

Guns do kill people

He walked into the wooded area bordering the bottom of his garden. It was one o'clock in the morning and the moon was up. It was a full moon that morning and he could see quite well by its light. He'd walked into the woods because he was sure something was in there. Probably some animal or maybe a peeping Tom. Peeping Toms were animals weren't they? His hand closed reflexively on the handle of the handgun he was holding. The feel of it gave him confidence.

He'd gone about five yards into the brush when he saw it. It was tall and gray and insubstantial, rising from the ground like smoke. The word 'wraith' appeared in his mind. It was unlike any person he had ever seen. It hovered furtively amongst the trees as if avoiding detection.

"Trying to cop a peek at my daughter, you sick bastard?" he asked, quietly. "Come out into the open. If you don't I'm going to blow your fucking head off."

The next morning Gloria Speroni was at the bottom of her garden when she spotted the figure of her husband lying sprawled in a bed of shrubbery.

She approached fearfully. His body was quite still. She didn't go to him, she could see quite clearly that his lifeless body was punctured with bullet wounds. She just stood straight up and screamed. Back in the house she called the boss of Anthony's Mafia family. He came over immediately and took charge. More members of the family showed up but there was complete bewilderment at the sight of the corpse. Someone removed Anthony's gun from the scene, noting out loud that its chamber was almost empty.

"Didn't hear nothin', hun?" the boss asked Gloria. Feeling safe in the midst of the concerned and sympathetic mobsters, she shook her head.

"Looks like he got half a dozen off. You sure you didn't hear nothin'?"

She shook her head again. The boss called the police, then he and all the mobsters left. Anthony was known to the police and they weren't surprised at the sight of his bullet-ridden corpse at the bottom of his garden. They arranged for the body to be collected, consoled the grieving widow and left. It was a crime they were not expecting to solve.

The next evening there was another shooting death in the Speroni neighborhood. It was, in fact, Anthony's next door neighbor. Mr. Dalgleish

was found dead, with a single bullet to the heart. This time the attention of the police was fully engaged. Mr. Dalgleish had been an upstanding, law-abiding citizen. His murder was a mystery. It looked to the police as if he had been shot with his own handgun, which was found next to the corpse. There was a single bullet missing from the chamber and the bullet found in Mr. Dalgleish's heart was a match with those remaining in the chamber. The police wanted to rule the death a suicide but Mrs. Dalgleish wouldn't hear of it. Two men, neighbors, had been shot to death on consecutive nights. There was no denying that it was very suspicious.

For the police, these were two very different deaths. Anthony Speroni was a mobster and for him death by shooting was an occupational hazard. Mr. Dalgleish's death, if related to Speroni's death, was probably the result of a mistake. Death seemed to permeate the surroundings of mobsters and innocents were often victims if they strayed, albeit unwittingly, into its orbit. The probable involvement of the Mafia in both deaths made the solving of the crimes unlikely. The godfather of Speroni's family was mystified. There was no-one on the radar who was a threat to Anthony and this other death strained credulity. Dalgleish was a civilian, for God's sake.

Credulity was pushed into the stratosphere by what happened next. Four more men, husbands and fathers, all hard-working, law-abiding citizens, were gunned down on Speroni's street. It was extreme even for a Mafia family. All men and all gunned down at night in their own back yards. The Mafia professed its bewilderment to the police. Anthony's death, an informant acknowledged to the police, they were looking into, but these other five? These were all civilians and were completely clear of involvement with the mob. All the men had been carrying guns, very understandable in light of the obvious need for self-protection in this neighborhood. All the guns were legally owned. No gun was found at the scene of Anthony Speroni's death but its absence was to be expected in light of his criminal history.

The local police chief dispatched ten heavily armed officers to watch over the neighborhood at night. One week later they were dead, all killed on the same night. The police chief was distraught. What had he done? They were dealing with something outside his experience here and he should have recognized that fact sooner. It was the largest loss of life in a single night police officers in the country had ever suffered. Now the police chief called in the National Guard. This is bigger than the mob, he told the mayor. They

would never go so far. Hell, all this loss of life was bad for business and that was what the mobsters were – business men operating outside the confines of the law. They would be as averse to this loss of life as the authorities were. There was only one set of bad actors who would shed life so readily and that was terrorists.

A couple of middle eastern-looking men were caught and gunned down at a local gas station and their police executioners were hailed as heroes. It didn't matter that the men were citizens and had never been outside the country. Everyone breathed a little more easily for a few days. Then, just as the Guard's deployment was coming to an end, disaster struck. A section of the deployed platoon was on patrol in the brushy area behind the street on which the Speronis lived. The section leader was in communication with platoon headquarters when suddenly he sent a brief garbled message. This was followed by total silence. A couple of officers were sent to investigate. They discovered the bullet ridden bodies of the soldiers. One of the soldiers was still alive when the officers arrived on the scene.

“It was like a puff of smoke,” he gasped. “Never seen anything like it. A wraith. But don’t worry, it’s dead. Nothing could have survived what we sent its way.” Then he looked at his commander, smiled proudly and died.

“Nothing could have survived! Wraith destroyed,” trumpeted the local newspaper. “Hero tells of platoon’s last stand.”

The National Guard’s brass weren’t convinced. Something, they told themselves, must have survived. After all, it had had the last word. Every last one of their soldiers was dead. Now regular army arrived. They posted themselves in the brush behind the Speroni’s street and waited. The army general in charge of the deployment was quoted in the newspapers. “It doesn’t matter to us. Mobsters or terrorists, they’re going down. Suburban life must be protected,” said General Walker.

The professional soldiers were confident to the point of arrogance. For several weeks nothing disturbed the peace of the suburban neighborhood. Until one Friday evening. A brief, extremely violent, firefight suddenly erupted at the conclusion of which forty soldiers lay dead. The press was not allowed to report this massacre. General Walker came to the scene to investigate personally. As he was standing there surveying the yards of the

collection of unremarkable suburban dwellings, one of the accompanying soldiers spotted a plume of what looked like white smoke.

“Incoming!” he yelled, and let off a burst of automatic fire. He was a tall man and fired over the heads of those who were standing with him. In the very next second his cruelly mangled body was sprawled at the feet of General Walker.

“Hold your fire!” snapped Walker.

“But I can see a wraith, sir,” one of the soldiers complained.

“No more fire! That’s an order!”

The soldier sullenly lowered his automatic weapon and stared meaningfully at his dead comrade. “I think it’s laughing at us, sir,” he said, accusingly.

The general drew himself up and directed his words in the direction of the wraith. “Can we talk?”

“Well,” he thought he heard, floating back to him on the slight breeze that was passing over them. “This makes a change. Every one of you humans has to date greeted us with bullets. What do you want to talk about?”

“I can hardly hear you,” bellowed the general.

“Is this better?” Suddenly the voice was loud and clear.

“Much,” said the general, conversationally. “Who are you?”

“We are a life form from another planet, a planet about one thousand AUs away.”

“Is that far?”

The wraith was quiet for a few seconds and then it said: “About one hundred billion miles. We should introduce ourselves. We are fumes just like you are humans. Our technology is much more advanced than yours. We are pleased and honored to meet you at last.”

“Why have you been killing all our people? Our policemen and soldiers. What have they done to you?”

“They tried to shoot us, human. As I said our technology is far in advance of yours. Every bullet fired at us was immediately returned to its originator. Only those that fired at us were killed. You could say they killed themselves. All those that died were frightened and stupid. We thought all humans were like that before we met you. Why did they fire on us? They didn’t know us.”

The general paused. He recognized the role into which he had been cast. Here he was representing humanity in its first interaction with alien life, and advanced life at that! It was daunting and already many lives had been lost. Now he had to ensure that there were no more deaths. He chose his words carefully.

“We humans, fume, we are afraid of what is not like us. We call it the other. You are the other to us. You are not like us and those people that shot at you were simply afraid you were going to hurt them.”

“Why were they afraid? Why weren’t they like you? A simple exchange and all the misunderstandings could have been avoided. No one would have been killed.”

“I’m older than most, fume, and I’ve seen a few things. I realized that the last soldier to die was standing amongst us. And none of us were hit, just the soldier that fired on you. I just put two and two together.”

“What has four got to do with anything?”

“It’s just a human saying, fume. It just means I was being logical. I realized that only people who shot at you were shot themselves.”

“It’s one of our most potent weapons, human. All attempted acts of violence against us are automatically turned back on to the perpetrators. We ourselves are incapable of initiating any act of violence. Our creator has endowed us with this trait. Violence just bounces back off our protection and is not allowed to contaminate us. What about your creator? What power did he give you?”

“He gave us love. He told us to love one another as we love ourselves. But we are also in possession of a free will and sometimes we don’t follow his teachings.”

“Really,” said the fume, sarcastically. “You certainly didn’t follow it with us, did you? All you had for us were bullets. Well, you picked the wrong other to be afraid of when you picked us. Wraiths you call us. Love one another! That’s a joke, isn’t it? Why have you all got guns?”

“We need them for protection, fume.”

“From whom?”

“From the criminals amongst us.”

There was quite a long pause before the fume spoke again. “OK human, here’s what we are going to do. We are going to add our anti violence trait to

your life form. All acts of violence between you will now be returned to the perpetrator. We are going to give you a trial period.”

Now the general fell silent. The fume, now in full view, hovered before the general and his men. No words issued from it but it was clearly waiting. Finally, the general spoke. “I’m not sure I can agree to that, fume. We love our freedom. You are telling us that we can no longer shoot each other. There are some among us who might not like that. They would argue that we need the discipline, that criminals will run riot.”

“We’ll just see what happens,” said the fume, shortly, and disappeared.

General Walker went back to report to his political masters. He told them what the fume had said. They didn’t believe him and so the fume’s message didn’t make its way out into the general population. There was a sudden explosion in police deaths. On the first day after the communication with the fume three hundred policemen and women were shot dead. There were also twenty shooting deaths in the general population. At the end of the first week shooting deaths of police had topped one thousand. This was slaughter on an unprecedented scale. Hysteria gripped the news media. The general was recalled to the capitol. What, the politicians asked, can we do?

What is happening? The general repeated the message from the fume and now he was believed. There was still some resistance, however.

“It’s in our constitution,” the politicians argued. “It’s our right to bear arms. That can never be revoked. Guns don’t kill people, people kill people. From our cold, dead hands.....”

“Just so,” replied the general. “But everyone one of you who shoots a gun now at someone else is going to be instantly shot dead themselves. It’s a new property bestowed on us by the fumes.”

At the end of the third week police deaths passed three thousand and all resistance crumbled. Police departments throughout the country were instructed to cease using their weapons in the enforcement of laws. Civilian deaths had declined to almost zero and the authorities saw no need for any general instructions to be given to the public. People could keep their guns, they just couldn’t shoot each other. The trigger happy amongst them had quickly eliminated themselves.

The general was once again visited by a fume. It appeared before him as he was taking a walk one night.

“Well?” it asked. “How are you liking the new human condition? You realize you were all suffering from an illness, don’t you? There was no rational explanation for your attachment to guns. You were killing each other in huge numbers and for what? For the profits of the gun manufacturers? All those innocent lives lost. It was a disgrace.”

General Walker bowed his head in acquiescence. “You’re right, fume. It was an illness. We just didn’t recognize it, that’s all. Even today people are still resisting the cure. I think it will take generations before we are finally rid of our love for guns as killing devices. Your cure was inspirational. The sickest amongst us simply eliminated themselves. We aren’t evil, fume, just stupid, I guess. Well, live and learn.”