The Boy Behind the Curtain
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Sunday afternoons I was given five or six bullets and entrusted to roam at liberty in the lonelier paddocks of local farms. This was a big deal, a privilege earned from months of training and supervision during which the dogma of firearms safety was drilled into me. I knew about the folly of climbing through fences with a weapon. Likewise the dangers of ricochet near water. I understood trajectory, the effects of wind, and the perils of firing into vegetation that could obscure livestock or an unsuspecting hiker. I observed the sanctity of the safety-catch. I never walked with the rifle cocked. Nor would I travel even the shortest distance in a vehicle with a round in the breech. And once the shooting was over I knew how to render the weapon safe, to clear the breech and check twice in a manner both ritualistic and pedantic.

Often enough on these solo excursions I came back without having fired a shot. True, the rabbits were skittish and the foxes wily. But there were moments when, having got the drop on something, I just couldn’t bring myself to pull the trigger. Not that I was squeamish. I’d killed snakes, birds and roos with hardly a thought. And it didn’t have to be a creature in my sight. Sometimes I couldn’t even let loose at a rusty tin. Because I was stricken by the very idea of the rifle, its eerie potential and authority, cowed by the sinister power of the thing, and burdened by the weight of responsibility that came with it.

The Lithgow was no blunderbuss – it made a noise like a damp Christmas cracker – and it lacked the slick glamour of the Winchester repeater Chuck Connors made famous in the TV show The Rifleman, or the Tommy gun Vic Morrow tooted so nonchalantly in Combat! All the same, our family gun was a killer; I’d destroyed enough things and creatures with it to know that. Some Sundays it was enough to cradle death in your hands and just hold fire. I was appalled by its atavistic potency, yet I was entirely in its thrall.
At our place during the seventies, in the days before mandatory gun safes, the Lithgow lived at the back of my parents’ wardrobe, behind a thicket of jackets and ties and police tunics. The bolt – the rifle’s firing mechanism – was kept separately in the drawer on my father’s side of the bed, next to the envelopes for the church collection. Lying snug against it were packs of antacids as big and orange as shotgun cartridges. In the cut-glass jars on the dressing table, salted in with the old man’s uniform buttons and old coins, were a few tarnished rounds of ammunition – .22 shorts and longs, the odd hollow-point, perhaps a .38. None of this was a secret. My parents understood that I knew it was all there. But I was not allowed to touch any of it. Handling the rifle indoors without adult supervision was forbidden; this was a fundamental rule. Of course there were worse sins, like pointing a gun at another person – that was completely unthinkable, the action of a dangerous fool or a ‘crim’, in the family parlance. I saw the sense in these regulations and mores and accepted them without reservation. I would have been disgusted by someone who flouted them.

And yet, at thirteen, whenever I had the house to myself, I went straight to the wardrobe and drew the rifle out. I handled it soberly, with appropriate awe, a respect laced with fear, but then I carried it to the window and aimed it at innocent passers-by. This didn’t happen only a time or two – I did it for months. I stood behind the filmy curtain, alert and alone, looking down the barrel of a gun. At strangers.

We hadn’t been in town long that year. The house was a modest fibro affair in a working-class suburb of Albany, but from its position on the ridge where Campbell Road crested the hill it commanded quite a view, and without even knowing why, I was compulsively converting that vista into a field of fire, reducing our new home to a pillbox. Below me lay the slumping rooftops and rainswept trees of a peaceful southern port and from my eyrie I was keeping a vigil,
the purpose of which eluded me. I was a placid kid in a loving, supportive family in a home where there was neither machismo nor violence. And there I was, acting like a sniper.

None of the townsfolk labouring uphill to pass by had wronged me – I didn’t know any of them, I was a total newbie – so I had no intention of harming or frightening them. But to view something through a gun sight is to see it jump or fall or explode in your mind’s eye. You know perfectly well that if you pull that trigger your target will be transformed in an instant, perhaps forever. I convinced myself that without its firing bolt the rifle wasn’t even a weapon. Moreover, it was only a *lethal* weapon if I slipped a bullet into the breech. And of course I was hardly about to do that, was I? But all this was sophistry and self-justification. Because some dark part of me knew I had the means of destruction close at hand. The makings were all about me in the room. And therein lay the queasy buzz.

Furtive as I was, I saw nothing sinister in this new habit. It didn’t strike me as creepy or nefarious. No one knew they had a gun pointed at them, so I wasn’t causing any fear. I did feel guilty about abusing my parents’ trust, but I told myself there wasn’t anything bad in what I was up to, and certainly nothing dangerous.

When I think of that kid at the window, the boy I once was, I get a lingering chill. Back then I had only the murkiest notion of how much trouble I was courting. Not for a moment did I imagine being one of those unsuspecting pedestrians or drivers, how it might feel to look up and see a gunman training a weapon on me. I’d never had a firearm aimed my way. At thirteen I didn’t yet know what that felt like. I was careful to remain unseen, but all it would have taken was for the barrel to snag on the curtain, for a neighbour to glance up, for someone to catch my silhouette, and things could have unravelled very quickly indeed. Appearing to ‘go armed so as to cause fear’ is a serious offence in most Australian jurisdictions. All over the world adults and minors brandishing replicas or toys have been mistakenly
shot dead by officers of the law, and even before the so-called Age of Terror and the mass panics it has spawned, it was no small thing to be seen menacing strangers with an actual firearm. To be caught doing it in a country town where your dad’s a cop – well, an event like that can be life-defining.

So what, you might ask, did I think I was doing all those months? It’s an uncomfortable question, and even now I struggle to answer it. I was a rational, intelligent and obedient child. But for a season, in the matter of the family gun, I just couldn’t help myself.

It was such a charged and sneaky compulsion. I waited for any opportunity; anticipation was part of the thrill. An empty house brought a febrile mood that was almost erotic. Having checked to see I was truly alone I’d stalk into the front room, reach into the cupboard, lay the rifle on the bed and survey the street and the valley below. And only when I took up my sentry post with the weapon in my arms did the jangly feeling begin to recede. Soon enough a stranger would come by, on the way to the Spencer Park shops or heading up to the rec centre in the lee of the school. It didn’t matter if they were an adult or a child, a man or a woman, I’d draw a bead on them and everything around me and within me would slow down. Once they were contained by the rifle’s simple open sight a person seemed smaller, easier to apprehend. The narrow focus calmed me. The visual imposition of the basic notch and tongue defused something. Not that I could have expressed it in those terms then. I’m not even sure they’re the right words now.

Looking back I recognize this period as a time when I felt besieged. Suddenly confronted by a fresh town and another house, with the strange new high school hulking ominously out there on the opposing ridge, and puberty doing weird things to my body and mind, I didn’t just treat the rifle as a source of talismanic power – it was a stilling point, a centring locus, like a religious icon. After all, there’s no shape or image in modern culture to match that of the
gun. Nothing else has its universal authority or saving promise. In our time the image of the cross has lost its potency, the national flag is debased and divisive. No, the gun is the supreme image. Only the dollar sign can rival it for the visceral response it produces, the power it radiates.

As it turned out, nothing happened. Nothing bad, that is. Thankfully, I didn’t shoot anyone, and neither was I sprung. After a few months I just stopped playing with the rifle and to this day I don’t know why. There was no revelation and no intervention. My mood changed, which is to say I grew out of the infatuation. Besides, with three siblings, a father who worked shifts and a stay-at-home mother to contend with, I found it increasingly rare to get the house to myself. For a while I wondered if my parents had twigged, but it turns out they had no idea what I’d been up to. When I asked them about it decades later they were mortified, and understandably so.

Somehow I stopped needing the rifle. By the time summer came around I was more resigned to my new life, less threatened by the alien worlds of the town and the school. In fact I began to enjoy them. I made friends, went surfing, fell in love, discovered ways of rendering myself amusing and within six months went from being a fearful, meek little fellow to a bit of a mouthy pest in class. Much of it, no doubt, was mere performance, faking it until I was making it, but it was better than cowering. I hadn’t even consciously recognized how miserable I’d been, but come Christmas I was a different boy, as if, out of rank desperation, I’d recast myself entirely. I rediscovered words, learnt to project myself with new and better ones, to defend myself with jokes and stories. As a little boy I was always a reader, and adults often remarked upon how articulate I was, but for a period there in 1973 I lost the means of expression. I felt I’d been consigned to exile but I lacked a language that matched my apprehensions and anxieties. Without words I was
dangerously powerless. The gun served as a default dialect, a jerry-built lingo that may have been less sophisticated than a laundry list, but it came with ready-made scripts that had been swilling about in the back of my mind since infancy. These were storylines as familiar as the object itself. But the lexicon of the gun is narrow and inhuman. Despite its allure it was insufficient to my needs. Once I found that life in Albany, Western Australia was not quite as threatening as I thought, I left the secret gunplay behind and forgot I ever did such things.

For another boy, a kid in tougher circumstances than mine, the outcome might not have been so happy. The gun’s slinky power has a special appeal to the young, the weak, the confused and the powerless. To those overlooked or spurned, access to a firearm is the spark of agency. With a gun in your hands, everything is possible. In a moment you imagine the respect it demands. You see yourself suddenly getting some attention, or exacting revenge. There’s nothing like those sleek contours, that baleful heft to make you feel larger, greater, wiser. Perhaps, deep down, everyone wants to feel dangerous. Being rich can do that for you. So can being very smart. For the rest who are neither, the gun is a short-cut. And whatever our circumstances, we’re all steeped in its romance. We’ve marinated in this cult all our lives; it’s inescapable. Even in a country where there is no fetishized right to bear arms, gunplay is a staple of entertainment. Researchers estimate that by the age of eighteen the average American child is likely to have been exposed to as many as twenty-six thousand gun murders on TV, and there’s no reason to assume Australian children’s exposure differs much. In TV, movies and video games, the underlying showbiz message is that the world is a dangerous place and the only tool that will make a difference in it is a firearm. The gun ends the discussion, solves the dispute, and, of course, brings the episode to its ‘natural end’.

This is a potent trope against which our children are largely
undefended. All-pervasive as it was in my childhood, it’s even more raw and brutish now. I’m not suggesting entertainment is uniquely responsible for gun violence, but in a country like ours, where gun ownership is uncommon, most young people’s knowledge of firearms is drawn from the festival of screentime killings. And as the internet has made plain, humans are suckers for a script. In recent years terror organizations have prospered by broadcasting real executions and assassinations, showing young men and women all across the world that they’re ‘getting things done’, just as the gunslinging idols of every generation have, from Randolph Scott to Idris Elba, from Dirty Harry to Harry Brown. Jihadis don’t upload these outrages solely for their own masturbatory gratification; the fact is, these video clips work as propaganda, as recruiting tools, they hit home. For those who claim to believe that God is Greatest, the AK-47 ends the discussion. In their minds, it would seem, even the most sacred words utterable are insufficient to the needs of the faithful.

A youth who is confused, depressed, or fearful will be tempted to resort to whatever means he has to make himself felt, if not understood, even if his problems, like those of my puberty, are minor and ephemeral, and a truly angry kid is liable to do something extreme and impulsive. In countries where firearms are commonplace in the home, this often extends to more than self-harm. Mass shootings have become a fixture of American news. The carnage in schools and public places is so unremarkable that ritual ‘outpourings of grief’ border on the perfunctory. Gun murder is so normal in the US it’s banal. And the gun itself is sacrosanct. The right to bear it outstrips a citizen’s right to be protected from it, and even a tearful president is impotent in the face of this cult. In 2016 Barack Obama declared that modest gun restrictions were ‘the price of living in a civilized society’ but it seemed few were listening. By all accounts, God is Great in America, too, but in
truth the nation has always lived as if the gun is greater. In God they trust, but armed they must proceed. Most Australians have never owned a firearm. Few will ever handle or discharge one, and I think this is something to be glad of. In moments of turmoil the mere presence of a gun alters the atmosphere. In a domestic dispute, a roadside altercation or a bout of depression, the thing most likely to push the scene out of shape beyond saving is a firearm. It so often gets the wrong job done.

I can’t say I ever really outgrew my fascination with guns. In high school I only joined the cadets so I could shoot big-calibre weapons and blow stuff up. I was a fair shot with a 7.62 SLR and could not resist the thought of Audie Murphy as I sprayed bullets from a rattling F1 submachine-gun. I continued to hunt occasionally with my father until I was in my twenties. And then I stopped shooting altogether. I spent some years in the inner city where there was no legitimate use for a firearm. Here guns were alien. They had no place in ordinary life and I didn’t miss them. If anything, I developed an aversion. Living abroad for a couple of years and having a weapon jerked my way once or twice by paramilitary police only intensified it. Whenever I visited relatives in the bush I was uncomfortable with weapons being displayed or passed around. Not because the presence of a Ruger or a Winchester was strange, but perhaps because it wasn’t yet strange enough. Secretly I liked the feel of a rifle in my hands again, but if a farmer asked me to come out and help shoot a few foxes I declined.

Apart from kitchen knives, my children never saw any kind of killing tool in the home. When they were little my wife and I refused to buy them toy weapons of any sort. Not that they escaped the romance of the gun, for despite our best efforts to monitor their screen time, firearms were everywhere they looked. If they picked up
sticks at play and made guns of them, then that was their right, we weren’t about to tell them what they could and could not imagine, but we had no intention of collaborating with the purveyors of the cult. Our kids were strangers to violence, but perhaps, like children everywhere, they play at war to ward it off.

My kids were still small in the autumn of 1996 when a disturbed young man with a very low IQ murdered thirty-five people at Port Arthur in Tasmania. Twenty-three others were injured that day. It was a rare and traumatic event in the recent life of this nation. It prompted a review of national gun laws and many Australians were surprised to see how stridently the locally emergent gun lobby resisted all talk of reform, which mainly focused on restricting access to semiautomatic weapons. So violent was their discourse that while addressing a hostile pro-gun rally in Sale that winter the prime minister, John Howard, resorted to wearing a Kevlar vest. These were scenes once unimaginable in modern Australia. I was never a fan of John Howard. I despised his retrograde social policies and was dismayed by his nostalgia for the unchallenged whiteness and patriarchy of the 1950s, but at a pivotal moment in our history he literally stuck his neck out and did something vital and brave. By following through on gun reform he made this country a little safer. Fronting angry rednecks from the dais that day, he looked pale and stiff, like a man unwell, but that sick look was the face of courage. That was the spectacle of a man exceeding himself.

In the days immediately after the slaughter in Tasmania a woman bailed me up at the gate of my kids’ primary school. She’d taken offence at something in one of my books and thought I could do with a little consciousness-raising. As she rehearsed her many opinions about men in general and me in particular, her three-year-old son waved a plastic machine-gun at me. The little fellow’s eyes were like slits and beneath them were shadows dark as bruises. His toy gun was the colour of bubblegum but for some reason it reminded
me of rendered flesh. Making all the sounds of televised murder, the kid ‘shot’ me about twenty times. Deprived of a response, he began to shove the barrel into my hip again and again, wheezing and squinting, stamping his feet, raging. I kept expecting his mother to make some token effort at curbing his assault, but she hadn’t taken a breath since she collared me. So it was a war on two fronts. He was only an infant, but the kid’s aggression was startling and demoralizing. Perhaps, I told myself, he’s just picked up on her mood and is trying to please her, but if that explained things his efforts were in vain because she appeared not to notice. In fact she paid this little man in the making no mind at all. It seemed she had bigger fish to grill. Maybe it was the proximity of the massacre and the images of that dead-eyed murderer in Tasmania, or perhaps I’m just thin-skinned, but this encounter with the Rumpelstiltskins rattled me. By the time my daughter skipped up to rescue me from the righteously jabbing hippie finger and the porn-pink Tommy gun, I was shaking.

The only time my kids heard a firearm discharged they were more scandalized than awed. When my brother-in-law set up a skeet trap in his home paddock they were wild with excitement, but when they heard what a shotgun really sounded like their enthusiasm waned. They stuck their fingers in their ears and retreated, pale and big-eyed, to the nominal shelter of the clothes hoist. After I’d watched their uncle for fifteen minutes and resisted all his entreaties for me to have a go, I relented. I don’t know what shocked the children more, seeing me fire a gun or realizing I was good at it. For half an hour, with a curious and rising exultation, I blasted away, blowing clay discs to dust, and nothing died, no one was in danger. I was out in the open, a threat to nobody. Everyone, including my own kids, could see it. And not even the mood of umbrage and inner-city disapproval radiating from the rear seat on the long drive home could make me regret it.
These days I’m back living in the bush. And the awkward fact is I could really do with a rifle. The local success of the government’s fox-eradication program has meant the whole peninsula we live on is overrun with rabbits and feral cats. The bunnies ravage the vegetation and the cats are killing everything from birds and small marsupials to baby turtles. Now and then a friend comes out with his .22 and we shoot as humanely as we can with low-velocity ammo and telescopic sights, but even the subsonic report makes the dog anxious, and my wife, despite acknowledging the need, hates having a gun in the house. So I’ll never buy one. Because however much I still like to let off a round or two, I’d prefer not to have a weapon at home. There are no longer any small kids to fret over, little chance one of my own will stand at the window and point the thing at passing roadtrains, but even secured in a safe somewhere discreet, a firearm would be a dark presence I can do without under my own roof. Too much sinister potential. Too much unearned power.

Some of my friends and neighbours have no such qualms, though there are times when I wish they did. A few have veritable arsenals at home and one or two are genuine enthusiasts. Not in any rabid gun-nut way, they’re more like trainspotters or collectors. But I worry about them, sometimes, worry for them. The sanest and safest people go through low patches, awful things happen out of the blue. Not many people have access to such ultimate and instantaneous temptation. Whether a gun owner acknowledges this or not, that’s what a proximate gun presents, and no one is immune.

A child is a strange creature, and a boy perhaps strangest of them all. He befuddles his parents and confounds his friends; most of the time he’s a mystery to himself. As a kid there are times when you brim with things that need saying but lack the words or suspect there’s no one willing to listen. It doesn’t matter if you’re wrong about this apprehension you’re hostage to; you’re stuck, you feel you’re cornered. I guess that was my experience. Lurking there behind my parents’ curtain I put a gun between myself and the world. I reduced my neighbours to objects, made targets of them. Anything could have happened, none of it good. And just in time, it would seem, before anything irreparable could come of this impulse, I found words. God knows I was a happier, safer boy once I did.
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