

Sue Repko

THE GUN SHOW

When I was twelve years old, my father accidentally shot our next door neighbor.

His name was Mr. Randall.* He liked to fish and golf. He was retired and friendly and sometimes wore plaid pants.

He died a couple days later.

Dad sank into depression, but eventually returned to the sale and repair of guns in a concrete garage behind our house in a neighborhood of Cape Cods, ranches, and split levels on small lots, with my mom just outside hanging laundry and my brothers, sisters, me, and other neighborhood children playing dodge ball and hide-and-seek, and I guess I never really forgave him for it, for the circumstances that led to the death of Mr. Randall, for his putting us at risk, for his bottomless need to surround himself with guns, for his politics, for all of it.

I went to my first gun show when I was forty years old, a long-married, suburban mother of two, living in a country club community in New Jersey. I'd seen a billboard with the details the week before on the way to visit my parents in my hometown in southeastern Pennsylvania. My adopted state of New Jersey had some of the most restrictive gun laws in the country, and I'd never seen a gun show advertised there. Back then news reports regularly described gun shows as places where weapons were illegally bought and sold, and licensing regulations thwarted, in the escalation of urban gang and drug wars. I found it hard to believe the Crips and Bloods and Latin Kings would be doing their shopping right there at the Sheraton, off the turnpike in Valley Forge, in broad daylight on a Sunday. Then again, when our visits to my parents' wound to a close, my dad liked to cultivate the impression that Pennsylvania was the Wild West and New Jersey another country altogether.

"You'd better start heading back... before they close the border," he'd tease.

* The name has been changed.

At the time, still suffering from a kind of mental and emotional compartmentalization about guns and the past, I could not describe exactly why I was compelled to go to that gun show on that gusty morning in March 2003, but there I was, wedging my minivan between two pickup trucks with NRA and Marine Corps decals on their rear windows, the same stickers that had been on the window of the front door of the house in which I'd grown up, my father's announcement to all who knocked not to mess with him. Inside the Sheraton I agreed to be patted down—to be touched—by a fat, bearded dude in camouflage. It was the first time in twenty years that a man other than my husband had put his hands on me. I may have blushed as a local rent-a-cop looked on, but I put on a stony face and forced my eyes to meet his. *See*, I wanted to say, *I can take whatever you dish out*. That's what this world brought out in me. I also didn't want to give either of them any reason to be suspicious. The national mood hovered at the red end of the terror spectrum then. Justified or not, people were skittish, and I imagined hundreds of itchy trigger fingers in the convention hall up ahead.

I paid my fee and ran smack into the Second Amendment Sisters table, which was manned by a heavysset woman whose T-shirt announced, "Self-defense is a basic human right." I've always been an advocate for women's rights and couldn't stop the voice in my head from giving a shout-out—*You go, girl!*—to this particular sister, asserting her place in this stereotypically man's world. But almost immediately I checked myself. *No, no, no! Man or woman, she's on the wrong side!* I picked up a brochure and kept moving.

As I entered the convention center, disappointment set in. Hardly anyone was there. Maybe people were still at church? I was feeling self-conscious, affluent and suburban, and found myself unusually tonguetied as I made my way up and down a couple of rows, where hopeful dealers stood behind their wares, displayed on hundreds of tables in the cavernous room. My eyes cast about, looking for somewhere to land. I avoided the Nazi memorabilia, instead pausing here and there to feign interest in an instruction manual or to admire some homemade duck decoys. Eventually, I gravitated toward a gun dealer who had a few customers milling around his table. I thought I might be able to hide among them. No such luck.

"What're you looking for?"

I stared at the man on the other side of the table as though he were speaking a foreign language. If you asked me now to pick him out of a lineup, I couldn't do it. Maybe he was in his late fifties, early sixties. I remember that he smiled, he was relaxed, he was in his element. I, on the

other hand, wondered if this had been a huge mistake, putting myself back in the middle of this world, if only for an hour.

"Just browsing," I said.

"Well, what're you interested in? Revolver? Pistol?"

He said it like there was a difference between the two, and it struck me: of course, there was a difference, which was pretty pathetic considering my father was a gunsmith and I'd spent many happy hours in his shop before the accident, the air tinged with the smell of kerosene, the chill of the concrete floor seeping through the soles of my Keds as I sorted the small parts that regularly arrived by UPS.

I shrugged and said, "I have no idea." And I smiled back, extending an obvious invitation to the guy to not give up on me. I'm like my father in that regard: I'll make small talk with just about anybody.

The dealer stepped around a buddy who was helping him out and moved closer to my end of the table. From there he launched into a soliloquy on, and demonstration of, revolvers, semi-automatic pistols, grips, clips, safeties, weight, and ease of loading and unloading, all from the perspective of a potential female handgun owner, but he went through the motions and explanations way too fast, or maybe I was just not really ready to receive the information. What stuck was the general idea that not all handguns are alike, even if, at first glance, they appear to be, and there were many factors to consider when purchasing a gun and many more when it came to actually shooting one.

At his insistence I held a few different models in my hand, felt their heft, how they lay in my palm, how my fingers wrapped around their cool solidity. For a few seconds, I imagined having one in my purse, pulling it out in a moment of terror, and pointing it at someone. No, I couldn't do it. I couldn't remember anything this guy had just told me. How would I remember what to do when some hulking intruder-rapist-carjacker was lunging toward me? But the dealer wasn't done yet.

"Try this. It's a Walther PPK," he said. "Handgun of choice for James Bond for many years."

The very reference made it sound Continental, sophisticated and sexy: slinky evening gowns and tuxedos.

The sides of the barrel were shiny. It was light. It fit easily in my hand, like the perfect fork, or gardening tool, or pen, something that might sustain me. Just holding the PPK felt like a kind of seduction. It was just such a thing—a handgun—that my dad had held practically every day of his life since his mid-teens, exactly the kind of thing I had been avoiding since I was twelve, the kind of thing that could end a life.

Click.

I guess I was looking for clues, for the beginning of a story that might explain my dad to me, or at least the part that had remained unknowable. But a kind of panic rose in me as I held that PPK, like maybe I was getting too close, like maybe that feeling of a gun in my hand—the part of it that felt right—might grow on me and inside of me and take root. I was, after all, my father's daughter: I'd been an angry kid, ready to do battle at any hint of a slight. I quickly gave the PPK back to the dealer.

"I'll think about it," I said, forcing a smile. "Thanks. Thanks a lot." And I walked away.

My sons, then twelve and nine years old, did not know that their grandfather was a gunsmith and a dealer with a federal firearms license and that the concrete shop behind their current home was an arsenal of sorts. They knew that their grandmother was a secretary at the Catholic high school that my five brothers and sisters and I had attended and that their grandfather was a retired high school German teacher. My husband and I had been silent about the rest and, without our ever having a conversation about it, my dad had gone along with it. When we visited for the holidays and my parents' stone ranch filled with boisterous grandchildren, most of them boys, my dad often announced his escape from the chaos with, "I'm goin' down to the shop." Sometimes a grandchild would ask, "Can I come, too?" or one of my siblings would turn to one of their kids and ask, "Do you want to go with Grandpop?" As though they were in on our silent pact, our sons never asked, and my husband and I never offered. In some respects, we were very good at silence, and I can only imagine that our sons were, too, and the subtext of that silence was that their grandfather—a man I didn't understand or trust—was to be kept at arm's length.

Buried deep within that silence were the details of the accident that had taken place one Sunday evening in May 1975, in a similar shop across town, behind another house, the one in which I'd grown up. There my father test-fired a faulty, semi-automatic handgun that, unbeknownst to him, sent out two rounds instead of one. The first round hit a wooden backstop underneath a window. The recoil kicked the gun up, and without his pulling the trigger again, a second round was discharged, traveling through a metal grate on the shop's window, through the window itself, across our neighbor's driveway, and clear through the abdomen of Mr. Randall before lodging in the back wall

of his garage. He had walked into his garage for a gardening tool. A few moments later he crawled out, moaning for help. The shot left only a small hole in the garage window. Dad and his customer, the superintendent of the public schools, didn't realize what had happened until they heard the moans.

On the inside of the chain-link fence that enclosed our back yard, I watched my father on his knees in Mr. Randall's driveway, crying for help and crying to God, holding Mr. Randall in his arms. I cannot tell you now if there was blood. I see my father, his white T-shirt, his khaki pants. I hear his voice. I had never seen him cry before. I knew that something had gone terribly wrong and he was somehow responsible. I see myself alone, rooted, mute, fingers threaded through the chain-link fence that enclosed our back yard, knowing.

Nearly twenty-eight years had passed between the accident and that gun show. I was finding it harder and harder to keep the compartments distinct: the daughter who had seen her father cry and cradle Mr. Randall and the mother who had kept a traumatic, life-defining moment from her own sons. My oldest son had just turned twelve, the same age I was when the accident occurred, and I suppose there was some subconscious urgency for me to reveal all of this to him, for him and his younger brother to know what I'd gone through at their age, to know me better, to know their own family history, for wasn't that a part of their own psychological DNA?

Although I wasn't literally looking for my father at that gun show—he didn't even go to gun shows and he would be singing in the church choir on a Sunday morning—that didn't stop me from scanning the convention center several times in the off-chance that he might suddenly walk in. This was an early adult attempt on my part to join with him and understand his world at a time when simply asking him about the accident, its precursors and aftermath, seemed out of the question. Over the years we had both adopted combative postures around politics and guns, and I was still a long way from dropping mine and approaching him as a daughter, vulnerable and willful, forgiving and in need of forgiveness. I suppose I hoped that maybe I could join with these strangers, amid their weapons, and that they would offer me some clues, some epiphanies that would give me the courage to try.

The other dealers at the gun show were friendly, plain-spoken, salt-of-the-earth types, wearing patriotic T-shirts, flannel, or camouflage. The

occasional supportive wife stood by her man in a knit sweater with bright flowers or an American flag rippling across it. They could have been my neighbors from childhood or in the pews at St. Al's in Pottstown that very moment. I felt their presence as a welcome, but the tables filled with their goods were still between us like a strait, our shores close but not touching, no bridge in sight. I imagined they might live up in the Poconos, or somewhere in Philly, or even in Pottstown, where my parents reported more shootings downtown, off the main drag, due to drug traffic pulsing outward from the city. I thought back to the news stories about gangs and straw purchasers: Was a clandestine transfer of weapons from one trunk to another happening right now outside a back door of the convention center? As I went up and down the rows, I felt the eyes of the dealers on me, across that gap, and the German word *ausländer* came to mind—*one who is away from the land*. I'd been away, in a figurative sense, for a long time, ever since I'd gone off to the Ivy League and Princeton, where I'd been recruited to play basketball, my reward for all those stubborn, solitary hours of shooting and dribbling at the playground up the street from our Cape Cod in Pottstown's North End. Then again, maybe I'd never really known these people, and they'd never known me.

A newspaper article implied that my dad had no zoning approval to run his gun shop out of the garage behind our house—the Borough was checking their records—and that the firing of any weapon in the Borough was illegal. How could my father have done that?

In the weeks following the accident—that was what we all called it—my father got up every day and went to school to teach. In the afternoons he lay in my parents' bed on his side, knees drawn up, succumbing to whatever Dr. Joe, the family doctor, had prescribed. Astonishingly, no criminal charges were filed. Gradually, he returned to us and at some point, I can't say exactly when, he returned to the cleaning and repair of guns in the same shop behind our house with Mrs. Randall, the widow, still living next door.

I remember sitting on a stool in our kitchen, my back up against the wall, when Dad said he was going to open up the shop again and go back to repairing guns. He talked about how repairing guns was part of who he was, how he'd done it his whole life, how he couldn't just stop. Of course, he wouldn't do any test-firing, he said; he wasn't allowed. It was an impassioned speech, almost pleading for understanding, maybe even for forgiveness? He stood near the sink, facing me from across the room. I recall Mom working near the stove, her back to us, late afternoon light flooding through the large picture window. Perhaps it was the following

spring? Or could it have been that fall, with the civil litigation recently filed by Mrs. Randall now in motion?

Regardless, to my adolescent mind it was too soon and might always be too soon. How could he ever touch a gun again after what had happened? A man had lost his life, and I felt sure some kind of permanent penance *on this earth* was in order. And if it happened once, it could happen again. Why take that chance? And what would the neighbors think, especially Mrs. Randall? He had already brought shame upon the family. How could he put us in that position again?

If he wanted some form of permission, he wasn't going to get it from me. I now had an inkling that the world, even just the world of our neighborhood and town, was filled with all these people who were connected in complicated, intimate ways. To greater and lesser degrees, we were responsible for each other. We lived in close concert, smelled what we were having for dinner, saw each other's underwear hanging on clotheslines, heard the arguments and the spankings through open windows. And how would it make Mrs. Randall feel to see customers coming and going again, weapons in hand, as though Mr. Randall had never existed?

Yet I felt like I was betraying my father with these thoughts, betraying his obvious need to surround himself with guns. Where did that come from? There was something bigger there that I couldn't compete with, nor, apparently, could common sense and common decency. I had no words then to say something like this out loud. I could only tamp it down, make my face go blank, press my lips tight, and close off a part of my heart and my head to this man I had believed in, trusted, and loved without condition.

As a child, whenever I walked with my dad down the main street of Pottstown, which then was bustling with activity, it seemed he had a handshake or a joke or a story for everyone we bumped into. Yet he told stories around the dinner table about regularly butting heads with the administration in the outlying district where he taught, occasionally threatening an administrator. While I didn't always understand the details, his message to them was clear: "Don't tell me what to do. Leave me alone." Everyone knew he was armed, if not at school, then outside school for sure, keeping a piece in the station wagon in the school parking lot, just in case something went down.

Although Dad was a school teacher with a master's degree, around the house I saw him primarily as a gunsmith, the guy that hunters and policemen brought their weapons to. *Guns and Ammo* and *National Rifleman* were in the basket on the back of the toilet along with *Reader's Digest*. When he wasn't teaching, he wore a white short-sleeved T-shirt, khaki pants, and black shoes, his workingman's uniform, adding a flannel shirt and olive green sweatshirt in the colder months. He worked with his hands and touted the value of having a trade to fall back on. Although he had shelves of books from college in a locked, makeshift office in the basement, he also kept his guns in the rafters there and, for the longest time, a copy of *Mein Kampf* on the desk. How was I supposed to make sense of this man, then and now?

Although the convention center was still mostly empty, more people had arrived. There I was, deep in the heart of this mammoth beast, wandering and afraid, afraid of what all the weapons inside it could do, afraid of the people who held those weapons close, celebrated them even. What if the beast erupted just then? What if someone went berserk? I couldn't help associating the world of gun shows with militia types and even with mass shooters, just for the sheer concentration of firepower in the room. I can see now how that line of thinking isn't fair, isn't nuanced, and doesn't exactly make sense, but a mother's heart, which is still, at its core, a daughter's heart, does the best it can.

Dad had gone on about the injustice of Waco at the time, and then again while lying in a hospital bed after a heart attack a few years later. At the time I didn't know if it would be the last conversation I'd ever have with him. It frightened me, the way he'd held onto it, the vitriol against Bill Clinton and Janet Reno. *They just wanted their guns, Sue, that's all*. He survived the heart attack and bypass surgery, but my sons were babies then, and I was even more wary of him after that. I didn't want them getting too close; I never asked my parents to babysit while my husband and I took a long weekend somewhere. He had loaded weapons in the back bedroom and by the kitchen door at night, just in case.

I didn't know the people at the gun show. I hadn't once loved them unconditionally, and so I didn't have any sense of how much love and

forgiveness may have counterbalanced the paranoia and fear I assumed to be in the room. It seemed to me that there was a wisp of something running through so many of these narratives: angry boys becoming simmering, armed men. This was the world in which my two sons were growing up. Where did this anger come from? How could I shield them from it?

In any conversation about guns, in any news story about a school shooting or a mass shooting, for me the essential questions revolve around power and anger and a festering silence, around mother and father and son. As the story unfolds in the aftermath, it almost always appears to be a case of the mighty versus the weak, and then the man-child, armed, made strong. It was one thing for me to navigate that border crossing—the one between fear and love—with some understanding of the nuances of personal history, to make calculations about my own safety or that of my children in the relatively controlled setting of my parents' home, but how could I possibly do it for all those people buying and selling at that gun show? Today, now, how can I possibly do it for all the people showing up at the movies on any given night or milling about the finish line of a marathon, or just for that one young man who busts through the doors of an elementary school in Connecticut? How can we predict which boy—they are mostly boys—will feel more fear than love, will yield to the anger and the call for vengeance in the narrative in his head and decide to make himself undeniably, finally, strong?

I didn't think any of this at the gun show. It was still largely unconscious. At the gun show I only concluded: I am the weak one here, the helpless one. I know nothing about these instruments of death. I don't know these people, can't possibly know these people, their family histories, the prevalence and meaning of their silences.

The few times I had tried to write about the death of Mr. Randall and my mixed-up feelings about my father, a lot of static went off in my head, one thought jumping to the next, the whole thing one tangled mess of wires, sparking, throwing off heat. My dad has regularly carried a gun on his person since he was a teen, and I still can't help seeing him as an angry, young man, his finger never far from the trigger. He had a collection of more than a dozen firearms by the time he was seventeen. I've heard him say many times that all he wanted was to be left alone. Who, I wondered, had been bothering him? Had he been bullied? I've never heard those stories, and after the death of Mr. Randall, Dad's strategy for making

himself feel safe was exactly what made me feel unsafe, not only around him but, when I became a parent, around neighbors I perceived to be like him—with a chip on the shoulder and operating on the margins of the law. Yet, I believe—I want to believe—he'd never intentionally hurt another human being. He isn't even a hunter. He used to bring women to tears, singing "Ave Maria" at weddings in his sweet tenor. He's an incorrigible flirt. He's gentle with my mother. He loves people, the give-and-take, life itself.

I've also often wondered: when did my father first hold a real gun and become certain of its power? That thought then leads to the next gun and the one after that, and all the weapons he ever held and cleaned and fixed, all the barrels he looked down, which led to his becoming an expert, to his being the man holding and firing that malfunctioning German Mauser that warm spring night in 1975. It's a wonder there weren't more "accidents." He once said that there are more among gunsmiths than you'd think; people don't want to talk about it.