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TWENTY-ONE STORIES ABOUT GUN CONTROL

Thomas Miller

1.

In 1967, my father, a freshman at Marquette University, joined the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps. He stood six feet three inches tall; his voice was low and slightly nasal. He would study comparative literature. On October 17, riots broke out ninety miles away at the University of Wisconsin over whether Dow Chemical, a manufacturer of napalm, should be permitted to recruit undergraduates. The administration at Marquette feared sympathy demonstrations might break out and deployed the ROTC to secure high-risk areas. Because my father and the rest of the freshmen cadets had not yet received weapons training, they were allowed to carry only walkie-talkies. My father was stationed at the entrance of the university library, which relieved my mother—she says he wouldn't have defended any other building on campus.

Several weeks later, his squad went to the rifle range, where, after several rounds of target practice, they stacked their guns and took a short breather. When my father returned, he had a problem. As he said to his drill instructor:

"I can't find my gun. Sir."

"First off, son, we call it a weapon, not a gun. Second, *how the Hell did you lose your weapon!*"

2.

Because my mother disliked the idea of children playing with toy guns, I didn't have one until I was six years old. I didn't mind. Andy Burgmeier and Pete Gingrass, who lived across the street, had Nerf guns and cap pistols and let me play with them. Besides, you could always pick up a tree branch, point it, and make machine gun noises. My mom eventually relented and

for Christmas bought me a Star Wars gun, a chunky, squarish block of hard, black plastic, with a grip and barrel stuck on at comical angles. No one would have mistaken it for a real gun. It shrieked in three pitches, depending on how far back you pulled the trigger—deafen the enemy must have been the theory. It took four D batteries, which made it weigh about two pounds, and much better for whacking people than a lighter, more realistic looking toy gun.

3.

My mother and I shot BB guns at the Mom and Me overnight campout. We were surprised to learn she was as good a markswoman as any of the Cub Scout mothers there. She said she wouldn't have minded every nine-year-old in the country owning a BB gun provided they had to follow the same rules we did: the mother loads when the son shoots and the son loads when the mother shoots.

4.

My fifth grade class went on a fall nature hike at the Audubon Center. We were learning to identify different trees and collecting leaves to press together between sheets of wax paper. My classmates and I wanted sugar maple leaves (glossy and scarlet) without too many insect holes in them, but our park ranger guide was into oak leaves—he offered us this mnemonic: “The red oak has pointed ends on its leaves, just like the pointy ends of the arrows the red man used. The white oak has round ends, like the round ends of the bullets the white man used.”

5.

Each Friday, we had an hour of Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or D.A.R.E., which was taught by a bald police officer. He was on duty while teaching, so he wore his utility

belt with all its equipment. Naturally, Jason Luell asked him if he'd ever killed anybody. He said no, but he'd fired his gun in the line of duty.

"Do you shoot someone in the leg if they're running away?" Jason asked.

"Never," the officer said. "We use force appropriate to the situation. We shoot only as a last resort and we shoot for either the head or the chest. They're dead in two seconds." He snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

6.

In May of that year, the LAPD cops who had beaten Rodney King were acquitted and riots erupted in Los Angeles. King appeared on television and famously said, "Can't we all just get along?" For weeks, we all aped Rodney. Playing dodgeball or capture the flag: "Can't we all just get along? [Thwack!] Can't we all just get along?"

7.

When the Boy Scouts came to recruit the Cub Scouts, they told us, "In the Boy Scouts, we don't shoot BB guns. [Restive murmurs from the crowd.] *We shoot .22 rifles!*" [Excited hooting.]

8.

At summer camp, five kids at a time lay prone on thin plastic mattresses, the stocks of their rifles snuggled up against their cheeks, the butts braced against their shoulders. The range master called out, "Put on your eyes and ears," which I thought meant, "Pay attention!" but which really meant, "Put on your goggles and ear protectors."

We used bolt-action .22s, which required us to manually eject the casing after each shot and reload a fresh cartridge. Five

shots at a target fifty feet distant. A “qualifying” target meant grouping all five shots closely enough that a quarter could cover them. Earning the merit badge required five qualifying targets. One target with ammunition cost twenty-five cents, so it was a relatively cheap merit badge, or an expensive one, depending on your aim.

I was nearsighted and had left my glasses at home. When I sighted in on the target all I could see was a big, black blur. I’d take as long as half a minute to aim—by my second shot the guys were screaming at me to hurry *up*, everybody else was *done* already—but when I pulled the trigger I couldn’t even tell whether I’d hit the target or missed it entirely. I had no trouble with the rest of the requirements. Some safety stuff, a few questions we were supposed to answer. We covered it in a half-hour on the first day. My favorite question was, “Describe how you would react if a friend visiting your home asked to see your or your family’s firearm(s).” After my smart aleck answer, the instructor asked me again: “*If* your family owned firearm(s) . . .” He didn’t smile.

My dad came up halfway through the week for his three-day shift as an adult leader. He brought my glasses. Suddenly I could see the concentric black rings on the target, each with a white number printed inside. Not that I could hit them, but I could see them. I needed twenty-five or thirty targets to qualify. A .22 doesn’t kick much, but it does sort of tap your cheek each time you fire. I had a tender spot beneath my left eye by the end of the week.

My rifl emanship merit badge is sewn on my uniform sash between my patches for coin collecting and first aid.

9.

Leonard McDowell, twenty-two, was a dropout from Wauwatos a West, the high school I later attended. On December 1, 1993, he returned to his alma mater and wandered the halls. One of his former teachers recognized him and immediately

called the office; they dispatched Dale Breitlow, the associate principal in charge of discipline, who had dealt frequently with Leonard when Leonard was a student. Mr. Breitlow confronted Leonard, who pulled a pistol from the waistband of his pants, shot Mr. Breitlow in the chest and walked away. A student in a nearby classroom—a lifeguard—attempted CPR, but failed to resuscitate Mr. Breitlow.

One hundred yards west of the high school was Eisenhower Elementary, where my brother and sister were locked down. One block east of the high school was Whitman Middle School, where I was locked down along with my fourth period German class. All we knew was that after a two-word announcement on the PA system Frau Witzke had locked the classroom door and told us we were not allowed to leave the room. She didn't know why. We cracked jokes and threw paper. No one needed to go to the bathroom until I asked if we could and Frau Witzke said no. Then everyone needed to.

We did not learn what had happened until several hours later, when we were dismissed. All the local news stations gave the shooting round-the-clock coverage and Tom Brokaw led with it on the *NBC Nightly News* (the only time in my childhood Wauwatosa was mentioned, aside from the *E. coli* outbreak at Sizzler's).

The police found the gun lying in the street near the apartment complex where my friend Justin Drane lived. They found Leonard a few hours after that. The guy was clearly crazy, but none of us cried six months later when he got life in prison instead of life in a mental institution.

We had school the day after the shooting, but no class. Instead, we had “sharing sessions” where we talked about how bad we felt or how bad we felt for Ty Breitlow, a fellow seventh grader. I played center behind him on the basketball team and had been assigned to him as a math tutor and mostly what I thought was that he'd use it as an excuse to act like an even bigger asshole than he usually did.

I went to the funeral with my parents. Ty hugged me in the receiving line. His mother burst into tears.

10.

When I started high school, I thought it lent me a tough guy legitimacy. Cross country meet, marching band competition: *Where's that guy from?* Nicolet. *Oh—rich suburban kid. Where's that guy from?* 'Tosa West. *Oh typical—wait, no . . . they were the ones that . . . yeah.*

11.

A dozen kids from my high school went to Fulda, Germany as exchange students. In history class, I looked at my host-brother's textbook. I was interested to see how the Germans wrote about World War II. Though the text was too complicated for me to follow, I realized I hadn't seen most of the pictures before—none of the familiar shots, no D-Day or Yalta Conference or atom bomb. The only photograph I recognized was one in which six *Wehrmacht* are pointing their rifles at a grinning, blindfolded member of the French resistance, who is lined up against the corner of a stone barn. He's positioned at the corner to prevent ricochets from rebounding toward the soldiers executing him.

12.

I wanted to say something about it, say, "You have all different pictures in your books, except for this one, which I have seen before." But it was a difficult sentence to translate and by the time I had parsed it, the teacher had decided her class should have a question and answer session with their visitor about life in America. They were to ask questions in English and I was to answer in German.

Is America a dangerous place? *Well, parts are. But I feel safe nearly always.* Is it very violent? Your news is quite violent. *Yes,*

the news is sometimes quite bad. But mostly it is not like that. Do you know people who have guns? Yes. But one must be eighteen years old. Also, one must not be a criminal. Would you be able to buy a gun? No, I am not eighteen. But if you wanted, could you get one? No, I could not do that. But perhaps some of my classmates could. Does anyone ever bring a gun to school?

Nein, nein, nein. Nie. Never. In Milwaukee, maybe. Then I realized I was lying. Not lying, really—it had been five years and I just never thought about it anymore. So I said, Der Hauptman von unsere Schüle war in 1993 geschossen. Aber nicht bei ein Student, bei ein verrückte Mann, der Leonard McDowell heisst. Aber das ist sehr untypisch—jederman in der USA hat über das gesprochen.

“Shit,” said my friend Erik Schleiker, afterwards. “Nice job. Now they think people shoot each other at American schools all the time.” I felt bad about giving the Germans the wrong impression. Then came 1999 and by the end of it, it had begun to feel like people really *did* shoot each other at American schools all the time.

13.

I took American Public Policy—civics, essentially—my senior year of high school. During the first week, our teacher drew a line on the chalkboard, marked one side “left” and one side “right” and told us to stand where on the political spectrum we thought we belonged on different issues. Due to a scheduling peculiarity, most students in my section were repeating the class, some for the second time, and were shaky on what constituted liberal versus conservative positions. The activity rapidly degenerated into a game of “Look at where Tom’s standing and figure out if you think you’re on the same side or on the other side.” When the issue of gun control came up, I held my position on the far left side and a dozen of my classmates bunched around me. The teacher asked me to explain what my position was. When

they heard the words “handgun ban” all but two of the students moved to the other side.

14.

Public school kids who were members of St. Joseph’s parish didn’t get confirmed until they were seventeen. I spent the two-day preparatory retreat trying to find a way to spend a few minutes alone with my girlfriend and speaking as little as possible in the group discussions out of fear that I’d be found out and sent home. (“If I think the teachings of Jesus are a good ethical code, but don’t really believe more than that, should I get confirmed?” Or, “Say you’re engaging in an activity you know is sinful and that you feel guilty about, but don’t want to stop doing it. Should you confess that?”)

As a bonding activity on the first night, we sat in a circle on wooden chairs and answered questions that the group leader read off index cards. I got “What’s the most useless invention ever?” I said paperclip. Second time around, I got, “What’s the cruelest thing someone has ever said or done to you?” The only thing I could think of was, “Dear Tom, I really don’t want to go out with you. Sorry. Kristin.” (In the form of a note delivered by a third party.) Only she was in the room. As was my infamously jealous girlfriend. So I said I didn’t know.

“Well, I know,” said Ty Breitlow, who was sitting next to me. “Leonard McDowell shot my father. That’s the cruelest thing anybody ever did to me.” He got up from the circle and left. We didn’t do any more questions after that.

15.

When the math team competed, I took both my calculators, a TI-34 and a TI-85, rectangular machines with heavy, black plastic cases. I liked to walk into the room where the test was being administered without my backpack. My calculators in my

back pockets, pencils in my front pocket. Unencumbered, like a Wild West gunslinger, all my weapons in easy reach. Removing the cover from the calculator felt like pulling back the slide on a pistol, I thought. The clack of the calculator shoved home in its case at the end of a test sounded not unlike a fresh magazine being inserted.

16.

In the forty-four-hour First Responder course I took before becoming a lifeguard, we learned to treat gunshot wounds or “GSWs.” (There had been shots fired at a county pool the year before, but no one had been hit.)

Things become complicated when the victim is PNB—pulseless non-breathing. In a group of three responders, two perform CPR and one patches the GSW, so the victim doesn’t bleed out. The tricky part is keeping the neck immobilized while rolling the victim to sweep the back for an exit wound—you assume that your victim has a C-spine injury and if the neck moves, he dies. My group couldn’t for the life of us (or of our instructor) roll him correctly. We killed him three times in a row.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” he said. “A PNB GSW—you’re not gonna bring him back with CPR. Maybe one percent of the time. Learn something else.”

17.

During the emergency preparedness test that summer, our examiner drafted me to play the victim’s friend in the GSW scenario. My job was to inform the lifeguards that there was an emergency and lead them to the site of the shooting. When the examiner said go, I ran up to Tracey Stayton and deadpanned, “Lifeguard, lifeguard, somebody just shot my friend!”

Afterwards, everybody got the giggles about it. “Jesus, you

sounded dumb,” Tracey said.

“What was I supposed to say?” I asked.

18.

The tenth word of my first real short story was “gunshot.”

19.

I read Timothy Zahn’s novel *Star Wars: Heir to the Empire* when I was eleven years old and started working on a sequel the day after I finished it. Over the next seven years, in the back of my school notebooks, I designed weapons systems for my stories—starfighters and shield generators and body armor and ejection seats. Over three hundred pages in all.

During my first week of college, I sat up one night diagramming a blaster in the back of my physics notebook. It was a BlasTech DL-44 heavy blaster pistol—Han Solo’s preferred weapon and the toy gun I had owned as a kid. I should have been working on a problem set—it was due the next day—but it required math I had never even heard of. A half-hour before, I had nearly walked out to the dumpster in the courtyard and chucked in my books. So there I sat, in my dormitory’s common room, sketching, working first in light pencil, then adding highlights with marker and ballpoint pen. I shielded my drawings with my body. I thought that if I caught a guy in my dorm drawing guns, I’d probably turn him in. Or I’d at least give him plenty of space if I were in line behind him for the shower.

20.

I joined an improvisational comedy team. Some of our members had favorite offensive jokes they told backstage, partly to break the tension but also in hopes that they would exhaust their supply of nastiness so it wouldn’t come out on stage. Rob

Dubbin did an impression of the Kennedy assassination in which he played the president, the side of the president's head, and Jackie crawling across the back of the limo. He'd studied the Zapruder tape, he knew Jack's little "That's odd—something seems to have bitten me in the shoulder" movement before the third shot. He understood ballistics, that the spray of blood and tissue particles moves in the *opposite* direction of a bullet, because the bullet creates a vacuum behind it. He knew that the conspiracy buffs who claim Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't have been the real assassin, because he would have been shooting from the wrong angle, have the physics backwards.

21.

After I graduated, I moved into an apartment with two guys I found online. One roommate, Benny, took medication for a facial tic. He thought our other roommate, Hayden, whom he had met only a couple of weeks before, was some sort of genius who inhabited a world of pure thought—you had to repeat something four or five times before Hayden realized you were speaking to him. I thought Hayden was hard of hearing.

I came home one Saturday afternoon to discover that Benny had allowed the apartment to be burglarized. It had happened while he was in the shower—Benny's showers lasted a half-hour, the same length of time as his Bon Jovi repertoire. He had walked out of the bathroom surrounded by a whoosh of steam, towel wrapped around his waist, and hadn't been able to find his glasses, which he had left on his dresser. They had been knocked to the floor. When he put them on, he discovered that the candy dish that he kept his change in was empty. He thought he heard a door slam.

I came home two hours later. Benny grabbed me by the shoulders and asked, "Where's Hayden?"

"At work," I said. "What . . ."

"On a Saturday? When did he leave?"

“He always works on Saturday. He left at like seven this morning. Why?”

“Because someone *knew* I was in the shower.” He explained about the burglary. He’d lost his change, his watch, and most of his DVD collection, including *Sorority Sex Kittens* (which the cops had been especially interested in—if they bagged a guy with that particular film they could trace him to our apartment). Benny thought it was an inside job. “Hayden,” he said again.

“Then why didn’t he take your computer?” I asked.

“Okay, maybe not him, maybe one of the neighbors.” Benny said. “I swear to God, though, if they try it again and that guy’s here when I come out of the shower—BAM! I take him down, and I’m not responsible for what happens next.”

It kept coming back to me over the following weeks, a prickle of anticipation in the time it took me to wipe the steam from the bathroom mirror, and hang up my towel, and stretch out the shower curtain to dry. Walk out of the bathroom, skin still soft and damp, water dripping down the folds of your ears, profoundly nearsighted, and there’s a guy in the living room with a knife. Benny had wrestled at the 185-pound weight class in college—it was one thing for him to talk about *BAM!*-ing someone while armed with a bathrobe and soap-on-a-rope. But I thought I’d want something more than that.

When I sublet my room several months later, I called my dad for advice. “So let’s say your apartment hypothetically gets broken into. Do you have a legal obligation to tell a potential sub-lessee?”

“When did this hypothetically happen?”

“October.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want Mom to worry. The neighborhood’s safe, it was just sort of a freak thing. It happened while Benny was in the shower. They took my camera.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You know all those people who say they want a gun for

protection? I mean, you'd have to shower with it for it to do you any good, but what if you get out and find somebody in the living room? You know what I mean?" I straightened a stack of books on my desk. "Is that stupid?"

"Yeah," my dad said. "Yeah, you're right. You have a legal obligation to tell them."

"Thanks," I said. I switched the phone from my left ear to my right. "Hey, did you see the game this afternoon?"

"Yeah. Favre shot the goddamn lights out, didn't he?"