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HOLDING THE GUN

My father brought out a handgun: a small, black service revolver that fit easily into the palm of his hand. "I got this from my father," he said. "He used to keep it at the bank.

"It's hammerless," he added. "You just pull the trigger."

He demonstrated by holding the gun at arm's length and pointing the muzzle at the floor. The chamber rotated as he squeezed the trigger, and the firing pin clicked.

"The problem is, the barrel moves when you pull the trigger, so you can't aim. Someone would have to be very close. Either that, or you'd have to keep shooting and hope you get lucky."

I pictured a banker—my grandfather—holding the gun and firing rapidly at a robber. The criminal would be wearing a black bandanna and clutching a bag of cash. He would bob and weave as he ran for the door. Behind him, my grandfather would be spraying bullets into the surrounding air.

"Was the bank ever robbed?" my mother asked.

"No," my father said.

I turned on the television and watched a show about a professional burglar. The man was named after a gun brand, Remington. He had switched sides and now enforced the law. He didn't wear a bandanna for a disguise; in fact, the camera zoomed in often on his stern facial features.

As I watched, Remington used his skills to break into an art museum. Laser beams laced the passageway to an inner room. In his black catsuit, Remington slithered under the shafts of light to reach the prize: an object in a glass case.

Not surprisingly, Remington had a girlfriend, a woman who had never been a criminal. She had always been straight-arrow and now owned a sleuthing company. She was Remington's boss. He would not "break and enter" unless she told him to do so.

I had to stop watching the show when my father came home from the local bar. "The rich get richer," he announced to no one, "and the poor get poorer."

My mother heard him and said, "We should be grateful for what we have."

"We'll have more," my father said, "when we take the wealth and redistribute it."

" 'I was complaining I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.' " my mother said. "That's what I learned."

"I've had enough of your Confucianism, my father said. "It's more like Confucianism. This is America, not China. We'll take from the rich and give to the poor."

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I picked up the service revolver and spun the cylinder. I tested my ability to aim by holding the gun at arm's length and squeezing the trigger. I wanted to hold the barrel steady while the internal parts moved. But the pressure of my finger on the trigger pulled the barrel slightly to the right. I considered aiming a bit to the left, but how would I know how far to the left? It made no sense to aim off the target in order to hit the target. I figured I should just fire as many times as possible. That would stop whoever was coming at me.

My father lined up his new artworks on the floor and called me to look at them. The paintings showed a hunched female figure in different landscapes. I recognized the landscapes as scenes outside our windows: farm fields in the foreground, wooded hills in the background.

I looked at the images and said nothing.

"Don't you have anything to say?" my father asked.

I didn't reply.

"Nobody cares what I do," he said. "The problem is, I have children, and I can't pay for children. We're going to change our lifestyle. We're going to live off the land. We're going to stake a claim and grow our own food."

He pointed with a finger. "Go out and clear the land."

I walked out to our back yard and looked at a bare patch of ground. The growing season hadn't started yet. I picked up some fist-sized pebbles and set them on the border of the potential garden.

At one point, a groundhog ambled into the yard and poked around. The animal was in the open when my father appeared with his handgun. He fired one shot, and the rodent sat up. It tucked its forelegs under its chin and stared with weak eyes in the direction of the report, then moved off to safety.

"There went our dinner," my father said.

My brother and I decided to go camping, but we didn't want to walk to the woods. We pitched our tent in our back yard.

The tent was a two-man pup. We could lie in it, but we couldn't stretch our arms or legs. We had sleeping bags, but no cushions. We lay like mummies—arms crossed in front—on the hard ground. After dark, the air became cold, and moisture collected on every nonliving surface. We shivered in our down-filled bags.

We heard a rustling outside. "What's that?" I asked.

"The wind," my brother said, "or leaves blown by the wind."

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"No. It's an animal, or a ghost."

"It's a cat, or the ghost of a cat."

I was sure the ghost was human. I pictured an ectoplasmic figure in a white gown floating over the lawn. The figure made no sound—no screams or moans—but its gown flapped in the wind.

We lay in silence for a while. Then we climbed from our bags and ran from the tent. I looked around the dark yard, listening for the flapping of a spirit's gown. Was it a murder victim, or a bedsheet on a clothesline? Whatever its composition, it was coming, and we were in its way.

When my father returned from the bar, he was having trouble walking. He steadied himself against the kitchen stove.

"The sheriff can't keep us down," he said. "I've got a band of Merry Men, and we're going to rise up together. But first we'll go to the mead hall, listen to the bard, and drink that honey water."

"We had opium eaters where I grew up," my mother said. "But we rebelled against the drug lords who were making us sleep."

"I don't care about your Boxers or your kickboxers. The ruling dynasty lives in Washington, D.C. We're going there with our bows and arrows."

My father left the house again, presumably to meet his cheerful men.

I looked for the service revolver but couldn't find it. I remembered it was kept in a valise, the kind a burglar like Remington would carry. But the case wasn't where it was supposed to be. I moved furniture and boxes; I cleared a space down to the floor, but I didn't see the gun. I wanted the weapon, if not to fire it, at least to hold it, to feel its weight in my hand.