



A.J. SHUMER

Readers Write

GUNS

I WAS RAISED ON GRANOLA, HOME-grown zucchini, and Peter, Paul and Mary albums. The only thing in our house that could have been considered a weapon was the kitchen knife, and if my pacifist parents had thought of it as such, they would have thrown it out.

Five years ago I bought a three-acre

farm in Hawaii. My partner and I acquired some goats and chickens and a piglet named Maggie. Then my partner brought home a male baby boar. The two pigs began to breed, and before long we had more pigs than goats.

We heard stories about armed men poaching livestock from local farms. The

police in our area were notorious for ignoring emergency calls, so my partner became convinced we needed a gun to protect ourselves and our animals. I bought a semiautomatic .223 rifle. I'd never even held a gun before. The first time I shot it, I thought I'd blown out my eardrums.

In the meantime the pigs continued to multiply, and I continued to buy pork chops, bacon, and pork roast for my partner, rather than slaughter one of his beloved pigs. When the pig population reached eighty-seven and I was spending \$250 a week on feed, I begged my partner to do something about the animals. But he refused to harm them or sell them as food. I stopped buying meat and told him we were hypocrites if we would eat chops packaged up from a factory farm but not eat livestock we'd raised. He finally agreed to start butchering them.

So we did it: we shot a pig. One bullet between the eyes dropped the animal. We quickly cut its throat and plunged the knife into its heart to release the blood. Then we dragged the several-hundred-pound carcass closer to the house to wash, skin, and gut it. My partner threw up, I cried, and we both called each other terrible names.

Over time, we killed twenty pigs. I tried to rationalize it — I feed them; they feed me — but it never got any easier. My partner blamed me for “forcing” him to kill the pigs; I blamed him for breeding them. Finally we separated. He went on a three-month drunk, and I gave away forty-seven pigs.

Though I got a restraining order against my ex, he still sneaks onto the property to see the remaining pigs. I'm out here in the country all by myself, with an angry, drunk former partner lurking about. I don't know what to do with the rifle. Whenever I pick it up, my whole body shakes. I don't want to be a pig farmer. I never want to eat meat again. I just want to eat granola and listen to Peter, Paul and Mary.

Name Withheld

ON AUGUST 17, 1969, FIVE DAYS AFTER my ninth birthday, I became one of the last casualties of World War I.

Here's how it happened: My father and I were out for a Sunday-morning bicycle ride around the neighborhood. A block from home, we saw our elderly neighbor Mr. Olsen working in his yard. He hailed us, and I followed Dad into Mr. Olsen's driveway for what I hoped would be a brief exchange.

Mr. Olsen was cantankerous and railed against everything from stray dogs to dirty hippies. He wanted all “long-haired peaceniks” rounded up and shipped to a remote island. “Give them all guns and leave them there,” he said.

I was about to tell my father I'd ride home without him when Mr. Olsen said he had something to show me. He disappeared into the house and returned carrying a small French pistol, a souvenir from the Great War, of which he was a veteran.

I don't remember hearing a sound when Mr. Olsen's finger inexplicably squeezed the trigger. I do remember seeing a bright orange flash from the muzzle. When the bullet entered my chest, I wrapped my arms around myself and said, “Dad, what happened?”

My father shouted for Mr. Olsen to call an ambulance. Then, not content to wait for help to arrive, he lifted me in his arms and started running home, yelling, “My son's been shot!”

In our driveway, my father screamed for my mother to call the hospital and tell them we were coming. Then he lifted my shirt to find out where I'd been hit. When he saw the bloody hole at the base of my sternum, he assumed the worst.

Lying in the back seat of the Ford as my father sped off, I reached around to feel my back, searching for an exit wound. I didn't find a hole, but I did feel a lump, two inches to the right of my spine: the slug lodged underneath my skin.

From the back of the speeding car, I cried over and over, “Dad, I don't want to die. I don't want to die!”

My father kept saying, “Hang on, son! You're not going to die!”

The bullet had missed my heart by an inch. The only organ the slug had hit was my liver, piercing a neat little hole. Five days later I was discharged from the hospital, and within a few weeks I was riding my bicycle again as though nothing had happened.

Dad told me that all the traffic lights

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Fame and Fortune	July 1	January 2008
Parties	August 1	February 2008
The Last Time	September 1	March 2008
Stealing	October 1	April 2008
Chance Encounters	November 1	May 2008
Patriotism	December 1	June 2008

on the way to the hospital had been green, but he subsequently admitted that the lights had been red, and he had run them all without slowing down.

*Eric Little
Freeland, Washington*

MY FATHER OWNED A GUN BUT KEPT it in a locked closet. I never even saw it until I was cleaning out the house after both my parents had died.

I'm glad my father's gun was locked away. My parents' violent arguments kept our family constantly off balance when I was a child. My father often chased my mother around the house, threatening to kill her if he caught her. My younger siblings and I stayed out of the "race-track," as we dubbed the trail they followed through the clutter in our home. We never doubted that my father — barrel-chested with strong biceps from stocking grocery-store shelves — could make good on his threat. My mother, by contrast, was whippet thin, worn down by menopause, agoraphobia, and a three-pot-a-day coffee habit.

Most of the time my father eventually lost interest and stomped upstairs to sulk, but every so often he'd catch her, and then I would intervene. The eldest daughter, I was my mother's defender. I'd jump in front of my father, stand tall, look into his enraged eyes, and scream, "Stop!" Then I'd belittle his manhood, or scream profanities, or dare him to hit me: anything to give my mother time to escape. My father always backed off. I was proud of the way I'd protected my mother. A warrior maiden by age ten, I'd found that the safest place to be was in the heart of danger. Even today, when I feel threatened, I prefer to stand toe-to-toe with what's threatening me.

So when my husband became interested in trap shooting, I decided to join him. Guns made me nervous, but I'd be damned if I was going to sit at home and fret.

The first day, I shot a hundred rounds and hit only a single clay target. I also discovered that I loved to shoot. I hadn't known such elation since my youngest son's birth more than a decade earlier.

My reaction confused me: how could I enjoy handling an instrument of destruc-

tion, especially after the violence that I'd witnessed as a child? My friends were horrified. None of them had firearms in their homes, and they were alarmed to learn that we did, even though our guns were always disassembled, cleaned, and locked away after every outing.

I've tried to figure out what I like best about trap shooting: the weight of the heavy steel on my forearms, the warm haze that rises off the barrel, the lazy timelessness of waiting for my turn to shoot. No, what I love best is the complete focus it requires, the sense of being in the moment — something I otherwise find impossible to achieve. (I'm a compulsive multitasker.)

Right before I shoot, I clear my thoughts, lift the shotgun, and let my body take over. After I fire comes a moment of perfect emptiness, as the Heart Sutra describes: "No cognition — no attainment. Nirvana."

Now this warrior maiden carries a twelve-gauge.

*Anne Newkirk Niven
Point Arena, California*

GROWING UP IN A WORKING-CLASS family, I learned all about guns. My father spent his leisure time hunting. For my twelfth birthday, he gave me, his daughter, a BB gun. (I am his oldest child, and I've always suspected that he wished I'd been a boy.)

My mother expressly forbade me to shoot at animals. She needn't have worried; as a lover of all vulnerable creatures, I'd never shoot an animal. Instead, when I took my new gun hunting, I shot the windows of our car.

Name Withheld

I SPENT MY JUNIOR YEAR OF COL-lege studying abroad in a Middle Eastern country that was at war. Every day guns went off. Bombs blew up a bus an hour after I'd been on it. The university dorm was guarded by soldiers carrying submachine guns. My roommate, an army-intelligence officer, woke me up at night with her screaming. She dreamed of bombs falling and bullets flying.

By the time I returned home for my senior year, the exposure to war had me feeling traumatized and depressed.

I struggled to reconcile my recent life in a war zone with life on a U.S. campus, where "disaster" referred to a poor grade or failing relationship.

My roommate, a brilliant musician with a chilly personality, made matters more difficult. That spring she became obsessed with a game called Assassin, then popular on college campuses. The objective was to "kill" all the other players with water guns. The last survivor won the game, which could go on for weeks, even months. Contestants could be "killed" almost anytime, anywhere, creating an atmosphere of paranoia.

While I fell deeper into despair, my roommate excelled at Assassin. She was among five remaining players — out of a field of sixty — and was determined to win, no matter what it took. As the tension built, she began screaming in her sleep, "You're dead! You're dead!" Sometimes she'd sit bolt upright and shoot repeatedly at my chest with her fingers in the shape of a gun.

My depression worsened, and I ended up on a deserted mountaintop, holding a loaded Smith and Wesson I'd just bought at a gun shop. Convinced that everyone would be better off without me, I prepared to end my life. I'm not sure what weakened my resolve, but I came back down alive. Back on campus, I unloaded the gun, put it into my desk drawer, and wondered what to do next.

Minutes later, my roommate entered, puffy eyed and deflated. "I'm dead," she sobbed. "They killed me. It's over." I'd missed her assassination.

Name Withheld

MELODY AND I HAD NO BUSINESS being friends. I was just in seventh grade, and she was already in high school. She dated older men, knew how to get alcohol, and often snuck out of her parents' house at night. I'd never been drunk, never been grounded, never even been kissed.

Our friendship lasted exactly one summer. We listened to records in each other's rooms and swam every day at the lake. Melody's friends also hung out there, but they rarely spoke to me. They were busy smoking cigarettes, groping each other, and scrawling heavy-metal-band

logos on their ripped jeans. Sometimes I'd catch them staring at me, in my brightly colored shirts and pastel eye shadow, probably wondering how I'd gotten a seat at their picnic table. My favorite bands were Led Zeppelin and Guns N' Roses, but it wasn't enough to like the right music; you had to *live* it. I was like the uncool little sibling they were forced to drag along.

Melody's little brother Jason, on the other hand, fit right in. He and I were in the same grade, and he hated me. At the lake, he publicly listed my crimes: wears trendy clothes, gets good grades, doesn't smoke or drink, hasn't got Megadeth's latest album. The older kids laughed, but Melody would come to my defense, punching him in the arm and saying, "You're such a little asshole!"

One afternoon I was at Melody's house. We were sitting on the floor of her bedroom, engrossed in a magazine. The door was open, and Jason walked in. In a calm, inviting tone, he said, "Look up."

I found myself staring into the barrel of a handgun. I'd never seen a gun outside of the movies. I certainly had never had one pointed at me. I fixated on the black opening at the end of the barrel, out of which my death might come rushing at any second.

With a sound like an ambulance siren, I screamed and curled into a ball, hands over my head.

I heard Melody yell, "Get out of my room, asshole, and put that away! Dad will be so pissed if he finds out you touched it."

I felt grateful to her for defending me. Then I realized that Melody wasn't as angry about the weapon as she was about the intrusion.

I finally understood: I did not belong in this place. I walked home, where my dog and my mom and my dinner were waiting.

*Becca C.
Sacramento, California*

I WAS A PRETTY LITTLE HIPPIE GIRL living in a houseboat community known as the "Waterfront," where everyone seemed opposed to weapons, war, and violence of any kind. Confused and inse-

cure, I was looking to change the world, have a good time, and find a man to call my own.

I found Gene, a ruggedly handsome waterfront cowboy who played in a rock-and-roll band and worked on tugboats. He was a real charmer, but he was also an alcoholic who kept a bottle with him all day long. I soon discovered that Gene had a violent temper and liked to turn it on women. But I was sure that if I could learn to be a better girlfriend, he would change back into the dashing man I'd fallen for.

I worked as a waitress and paid for our car, the dock fee for our boat, the groceries, and Gene's vodka. But I balked when he asked me to buy him a powerful, large-caliber handgun. He regaled me with tales of his marksmanship in the army and told me every cowboy needed a pistol. I finally compromised and bought him a small-caliber rifle, which couldn't be concealed.

I was horrified to come home from work one day and find him taking "target practice" on the graceful sea gulls. "Obnoxious, messy, bad-tempered scavengers," he called them. I said nothing.

Not content with killing gulls, Gene began shooting holes in my personal possessions: my sewing machine, my paintings, the TV. He even shot the dishes off the table when he didn't like the dinner I'd cooked. Scared for my life, I began telling anyone who'd listen about the drinking and abuse. But Gene was a beloved local character. Everyone dismissed my pleas with a shrug, sure that I was exaggerating. So I kept my fears to myself and began drinking to quell the anxiety.

One July afternoon I came home from the restaurant to find Gene sprawled drunk with a friend. The ugly glint in Gene's eye set off an alarm in my head. I knew I had to get out of there. Remaining outwardly calm, I asked if they were hungry and offered to run to the store to buy food. Gene just squinted at me and grinned viciously. I managed to walk out the door and get in my car.

Turning out of the drive onto the street, I heard Gene shout, "Fucking cunt!" and felt something hit me hard in the head. The windshield cracked into

a million spider webs. I heard a whistling sound and a crack, and my head was hit again, as if by a hot rock. When I reached up to touch it, I felt warm liquid oozing through my hair. The whistling, cracking noises continued. My hand yanked the door handle, and I threw myself from the moving car.

I must have knocked the gearshift into reverse as I jumped, because the car rolled backward. Thirteen more shots went into the driver's seat as I tumbled over the pavement, leaving a trail of blood. My anger was all that kept me from losing consciousness: *That son of a bitch tried to kill me!*

A young man who'd been a medic in Vietnam kept me alive until the ambulance got there. As I felt myself being lifted onto a gurney, I debated whether to sink blissfully into oblivion or fight like mad to stay conscious. My anger kept me from passing out.

Of the seventeen shots fired, four of them had hit me, three in the head. Gene was arrested, but the attempted-murder charge was reduced to "reckless use of a firearm in a public place." He served ten months. Years later he died of cirrhosis of the liver.

Today I thank God I made it. I thank God for that fast-acting medic. And I thank God I didn't give in to Gene's pleas for a larger-caliber gun.

Name Withheld

(end of excerpt)