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Shots

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SHOTS

MY FATHER TOOK me with him to test-fire his restored seven-millimeter Mauser. We walked uphill, away from the houses, until we came to a snowy field.

"This rifle was used by cavalry in the First World War," my father said. "It's so old the chamber might explode."

He held the gun at his side, and I covered my ears with my hands. When he fired, I saw an orange flash and light-blue powder smoke, and the air rippled around him. He worked the bolt and fired again. The report echoed along the side of the mountain.

"Mussolini had some good ideas," my father said. "He knew the difference between humans and people. I also know the difference. But I'm not wearing a black shirt."

I walked forward a few yards and found the tracks the bullets had made through snow and dirt. When I looked closely, I found the mangled slugs, shaped like small mushrooms.

"If you kill a person in self-defense," my father said, "it's not murder."

At home, I went to my room and pulled the shades to shut out daylight. When my mother found me, she tried to cheer me up.

"Your first word," she told me, "was 'gun.'"

"Once, when we were watching a movie," she continued, "I tried to teach you a new word. I pointed at the screen and said, 'Cowboy! Cowboy!'

"You looked and said, 'Singing gunslinger Gene Autry!'

"By the time you were two, you were speaking in multisyllables. Then you stopped talking. I didn't know if you had no thoughts or just didn't want to tell them. I knew you could hear me, because you answered questions—but only with single syllables. I don't know why."

My sister ran out of her room in the middle of the night. "My window shade went up," she said, "without anybody touching it."

"Go back to sleep," my mother said.

"I can't," my sister said.

She decided to sleep in the room I shared with my brother, so I moved out, into her room.

During the night, I did not hear the window shade snap up unexpectedly. Instead, I imagined I was pinned to the ground by a sniper. I stayed flat, keeping my head down. But the rifle bullet hit, and I couldn't move, I couldn't even crawl, because I was going to die.

When I returned to my bed in the morning, I saw two people in it: two thatches of dark hair poked above the covers. The longer hair belonged to my sister; the shorter was my father's.

Later, when I was alone with my brother, I asked what my father and sister had been doing.

"What do you think?" my brother asked.

"I think they were doing something," I said.

"Maybe they were," he said, "but whenever I woke up and looked, they were just lying there."

I went to my father's gun rack and picked up a shotgun. I raised it to my shoulder, looked down the barrel and aligned the bead with the curved metal. I sighted at a ceramic lamp, a mirror, a window. I put my finger on the trigger and clicked off the safety.

For some reason, I didn't pull the trigger. Instead, I pulled back the bolt. When I did, a live cartridge twirled out of the chamber.

I replaced the cartridge, closed the bolt, and put the gun back on the rack, so no one would know I had touched it.

At dinner, my father delivered a short tirade.

"People tell me that if I don't like it here, I can leave," he said. "But I'm not going to Russia; I'm going to Louisiana. I have an offer to teach art there.

"My parents always told me to get a job. When I said I wanted to teach, they said, 'Who can you teach?'"

"I can teach young adults in Beauregard County about impasto, chiaroscuro and techniques of gesso."

"Why go so far?" my mother asked.

"The Dalai Lama had some good ideas," my father said. "He gathered his disciples and went into exile in India. I'm going into exile, too, as a guru on the bayou."

"When you leave," my mother said, "I'm buying the children a television."

I found a can of black powder and poured a pile of the pellets onto a metal table, then mixed in azure pigment from my chemistry set. When I lit the powder mound, it burned with an energetic hiss and a blue flame.

Next, I figured a way to contain the mixture so that it would explode. I found a piece of copper tubing, the kind used for plumbing, and packed it with tinted gunpowder. I made a fuse from match heads and sealed the device with solder.

I waited till dark, then fetched my brother and sister and took them, along with the ordnance, to the schoolyard. I placed my bomb on the ground and lit the fuse. The three of us hid behind a small hill and waited.

There was no explosion, only a shower of sparkling blue teardrops in the shape of a blossom.

A fire caught in the dry grass and spread outward from my homemade grenade. My brother and sister and I stamped out the flames, then headed home.

Inside, we checked the weekly listings, turned on the television, and settled in for serious viewing.

When my father returned from wherever he had been, he collected all of his ammunition and took it outside. He picked up the boxes of cartridges one by one and threw them as far as he could. Then he came inside, picked up the television set, and pitched it through a window.

He didn't stop throwing things until my mother called the police and said he was trying to kill us.

I took my .22-caliber peashooter to the hill above town. I looked for a target and found a glass gallon jug filled with partly frozen water. I set it on a rock, stepped back and took aim. When I fired, a mist of glass, water and ice sprayed into the air.

I found increasingly smaller objects to shoot at: rusted cans, empty shotgun shells. I practiced until my support hand didn't waver, my trigger finger didn't jerk, and my shots didn't often miss.

I decided that someday I would become a pacifist.