of his desk drawer. "Snubby."

"Feel the balance."

"Feels good," I said, "Nice little Smitty."

"That's the .32 frame I mounted it on. Lighter."

"Terrific grips," I said.

"Pachmeyer," he said with a big grin. He was proud of his gunsmithing and amused at my reaction, which was increasingly self-conscious. There were students passing in the open doorway.

"Paul—"

He tossed me the holster. "Keep it as long as you want."

I saw two images simultaneously: Paul's face, friendly and grinning, with Phyllis's face superimposed, dark and frowning. Paul had made a gesture of friendship and, given all I had told him about my own past with guns, refusal would have been tantamount to rejection. But how was I going to explain the Smitty to Phyllis? I thanked Paul, put the gun into the inside pocket of my sport jacket, and tried to make a casual exit.

Once in the hall, I felt that everyone knew I was packing. My jacket hung lopsidedly. Trying to get to my office as quickly as possible to hide the weapon, I ran into the Chair of the Department who, friendly as ever, stopped me to ask how I was enjoying my year in Utah so far. My face felt scarlet. I was sure he could read something wrong, but our exchange of pleasantries seemed long enough for some entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

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Phyllis. My wife grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, historically a mob city geared to guns, bloody sidewalks, and dead bodies. But Phyllis had no experience with guns. Like my mother, she hates them. There were no firearms in her home. Some of her uncles hunted rabbits and squirrels and she admits to having eaten rabbit. But she was removed from the bloody process. Like my mother, she knew that guns were made for only one thing and wanted nothing to do with them. She knew that as a teenager I had been a card-carrying member of the N.R.A.. She also knew about the fur bearing animals I trapped for money. She was amused by my adolescent adventures. She heard stories, too, from my mother herself, about how she hated to go into the basement to do laundry during trapping or hunting season. There were always muskrats, foxes, and raccoons (The Davy Crockett TV series created a great demand for coonskin caps) hanging from the joists on

hooks, waiting for me to get home from school to skin them and stretch the pelts on fur frames.

Phyllis forgave me my unenlightened adolescence. It was before Animal Rights, before the Vietnam War, and before criticism of our gun culture came to the fore. She also found it easy to forgive my teenage love affair with guns because it was in the distant past. But news that we now had a handgun in our apartment would be as welcome as news that I had taken a mistress and was hoping she could move in with us. An acquaintance once told me that what he did was his own business, and what his wife didn't know wouldn't hurt her. He was discreet, he said. I never bought that line of thinking, but I was in a tight spot. I'd hide the gun. Phyllis wouldn't know. I'd be discreet.

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My mother's strenuous aversion to guns parallels my own to carnivals, but when my son was in the 6th grade, I found myself on a hot August midway that seethed with dust and a seedy vigor. We moved through the smell of elephant flop, past the Fun-O-Rama, past knock-down dolls and a sideshow tent that read "Wolf Boy" and "Pig with Two Heads." When the boys climbed aboard the Tilt-O-Whirl, I pointed and said I would meet them by the bingo tent. Then, half-hidden by the calliope notes of a carousel, I heard another kind of music: the unmistakable crack and metallic clank of a shooting gallery.

I was surprised to see pump-action Remingtons firing .22 shorts. This was rural North Carolina. Ducks and lighted candles went from left to right. There were also clay pipes and fixed paper targets. I hadn't fired a rifle in almost twenty years and wondered if my eye was still good. Guessing the sights were deliberately off, I shot first at the paper bull for a test. Sights were low and to the left, so I made the mental correction. Ducks fell and candles went out. I was enjoying myself. After three or four reloads I quit, but before I did, my son and his pals arrived and watched with great interest.

They wanted to try. No, I said, this was not for kids. They whined and wheedled but fortunately I had a sign on my side: "Shooters Must Be At Least 16 Years Old." I had a prize coming and let my son choose.

"That," he pointed.

It was a red Super Soaker, the squirt gun equivalent of a .357 Magnum.

I thought nothing of the incident. That night my wife told me Keith was impressed by my shooting. Because I owned no guns, had never shot one in front of him, he had no idea I knew how to use a rifle, and was doubly surprised that I was able to win a prize. Before going to bed, he asked me some questions. I told him I used to hunt and that in high school I had been on the rifle team (I didn't tell him that a yearbook photo shows me, a James Dean clone, between two other shooters, also collar-up clones, who are furtively flipping off the photographer, the teachers, the town, and the galaxy). I could see he was impressed. Secretly I was glad. It was probably the only thing I had done up to that point that impressed him. I was a college professor, but that meant nothing. My books, nothing. I thought: *Lord, this might be my legacy.* I imagined myself long gone and him fondly shaking his head and telling a buddy: "Yeah, my ol' daddy was a helluva shot."

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I drove to our apartment in Orem, seeing little along the way, even though it had snowed the night before and the last sun was making the peaks of Mt. Timpanogos dazzle. I had the Smitty in my briefcase. When I entered the apartment, I yelled "Hey, it's me" and headed upstairs to the room where I had made some cinder block bookshelves, and a desk out of an old door. Fortunately, Phyllis was on the phone in the kitchen. I quickly took the gun and put it where I had planned—at the back of a top shelf in our closet. In Utah for only a year, we had little furniture, and there was no place to hide anything. I'm much taller than my wife and knew she'd have no cause to look on a shelf that was empty, or appeared so from her level.

That done, I pulled off my tie, changed into Wranglers, and went downstairs. It was Friday night, as I recall, and we would follow our usual Friday ritual, dinner and a movie, which meant Salt Lake City where there were more film offerings, nicer restaurants, and where it was easier to get a drink. (In Mormon Country it is far easier to buy a gun than a glass of wine)

"What's so funny?" Phyllis asked me.

My secret must have had me smirking. "Nothing," I said. "Just glad it's Friday." Then I told her about my classes and a few amusing things that had happened during the day.

Later, in the restaurant, waiting for the entrees, I sipped my wine, listening to her talk about her parents, both not doing well physically, and about her plans to fly down to Phoenix for a week's visit. All the while, I could see Smitty on the top shelf of the closet in his leather holster. There came upon me an urge to confess. I was close to telling my story. A business consultant and former teacher of technical writing, Phyllis might be interested to learn what Paul Brady, also a teacher of technical writing, was doing with that handgun in his desk.

What was he doing with it? I imagined her asking.

I rehearsed my reply. He uses it to desensitize students, a number of them women who have irrational fears about a hunk of machined steel. He makes them describe the revolver in detail as if it were any piece of machinery. He has them open the cylinder, spin, close, engage the safety, cock the hammer, etc. See the way each piece works. Take it apart. He finds that this exercise helps students overcome their fears and gain the confidence that they can describe the functions of something that is initially alien, or even frightening.

Somehow I knew this wouldn't work. I could almost hear her eyeballs click when they rolled to the ceiling with *Give me a break!*

Or maybe I could expand on Dave's line: *Better to have one and not need it . . .* But Phyllis was quick, she would hear right through the specious appeal. Availability makes things too irreversibly easy. And there is a difference between "wanting" and "needing." Only months after my mother died, my father was mugged, beaten badly, and the assailant's wealthy, well-connected uncle got him off with probation even though his priors were long and impressive. My father died only months later as a result, I believe, of both the mental trauma of my mother's death and the physical trauma of having been beaten up at age seventy-two. Until the assault, he had been healthy. The words *depressed* or *angry* don't begin to describe how I felt. This is perhaps the only time in my life I have ever really imagined myself killing somebody, actually planning how I'd do it. "Remember that old man you beat up?" I'd say when the guy was on the ground and

bleeding. I'd draw it out, make him cry and beg for his life, then waste him. I had the motive and the cue for passion, but not the weapon, and I'm glad I didn't.

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Phoenix. It's late, hot, airless. I take a break from writing this and find myself gassing up at a nearby Circle K. Tomorrow we plan to head up toward Flagstaff to beat the heat and hike in Oak Creek Canyon. I want to get out of Phoenix early. At the cash register, there is a guy with a cowboy hat who is smoking and talking to the clerk, a gaudy woman with orange hair who is also smoking. I give her my credit card and check out the guy's costume. Well worn Wranglers, tall white hat, a silver buckle the size of a saucer, dusty boots. I wonder what rawhide hero helped him design himself? I'm thinking Steve McQueen in *Tom Horn*. The hat is right but the guy is not good looking, has a narrow face and a mean rodent mouth that is really closer to Bruce Dern in *Hang 'em High*. But what's wrong with this picture? Then I realize he should be packing a western-style Colt instead of the Glock 9 millimeter, an anachronism, riding high in a tooled leather holster on his hip.

My credit card is taking ages to go through. Nervous, I'd like to be out of here. In Phoenix anyone with an Arizona driver's license can tote a handgun as long as it's visible. The cowboy cranks up his zipo and lights another cigarette.

In comes a dark skinned teenager, a Mexican kid with hair that is sculpted, floppy on top with designs razored into the close-cropped sides of his head. His own costume is baggy hiphop. He's big and a bit sullen. He goes to the back of the store and takes his time in the party snacks.

The woman sighs and says, "This machine's been slow all day."

Leather creaks and I can see the cowboy has his hand resting on the Glock. He says, *soto voce*, "Make my day." The woman snorts. Yellowish teeth peek from his smirk then slide back, covered by dry bluish lips.

The kid catches my eye and jerks his head, beckoning. I take a few steps down the aisle. He holds up two cans of cheese dip and asks me in a soft apologetic whisper which of these has the chillis. His buddies want the spicy, not the mild. He tries to laugh. For a second, I think he's putting me on, then realize he can't read. I tell him what he wants to know and while I'm wondering if Bobby Purcell—the teen who killed the honors students—can read, the Mexican does one of those bouncy gang walks toward the clerk and the make-believe cowboy whose face is blank as a screen where some horrific footage could suddenly blaze to life.

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When Phyllis decided to take advantage of a cut-rate airfare to visit her parents in Phoenix for a week, I was alone in the apartment with the gun. I tried to put it out of mind. Reading, writing, and grading papers held my attention for long periods of time. So did dreaming out the window at Mt. Timpanogos where I thought about taking a hike. But could I do that without the gun? Maybe I should fire it a few times to make sure it works. A small voice said *no*, told me I had better things to do. Finally I got it down from the shelf. I aimed at various things in the apartment. Then I stuck it in my belt and got belligerent with the bedroom mirror as Robert De Niro does in *Taxi Driver*. My improvised tough-guy monologue had me cracking up. Downstairs, I put the revolver on the kitchen counter, loaded the Mr. Coffee, and switched it on. While I was waiting, I spun ol' Smitty. If the barrel points at me, I told myself, I'll fire it. In five or six spins,

the barrel never once pointed toward me. Finally, after a cup of coffee, I decided, as Oscar Wilde would have, that the best way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.

I drove to a sporting goods store near the ZCMI mall on State Street. Which brand of shells do I buy? Winchester? Yes, the word had a ring to it and recalled a 1950s flick—Jimmy Stewart in maniacal pursuit of his heart's stolen beauty, a Winchester '73. It was a film of intense dramatic moments and lots of gunplay, but essentially bloodless—milk and cookies when measured against the high octane violence of today's films.

But the shells—do I buy one or two boxes of shells? Best be safe and get four.

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I drove north on Interstate 15 past Spanish Forks to Lehi. Under the looming ramparts of Mt. Timpanogos, I turned west on Utah 73 for a half hour or so, stopping here and there to collect drink cans from the side of the road. At Fairfield, where you can pick up the old Pony Express Trail, there is an historical site, The Stagecoach Inn. As I passed it, left the paved road, and rattled over a cattle guard, I thought of John Ford's *Stagecoach* and an early classic performance by John Wayne. A few minutes later, easing past white-faced cattle, I was Heston at the beginning of *Will Penny*, singing "Get Along Little Dogie."

I spotted four bald eagles sitting on a watering tank. As I drove further west, the land expanded in all directions, everything sharply defined in the clear light. East of the Dugway Proving Grounds (where some of our military's deadliest nerve agents have been tested), you could see for miles across the valley floor toward the Great Salt Desert, segments of the trail reappearing now and then as it snaked into the far distance. Not a soul in sight. No cloud of moving dust that might indicate another car. I told myself: you *need* a gun to protect you from all this nothingness. It was some seventy miles or so to Fish Springs, a bird refuge, but I knew I wasn't going that far. Not today. Save it for a trip with Phyllis.

Smitty lay on the seat beside me and was getting antsy to exit his holster and have some fun. I told him to be patient. I didn't want some rancher investigating gunshots. The dirt trail was badly rutted, washed out in a few places. I drove down into a dry creek bed at one point and without 4-wheel drive, I'd probably still be there. The windows were down and I could smell the clean scent of sage.

I got out and rested Smitty on the fender while I divided the first box of ammo into different pockets. I set a line of cans at the top of a dirt embankment. A friend once told me a .38 snub nose was only good for shootouts between two guys in a phone booth. Funny, but not accurate. If you knew what you were doing, you could still hit something from, say, thirty feet, or farther.

I wasn't about to buy shooting range earmuffs and brought along instead the plugs I used for swimming laps in the university pool. At first I fired fast and didn't hit a thing. Same the second time around. For a minute, I thought I was firing blanks. While reloading, I heard Slim Pickens as Lon, the sadistic deputy in *One-Eyed Jacks*, try to bluff Brando who is aiming a derringer at him: "You ain't about to take *my* neck off with that little ol' popper. . . You lucky you hit the wall."

I took aim the third time and said, "Is that so, Lon?" This time I hit two cans. On the next reload, I hit three. After a while, the cans were pretty well ventilated and I looked for other targets. I remembered *Shane*, the famous teach-me-how-to-shoot scene

where little Bobby points to a small white rock and Shane makes it jump about. Fortunately there happened to be a white rock handy, so I started blasting away, trying to do the same. Poor Smitty made unconvincing *pops* compared to the potent roar of Shane's big six gun. In between reloads, while the silence regathered and my ears stopped ringing, I entertained myself by doing Alan Ladd as I sometimes would at a party. Like my mother, Bobby's mother hated guns, and Shane had to set her straight: "Marion, a gun is just a tool, no better or worse than any other tool. . . . A gun's as good or as bad as the man using it." I could almost see him as an N.R.A. poster boy delivering the old bumper sticker line: "If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns."

I was laughing and having a good time for myself, a kid again, but I kept looking around guiltily to see if somebody might be watching. There was nothing but unfillable silence, knee-high sage and low clumps of dark green juniper that dotted the reddish land as it rose and fell to distance. I spilled the warm shells into my hand. The smell of brass and black powder was like a Proustian \square adeleine and took me back.

*

One October day, my friend Nelson and I decided to skip school to hunt for ringnecks. When I arrived at Nelson's house, his mother was making breakfast for his two younger brothers. The smell of frying bacon was wonderful when I stepped in the back door out of the cold. I spoke briefly to his mother and took the stairway just off the kitchen that led upstairs to his room. Bobby, another friend, was already there. Nelson was pulling on boots, and his 16 gauge Savage lay across the bed. Bobby, someone we were always trying to get rid of, picked up the gun and aimed it at me: "Go ahead, make one false move."

Nelson grabbed the gun from Bobby and said, "Let's go."

Bobby said, "Man, I wish I could go with you guys but I got too many cuts. Mr. Flanagan makes one more phone call and I'm dead."

I went down first, said good-bye to Mrs. Cone, and stepped outside. I stood in the sharp autumn air, waiting, wondering what the hold up was when I heard a great muffled *boom*. Reflexively, I turned from the house. BBs, glass, and bits of wood rained against my hunting jacket. When I turned back, I saw a hole the size of a garbage can lid. The window mullions were gone and long reddish curtains hung from the blown-out frame like viscera. There was an unforgettable scream, the kind that stripped varnish from the soul, followed by a long silence. Then: "Oh God, Oh Sweet Jesus!"

Mrs. Cone's terrified prayer was answered because nobody was injured, or almost. Nelson's younger brother, Lee, broke a filling in his tooth when he got back to finishing his scrambled eggs, where a pellet had landed and hidden itself.

Nelson had foolishly loaded the shotgun in his room, even though we had been instructed never to do such things in the safety course we were required to take in order to get hunting licenses. When the gun discharged on the stairs, Bobby was only three feet in front of Nelson. Had the barrel moved six or eight inches one way or another on that narrow stairwell, Bobby would have been cut in half. In the hallway, the acrid smell of cordite was overwhelming.

*

The only time I ever carried Smitty was when Phyllis and I went out to some remote place for a hike. My usual procedure was to do a transfer from the closet shelf to the floor under the driver's seat while Phyllis was in the apartment busy with something

else. When we arrived at the trailhead for our hike, I'd let Phyllis get out of the car first, then I'd reach the revolver from under the seat, and clip the holster at the small of my back between the my waistband and undershirt. Emerging from the Jeep, I let my shirt or jacket cover it the way Don Johnson always did in *Miami Vice*.

I'd gone through this routine many times: near Vernal, up in the Uintas, at Canyonlands, Moab, and other places. Often I'd forget I was packing, until I'd sit down for lunch, or lean against a rock and feel Smitty hard against my back. Phyllis and I had good times in these places, looking at birds, hawks, and eagles. Once we saw a bear in the distance, but never a cougar, though we did see paw prints in an arroyo once, after a storm, the prints still filling with water.

The year was almost over. One last trip took us down to Price, past the rusty remains of an old mining operation, and into the rugged terrain of Nine Mile Canyon (really closer to forty miles) where one of my students told me we would find extraordinary rock art from the Fremonts, an early native people who, according to archaeologists, were absorbed by the Anasazi when they abruptly and mysteriously left the canyon 900-1000 years ago.

We were among some shady cottonwoods next to the cliffs, looking at a sandstone petroglyph, a perfect panel which depicts hunters with bows and arrows sneaking up on a herd of mule deer. (I'm told that this priceless and unprotectable art has since been shotgunned away, irretrievably gone.) We were glad we had made the trip and taken the trouble to find such a remote place. Deeply silent. No alien sounds. It was mating season, and lots of deer were about. Six or eight foraged on the trail less than a hundred yards from us. The same deer hunted by the Fremonts. A sense of timelessness. It was the kind of magic place that prompts the imagination. You see things.

Four scruffy dogs came through a clearing to our left. The deer bolted. Their hooves clacked on sandstone. The dogs, seeing easier meat, slowed and changed direction. They were shaggy, more like wolves. A huge black male seemed to be the leader. Yellowish eyes. Two other dogs were brown with thick tails, another black and white. They were ranch dogs gone feral. They came toward us at a lope and spread out, going for position, as they did with deer. I pulled Phyllis into a shallow stone alcove to have our backs covered just as they started to bark, but the barking quickly gave way to snarling. The black dog's ears went back. He growled and showed his teeth, which stood out impressively against his black face and red tongue.

Out came Smitty. *Pop, pop, pop*. An incredible rush. When the dirt jumped up only a few feet from his face, Blackie vanished like the fantasy he was. The deer never bolted. The dogs were never there but that never-never-land footage had stuttered to life because I wanted it, wanted a situation where I could deepen my voice in an actorish way and say to an outraged Phyllis, "Would you rather they had us for lunch?" Or, after some back and forth, I'd deliver the argumentative kill shot and say, "Better to have one and not need it, than need one and not have it."

Smitty fortunately never made an appearance during any of our hikes that year, but when I carried the gun, I felt myself altered somewhat. I didn't walk or talk like John Wayne, but I imagined and projected, nay, even vaguely longed for something that would justify all the guilty subterfuge, a situation that would bring back and make real those anti-historical counterworlds where I had spent so many hours. I wanted problems to disappear with the ease of a pulled trigger. When I first hefted the revolver in Paul's

office, the old wires twitched. These wires stretch back through adolescence to the Paleolithic caves. These wires mean money now, big money, and they are kept well insulated by Hollywood. They run as deep as resistance to change.

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