

UP IN ARMS

} by *T Cooper*

I hate guns, but I have one.

I grew up around guns — lots of them — and like most things that kids are raised around, guns seemed eminently quotidian to me. It was only after I moved away from home at seventeen that I realized not everybody was shooting fully automatic Uzis out in the desert when they went on family vacations.

My brother, seven years my senior, and now a police officer in our hometown of Los Angeles, was a Guns & Ammo/Soldier of Fortune aficionado for as long as I can remember, and my father, while never in the service or on the job with any public safety force, has always been a bit of a citified cowboy, rarely sans pistol holstered in a bedside drawer or sandwiched beneath the floor mat of his truck. He might kill me (with one of these concealed weapons perhaps?) for writing this, but my father was arrested once for trying to take a gun through Washington, D.C. airport security. He had been on a road trip through the South with my mother and had forgotten to take the pistol out of his carry-on bag to pack it into his checked bag. The two were en route to having Thanksgiving with me while I was in college in Vermont, but when I showed up at the airport in Burlington to collect them, it was just my mother who came bounding out of the terminal, lower teeth flashing like an anxious mongoose.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Your father was arrested,” she blurted out. But he got sprung the next day, and caught the next flight to Burlington to join us for dinner that night. The incident subsequently turned into quite the legal snafu.

Before she met my father, my mother was no stranger to guns either. Her brothers always boasted a medley of weaponry. When we’d visit them in Texas during holidays, we’d go shooting with the whole extended family — uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, and neighbors. Even my eighty-year-old, cotton candy-haired grandmother came along and watched the action from the car. Her son and my mother’s brother, my uncle “Pudge,” almost had his arm blown off when he was eighteen and nearly died from blood loss. He had been patronizing an Amarillo gun shop when another customer accidentally fired a round while

examining a handgun down the counter. The bullet penetrated Pudge's arm just above his elbow, shattering bone and completely decimating his bicep and artery. His left arm was permanently mutilated. It now looks as though a wide-mouthed shark took a chunk out of it from mid-forearm to shoulder, a knotty mess of crisscrossing scars filling up where the rest of his arm used to be. Fingers and thumb move pretty reliably now, but his hand is in a permanently flexed posture. Despite the small handicap, Pudge has, over the years, managed to figure out how to do most things quite well, including golf, fishing — and, of course, shooting.

My own brother used to tinker with weapons and hand make ammunition in our garage into the wee hours. As a teenager, he would send away for tiny mechanical parts, which would convert (legal) semi-automatic weapons into (illegal) fully automatic ones. Somewhere I have a photo of myself at about ten, back propped against our old yellow and white Chevy Suburban truck, desperately trying to maintain control of one of these machine guns while spraying bullets in the general direction of a row of Dr. Pepper cans propped against a sandy embankment on the outskirts of Amarillo. Those guns have a hell of a lot of kick for a ten-year-old.

I guess I was a pretty good shot, but somewhere in my early twenties I became rabidly anti-gun. My knowledge of and skills with guns embarrassed me, as did some of my family members' dependence upon and fascination with them. Nevertheless, when I uprooted to New Orleans after college, my father gave me a Smith & Wesson .38 Special to keep in my new apartment. New Orleans was considered the official Murder Capital of the U.S. at the time, and he practically insisted I accept the weapon. At first, I ignored the pistol, keeping it safely padlocked and hidden beneath some boots at the bottom of a wardrobe in my bedroom.

But living on the edge of the Upper Garden District of New Orleans for a couple months, I started hearing the occasional burst of gunfire popping after the sun went down, as well as the resultant stories about its origins. One winter night, a young couple who lived a few blocks over on Eighth Street were out walking their small dog when two guys stopped them on the sidewalk, pulled out high-caliber handguns and proceeded to hold up the recently married man and woman. When the couple insisted they didn't have anything to offer because they were simply on a stroll, witnesses reported that the two muggers asked the newlyweds to get down on their knees, and then forced them to apologize for being white, before shooting them both dead, execution-style, in the head. A few weeks after that incident, at eight in the morning on a school

day, a woman and her young child were shot and killed in a carjacking just a few blocks in the other direction, on Magazine Street.

So sometimes at night I started sheepishly slipping that .38 pistol into my pocket, loaded, when I went out alone to walk my own dog before bed. I was ashamed even to have it, but more than a few times a car would slow beside me, or somebody would seemingly deliberately cross the street ahead of me, and I'd reach into that pocket and palm the gun against my thigh. I don't know if I'd have ever used it, and I can't even say it actually felt any better to have it on me, but I recall some moments when I was genuinely afraid for my safety and pretty certain something bad was fixing to go down. One night I was woken up by somebody trying to break into my apartment and I called the police after (I believe) my dog scared the would-be burglar away. When the police officer arrived, he glanced up at the wraparound deck where the intruder had snapped a few pieces off the wooden railing on the way to my bedroom window. The culprit had jiggled the frame enough to alarm the dog and, subsequently, me.

"Do you have a gun?" the officer asked me casually.

I equivocated, knowing full well I didn't have a permit to possess one legally.

He understood immediately. "Well, if you did just happen to have a gun around the house, the next time something like this happens, I'd strongly suggest using it first and asking questions later."

That exchange with the New Orleans police officer troubled me. It seemed like it was about much more than my right to self-protection that the officer was hinting at. It was at once about race and class and power, and, despite my distaste, here I was entirely complicit in a cycle I fancied myself apart from. The winking understanding the cop assumed we shared is what smarted. Because he was (mostly) right about me: certainly in theory, I was anti-gun, but in deed, I was allowing fear (and probably my past history with guns) to introduce a loaded weapon into any questionable imaginary scene. And you know what Chekhov said about a pistol hanging on the wall in the first act...you better be willing to make it go off by the last.

When I lived in New Orleans, one of my closest friends and neighbors, Donna, was a general surgeon in the middle of her residency at Charity Hospital. Every few days I'd walk across the street to her place, and she'd tell me about what she'd seen in the ER over her last seventy-two-hour shift. One of the more remarkable trends in the emergency medical system back then

was called “shit-bagging.” Apparently it wasn’t enough just to kill somebody by shooting them point-blank in the stomach, severing their spinal cord and leaving them for dead. Many of the guys who Donna stitched up — because it was almost always men — explained that some assailants considered murder a failure; instead, they wanted to decimate a victim’s colon — to assure that he must use a colostomy bag for the rest of his life, carrying around his own waste strapped to his side, repelling women and serving as a constant reminder of his weakness for all of time.

During my brief time as an emergency medical technician in L.A. one summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, I had the opportunity to witness personally the damage guns do to people. There’s this one victim I remember in particular, a young mother in her late teens who had been sitting in her family’s backyard in South Central Los Angeles one weekend night. Just sitting there with her toddler on her lap, listening to music and getting ready to enjoy some barbecue, when a bullet plummeted from the sky and pierced her face through a nostril and lip, taking a small chunk out of her upper gum before lodging in her thigh. I was just in training then, shadowing other EMTs and observing ER shifts, so I ended up sitting with her in a trauma room for what seemed like hours, awaiting a plastic surgeon. She was so young, and her breath reeked of fear and shock and trauma. I tried to chat with her about other topics (music, school, the Lakers, her kid), as I stared at the gaping holes and tended to them periodically, her face steadily swelling by the hour. I remember touching her shoulder a lot, even though I couldn’t tell whether she wanted me to.

Nobody had heard a gunshot or seen a weapon; she had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. From the trajectory of the bullet through her body, it was assumed that somebody, likely miles away, had fired a weapon into the sky, and her face just happened to be where the bullet came back down to earth, missing her child by a mere two or three inches.

When I moved to New York City after a few years in New Orleans, I buried that .38 pistol, still padlocked around the barrel, deep inside a trunk of old clothes and sports equipment that was stored in my apartment building’s

basement. When the sewers backed up and flooded the basement after a storm, the trunk soaked up the waste and ultimately had to be trashed. It was only when I watched two burly garbage men heft it into the back of their truck and pull the lever to slowly munch the thing into pieces that I remembered the gun had been in there all those years. I fretted about the possibility that somebody (a kid?) had rifled through the trunk on the curb and plucked out the gun before it was hauled off — but hopefully the raw sewage had been a sufficient deterrent. Either that, or the piece was found, the lock hacked off, serial number filed away, and then the weapon used in some abhorrent drug-related crime in which several cute and innocent infants were killed by stray gunfire. All because of me.

So I was happily gun-free for a decade and a half. In fact quite smugly and likely annoyingly so. Bowling for Columbine! Yeah, fuck Charlton Heston — and that sissy Tom Selleck, too!

And then there's now.

Not too long ago, I bought a rifle from Shooters, my local upstate New York gun shop specializing in accoutrements associated with every possible method of killing animals, big and small. In Shooters, there are likenesses of President Obama on the wall, one with a target over his face, another with the designation beneath it: "Firearms Salesman of the Year." There are also bumper stickers for sale that read, "Extremely Right Wing." Pinned to every area of wall free of taxidermy are curled and faded photographs of various hunters from various decades holding up massive (hitherto noble and beautiful) dead animals and posing, self-satisfied, beside them — generations of deer, hulking wild turkeys, a coyote or two, a mountain lion, a few black bears. A proud young father in tree camouflage, hoisting what seem to be twin infants over each of a massive buck's antlers like he's about to place them in two cradles.

Despite my not being typical clientele, both my basic knowledge of guns and my Tractor Supply Company cap helped me blend in somewhat at Shooters, and soon I located and purchased a used Winchester Viper .22 rifle, pretty much the most "economical" rifle out there, which is also a nice way of saying "cheapest." It's not even wood; instead it's fashioned from some sort of composite black plastic that makes it look either like a paintball-firing contraption, or an assault weapon, depending on both your outlook and from what angle you look at it. But it has a pretty decent scope, and it's surprisingly accurate. Plus it's relatively light, yet feels solid in your hands. The weapon is stored in the front corner of my bedroom closet, locked away from children and ammunition, but nevertheless ready to go in the event I need to, say, scare

off what are becoming increasingly bold coyotes from approaching (or worse, injuring) my kids or dogs on our roughly ten acres of property.

I recently took my new rifle out for a test run — the first time I'd fired a weapon in almost twenty-five years. It turns out I'm still pretty good at shooting cans. And I like doing it. I also like teaching my eight and ten-year-old kids how to safely handle and operate a rifle: to make sure they know never to touch a firearm unless they are with a trusted adult, to stay far away and tell somebody if they run across a gun either in our house or somebody else's. How to work a safety switch, where to point the barrel, where never to point the barrel, how to fill a clip with ten rounds and insert it into the rifle, load a round into the chamber. Where to stand when somebody else is shooting. All the things my dad, brother, and uncles taught me so many times over so many years before.

And yet. When I was a kid, I was nearly shot when my friend J — picked up my father's .22 pistol and pulled the trigger while standing beside me. We were about eight, the age of my youngest now. My folks owned a small vacation condo on Catalina Island off of the coast of Southern California, and we often took the ferry there on weekends and holidays. On this particular trip, I was allowed to bring along a friend, and it was shortly after we arrived at the apartment, my mother busily throwing open windows, sweeping eucalyptus leaves off the deck, and tucking fresh linens onto the sleeper sofa, when my father had apparently (need I add mindlessly), emptied the contents of his pockets and left the pile of coins, wallet, keys, and his gun on the kitchen counter before going up for a nap. It was a tiny pistol, no more than four inches in length: a simple, matte-silver revolver with a black plastic grip; in fact, it looked precisely like a child's toy, veritably cap-gun-like.

All I remember of the incident was standing next to J — in front of the counter one second, getting excited about going to the beach for a swim, and then all of a sudden hearing a really loud pop and feeling a flash of searing heat on my right quadricep. The bullet missed my flesh, but it did graze my skin. There were brown spark burns when I looked down, and it smelled like singed hair. Plus it stung like a motherfucker.

J — was still holding the tiny gun in both hands, and looked up at me, confused. My eyes instinctively searched for the bullet in the orange and rust colored shag carpet under our toes, while a little smoke hung in the space between us, a tickle in my nostrils from the gunpowder. I don't recall what

happened next, but I know both my mother and father rushed to us, and then one of them, probably my father, held me uncomfortably close on the scratchy wool couch for longer than I wanted. Then there was likely a swim and dinner, and a subsequent talk with J—— and me about what had happened earlier. Not that any of it stuck or really even mattered.

I wonder if my parents ever communicated to J——’s parents that their kid had almost shot me with a gun. A real one. I’ve never asked. But now that I have kids of my own and have had moments on their play dates with friends where I say to myself, “Don’t fuck up, dude, you are singularly responsible for another person’s kid right now,” I can’t imagine the embarrassment my parents must’ve felt. Beyond the relief, I mean. There must’ve been just pure shame for being so flagrantly negligent.

When I used to think about this incident when I was younger, I would go over it and over it in my head: What if J—— had picked up the gun and, thinking it was a toy, joked, “Hey, T, look!” and pretended to shoot it at my face? It would’ve been like J—— to do that. Why not? Why would a kid have expected a real gun to be fully loaded and sitting openly on the counter at a buddy’s parents’ house? Because no matter how careful you are with teaching gun safety to children, there are always going to be other children who have never seen a gun, much less been schooled in their safety. Not to mention kids who are gun-safe but make mistakes. It happens all the time. I just looked at the headlines on www.kidsandguns.org — so depressing it makes me want to pick up a gun and shoot myself in the head:

“West Virginia Boy, 11, Accidentally Kills Self with Gun”

“Port Richey, Florida 2-year-old Shoots Herself with Gun Left on Nightstand”

“Louisville, Kentucky Boy, 12, Killed by 14-year-old Brother with Gun in the Home”

“Spalding, Georgia 4-year-old Girl Shot by Twin Brother with Father’s Gun”

“Treasure Valley, Idaho 15-year-old Accidentally Shoots Father while Target Shooting”

And that’s just the first five. Nothing but luck kept me out of those headlines when I was a kid. So I wonder if I’m insane to have this rifle in our house with the children. We don’t need to kill animals and eat them. My wife, raised in Appalachian West Virginia, has a familiarity with guns and the uses people have for them (namely food and protection), but like me, also has an abiding ambivalence toward them. I can’t tell whether she’s looking at me funny when I take our daughters out into our field to shoot at organic, natural cola cans pilfered from our recycling bin.

But I do know that I'd rather our kids know something about guns than come across one at a friend's house somewhere down the line and unknowingly pick it up. And now that I am blessed with the love of the best woman in the world and our children, three people I'd protect to the death, I have to admit I'm often reminded of what the New Orleans police officer told me all those years ago. In fact, I think about him all the time.

I don't want or need to go into much detail, but there lurks a very bad man out there who at one time threatened the safety of these three supremely important individuals, mostly before I was in their lives. He made threats against the children, and was abusive to my wife. Sometimes I have dreams in which this man has invaded our house while I am away, and when I come home, he is assaulting my wife in our bedroom. I go to the safe and pull out that old .38 pistol, and then walk back into the bedroom and put the barrel to the side of his head. I tell him to get off of her, and when he doesn't, I calmly pull the trigger. I never see what happens next because I wake up at the precise moment the hammer strikes bullet.

I have had this dream repeatedly, or different variations on it, ever since I learned of this man's existence. Sometimes the kids are outside playing on the trampoline and he rolls up in a car and lures them over, and they go with him because they know him. I get the pistol and run out, but often I'm too late. Other times it's on the street in New York City, and I spot him and immediately recognize him and stride right up to him, pull the .38 out of my pocket and say quietly, "You know what you did," before pulling the trigger and unloading into his gut. Again, I'll always wake up when I hear the bullet firing. Sometimes my start also wakes up my wife, who's sleeping beside me (in real life, not in the dream), and I'll cling to her while I quietly pant and sob and she wonders what the hell is wrong with me.

I don't know why there is always a gun in these dreams. I hate that my brain puts it there. I do have a fairly high-level belt in Tae Kwon Do and know how to fight effectively. I also know this man is the epitome of a coward in every way, and even though he probably outweighs me by at least forty pounds, I know I could do some damage to him without relying upon a weapon; I have an infinite supply of rage toward him, and at what he's done repeatedly, without retribution, to my wife, as well as to other women. But that, I suppose, is neither here nor there.

Because it is not about race or class, or politics or liberals or extreme right wingers or the NRA or Michael Moore or Charlton Heston, or even Magnum, P.I. In real life, not in my dreams, I would have no problem shooting this man the instant he stepped into our house with menacing intent. I don't think I could've shot the guy breaking into my apartment in New Orleans that night, or even somebody robbing me on the street while out walking my dog. It never made sense to protect myself in that way. But if he ever threatened my family again, I would shoot this horrible man and I would kill him, and I do not care who hears me say it.

That officer was right: I will shoot first. But you know what? He was wrong about the second part. I wouldn't ask questions later. I'm not certain there are any.