

A Part of Growing Up

Late in the day the sun painted everything deep yellow. The light concentrated on the horizon contoured the lawn stretching away like linen with one of the year's first cuts. The facing sides of the big pines, the rock walls along the creek, glowed as if producing their own light. Even though the boy promised his mother he would go somewhere else, the patio under the deck seemed like the perfect spot with its rise overlooking the yard all things presented by the high vantage. He held still there a long time with his gun, being judicious, studying what to shoot.

It was a simple BB gun. Used and old, one pump, with a cracked stock. But the boy didn't see any of that. He loved holding it letting his arms dangle from its weight considering targets, feeling the power of contemplating which things would get shot.

He didn't aim at birds anymore even though they were singing. A few days before after school, swaggering along with his new weapon and at the teasing of friends he shot a mocking bird from a low branch. It was too easy a shot. The bird trusting, chirping, oblivious to the danger. It had fallen with dead weight like a stone twitching at his feet, one unblinking vague eye like a black marble fixed on him. Everyone bent over it squealing except the little girl neighbor, the one who was always especially nice to him, who he might like if he cared about girls, which he did not. She had gone inside looking back eyes burning with disappointment having seen something not suspected, thinking him different.

One of his friends said he had to kill it now. "Put it out of its misery, you can't let it suffer," repeating something he'd learned from TV. The boy knew he was right pressing the barrel into the birds head then pulling the trigger. The bird's eye was gone. It was still

after that. Nothing about killing the bird had been fun and he felt ashamed for killing with no reason. He took the bird away, telling the others not to follow burying it near his dog's grave in the far corner of his back yard.

Now he was satisfied with plunking trees, low pine cones, targets circled on boxes. Adjusting carefully at distances he followed the arc of sinking BB's into far away targets, listening for the faint report on cans and plastic jugs. The gun was not strong but strong enough. In close it would deliver a sharp ricocheting ping off metal or a smack into wood burying its shot there.

It was older than him coming by mail from his uncle rusted and rubbed smooth, faintly glowing from other hands. His mother had feeling for it too, remembering her brother carrying it, concerned her son might hurt himself but allowing it out of fondness.

“Now you take care of that gun, you know it's a family possession. Maybe one day you'll pass it on to your son.” Then quieting herself saying, “just don't let your father see it, he thinks guns are dangerous, he'll be mad if he knows you have it.” With that he treated it gently, with honor. It now being a shared secret conveying the spell of many of whom he was just one. He smoothed it with oil again and again getting into each crevasse with the small rag devoted only to that purpose, preserving and making it new in his hands no less than it had been for his uncle straight from the box.

This spot under the deck was quiet and dark. So remote he thought no one would know where he was. He stood poised holding his gun, regarding targets, imagining himself a soldier or a big game hunter. He hadn't thought of time or if anyone knew where he was. At ten he had the run of his neighborhood not needing to be looked after every moment.

“Why don’t you take your gun to the new boy’s house or out into the woods,” his mother told him, “get out of the yard, I don’t want you shooting it around the house, and don’t let your father see it,” she whispered leaning close. “This is our secret, let’s keep it that way.” Then in the next breath saying, “but dinner will be ready soon so don’t go far, I don’t want to come find you, I’m making your favorite, you’ll see,” and with all that he stayed home hiding out where he was. Or so he thought. Until he heard the door open from the basement behind him.

During the work week his father wore leather soled wing tips. When he arrived home stepping onto the hardwood floors their distinct slap, along with his deep voice resonating through the walls allowed the boy’s ears to fix on him knowing where he was and how he felt. From his upstairs room he tracked him as he moved, cocking his head his ears following his course. This was necessary because their relationship was about discipline. The boy had to know his father’s whereabouts and mood, avoiding him if he could planning an escape, always preparing for the worst. Discipline could come at any time its exact nature always unpredictable. A straight punch to the jaw or a choreographed belt whipping where the boy was made to grunt out the count laying flat on his parent’s bed pants down eyes forward so he couldn’t see the blows coming. His father was always formal about these sessions, ceremonial even it qualifying as proper discipline requiring decorum allowing him to stretch it out indulgently, particularly satisfied and grim, with careful attention to its execution.

The boy could never know how bad the discipline would be or even clearly what it was for, that being dependent on what was possible that day, or how the day’s mood dictated the punishment. Even when he knew what the punishment was about it didn’t

always follow the same measure of things, one time taking a rounding backhand to the jaw after sweeping the garage presenting the dust in a neat pile in the center of the floor. He had meant to show how much he had gathered, a clear exhibit of his effort. His father always preached thoroughness. But according to his father this time he should have already used the dustpan and “gotten that shit off the god damned floor.” Afterward his father stomped from the room screaming “now clean it up,” the boy staying down his cheek throbbing, trembling from the suddenness of it all, listening closely in case he came back. The boy could always be summoned by that big resonant voice from anywhere in the house and would have to go, head down, approaching fearfully trying to stay out of reach.

Every evening the boy was keen to the thump of that particular car door slamming, his heart gathering speed as his father stomped up the back steps like the beating of a drum. Then that first leathery smack of his soles on the wood floor and the play of his voice through the timbers of the house signaling his mood. The boy held quiet registering each nuance, it meaning so much.

But this was the weekend when his father wore tennis shoes. The boy was with his thoughts and didn't hear the door opening behind him. By the time he heard it click shut, his father clearing his throat, it was too late. He had made a mistake.

“What have you got there,” his father demanded, “I say what have you got there boy, is that a gun, do you have a gun, where did you get it, did you hear me, I said where did you get it.” He moved towards the boy who had turned backing away eyes on his father, body snapped taut.

“Yes sir,” the boy stammered, “yes sir.”

“Yes sir what.”

“Yes sir, it’s a gun. I got it in the mail.”

“The mail, are you saying it just came in the mail, it appeared one day and you don’t know where it came from.” His father moved closer the boy keeping him in front shuffling a retreat.

“Do you know what I’m asking you,” his father kept on. “Did you hear what I said, it’s a simple question. Are you telling me the gun just appeared in the mailbox like magic.” The boy now knew anything he said would be wrong so kept quiet. “Can you speak,” his father said leaning close. “Can you hear me.” The boy nodded eyes pegged on his father.

His father stood straight and glared. It was these moments that made the boy most afraid, facing his father who was within reach, naturally muscled unlike the boy who was thin for his age, weak in a fight, embarrassed to show his legs or go without a shirt, always feeling diminished and vulnerable beside his father, a swollen red faced giant two feet taller bulging with strength that could crush him. The boy made no sudden moves holding the gun low. He let his arms dangle to their full length trying to keep it from sight.

“Give it to me,” his father snarled. “Let me have it.” The boy held still hoping his father would stop asking. His father held out his hand. “I said give it to me, give me the gun.” He was baring his teeth in a way the boy knew.

Months before the boy’s grandparents had visited Texas bringing him a bullwhip. It was eight feet long with a lathed wooden handle, of braided leather starting thick tapering at the end to loose strands of leather that whistled the air when he swung it. He learned to

swing hard making it ignite with a sharp crack. He would walk it around his yard eyeing things as targets or stand in one place snapping it over and over savoring its charged feel and potential for pain. He had seen a pirate movie of men on sailing ships. Prisoners were tied to barrels shirts with ripped open exposing their backs. Whips tore their skin as they screamed. He saw that as he snapped it. He was the one punishing. They all deserved it.

He had banged a nail in the wall by his door hanging it there coiled and ready. It was what a boy needed. You never knew what could happen. Most of his room was like that, full of things a boy might need, railroad spikes, pocket knives, strangely colored rocks, bird feathers, an odd stick he had whittled imagining it a wizard's staff containing magic. All things gathered from escapes brought back displayed like trophies, proof of his having been somewhere else.

One night his father surprised him standing in the door finding the boy reading. He looked around finally seeing the whip taking it down, rolling it in his hands feeling its softness, yanking it taut testing its strength. He began to snap it across the room smiling, easing in from the door, its ends singing close while the boy retreated. His teeth gleamed as he watched the boy run out of room squatting in the small gap between the dresser and corner making himself into a ball burying his face in his legs the whip nipping his shins. The boy didn't make any noise staying down forcing his mind to go numb until it ended.

That's where the boy knew that radiant manic expression, from his tight crouch in the corner making himself small peering through his knees. And from other times like it more often than not also with his father laughing.

“What are you so afraid of, does it scare you when I do this, tell me does this scare you.” The boy took down the whip after that hiding it deep in his closet. He stayed in his

room the rest of the night lying awake angry with himself for doing nothing, vowing if his father hurt him again it would be different. He imagined things he could have done if he had gotten the whip first. He would have swung it right at his father's face snapping it like he had practiced, backing him into the corner scared and sniveling, slashing his face making him bleed. He could have spun it up around his neck cinching his throat closed, his father falling to the floor face swelling red, fear plain in his eyes for the boy to enjoy, his father realizing all his mistakes starting to cry. The boy would jerk the whip tight while his father reached for mercy and the boy enjoyed his suffering.

"I'm not going to tell you again, give me the gun or I'll take it." Now his father was angry. The boy raised it high holding it like an offering. His father snatched it, hefting it about examining at it from all sides, running his cupped hand along the barrel. "It looks like you've cleaned it, it looks good, like you take good care of it." The boy kept silent head down but eyes up, watching every motion, every twitch. He backed away as his father spread his legs wide raising the gun to his shoulder focusing his eye down the sights.

His father stopped moving. That smile came to his face. He cocked the gun with his great arm easily pressing the bar into place then holding it the proper way, one hand cradling the barrel the other pressing his finger to the trigger.

"Do you know what I want you to do," he said raising an eyebrow speaking plainly. The boy shook his head but he knew. "Are you sure." The boy nodded. His father stuck raised the gun holding it ready. "Run," he said. The boy watched him not moving. "Run," his father said louder lifting the gun to his eye pointing it at the boy. The boy knew his father would shoot him, that only by running could he save himself. He jumped digging

his feet into the grass down the slope feeling gravity give him speed, for a moment having the thought that he might get away, that he was fast enough.

The first shot hit the boy in the rear as he made the bottom of the slope. It felt sharp and hot making him yelp and dig his feet harder giving out all his speed. The second shot got him in the small of the back through his thin shirt and felt hotter, finding thin new flesh not tempered by whippings. He was looking heading for open space, his body taking any direction with room, across his neighbor's yard and its smooth flat grass where he could build speed. The third shot caught him low on his leg. Maybe it was the thickness of his jeans or because he was further away but it didn't hurt as much making him believe he was safer, gaining distance taking effect. But the fourth shot came later, the boy almost waiting for it as his father took careful aim. It struck him on the nape of his neck like it had been doused with gasoline and set on fire. His hand flew to it, his legs buckled almost falling but he kept them churning fighting for balance getting further away.

Now he fixed on one large pine tree at the end of his neighbors grass. He told himself to run hard and not think of the next shot, that thinking would make him slower. As he made the tree he hit it full speed gouging his arms on the bark squeezing behind it as his father found its range fresh shots popping into it while the boy made himself a silhouette, thin within the lines of the tree holding that way fighting his breath, listening to BB's smack into the layered bark, his father still caught in the pace of a moving target, cocking and firing quickly in rhythm.

The shots started coming slower. Then his father didn't shoot at all, waiting for him to make a mistake, to expose himself. The boy would barely peek around the edge, see his

father waiting, gun poised, and jerk back as a shot popped into the tree followed by his father's laughter.

The boy felt safe as long as he didn't move. So he held still and erect keeping himself thin, feeling his heart pound inside his chest. After a long while he carefully peeked again and saw his father propping against the small table still holding the gun ready watching him and he knew he was safe. His father would not come out after him. He liked the way the game was now, how he could relax taking shots keeping the boy pinned behind the tree. The boy pulled back almost languidly tempting him as his father raised the gun one more shot snapping into the tree.

The sunlight was fading. Slowly things blended into the darkness. The yellow bug light beneath the deck came on allowing the boy the advantage of seeing his father as it got darker. He could more freely ease out watching knowing his father could not see back.

His father sat all the way down on the table now drooping the gun to his legs. The boy looked on not afraid the darkness protecting him. His father's head was down. He was keeping oddly still. Because of the darkness and his father's posture the boy exposed himself more watching his father set the gun against a post supporting the deck out of quick reach. Now and again his father would look into the darkness cocking his head like he thought to speak.

"Come on in son," he finally said. His voice was weak, as if other people might be listening, the sound barely carrying out to the boy focusing all his senses on his father. "Come on in, I won't do it again. I promise. You can see the gun over here, I won't touch it. Trust me. Please come in."

The boy was not coming in. He would not leave his tree and the safe feeling of the moment even though his father would punish him later. It was a calculation worth making, trading a certain present for merely a problematic future. His father stood now hands on his hips leaning forward fixing his eyes into the yard closer to the gun. If the boy started in now his father would have time to snatch it and shoot as he appeared from the darkness, hitting him in the face, his chest, it hurting in fierce new ways the boy imagined taking him behind the tree again clutching it tighter.

He still watched his father stare into the darkness. He seemed sad and ashamed. This was confusing. The boy felt sorry for him and he was still afraid. The thoughts together gave him a pain in his chest so he closed his eyes trying to put it all together in some order. When he opened them again he looked at his father more closely, squinting him into focus. It was hard to tell over the darkness and distance whether his father was looking directly into his eyes, if his father could see him at all.

“I promise son,” his father spoke out louder purposefully kind, gilded with a sweetness the boy took as deception to lure him in. “I promise this time you’re safe, I won’t do it.”

It was fully dark now. The boy was surprised at how quickly it became that way. The light under the deck glowed brighter. Only blurred details of the yard and house showed coated in yellow haze. His father was standing with the light at his back. His face in shadow. It was quiet except for the rattle of cicadas rising and falling in unisoned waves, peaking blurred screams causing the boy to hold his breath until they passed. This was the time of year for fireflies, their blinking dotting the darkness between the boy and his father giving away distance, laying a scale to the void between them.

His father's shoulders sagged. He turned away walking to the door going inside. The boy was alone. It felt as if gravity lifted. He eased his grip on the tree stepping out planting his feet full in the yard squaring his shoulders towards home, part of him still not believing ready to leap back thinking this a trick. But hopeful, waiting, watching the door.

His mother walked into the pool of light on the deck standing at its edge near the rail hands on hips peering out. The boy could see her crimped eyes as she cupped her hands about her mouth calling his name in long loping syllables, leaning into it giving it power like she imagined him far away.

He held still. If he came in now appearing suddenly from the darkness he would need to explain. He could see by her anxious pacing she was worried. She kept on several minutes calling then looking out, turning away and coming back as he held still, breathing slowly, not making a sound or movement she could pinpoint in the darkness. He imagined he would appear only as a smudge to her, a ghostly shape she could not recognize. If he didn't move or give himself away she would never know the shape was her son.

She turned slowly while thinking and walked back in. He started toward the house, creeping his way along the edge of his neighbor's yard holding close to the cover of trees. He knew once he was inside he would be safe. His father would never shoot him in front of his mother. Her presence would protect him. So it was just a matter of getting there. He picked his way carefully always keeping the next tree in sight dashing for it, making progress by measured leaps calculating risk, finally leaving one last distance to the deck which he covered in an all out burst, digging in his shoes as fiercely as he had done

getting away, flying in beneath the deck stopping there panting feeling complete, back where he had begun.

The gun was where his father had left it. He picked it up holding his eye down the sight looking towards the big tree faint in the thin light seeing the shot as his father had, imagining a head sticking out then shooting it. He lowered the gun studying it anew. Its oil reflected the light in smudges from hands, his own and now his father's. He snatched it by the end of the barrel holding it over his head swinging the butt hard into the concrete. A large piece snapped off skipping into the grass. He smashed it again, and again, until the butt was gone and there was only the metal of the barrel and cocking arm and trigger. He balanced that against the post from the deck kicking it, it falling so that he set it up again kicking it until the barrel was bent and the arm wrenched worthless to the side. He held it by the end of the barrel again and brought it down smashing it harder against the concrete until the cocking arm and other shards sprang off and he was winded and his hands stung and he let it go, it lying dashed about on the concrete and grass in pieces large and small. He looked all around taking account of it until his breathing slowed, glad now, feeling wild, vengeful, wanting more.

When his heart slowed he gathered the pieces, crouching on his knees pressing his face low seeing under the darkness certain to get them all large and small. He gently tooled them into a pile in the center of the patio, large pieces forming the foundation, working higher until the smallest fragments balanced on top giving it height. It was as neat and as artful as he could make it. He stood back admiring it, imagining the impression it would make, how someone might be struck by its carefulness, the way things were so precisely teetered allowing it to hold together.

By the patio his father kept a gardenia bush. It was in full bloom, stems of soft white flowers rising from its top. He had bought it large and grown as if he didn't prefer small things. It was one of the few things the boy had ever seen him care for, fertilizing it, making sure it had plenty of water after it was planted. It had survived beautifully becoming established, every year since showing blossoms and new growth. The boy always thought it odd and stupid the way his father cared about that plant like nothing else, pressing his face into it smelling its blooms. The boy reached deep into it ripping out a full limb of flowers. He placed that on top of the pile kneeling beside it like a grave, as if something had died, then he stepped back taking that in, feeling vindicated.

He started up the steps of the deck which he normally bounded every time as if just home from school. But hearing his footfalls, knowing how that might sound, he slowed setting his feet softly and crept to the top. He pressed close against the wall peeking around the corner through the glass door inside.

He entered carefully, slowly turning the knob, placing his feet to make no sound, pressing the door closed. He could hear his parents at the kitchen table having sat down to eat. First his father sounding impatient.

"I'm sure he's out in yard with one his buddies, he'll be in any second, stop making a fuss."

"Well I'll make a fuss if I want to but I'm not making a fuss. I am just worried," his mother said, "that's all, let me be worried, is that all right with you, do you mind if I worry about my own son while he's alone out in the dark."

The boy gathered a large breath and stepped into the room revealing himself slowly, imagining himself materializing from thin air looking at his mother until she lifted her eyes seeing him her face melting in relief.

“Well it’s about time, I called for you. I stood right on that back deck calling and didn’t hear a thing. Where have you been. I made your favorite and you knew it. I told you about it, where have you been, I’m asking you,” she said looking at him until he looked back meeting her eyes with his own then she scraped out her chair. “Now sit down. I will fix you a plate,” and she was on her feet at the stove plate in hand scooping lasagna with a big spoon still talking, “Were you at the new boy’s, is that where. You knew we were about to eat. Maybe I need to get you a wristwatch or something so you’ll know what time it is. I was worried.”

The boy took his seat without looking at his father keeping his eyes fixed on things before him, the bowl of fresh gardenias in the center of the table, the act of pulling out his chair settling into it. His silverware and glass were there and he rubbed his fingertips across them feeling his father’s eyes, knowing he was looking. When his mother set down his plate he took his fork putting a small bit into his mouth. He was afraid he had made a mistake picturing the broken gun and the way he carefully formed the pile, topping it with gardenias, flaunting his effort asking for trouble, feeling again the limb tear from the bush.

His mother sat down now comforted taking up her fork addressing her plate as she kept talking. She was always the talker at dinner making it easy for everyone else to remain silent. When she spoke in a particularly rhythmic way preceded by a large breath

they knew she would carry on for a while. They could be silent to themselves letting her get it all out.

“I’ve been thinking. Now you know I want you to explore, that I want you out of this house off with the other boys. But I also need to call you, I need to know you’re okay. So I have an idea. I’m going to buy a bell, a big brass bell, something loud that will go next to the back door that I can ring then we will all know it’s time to eat. Because it’s frustrating when you cook something, getting it just right, then nobody shows up. It’s not as good that way. It’s about timing. I go to a lot of trouble to get it right, then it sets up, loses its taste. You have to serve it right away if you want it to be good.”

The boy was grateful for the food. In spite of his fear he was hungry. The food gave him something to do to avoid his father. He could feel his eyes there. Peripherally he could see him raising and lowering his fork. He knew by his silence he was watching.

Lasagna was his favorite. That made everything easier tasting the rich meat sauce, filling his mouth feeling it dull the pang wrenching his stomach. He had been very hungry. Only by eating did he realize it, it being mindless, making him calm able to forget. He kept his face low over his plate forking it into his mouth.

His father was talking, almost mumbling. At first he had ignored it because of the food but then he listened when his mother’s voice came in high over the top of it.

“What are you talking about, I don’t understand.” It was her shrillness that got his attention. “Why are you saying this, is this good dinner time conversation, I wish we could talk about something else.”

“I was just remembering, that’s all,” his father said, “when I was a boy that’s what I did when my father got home, that is if I wanted to stay in one piece. Maybe it was his

work but he was always in a bad mood. If you knew what was good for you, you stayed out his way. That's no excuse or anything, just how it was." The boy felt his father was talking directly to him, his voice aimed at him waiting for him to look up so he did trying to not be afraid, controlling himself, keeping a blank expression looking directly back. His father met the boy's eyes with his own raising an eyebrow as if there had been a question. The boy fought himself to not flinch, to keep staring, not be the first to turn away showing his fear.

"Well I just don't know what that means," his mother said. "I don't know why that is important. This is the dinner table, let's talk about other things, like changes we're going to make around here, new ways of doing things. I'm going shopping for our bell tomorrow while the two of you are out then we can put it up next to the door on the deck, up high so it will be heard a long way. That's what we need." She was looking off now at a car light moving across the window, a neighbor pulling into his driveway late, speaking absently her voice slow, catching on sharp consonants. "A big brass bell, something that really gives out a pure sound, beautiful that you can hear a long, long way."

The boy was squeaking his fork across his plate gathering the last of the sauce when his mother noticed.

"Well look at you, you never do that, you must have worked up quite an appetite today with all that running around, would you like more." The boy nodded. She got up coming around behind him reaching for his plate.

"What is this, what is this on your neck." She leaned close to where the BB had hit. He had felt it all along hot and stinging now tingling from her attention. She leaned close pressing it with her finger. He jerked away.

“I don’t know, it’s nothing, a bug bite, I don’t know.”

“Leave the boy alone,” his father said, “it’s probably just a scratch, why don’t you get him something to eat, can’t you see he’s hungry.” He started out of his chair, his voice louder. “I mean come on, little wounds are a part of growing up, I had them all the time.”

But his mother would not leave it alone. She looked at it closely for clues, some telling feature. “Well it’s not a bug bite. I can tell you that. And it’s definitely not just a part of growing up. I think I know what that looks like too,” she said sharply turning to her husband then focusing quickly back on the wound. “No, something happened here, something caused this, it looks like something, maybe, well I don’t know.” Her voice trailing off. The boy held still feeling her fingers and breath. “How did you get this,” she asked coming around him taking him by his shoulders, voice strong. “I want you to tell me how you got this, I know that you know.”

He didn’t speak but his eyes went to his father then he nodded, just slightly without meaning to, then quickly looked away. Her eyes narrowed. The muscles in her jaw rippled. She dropped her hands turning around to his father who drew back holding high his open palms.

“What, don’t look at me. I don’t know anything.” His face hardened and set, as if looking away or blinking would confess something. He held his expression until she turned away, snatching the boy’s plate marching towards the stove. The boy could see her shaking. The light cotton of her skirt quivered as she stood at the stove taking up the large spoon then holding still, her other hand pinching the bridge of her nose digging into the corners of her eyes. She set the big spoon and plate on the counter leaning into it, propping herself there. When she did she brushed against a pan perched on the edge. Her

new pan, straight from the box without a scuff. It fell to the floor. With its large deep shape and thin gauge, the way it struck on its bottom, it rang a pure hard note startling his father then vibrating the air with a sustained deep note, like a far away bell marking time, making them all pause and hold still listening until it disappeared and everything was over.