
THE LOS ANGELES REVIEW

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REVOLVING

TYLER STALLINGS

BE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THESE INSTRUCTIONS AND WARNINGS BEFORE USING THIS FIREARM.

I inherited a revolver from my father. I've never shot it. It has sat in its leather holster for decades. As his only child and son, it came into my possession when he died thirty-five years ago at age thirty-five. I was thirteen years old then, but my last contact with him was when I was ten, saying goodbye after his divorce from my mother. It took years to have a cop friend open it properly to see if it was loaded. It was not. Prior to this favor, I had horrible fantasies of an unforeseen bullet fired mistakenly, killing whoever was in its path. That never happened, but what has been fired into my life since inheriting the gun is its karma.

He died young from cirrhosis of the liver. He drank himself to death. Such a death is certain, I would have thought that he would have shot himself at some point. He did shoot the gun at his wife, my mother, a couple of times in the kitchen of our Deep South, Birmingham, Alabama home. Sometimes when an argument got just too heated, but usually fueled by whiskey or bourbon.

I mention the geographic location because guns have been more prevalent throughout the South in US history, due in part to only limited gun laws, and in part to a largely rural population that would often have to take matters into their own hands, to the legacy of the Civil War, and, hence, interpreting the Second Amendment as not just about arming soldiers but more about private citizens crowd-sourcing their firepower to overthrow a federal government that might choose tyranny at any moment. This buildup of fear becomes self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling: I am afraid, I need a gun, and you're now afraid that I have a gun, so you need a gun too. It was not uncommon to feel the kick of a rifle, pistol or revolver by the age of seven where I grew up.

I wish that I could imagine that my father was once a law officer or even a criminal, or any sort of exotic character. One of the few stories that I have about him and his firearm is from

a neighbor of his mother's, my grandmother, whose house he returned to live in after the divorce, located in a small Alabama town, Gadsden, where he was born.

"Yeah, your dad was shooting up the house. The SWAT team had to be called. They surrounded the house. He came out and was taken away. But, your grandmother didn't press charges. So, he came back home."

This handgun is not equipped with a device that fully blocks use by unauthorized users. More than 200,000 firearms like this one are stolen from their owners every year in the United States. In addition, there are more than a thousand suicides each year by younger children and teenagers who get access to firearms. Hundreds more die from accidental discharge. It is likely that many more children sustain serious wounds or inflict such wounds accidentally on others.

A MANUAL FOR INHERITANCE

Now, I'm looking at this piece of lethal, molded metal again. I still don't know how to use it. I resort to downloading from the web a manual for this Smith & Wesson revolver.

SAFETY IS YOUR NUMBER ONE RESPONSIBILITY!!!! WARNING: YOU MUST FOLLOW ALL OF THESE SAFETY RULES TO ENSURE THE SAFE USE OF YOUR FIREARM.

It is hard not to consider a narrative subtext as I read the manual. Despite warnings about the danger of firearms being interwoven throughout, and statements about how safe gun handling is "YOUR" personal responsibility at all times, it still feels like the inevitable results of using the gun are being ignored, as if just too hard to face: violence, maiming, death. Or, rather, there are passages that allude to death, but only "mistaken deaths" due to mishandling the revolver due to not following the instructions correctly. It feels like risk management policies are the invisible editors of the S&W manual: positioning the revolver more like an expensive toy than the lethal device it truly is. The original intention of the revolver is never alluded to: it was not made for play, but for aiming and shooting at a target, which is usually another living being, whether human or animal.

Safe storage is your responsibility. In particular, you must secure firearms safely from children and unauthorized users. A lock has been provided for your use with this firearm.

Accidents are the result of violating the rules of safe gun handling and common sense.

My first gun was not a Crickett My First Rifle, which produces "Quality Firearms for America's Youth," according to its website. The company was embroiled in a controversy

recently for its advertisements that, in essence, depicted the rifle as toy, and even showed a friend of a young boy who was disappointed over receiving a soccer ball instead of a rifle as a gift. The boy's sister was the recipient of a pink Crickett rifle. The controversy occurred when a five-year-old boy accidentally shot and killed his two-year-old sister in Cumberland County, Kentucky, while playing with his Crickett .22 caliber rifle that he had received as a gift a year earlier.

Before inheriting the revolver that I hold in my hands now, I was gifted a Daisy BB gun when I was seven years old. I wanted it and campaigned for it, just like nine-year-old Ralphie did in the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*, which has gone on to become a classic comedic holiday film. Ralphie wants nothing more than a Red Ryder BB gun with a compass in the stock, despite the mantra from his parents "You'll shoot your eye out." In the end, he does receive one, but only because his father relents over his wife's objections. The rifle was a tool for bonding between father and son, a way for men to connect to other men and sidestep the excessive caution of women.

It is my recollection that my Daisy was a Red Ryder too. Today, it is described on Daisy's website as:

The most popular BB gun in the world remains faithful to its original design. From the pages of comic books to the famous holiday motion picture, a Daisy Red Ryder has been the dream of youths since its introduction in 1940. Over the years the Daisy Red Ryder has achieved a legendary status. With its solid wood stock and forearm, lariat ring with a leather saddle thong, today's Daisy Red Ryder is the spittin' image of the one you cherished growing up! The Daisy Red Ryder is recommended for ages 10 and older with adult supervision.

It is my sense too that my father bought my own BB gun in an effort to bond and to make me a little bit more of a man, something that I had failed to sufficiently become. I was attracted more to the pages of comic books and their fantastically imagined ray guns rather than real-life maiming and killing machines. "Attracted to" is not the right phrase. Rather, I retreated into them, away from my father, around whom I walked on eggshells. His alcohol-fueled unpredictability could easily have resulted in the black orifice of this revolver aimed at me, ready to swallow any manhood or super-heroism. He was, in the way it was understood in those days, a man's man.

So, he started me with buying a Daisy Red Ryder gun and, just a few years later after his death, his "plan for manhood" came to fruition with my inheritance of his revolver. Whom did he aim it toward in the past: his mother, his father, my mother, me in the crib, or even at himself?

FIRST KILL

The BB gun was given to me on a Christmas day at his mother's house, which sat on a couple of acres that overlooked the wide Coosa River. Black water moccasins would slither up from the steep bank regularly, poking their heads above the grass. I would freeze in my tracks, and Grandmother would grab a hoe and decapitate them. It was self-defense, I suppose.

DO NOT SHOOT AT HARD SURFACES, WATER OR UP INTO THE SKY. Always select a place to shoot that has a safe backstop, is free from obstructions and water surfaces which cause ricochets.

One of the first animals that I shot was just for the sake of it. I found a huge web with a zigzag pattern down its middle and a black-and-yellow garden spider on it. It was about the size of my palm with its legs outstretched. Its distinctive markings are on its abdomen and legs. It was minding its own business. Decades later, the image of its abdomen bursting from the penetration of a pellet that I shot dead-on still disturbs me. Its intestine, heart, silk gland, and ovaries (females are the large and colorful ones) burst all over the web. Its carcass hung on its own sticky filaments.

I don't think my parents or grandparents ever knew about the spider. But, for me, it's what the Red Ryder BB gun brought out in me. It allowed me to direct my childhood frustration, anger, fear, and anxiety against an animal once alive, now dead. I'm tempted to say that at least it wasn't a squirrel. After all, they have big eyes, mouths, ears, and fur, that is, things that we share. We have some kinship with them, as opposed to the alien exoskeleton of insects or arachnids; those are easier to kill, a lack of empathy born of differences in physiognomy.

However, the subject of the killing is not the point. Rather, in retrospect, it is for me an early origin point for generating bad karma. The image of the spider's exploding abdomen has sunk into each new brain crease through the decades. It's a virus in the form of an image that has infected me. I feel the same about the revolver. In that hunk of steel, my father found a way to stick around, no matter what.

I wish that I could say that shooting the spider was the only incident of violence inflicted on animals when I was a child. There were many other insects and arachnids. I did not graduate to amphibians or mammals, thankfully. It lasted for about three years. It began with the means of easy destruction being laid in my hands, giftwrapped, at age seven, and ended when I was ten years old, which was when my father left for good. The Red Ryder BB gun

went into the closet at my own volition. Eventually, I gave it away to a thrift store. I wonder what happened to Ralphie and *his* Red Ryder?

My father died three years after our separation. I inherited his revolver and several cases of bullets.

Position the shooter and all others so that they are not within an area where they may be struck by particle-spitting from a revolver or by ejected cases from other types of firearms.

MORALITY AND INHERITANCE

By inheriting the gun, I am left with a moral question: keep it, sell it, or turn it in? If I keep it, then might I shoot it one day? But at what or whom? Will it be for self-defense, target shooting, or hunting? These are the statistical hierarchy of reasons given for buying a gun, even though the reality is more like: target shooting, hunting, suicide, accidental death by firearm, and self-defense.

If I sell it, then I allow yet another gun to remain in circulation, never knowing how it may contribute to someone's death. It's another laundry list of stats, one without the sportive elements we commonly think of: accidental death, suicide, or homicide.

My inclination is to wait for another police program where they either buy the gun or trade them for gift cards to buy groceries. The police will destroy it then, and I will have groceries for a week. Perhaps I will then be done with my father and his inheritance after the last bite of eggs and toast one morning.

I could turn it into art. In fact, I own a pair of porcelain pistols made by Seattle-based artist Charles Krafft that are replicas of revolvers. His works are in the Delft ceramics tradition. In 1995, Krafft traveled to war-ravaged Bosnia-Herzegovina with the Slovenian industrial rock band Laibach. His website remarks that he was "moved by the plight of the besieged residents of Sarajevo, [so] he returned to Central Europe and created an arsenal of Delft weaponry. The Porcelain War Museum Project premiered at the Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Defense headquarters in Ljubljana in 2000."

My set of his pistols rest in a black, velvet-lined case, like a set of dueling pistols. Their fragile materials embody the fragile lives that their metal counterpoints may have taken. The materials and decorative motifs also speak of domesticity, the opposite of a Man of Adventure

who hunts down spiders and crawfish, splattering their guts on webs and in the creek behind the house on the river bank.

Use the correct ammunition for your particular firearm as indicated by the marking on the barrel. Never use non-standard, reloaded, or “handloaded” ammunition which has not been subjected to internal ballistic pressure testing.

Discharging firearms in poorly ventilated areas, cleaning firearms, or handling ammunition may result in exposure to lead and other substances known to cause birth defects, reproductive harm, and other serious physical injury.

Never use alcohol or drugs before or while shooting. Do not use your firearm if you are on any medication which impairs, even slightly, your mental or physical ability.

RAY GUNS

I played war and cowboys and Indians when I was a kid. In Birmingham, I lived on a cul-de-sac with other families with kids, so it was a perfect arena for combat, especially with plentiful acorns as projectiles and trashcan lids as shields. Black eyes and bruises were common. Guns were simply a pointed finger for the muzzle, a thumb for the hammer, and the other three fingers curled to suggest the handle and trigger. Then an acorn was thrown when “Bang!” was yelled.

I heard “bangs” inside my home too. They were not the sounds of acorns hitting metal trashcan lids. Rather, they were what I heard on several occasions from my upstairs bedroom as my father fired warning shots at my mother, usually in the downstairs kitchen. Maybe that location was the site of overheated arguments since it was also the place where most of our family conversations happened, like in many homes, but in my case, a normal conversation could escalate quickly with my father feeling accused, berated, and overwhelmed with life’s responsibilities. I don’t know if they were really warning shots. I hope that they were. He may truly have wanted to kill her, or at least his alcoholic rages convinced him he did those times. What I recall from those incidents is my mother running upstairs, grabbing me from my bedroom in my pajamas, and then rushing to the car and driving away, no plan, just fleeing my father and his rage. But she always went back. I don’t know why. She died just ten years later from cancer, and I had not matured enough to ask her such a question. I had my own anger for having been made to learn to survive alone within my own family.

After the divorce, my mother and I moved to Louisville, Kentucky, in the mid-1970s, where her parents lived. I took up Dungeons and Dragons, among other role-playing games. The

impetus to partake was no different than today's shooter video games or paintball courses. They're all about strategy, building better traps, accumulating power, creating alliances, and defeating opponents. One of the most creative aspects of D&D was to create unique weapons. Ironically, because of the fantasy, King Arthur-like world implied by the game's title, guns were not present. Rather, there were dangerous wands, sabers, talismans, and other devices. However, they could kill just as well, if not better, than a bullet. As ever, power at a distance is the fascination of boys.

Do not allow any alteration or replacement of parts in your Smith & Wesson firearm unless performed by a qualified gunsmith using genuine Smith & Wesson parts. If you do otherwise, improper functioning of your firearm may occur and serious injury may result.

I recall that one of my most inventive weapons for the D&D world of fantasy was removing a section of dragon intestine after it was slain, then making an incision into one's abdomen and suturing the intestine to the whole. Then, when in danger, a warrior could spray their own stomach acid on their opponent, melting the enemy's eyeballs out of their sockets.

Recollecting my imaginary, biological-based arsenal from the late 1970s reminds me of the inventive, futuristic gun in David Cronenberg's 1999 film *eXistenZ*. The film involves characters that connect into a video game via a spinal cord link. At some point they lose a sense of the difference between the real and the virtual while tracking down criminals; it is meant to be just a game, but maybe their lives are really at stake now. They can't tell the difference, so they have to act always as if they are being chased, as if they are caught in a conspiracy, as if they can trust only each other—or can they?

If my father were alive today and watched the movie, he might say, "We're all being chased all the time. But our guns will turn them back."

Just as playing the game involves a blending of biology and technology, so do the devices within the game/reality. The one that I think about every time I eat dim sum is a gun that is assembled from mutated animal parts left over after lunch at a Chinese restaurant. Bones form the structure, ligaments the spring action, and ivory teeth are the bullets. Ingenious! And, if the gun existed today, it would evade detection easily.

My father's actions evaded detection. My first memory of one of his violent outbursts was forty years ago, in 1973. Now I am a married man with no children. Domestic violence back then was only beginning to register with the law and to be prosecuted. Yes, women's rights

have come a long way today, but that is only their rights. The degree of physical abuse and murder still continues in its primal, destructive, self-justified, threatening, beating, gun-wielding manner as it did in 1973, and back through centuries when women and children were but the property of the husband-father. Had our family remained intact, I would be in prison surely, for I would have killed him at some point. I had already said to myself at a young, single-digit age: *You are not my father*. He was a violent intruder in my life, and I don't doubt that some day I would have found and used the revolver he left me.

Then again, creating undetectable guns (without metal) today is coming to fruition. Desktop 3D printers provide a consumer the ability to create homemade, metal-less pistols from resin. The entire gun is not created at once. Rather, its individual parts are manufactured and then assembled. If I could invent some sort of painless, self-surgery machine for the home, and connect it with the 3D printer, then my D&D childhood fantasy gun might be viable, something I might call "The Dragon-testine Gun."

Appropriate use for your firearm means using your firearm for legal purposes. For example—target shooting and lawful resistance of deadly criminal force.

Today, in a different frame of my mind, I can feel that the fascination with futuristic weaponry can be attributed not only to the received culture of boyhood games but also to a rare opportunity to be creative, even if misguided. That and the desire for power at a distance, something that does not diminish with age and wisdom. When the justice system fails us, who is immune to the desire to mete out deserved punishment?

For me, I think that whether it was the BB gun killings or the imaginary biotech guns, I was looking for a way to protect myself from my father. I was preparing myself for survival if necessary, even though he was supposed to be on my side. I was preparing for self-defense—the number one reason people buy a gun.

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Tyler Stallings focuses on identity, technology, photography, popular culture, and desert studies. He is the Artistic Director at Culver Center of the Arts at the University of California, Riverside. His book *Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States* was published by Blue West Books in April 2014. Visit his website at <http://tylerstallings.com>.