

## NEW WAVE GUN

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*Dennis Johnson*

MY WIFE'S FRENCH poodle, Fifi, got its little paw stuck in the trigger of my new gun. The first thing I saw when I came back into the living room was the tiny white mutt up on the coffee table, fiercely shaking its foot, the shining blue-black .44 caliber pistol attached and pointing my way. "Holy Jesus!" I said. I hit the deck as the gun went off. There was a wicked splintering of the doorframe just over my head and a yelp as the pooch flew off and landed on the sofa with a dull thud. I started to get up, saying "Easy now, Fifi, take it easy—" but the dog was out of its mind, jerking the gun violently and turning towards me for help. I dove behind the easy chair as two bullets pumped into the tv and it blew up in a shower of glass. Maggie came running into the room and I screamed at her to dive. She did, instinctively, just as two more shots fired: the glass-pedestal lamp exploded with a puff of electricity, and the back of her grandmother's oak rocker split into pieces. "What the!" shouted Maggie. "Dog's got a gun!" I shouted back.

I took a deep breath and wondered if I could get the drop on Fifi and snatch the gun away from her. Peeking out from behind the chair, I quickly ruled this out. Fifi was manic, flailing herself against the arm of the sofa. I counted back and realized there was only one bullet left. It went off through the arm of the sofa—tufts of stuffing spraying out—and angled up into my typewriter on the small desk in the corner. There was a moment of silence, then the pattering of keys on the wooden floor.

I stood up slowly, eyes riveted on Fifi. It was a frightening sight. The dog didn't even look like a dog anymore, she was a whimpering white hairball, shoved back between the cushions of the couch, her leg shattered almost as badly as her mind.

Maggie stood up hesitantly, looking around the room with wide eyes. She tried to speak, but her lips puckered soundlessly, like a fish.

"I told you dogs were nothing but problems," I said.

Maggie, my beautiful, articulate wife, turned to me. "Gun," she said. "Big gun."

"Incredible," I said. "I just bought the thing. I hurried home,—I remembered you wanted to talk about something tonight, I didn't forget—and I walk in, put it down on the coffee table, go to hang up my coat, and when I come back a second later, Rin Tin Tin here has jumped up on the furniture, just like I've told you a thousand times—"

Maggie grabbed my shirt front into her fists and shook me. She was still having trouble speaking. "Why?" she blurted out. "Why gun?"

Standing there amidst the wreckage of our tiny living room, I felt it was a fair question. Things hadn't gone exactly as I'd planned.

Maggie was staring at me, up close. Fifi was making eerie moaning and wailing sounds that gave me a chill, they seemed so big for such a little dog. And it got worse: after a moment, I realized it wasn't only Fifi. It sounded like every cop car in Boston was headed for our apartment.

Maggie didn't wait for an answer. She released me and went to pull Fifi's mangled leg away from the smoking gun. My mind was racing. "Wait!" I said, jumping to pull her back. "Evidence! The cops'll never believe this unless they see Fifi staring down the barrel of that thing!"

Maggie looked at me and took a step back. "What—" she said. Then her eyes shifted and something seemed to come to her. She gasped. "Your thesis!" she said. "This is some kind of sicko research for your thesis, isn't it? 'Men without guns.' Jesus Christ, Mark. You brought a gun into our house! You, of all people. The great liberal! I don't believe it . . ."

"No, wait," I said. "It's not really a gun—I mean, of course it's a gun, but it doesn't represent *gun*, you know what I mean? It's not like I'm the kind of guy who goes out and buys a *gun*, for Christ's sake."

Maggie looked around the room. "It looks a lot like you went out and bought a gun to me," she said.

"No," I said. "You know what I mean. I'm not some macho guy, I'm not some NRA maniac. This is *research*! I'm trying to understand something. I'm making an attempt at *understanding* here."

"Oh Lord," she said. "What is it you're trying to understand this time?"

Our leaders and their armies I wanted to say. The lower classes being forced to resort to criminal arms. Sidewalk safety, domestic violence—what's a man supposed to do with his hands? At the gunstore, trembling, I'd had it down to succinct sentences: a whole history of hand weaponry leading to unarmed moments between a

man and a woman. Big thoughts, big thoughts, people get scared of big thoughts. It was best to start small. "Protection," I said.

"Wonderful," Maggie said. "Now we're safe from all the dangerous furniture." She shook her head and folded her arms and sank down onto what was left of her grandmother's rocker. It collapsed.

"See," I said, "you're never safe." She didn't laugh. She sat on the floor, arms still folded, and looked at me, and if looks could kill, or even only maim—"Maggie," I said, "honey—"

"No," she said, "no honey business."

"Maggie," I said. "Look, it's not my fault. I just wanted to see what it felt like. I mean, you know, in the old days, guys carried guns. Always, or spears or whatever. Back in the days when things were formed. You know, roles, and all that stuff. I'm not saying things were better, they were just clearer, that's all."

Suddenly, a loud pounding sounded on the door. "Oh God," I said. The cops respond quickly to calls on Beacon Hill, even on this side of Beacon Hill. Panicked, I darted glances around the room, got more nervous, and looked to Maggie. She sat unmoved on the floor, like an angry Indian, splintered slats of oak blooming out from beneath her. "Well," she said. "*Answer the goddamn door!*"

I did and three policemen strode into the room. They looked around. Nobody said a word. Then one of them whistled. "Fifi did it," I said. There was the sound of more heavy footsteps charging up the stairs.

As it turned out, the cops had a good time. They thought everything was funny. They took statements, checked out the paperwork for the gun, and gave me a couple of tickets for discharging a firearm within city limits. "That's right, buddy," the one writing the tickets said to me. "You can own it, you just can't use it, capice?" They all roared when I suggested that they ticket the one that did the discharging. One of them pointed out that in addition to the bullets, Fifi had discharged plenty, all over the sofa. "That's one reason I don't allow my wife's dog up on the furniture," he said. This, too, got a big laugh, and then another guy—a big Irish cop—put a hand over his holstered pistol and squinted at the dog. "Fifi, honey," he said with a slight brogue, "Make my day." It was a minute or two before the troops recovered from this one. Finally, after some more treading around and laughing, they herded out, leather creaking. I leaned against the door and listened to them clomp down the stairs. The red lights stopped flashing against the frosted window. I found myself holding a gun limply at my side. The room was rank with the smell of gunpowder.

Maggie put on her coat and picked up Fifi, who now resembled

what could only be called a zombie-dog. "I'm taking Fifi to the animal hospital," she said. "Get rid of that thing before I come back. Throw it in the river. Along with your thesis. And then we're gonna talk."

"Look," I said. "Wait a minute. This isn't my fault. You can't go yet."

"Mark," she said, "my dog just got her foot caught in a handgun and shot up the living room. She's hurt."

The dog. Surrounded by the rubble of nearly all we owned, I did not want to hear about the dog. Guns don't shoot themselves, you know. "C'mon," I said. "Give me a break. I didn't hassle you about getting that little yappy thing, did I? Or about naming it Fifi, for God's sake." I forced a laugh that came out rather unfortunately like a bark.

"Mark," she said. She pointed to Fifi. "Dog," she said. Then she pointed to the .44. "Gun," she said.

"No, wait Maggie," I said. "I know this seems a little weird, but you have to try—"

"I have to go."

I jumped, spewing psycho-babble; I just wanted to hold her. "Maggie, look, through the ages, men have always carried weapons, it's practically genetic, and now most of them can't, culturally—justifiably, of course, but still—that's what's wrong with modern man, they no longer have any symbols of strength and security, yet they're expected to just go forth—"

"Mark!" she said. She gracefully swept an arm around the room, and there was nothing to say. It's astounding how much damage a French poodle with a handgun can do. Maggie looked at me and said, "This is what happens when you think too hard." The door closed behind her with a gentle click.

"Oh, God," I said.

I looked down and saw the gun in my hand. My grip on it was white knuckled. I felt my pulse—three distinct beats—and then suddenly everything was clear as hell. It came to me that semester after semester as a teaching assistant for "Symbols Of Modern Man" must have made me crazy; I'd gotten all caught up in the search for a thesis that would begin a whole new movement, a new wave psychology of history and biology that I would explain in *Psychology Today* articles, and then a breakthrough book and perhaps a talk show appearance. Meanwhile my wife was going out of town to visit her parents every weekend, and now, I was holding a gun and shaking as if spies were at the door.

I hurried to the window and threw it open. Maggie was at the corner, about to step into a cab. "Wait!" I called out to her. She looked up at me. "Come with me to the bridge," I said. "Please."

She paused, cradling Fifi in her arms like a baby. She shook her head, then stopped and said something to the cabbie. I couldn't make

out his reply, but Maggie said, "Same to you," and the cab pulled off with a screech. My eyes followed the taxi down the hill. My right hand flinched. Kapow, I thought.

I caught myself and quickly stepped back into the room. No fooling around, I told myself. Just get rid of the gun. Maggie's waiting. Show her something, devise a sort of ceremony. I went over to the coffee table. There was a long burn mark on it from Fifi's first shot. I took up the little box with the extra bullets rattling around in it. There was a moment of suspension, and my original idea recurred to me clearly: I'd planned to accompany Maggie the next day when she went to visit her family, her rich parents on their sprawling farm in the hills of western Mass. I'd planned to slip off into the woods and secretly read a maple tree its rights, then, quietly, calmly, I would return to the big house. Her parents seemed to miss a sense of manhood in me; I'd thought firing a gun might give me a notion of what it was. I'd thought it might take the sneer off her father's face, the sneer that even our moving to Beacon Hill had failed to remove. How stupid it seemed to me now. Ridiculous, I thought, slipping six cold slugs into the still warm gun. See how dumb this is, I thought, watching my hands. But now I had reassembled the gun to its true state, and I would throw it away.

Snapping back, I pulled on my trenchcoat and rushed for the door, but I slipped on some keys from the typewriter and fell. A stab of pain shot through my leg; I got up and picked the letter "E" out from my kneecap. I looked back at the typewriter, sitting in its normal place but with a large gaping hole in the middle of the keyboard. "I don't need you anymore," I said. "So watch it." I left without locking up, spiraling down the five flights of stairs to the street.

Outside, Maggie was leaning against one of the imitation gas lamps. "What took you?" she asked. "It's freezing and Fifi needs help."

"They still shoot horses, don't they?" I said. Maggie looked at me. "Just a joke," I said. "I care. You know that. You know I care."

We set off walking down the middle of the narrow road, a habit left over from all the bad neighborhoods we'd lived in; we still lived in a tiny, dingy apartment, but now it was in a classy neighborhood. But even on Beacon Hill it was a good idea to stay away from the alleys separating the red brick buildings.

Freezing blasts of air swept up the hill from Government Center. Pushing into it, eyes on the cobblestones, I thought about Maggie, and was determined: get rid of the gun, get my wife and her dog to the hospital. I loved Maggie, we'd been through a lot, we'd make this. We kept our heads down into the wind and looked up only at the intersection: debris blinked on and off beneath a traffic light. A sheet

of newspaper lifted up, caught in a whirlwind, and loomed for a moment. The news of the day was right there staring at us, defying my detachment like an intellectual target. I put my head back down.

We came out into Government Center shivering. Hands buried deep in pockets, arms pressed against ribs; I could feel the gun under my arm, heavy against my heartbeat.

The city's hub—stately old pillared halls running the Commonwealth, with a phalanx of glassy federal skyscrapers, gathered at the foot of what I call Etiquette Hill—wasn't the best place to be late at night. There were a lot of muggings there. We looked around. A stray bespectacled bureaucrat scurried across the deserted square towards the subway. A long-legged couple strode away from the taxi stand and disappeared into an offshoot of fancy restaurants and bars. Around the plaza, derelicts sprawled or squatted behind columns of various government buildings. Armed, I still felt unsafe, immune from protection. I wanted to lead Maggie away from this, and beyond, but she spoke first.

"Let's take a cab," she said.

This caught me off-guard, and then my jaw tightened as I realized that she'd taken money from her father again. "We can't afford a cab," I told her.

"We could afford a gun," she said.

"And a dog," I said.

She sighed. "It's a long walk from here."

But it wasn't, we were close now, and I wanted to show her that I could do this. And we had to hurry so we could take care of her dog. *Her* dog. I hated the little rat-face, I admit it. I had never wanted her to get it, but I'd done nothing to stop her and now, by God, I was going to help. I turned and started off.

But she stayed put. "Mark," she said. "It's late, it's cold, it's a long walk—let's just take a cab. Fifi's in shock."

Her words jerked me back as if I were on a leash. "We're poor, Maggie. We're why God created mass transit."

"There's no stop down there."

"That's why God gave us feet."

"But the bridge is in a rough neighborhood."

"That's why God gave us guns."

Maggie stiffened, her lips pressed white. She walked the remaining few blocks a step or two behind me. When the bridge finally loomed before us she said, "I'm going out to the farm tomorrow."

"I know," I said. "I was thinking of going with you this time."

"This time," she said, passing me, "I'm going to stay for a while."

I stopped, but she kept on walking. I caught up. "How long?" I

asked.

"I'm not sure," she said.

And with that, we were there. The sound of the city quickly faded to a hissing white noise. I couldn't turn my head to look at Maggie; I found my eyes were locked into focus on the stumpy twin towers of the bridge, which suddenly resembled a giant gun sight, aiming at the clutch of high-rise buildings across the river. Maggie's voice drifted in, saying, "It isn't just tonight, Mark. You know. I've been sort of . . ." She put a hesitant mitten on my shoulder. "Let's just do this, and then take care of Fifi," she said, "and then we'll just . . . see . . ." Instinctively, I pulled away. My ears were ringing, just as they were when the gun had fired. I thought *but we've come this far*. I hurried onto the walk ramp out over the sudden foul smell of the black Charles. Out in the open, the wind and the cold were worse, knifing into me.

Cars passed us in streams, steady rhythms, each pass an isolated thump like a heartbeat. At the middle of the bridge, I stopped and peeled off my glove. I looked at Maggie. The headlights lapped across her as she rocked Fifi in her arms. She gave me a gauzy look, like she was sorry for me, like she knew everything about me. There was a let-up in the flow of cars, and her face went dark. I turned away and unbuttoned my coat to get the gun.

My bare hand was raw in the biting cold. I was afraid my skin would stick to the cold metal, that I wouldn't be able to shake the .44 off my hand, that I'd never get rid of the damned thing. And what if I squeezed six shots off into the icy blackness? So what? The dog shot the gun off. Big deal. We heard footsteps nearby, echoing out over the water, echoing through the wake of the gone cars. I turned and saw a dark figure, a man in a hat, his hand stretched out toward us; I thought I saw something in it, glinting. Maggie stepped back against me. I moved in front of her, shielding her, and said, "Wait."