

## ARMED AND DANGEROUS

The morning after the break-in, Harlan knew he would have to buy a gun. He ate his breakfast one-handed and reviewed his foolishness. He had turned on the basement light and taken the stairs two at a time, gripping his ax handle and yelling like a one-man infantry charge. He saw the ass end of the intruder scurrying through the window, legs dangling like some slithery creature fleeing the light. He swung his club and connected real good on an ankle. He heard the satisfying sound of hardwood smacking bone, heard the young voice scream in pain. He dropped the ax handle and grabbed the foot. Then he heard a loud *pop*, followed by another and another. Pain tore through his arm. The intruder kicked hard then, throwing him off balance. He staggered backward a few steps and was left holding a dirty red sneaker as the burglar disappeared through the window and blood leaked from his arm.

As he sipped black coffee and considered his options, the idea of a gun darted in and out of his mind. He thought of bars for the windows - ugly - and a home security system - expen-

sive. He settled on window sash locks for the first floor and glass block windows in the basement - a good weekend project. But the gun idea wouldn't leave him alone.

He looked past his oatmeal to the empty chair that had once been Marge's. "I was lucky this time," he told his deceased wife. "The son of a bitch shot me." He was being practical, he argued, solving a problem. She still helped him after she was gone by letting him think out loud at the kitchen table. He took her silence as acquiescence to his plan.

The ax handle had been a concession to Marge. She had convinced him that he didn't need a gun, that there were too many guns as it was. He bought the ax handle a year ago, after he woke one morning to find his tomato plants had been picked clean during the night. He lay awake every night for two weeks, listening, hoping they'd try to steal his new crop of zucchini.

The day he bought the ax handle, he showed it to the other custodians at Longfellow Elementary School, holding it like a baseball bat during their coffee break. He said they'd better not try to raid his garden again. Jake, the head custodian, roared with laughter.

"An ax handle? Man! I got me a pump action shotgun and a sign on the back door that says, 'Insured by Smith and Wesson.' "

"The bad guys aren't gonna read your sign, Jake." This came from Babs, the only woman Harlan had ever worked with in his twenty years in the public schools. Jake called her "Boobs," but never to her face.

"Their problem," said Jake. "They miss my sign, then they're too stupid to live. One less lowlife son of a bitch. I'd be doing the world a service. Hey! You know why a shotgun's like a digital camera? You just point and shoot. An ax handle? What's wrong with you, Harlan?"

Harlan came back with how he didn't need a gun, giving Marge's argument. A gun was overkill, he said. They all laughed at that, and argued some more before going up to clean the classrooms now that the kids had gone home.

He refilled his cup and resumed his argument with his wife's ghost. She brought up Italy. Had it been only five years since she dragged him there? "The one place I want to see before I die," she had said. He'd relented, not knowing her wish would become prophecy.

Marge had read aloud to him about the pickpockets of Florence. The tour book informed them that petty thieves made emptying the pockets of tourists an art and an industry. This caught Harlan's imagination. He had admired the finesse of these unseen adversaries and had looked forward to outwitting them.

"Those days are gone," Harlan said to the empty kitchen. "You can't outsmart a bullet."

After work, he drove out to a building supply warehouse in the distant suburbs. He bought glass blocks, mortar and frames and loaded up the truck. Then he crossed the highway to a large sporting goods store and bought the gun.

It wasn't until he stood at the counter, surveying the vast array of weaponry in front of him - shotguns, single-barreled, double-barreled, hunting rifles, revolvers, semiautomatic pistols, so many he couldn't imagine the need for them all - that the realities of buying a gun hit him.

"Help you?" A gray-haired man wearing a smile said from behind a thick white mustache.

"I want to buy a handgun." He added, "To protect my home. I had a burglary last night," as if to explain that he wasn't really that kind of person.

“Permit?”

“What?”

“You got your permit to purchase? Got to have one to legally purchase a handgun in this state.”

Why hadn't he thought of that? The salesman produced the required application, filled out the dealer portion and told him where to file it in person. He asked if Harlan also wanted a permit to carry a handgun.

“You're just as likely to run into trouble on the street as have another home invasion, especially in the city,” he said.

Harlan decided, on the spot, why not? No point in going halfway.

Next they talked guns. He knew nothing about them. The salesman, whose name was Earl, claimed to be something of an expert, said he had made it a hobby two years ago, when his home was broken into. Earl reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and extracted a photo of three smiling children. They were his grandkids, he said, and they were sleeping over the night of the burglary. They all slept through it. When they discovered the break-in the next morning, his wife's hysterics had frightened the children.

“She told me to get the gun. I ended up with three; got two of them strategically hidden around the house and one strategically on my person right now, so you behave.” He raised his eyebrows and grinned.

Earl showed him four guns, turning each in his hands, pointing out its features, then passing it to Harlan. As he took the first gun, the muscles in Harlan's hands deserted him, and he thought he would drop the weapon. He forced himself to mimic Earl's actions. He thumbed the hammer, opened the cylinder and examined it. He spun the cylinder, admiring the smooth, well-

oiled action and the soft, efficient clicking sound. His hands operated on their own, beyond his control. He gripped each gun, sighted an imaginary target, squeezed the trigger.

With each gun he handled, the tingling muscle weakness receded. He recognized guns for what they were - tools, like hammers, table saws. He was on familiar ground. What's it good for? How does it handle?

In the end, he decided on a Colt Cobra .38 caliber five-shot double action revolver with a two-inch barrel. He chose the blued steel barrel and the composite rubber grip.

Earl said it was a perfect choice for home defense.

Harlan liked the feel of it in his hand, its heft and the snug fit of his hand on the rubber grip. Earl suggested a trigger lock; and Harlan agreed it made sense, insurance in the unlikely event his weapon fell into someone else's hands. He ordered the Colt ankle holster made specifically for this gun and paid extra to get leather instead of nylon.

Earl recommended a handgun training course, a requirement if Harlan was going to apply for a concealed carry permit. "They're the best," he said. "I used them, so I can vouch for them. State approved, too."

Harlan paid for his purchase and left the store with the gait of a man who knew he had done the right thing. He drove straight to the Fifth Police Precinct, where he delivered his Permission to Purchase application to the officer on duty.

As he drove home, Earl's words returned to him, *just as likely to run into trouble on the street*. The break-in hadn't surprised him. The neighborhood had been changing for twenty years. As his neighbors aged, a few traded their homes for RVs and went off on a vagabond existence Harlan couldn't understand. Renters were sucked in with the backwash of their depar-

ture. Homes became properties. Properties became eyesores, longing for a fresh coat of paint. Lawns frayed under relentless use by too many children.

Litter drifted in like flotsam - beer cans, broken bottles, fast food containers. Crime followed the litter. Cars parked on the street were broken into. Bicycles were stolen from garages. He called to report abandoned cars and noisy parties. Graffiti appeared everywhere. One morning early in the summer he found a wall of his garage covered with swirls of black and red paint. He called the police, knowing they could do nothing. He needed three coats of white paint to erase this newest insult. Shoveling shit against the tide, he thought.

On some blocks - not his, thank god, not yet - men sat on porches in the middle of the day and late into the night, drinking, taking up space. Why these losers didn't get a damn job and take care of their homes, he just didn't know.

He and Marge used to walk, carefree, each night after dinner. Ollie, their black lab, would zigzag ahead, sniffing for treasure. When Ollie died, Marge said, "Now I'll have to walk you, instead."

"I'm not wearing a leash," he said, and she smiled at him.

And then Marge was gone. Harlan kept walking, grief his companion. He altered his route now to avoid the men, only to encounter teenagers on street corners and in the park. The kids were loud, and the air reeked of marijuana and profanity. He changed course again, his world shrinking like an old man's eyesight.

A week after the burglary, he picked up his Permission to Purchase at the police station and returned to the store, where Earl met him with a huge grin and produced his gun, the holster, trigger lock and a box of ammunition.

Harlan held the handgun to his nose. Like the soft leather of the holster, the gun had its own scent. As he smelled its oiled mechanisms and felt the cool hard steel, he admired again the functional beauty of a well-crafted tool.

The first night the gun was in his house, he couldn't sleep. He put it in the drawer of his bedside table, without the trigger lock. What if it happened now? Would he shout a warning? Would he shoot? He remembered something Earl had told him. *Don't pick up your weapon if you're not willing to use it.* The gun lay in the drawer, inches from his head, loaded, five live bullets. The knowledge set his heart to beating like it had the first time he and Marge had lain together in this bed.

On the first night of the defensive handgun training course at the local community college, Harlan counted ten women and four other men sitting in student desks with him. At the front of the room, a small, thin man with a well-trimmed moustache and a military haircut leaned against the teacher's desk, arms folded, watching silently as the room filled.

At precisely seven-thirty, the man walked behind the desk, placed his hands on the surface, no-nonsense like, leaned toward them as if ready to share a confidence and began their instruction.

Over the next five weeks, the instructor drilled them until they demonstrated flawlessly the skills needed to handle and shoot a gun safely. They became fluent in the rules for handgun safety, the fine points of state laws pertaining to handguns and the psychology of violent confrontation. They practiced the Weaver stance to perfection, dominant hand holding the gun, support hand wrapped around the gun frame, covering the strong hand. Hundreds of times they gripped their unloaded guns, pushing forward with the dominant hand while exerting rearward

pressure with the support hand, providing the isometric tension needed to control recoil and to shoot with greater speed and accuracy.

Each night after dinner, Harlan sat at the kitchen table, disassembling the Cobra and putting it back together until he could perform the entire feat in thirty seconds with his eyes closed. Unable to sleep, he rehearsed break-ins, like the students at Longfellow rehearsed fire drills. He slipped through the dark house to the kitchen and the basement, the most likely entry points. He flipped the light switch, assumed the Weaver stance, said, "Freeze!" He was armed and ready.

The sixth week, they met at the firing range. After all the lectures, all the rehearsal with their empty weapons, the group was subdued, businesslike. One person at a time stepped to the firing line as the instructor hovered close, watching for the slightest imperfection in their technique while the others looked on.

When it was his turn, Harlan was calm. He settled into the shooting stance, gripped the weapon as he had countless times, squared his torso, and completed the triangle with his right hand covering his left. He looked at the black silhouette thirty feet away. He squeezed the trigger and fired again and again until the Cobra and he were spent. Three of his shots had hit the silhouette - one in the shoulder, two in the broad mass of the torso. He wanted to reload the Cobra and empty it over and over into the target.

"Not too bad," said the instructor. None of the others had done as well. They all applauded, as they did for everyone. He returned to the group as one of the women took her place on the firing line. He watched and applauded without seeing or hearing.

Later, a group of them went for drinks at the Bull and Barrel. One of the women said that, as she aimed, she felt an almost sexual intensity, as if she and the target were partners, alone in the world. Another woman said, "Yes!" The men were silent, but Harlan nodded.



The county sheriff was the issuing authority for permits to carry a handgun. Harlan applied the day he received his certification of successful completion of the handgun course.

Every Thursday when he finished his shift, he drove to the firing range. Each time he took the firing stance, his concentration was complete. He had no name, no job, no home. No Marge. He was alone in the world, with the target, his bullets penetrating it with relentless accuracy. His aim improved so that at thirty feet he could put all five rounds into the center of the torso almost every time. He was a goddamned natural. Driving home, he wondered what it would be like to aim at a live target and squeeze the trigger. He wondered if Babs owned a gun. Maybe they could practice together.

The carry permit was approved right on schedule, and he claimed his prize at the sheriff's office. The next morning, he strapped the ankle holster to his left leg, the Cobra snug in its place. At the breakfast table, he could feel Marge's glare as he rushed to finish his oatmeal.

*Not to school, Harlan. Please.* Her voice was so clear that he looked up, certain he would see her sitting across from him.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid," he said. Remember Columbine, he told her, his voice soft. Maybe if someone at Columbine had been carrying - a teacher, a hall monitor, a custodian like him - the tragedy could have been avoided. Maybe there would have been no grieving mothers and fathers. He rose from the table, put his dishes in the dishwasher and hurried from the house.

He parked his truck near the custodians' entrance to the school and hurried through the early morning chill. At the door, he slowed as he saw the bold-lettered sign, *This establishment bans firearms.* He felt naked, the Cobra exposed.

“Hey, Harlan. Cold enough for you?” Harlan spun around at the cheerful greeting.

“You’re a little jumpy today. Too much coffee?” said Babs.

Harlan recovered and smiled, hoping he didn’t look guilty. He held the door for her.

Babs returned his smile and said, “Oh, a gentleman. Not enough of that going around these days.” As she entered, her breasts under her winter coat brushed against him. She took his arm and led him past the sign.

All day, the Cobra clung to his leg and the encounter with Babs to his thoughts. He reminded himself that his carrying was a measure of extra security for the school. Still, that whole first day, fear rattled around inside him. As he mopped spills in the lunchroom and bantered with teacher’s aides, his breathing came in short, violent bursts, like gunfire.

His insomnia persisted. He gave up fighting it. He’d get out of bed at three in the morning, tuck the Cobra in the waistband of his pants, and go for a ride in the truck. He’d cruise the dark streets and alleys, looking for signs of trouble, for a chance to do something. He took up smoking again after twenty years. He’d drive around, eyes searching the shadows for movement, ears tuned to noises, chain-smoking and listening to talk radio turned real low until the first light appeared in the eastern sky. Then he would go home and get ready for work.

The night was warm for November in Minnesota. Harlan wore a light jacket as he set off on his walk. People were out. Ahead, at the corner, he saw a cluster of teenagers enjoying one more night of loitering, wasting their lives. Seven boys were shouting, laughing, pushing, showing off for three girls. The girls were just as loud. He heard filthy language, obscene suggestions, taunts. The Cobra hugged his ankle, but failed to reassure him. He wished it were in his

pocket, easy to reach. He walked past the group, careful to avoid eye contact but walking in a way that showed he belonged there just as much as they did. The teenagers paid him no attention.

After that, he abandoned the ankle holster in favor of carrying the Cobra in his jacket pocket. He liked his tough guy image, collar turned up, hands in pockets, like Marlon Brando on the waterfront. He'd wrap his palm around the gun's rubber grip, his finger caressing the trigger. Sometimes he felt himself grow hard and allowed his thoughts to turn to Babs.

A week later, the weather turned. He could smell snow in the air. It was dark by the time he finished the dishes and left the house. He neared the corner where the teenagers hung out, but the cold had driven them off. He headed for the park, a small wooded area where young toughs loitered and drank beer and other unsavory characters - drug dealers, homeless men - occupied the shadows, unseen. He used to avoid the park after dark. That was before the gun. Now he could walk any damned place he pleased.

He entered the woods, and as he left the pavement behind, he enjoyed the feel of the soft wood chip path under his boots. A movement ahead caught his eye, something coming fast toward him. He pulled the gun from his pocket, and had his thumb on the safety release, when a golden retriever skidded to a halt at his feet, then pushed its body against his leg, rubbing hard, making friends.

*Jesus!*

He slipped the gun into his pocket and rubbed the dog's thick coat. "Good dog," he said. *And almost a dead one.* Where was the damned owner? There were leash laws, for a good reason.

A man appeared, walking slowly, a leash draped around his shoulders, unfazed by his own negligence. Harlan straightened, not wanting the man to see that it was okay between him and the dog. He put his hands in his pockets.

“There are leash laws,” he said.

“Sorry.” The man tossed out the word like loose change, then added, “Nobody leashes in here.”

“Well, you better control your dog. Something bad could happen. What if I had a gun?”

The man took the leash from around his neck, wound it a turn in his hand.

“Are you threatening me?”

“I’m telling you to obey the law. Take care of your damned dog before something bad happens to it.”

“Fuck you, man. Come on, Jocko. Come!”

The man strode past him. The dog ran after his master. Harlan watched them until they rounded a bend. He turned and walked, practically ran. Goddamn! That was a situation. As he walked himself back to a state of calm, he reviewed how he handled himself. He decided he had done well. He asserted himself, used reasonable restraint, and stayed well within the law. But the surge of adrenaline - he hadn’t been ready for that.

\*\*\*\*\*

Harlan knew it was all wrong even as he squeezed the trigger, before the man cried out. He did everything right - turned on the garage light, shouted a warning, assumed the Weaver stance. The man lunged. He fired.

“Aw, man! You shot me.”

The man fell to his knees, holding his shoulder, blood trickling through his fingers. No more than a dozen feet separated them. Hundreds of practice rounds placed in the kill zone, and he missed from twelve damned feet.

“Don’t shoot me, man. I’m just tryin’ to get warm,” the man said.

Harlan kept the Cobra pointed at his live target, studied the target through the sight. He saw a man his age, two hundred pounds at least, round face flecked with gray stubble. The man wore a dirty Twins baseball cap. His grease-stained black warm-up jacket, too flimsy for the brutal cold, was opened to reveal a shirt so filthy Harlan couldn’t be sure of its true colors. The man wore no gloves. Tears streaked his face.

The man said, “All I want is to get warm, man.” He swayed and leaned into the fender of Harlan’s truck. Harlan pivoted, following the man’s movement with the Cobra. As the man knelt, motionless, his eyes closed and his face softened. He looked as if he were just resting, without a care to bother him.

The gun grew heavy. Harlan, spent, lowered it to his side. He had aimed to kill, and he had failed. His teeth chattered, and he began to shiver. Weariness advanced on Harlan with the cold. Like an unfaithful husband who has been found out, he was now faced with the mess he had created. He couldn’t leave his victim in the frigid garage, even for a short while. He stuck the Cobra in the pocket of his coat, walked to his victim and lifted him to his feet.

He led the man into his home. The man whimpered, “Don’t shoot me. Don’t shoot me,” until Harlan said, “Be quiet. I’m not going to shoot you.” He cleaned and dressed the man’s wound in the bathroom, breathing in shallow gasps against the stink of homelessness and booze.

Now they sat opposite each other at Harlan's kitchen table, his victim hunched over a mug of hot chocolate, grasping it with both hands as if trying to absorb every possible heat calorie. Harlan drank from a bottle of Leinenkugel. The Cobra lay on the table by his hand.

The man, keeping his head low, lifted his eyes in a plea.

"You got a cigarette?" the man said.

"No," Harlan lied. "Cigarettes'll kill you."

The man's head dropped and began to bob. He was laughing.

"They'll kill me quicker than you will," the man said. "You got a gun, you ought to know how to use it 'fore you hurt yourself." Then he said, "You going to call the police?"

Harlan had not thought past shooting the intruder, who was supposed to be dead. Like when you put milk out for a stray cat and you are stuck with that cat, Harlan had taken this stray in, and now he was stuck. He could no longer shoot him and solve his problem.

"If I call the police," he said, "they'll take you to a hospital, or a shelter maybe. You'll be out of the cold." *Both of our problems will be solved*, he thought.

The man shook his head. "Uh uh," he said. "No police. No hospital. No shelter."

"You'll freeze to death out there tonight. It's got to be ten below."

"I ain't froze to death yet. You call the police, I believe I'll just up and walk out your door." He sipped his hot chocolate, at ease in Harlan's kitchen.

"You're not afraid of me? I've got the gun."

"Ain't nothing much for a man like me to be afraid of, although I do respect that gun. Always respect a man with a gun, I say. But I don't believe you'll shoot me if I turn my back on you and walk out of your house." He added, "That what you want? Me to be afraid of you?"

"I wanted you dead."

“But you don’t now.”

“You were just trying to get warm. No crime in that.”

Harlan drained his beer, stood up and walked to the sink. As he rinsed the bottle, he looked at the thermometer outside the window. Fifteen below. The man’s reflection looked at Harlan from where he sat in Marge’s chair. Harlan made his decision.

“I have a spare bed. You can sleep here tonight. Take a shower first.” He added, “I sleep light. You move from your room before morning, I’ll shoot you. And I won’t miss this time. You go when I leave in the morning, and don’t ever come back.”

“I’ll go right now, goddamnit. Just ‘cause you got a gun don’t mean you can talk to a man like that.”

“Your choice. I’m going up. Either come or get out.”

The man grinned and said, “Shit. Why not? What I came here for.”

Harlan lay on his back, looking at the bedroom ceiling. He and Marge had walked the crowded, steamy streets of Florence. They had had no problem with pickpockets. They had taken precautions - money belts, zippered pockets. They dressed and acted to blend in. They finessed the street thieves with their attitude and laughed about it over glasses of Rosso di Montalcino. He had tried to identify the thieves as they strolled the markets, but it had been impossible. He could see them now - young men in clean jeans and stylish wide-collared shirts, women with babies, boys and girls who posed for tourists’ cameras - because now they grinned and held up their loot for his inspection - watches, wallets, passports, cameras. One boy held an object delicately with his thumb and index finger, like a rare specimen. The boy approached, and

Harlan saw that the boy held the Cobra. He reached under his pillow, but the gun was gone. The pickpockets burst into silent laughter.

Harlan sat upright, his heart racing, and slid his hand under the pillow, felt the Cobra nestled where it belonged. Armed and ready. Like seeing the face of an old acquaintance and not being able to attach a name to it, Harlan sought to name the current that pulsed through him. *Fear*. He had drawn his gun twice. A dog and a drunk. As jittery as a boy on a date, he thought. And far more dangerous. What was a man with a gun to do?

*Use it*, said Earl. *Do the world a service*, roared Jake. *Finesse*, whispered the boy.

He saw then how this could play out. He got up, carrying the Cobra in his left hand, by his side. He stopped at the guest room door and heard snoring. He went downstairs to do what was necessary, then went to bed and lay with his eyes open until he fell into an uneasy sleep.

He awoke, as he always did, before the winter sun broke the night. He dressed for work and slipped the Cobra into the waistband of his work pants. The door to the second bedroom was open, and the bed was empty. He went to the kitchen.

The old down parka he had placed on the table was gone. The wool watch cap, the old flannel shirt, work boots, heavy socks and gloves were also gone, along with the two twenty-dollar bills he had set out.

In the center of the table, under the man's empty hot chocolate mug, lay a torn piece of paper. Harlan picked up the paper and read the scrawled note.

*Don't worry*, it said. *I won't be back*. It was signed, *Bear*.

Harlan crumbled the paper and dropped it on the table. *Not if you're smart, you won't*, *Bear*, he thought. He fixed himself scrambled eggs, toast and coffee. As he ate, he looked across the table at Marge's empty chair. "There," he said. "Satisfied?" Marge smiled and nod-



ded once. He put his dishes in the dishwasher, then got his holster and attached it to his ankle.

He transferred the Cobra from his waistband to the holster. It was time to go to work.