



If It Had to Perish Twice

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THE GUN SLIDES into my hand and, without thinking, without hesitating, I pull the trigger. Being thirteen years old, I expect to hear noise. Something obnoxious and angry, like in *Die Hard*, but instead am disappointed by a whimpering click. Still, the sound—that hollow, deadening click—is enough to make me twitch. Behind the display case the clerk laughs.

“Jesus,” he says, “just wait till someday when your daddy here buys you a *real* gun.”

Within the hour I will have my first gun. A Crosman-760 Pumpmaster pneumatic air rifle. I could have used my hard-earned money on one of those sleek pellet handguns—I could have been *Robocop*. Instead, I go with something more reminiscent of guerrilla warfare.

If I gave it a name I have since forgotten what. Probably something lame like Freedom, or Widowmaker. I was unoriginal like that. Maybe I called it Robin, who happened to be the girl I was crushing on back in the seventh grade.

All my friends have BB guns. One even has a butterfly knife. He lives on the sketchy side of town and goes to a magnet school which back in those days we think of as code for retarded (back when we said the word without shame or guilt). He shows it to us at the park, claiming he found it stained with blood. His hand is all scarred with tiny scratches from practicing tricks.

“This probably killed someone,” he says. We all lean closer.

August in Missouri. Since leaving home at eighteen I've spent August in gulf coast Texas and walked the streets of the Yucatan Peninsula in August wearing slacks and a collared shirt and tie. This feels worse. The sun is a white hot bulb and nobody seems to locate the off switch. The air is humid and stagnant. Like bathing in melted butter.

My wife and I live with our four kids in a second-floor condo. The blinds and curtains are shut. The bedroom doors are closed to bottle-in the cold air. None of it matters. Heat rises. I watch the thermostat tick up. We're slowly baking inside our own home.

The news station shows footage from Ferguson. Tear gas. Pepper spray bullets. The CNN anchor with delicate blond hair asks very earnestly, "Why not just use water cannons?" Her co-anchor sits there blinking in disbelief.

"Time for the pool," my wife says.

Before we leave the phone rings. It's my father.

"They're burning down your city."

"No," I remind him, "we're two hours away."

"Better stay safe," he says.

I have no idea what he means by this. I guess it's just one of those things fathers are supposed to say in case something really does go wrong. As a father I'm learning the words, "I told you so," is a key weapon in our parenting arsenal.

The caravan of children and towels and sunscreen steps out into the sun. Instinctively, our eyes close.

My parents are a bit reluctant to put a BB gun in my thirteen year-old hands. I have to compliment my mother on her new hairstyle and not make fun of her when she talks with the trees in the backyard. I have to scrub the dirty dental equipment in my father's office for almost a year before he entertains more than two words in the conversation. Like most decent parents, my mother and father understand I lack the responsibility and temperament to practice my second amendment rights. Once, when my older brother cheated in a game of

Monopoly, I chased him around the neighborhood with a butter knife threatening to cut off his balls. And the egg I had to carry around school and pretend it was a baby? Scrambled within a few hours.

When they finally cave I have to sign a contract. They impress upon me the gravity of this agreement by reminding me what I had learned in Sunday school about Moses and the Ten Commandments. The Jews who disobeyed and worshipped the Golden Calf were butchered. My father hands me the pen.

“A BB gun can be like a Golden Calf,” my mother says rather solemnly.

Whatever. I sign it. No doubt there is still a copy of this contract in a scrapbook somewhere in my parents’ attic. Thou shalt not touch the BB gun without permission. Thou shalt not remove the BB gun beyond the threshold of the family property. Thou shalt not aim the BB gun at any living creature, including thine own kin. And so on.

Two days after buying the gun I get bored shooting cans full of water and go hunting my brother. I aim for his leg and hit him in the neck. I lose gun privileges for a month.

My wife and I own two guns. One is a dollar-store pump-action water pistol. The other looks something like a Russian Kalashnikov painted neon blue. My son bought it with birthday money. It’s made of a hard, camouflage plastic. When you pull the trigger it makes an obnoxious rattling noise my son finds enchanting. It’s a dangerous gun. My toes are permanently disfigured from all the times I’ve stepped on it escorting children to and from the bathroom in the pitch black hallways at night.

My son insists on bringing the water gun to the pool. He pretends he’s trying to kill something. Bam. The tree is dead. Bam. There goes a bird. Bam. His sister is dead. Bam. Bam. Bam. It wouldn’t matter if I took it away. He’d use his fingers and shoot bullets made of air. If I took that away he’d imagine he’s holding an invisible lightsaber. I’ve always mocked those parents who won’t let their kids play cops and robbers and roll my eyes when a child is suspended from school for using a finger gun. I keep telling myself it’s harmless, it’s what boys do, hell, this is exactly what I did and I’m an upstanding citizen, but I can’t help but feel that somehow things are different, that I’m letting him believe it’s okay to weaponize the world.

I'm holding my beloved Pumpmaster, cradling it practically, when the *Cosby Show* is interrupted by news coverage of the L.A. riots.

"Is that nearby?" I want to know.

"Turn the channel," my mother orders.

My father flips the channels between sitcom laugh tracks and shaky footage of burning stores and rioters roaming over vast seas of shattered glass. The camera angles are deliberate to make the rioters look like grunting cavemen with spittle dripping down their chins. They wear bandanas and wife beaters. They throw Molotov cocktails. They loot. They fire weapons. They run.

"Thugs," my father says.

I sit on the floor without blinking, slowly pumping the Crosman-760.

Our condo pool is like a little island bathtub held up on stilts in the center of a manmade pond. A wooden walkway runs from the street sidewalk across the pond where it joins with the pool deck. A chain-linked fence with barbed-wire runs along the borders of the deck. The door to the walkway is heavily gated: a big, iron door with a numerical pin pad. To get the code the condo commission makes you take a monastic vow of silence. It's like a baby version of Alcatraz.

Nobody else is at the pool. The kids do cannon balls trying to drown out the noise of cicadas. My son fingers the bruise on my chest. It's pretty in a strange way with its swirl of colors: purple, yellow, blue. A few days earlier my wife and I went paintballing. This might have been something of a mid-life crisis. Four kids in a 1500-square-foot condo will make you want to settle marital differences with a paintball shootout. We both have bruises. It was the first time I had fired a gun since I was thirteen. My son is fascinated with the bruise, as if I had been touched by the gods. Cool, he says. He knows I was shot, but I'm not convinced he can distinguish between a bullet and a paint pellet and the water he sprays in my face.

From the pool we can see across the pond to the car pulling up to the curb. Two black college students get out. We see them watching us across the pond.

They wave. We wave back. They go to the door. It rattles furiously.

“Hey!” one of the guys yells. “Open the door.”

It’s a college town. We’re not in the habit of giving away the code to the pool door. Once, someone gave away the code and the next morning we fished out a dead raccoon from the pool with a Cheez Whiz canister lodged down its throat. Maybe it wasn’t the college kids. Maybe that raccoon had it coming. Maybe we’ll all get rabies. We’ve refused to open the pool door to other people. Old ladies wanting to do water aerobics. People who look like us; people with kids, even. We’re not snobby white elitists who believe the world is our oyster. We’re poor graduate students who follow the rules.

We try to explain they need the code. They say they forgot it. We tell them to contact the condo commission. The two guys keep hollering. We apologize. Their words get lost crossing the pond. We pretend not to hear them.

“Racists!” one of the guys shouts. He kicks at the grassy slope and spits. His friend laughs. We sit in the pool a little confused. Racists. Wait. Are we racists?

One of the guys with thick veins in his neck that frighten me, climbs along the outside edge of the deck walkway until he’s over the middle of the pond, hops over, then circles back to the door and lets his friend inside.

They sit on the pool chairs and stare at the water. They look sheepish, almost ashamed. They don’t look at us. We don’t look at them. As they leave, I’m horrified as my son aims the water gun and pretends to shoot them in the back.

It was maybe a day or two after L.A. riots started that they canceled our school. Torrance is less than twenty miles from South Central—which means more than an hour in L.A. traffic—but the paranoia goes airborne overnight. Even Palos Verdes Estates, the epicenter of white privilege, is under curfew. Rumor is the rioters are being assisted by the Bloods and Crips and plan on cruising through Torrance after sunset with the headlights on their cars turned off. Those unsuspecting drivers who give a courtesy headlight flash will be instantly driven off the road and gunned down. Rumors multiply like viruses. We are advised to be wary of Cadillacs.

On the second day of cancelled school a few friends arrive on my doorstep brandishing their BB guns. With my mother not home I take my BB gun from the closet, load it, and start pumping.

For the next hour we patrol the neighborhood, shooting off our guns at birds and fences and anything else that seems remotely threatening. We're about eight hundred years late to the Children's Crusade, but we don't care about history. We're dumb enough to believe we're making history.

In a group of friends I often walk behind everyone. This is a habit of being the tallest in the class and always sent to the back row during group photos. In photographs I often exist as a disembodied floating head, trying to hide my tallness, trying to disappear. Not when I have my BB gun. I'm in front, yelling, surprised by my own visibility. I feel strong. Heroic, even. The gun is like a wedge between me and a world I don't understand but want to pretend I can conquer.

My heart races. It's still racing hours later when I'm lying in bed, everyone asleep except me, listening for the sound of rioters so I can grab the BB gun beneath my bed and spring into action.

For now we patrol. We taunt the rioters twenty miles away with chants of "Hell no! We won't go!" We sing lyrics to clandestine songs by N.W.A., Bel Biv Devoe and Another Bad Creation. At the end of the street that T-bones into Crenshaw near Pacific Coast Highway we hold up our BB guns so the people know we're here to protect them. A few slow down, others honk, but otherwise they keep driving.

We make another loop. Many of our neighbors are Koreans and Japanese and Filipinos. Nobody stops us on our patrol, but I imagine the neighbors are peering through their curtains confused—if not alarmed—why this underage white militia freely commanding the street does not make the evening news.

Back in the condo it's late, way past my children's bedtime, but on the television the sky lights up with Molotov cocktails that mingle with the smoke bombs to create an orange haze. The protestors, hands raised, are like a dark sea of waves rocking back and forth against the police barricades. It's oddly

mesmerizing. Today Ferguson. Later it will be Baltimore, Baton Rouge, Dallas. Even the university right up the street from our house. As St. Louis burns I wonder: twenty years from now, how will my children remember this?

I sit on the floor gently burping my newborn daughter. She can't even open her eyes for more than a few seconds. It makes me grateful. My other daughter, almost six, is confused.

"Those are the same guys from the pool," she says, pointing to the protestors. She's sunburned. I rub aloe vera on her back.

"No, this is different," I tell her.

"No, it's the same ones," she insists. "Look at them. Look at them."

I can only wonder where she's learned this. Does she look at white people and think they're all the same person? Maybe it's innocent. A kid reflex. Maybe I've already failed her.

She persists with her questions. What's happening? Why are the police shooting people? Why are the black people upset? Are they bad people? Is that nearby? Are we safe?

"It's nothing," I say after a prolonged pause. "It's far away. It has nothing to do with us." That last sentence leaves an icy wedge in my throat. It's a lie. She's smarter than that. It's like I am Cordelia and she is Lear. Nothing will come from nothing. Speak again. But I don't.

I've never talked with my kids about race. Part of me is naïve enough to think that if we don't talk about it the issue will go away. Truth be told, I'm terrified of it, like a monster lurking under the bed that won't go away. Many synesthetes have the remarkable ability to see words in shapes and colors and tastes. Sensory fusion. The word *there* might taste like gooey banana bread. *Tomorrow* takes the shape of a green rhombus. I imagine synesthetes are the least racist people in the world. For them the world is a fusion of the senses. A world without arbitrary boundaries. The rest of us are not so lucky. I wonder what *race* would taste like? Gritty. Bitter. Chewy. A word that's hard to swallow.

What words can I offer my daughter? How do I explain that Michael Brown is neither hero nor villain? Somewhere between innocent and guilty? What are the words that express thick shades of grey?

Too often my words come out in black and white stains that won't go away.

After dinner, between commercial breaks in the live broadcast of downtown South Central, my father abruptly announces I will be joining him for a drive.

“What about the curfew?”

“Hmph,” dad grunts.

He really does make that noise. Hmph. Like a sneer. He’s sitting on the couch, head tilted back, eyes closed, chewing his fingernails. Hmph. Hmph.

He knows the rumors. He must. How could he not know about the Bloods and Crips who, at that very moment, have selected names from a phonebook and, without question, are cruising around with darkened headlights just waiting to intercept an unsuspecting dentist of German descent and his anxious son in their GM mini-van—the Battle Wagon, we affectionately called it—on their way to nowhere in particular.

We drive for hours. He never says a word. He just drives. Even now I’m not entirely sure why he did it—why he *needed* to drive past curfew, or why he *needed* to take me with him. There is a lot I never understood about my father. Why he talks with his eyes closed. Why I woke up once at 3 A.M. and found him in his underwear, gnawing on a block of cheese and watching *Dances with Wolves*.

Very few cars are on the road. We do see one car with its headlights turned off. A salty knot forms in my throat. My dad gives a courtesy headlight flash. It speeds past us.

“Hmph,” dad grunts.

I stare at the bruise leftover from the paintball shootout. It will be gone in few days. I could see the pellet coming at me. Time felt like it slowed down. I couldn’t move. I keep thinking how strange it was to fire a gun after more than twenty years. I remember being alone in my backyard, the BB gun making a dull vibration each time I pulled the trigger. The can exploded, then silence. But on the paintball field the sensation is different. Things are moving. The air buzzes. There’s a primal tingling racing through my body. I shoot and the faceless enemy in masks shoots back. I run and the faceless enemy in masks runs

too. Each time I pull the trigger I'm euphoric. My throat burns. It feels like I'm floating. I want to shoot again and again to keep the feeling going. There's nothing enchanting about the bruise. It's pathetic. When the game finishes we laugh about our bruises. Michael Brown wasn't given the luxury of a bruise. It's a reminder that two hours away, or just on the other side of the pond, is still worlds apart.

Two weeks after the L.A. riots, a Sunday, instead of church services our congregation loads into mini-vans and drives into South Central to assist with the clean-up. It is my first time ever in downtown Los Angeles. Our caravan creeps through the rubble. My memories of that trip are, admittedly, flimsy and almost unreal, but often when I watch an episode of *The Walking Dead* and see the blasted urban landscapes of a post-apocalyptic world I feel the same eerie sensation of that drive through South Central. A river of gutter trash. Crippled buildings. People wandering like sleepwalkers. Charred cars. Glass on the asphalt forming an errant constellation. It was a sad, unholy sacrament.

Within minutes of our arrival we get separated from the church caravan. My father, who never missed an opportunity to remind us he was an Eagle Scout, prides himself on never getting lost. Even when he does—which was often—he denies it. Strategic traveling, he called it.

“We're lost,” he says.

“Lock the doors. Don't stare out the windows, boys,” my mother commands.

My mother, who never missed an opportunity to curse, unloads a reservoir of expletives which to this day has not been equaled by hip-hop artists.

“We're lost, we're lost,” my father keeps saying.

We never leave the car. My father, fidgeting in the driver's seat, never looked so happy to be so lost.

I chew my fingernails. My daughter watches St. Louis go up in smoke. She's come to the conclusion the black people have their hands up because they're dancing. I don't deny this. I'm supposed to have answers. I'm supposed to say

something profound. Something enlightening. For someone who has spent the better part of a decade studying words, it's pathetic I can't find the right ones. I fidget on the floor, changing the channel until we hear the comfortable noise of a sitcom laugh track.

"What are you doing?" my wife asks, gathering up the kids for bed.

"Yeah, daddy," my daughter mimics, "what are *you* doing?"

I avert my eyes. My throat burns. It burns behind my ears too. Down my spine is an icy tingle that won't go away as I try to get lost in some other channel.

"Nothing," I say. "Nothing."