

AMMUNITION

- There's a bullet with my name on it. My father keeps it in the top drawer of his desk. A strip of masking tape along one side reads SNIDER, printed in his neat all-caps script. There are more bullets in his old army trunk, some in clear plastic collector tubes, others in tiny paper boxes. They are stashed between family photos, a Japanese bayonet, books about Vietnam, old army bulletins, and a half-empty bottle of Brut cologne. My father has collected Snider bullets from eBay and gun shows across the country, scores of small, unremarkable bullets made for the .577 British Snider-Enfield rifle, a type of breech-loading rifle invented in 1866 by the American Jacob Snider. No record exists that Jacob Snider is related to our family, but he spelled his name "Snider" instead of the more common American spelling, "Snyder." *I not y: proof enough, my father insists, that he's blood.*
- My father collects mostly antique pistols and rifles, military models from WWI, WWII, and the American Civil War. He owns a Pattern 1914, a 30.06 M1 Garand, several Japanese Arisakas (including one 6.5 with its original leather strap), and an 8 millimeter German Mauser. He'll describe at length the wood-grained stock of the Remington Model Seven or the nickel finish on the .38 Super Springfield. He carefully cleans each one, wiping it down with Hoppe's No. 9 Solvent and Remington Oil, holding it to the light so it gleams. He loves the details, spending hours researching, cleaning, and displaying. When I visit, he takes his new ones off the walls: *Look at the hexagonal barrel on this one, he says, or: This one has detachable box magazines.* He looks at them the way I might a line by Keats.

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Of all my father's guns, his most prized are three Civil War-era Snider-Enfields, purchased for me and my two younger brothers. They hang on the wall of his den over a black metal filing cabinet, neatly arranged, one on top of the other. We'll get them when he's dead.

- A young man named Chip Davidson served with my father in Vietnam. Chip was from Kokomo, Indiana, the only other Hoosier in their platoon. One night, under fire from the enemy, he and Chip took cover in a grove

of trees near a rice paddy. Standing guard, my father heard Chip say, *Jesus. Hey Snider, look at this.* When my father turned, he found Chip holding up his right hand. In the triangle of skin between the base of his forefinger and thumb, a small hole gaped where a bullet, so hot and quick, had seared the skin around it. Chip held his hand up to his face and looked through the hole at my father. *What the fuck?* Chip said, *Can you believe this?* They kept fighting, and when the firefight ended, my father turned around to find Chip dead, another bullet having pierced his skull. Everything in the area was so wet and muddy that when he tried to drag the body, it kept slipping away from him. Finally, he put his finger through the bullet hole in the hand, dragging Chip's body to the chopper.

- Years ago, after teaching a night class at the University of Texas, I walk across campus to where I'd parked, only to find that my car has been towed. The day before, I'd had minor surgery to relieve a pinched nerve in my right foot, so I'm limping, wearing a special post-surgical shoe.

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I find a pay phone at the end of the street, call my boyfriend to give me a ride home. As I wait, a car of teenage boys pulls up beside me. The driver rolls down his window. He's wearing a black T-shirt with a yellow smiley face on it.

Hey fag, he says, get in.

I think I've misheard him.

Faggot, he says, I said get in.

I'm in a dim part of campus, no students, no police. So I limp down the sidewalk, ignoring the pain in my foot, as they drive beside me. From the backseat, a kid with a shaved head rolls down his window and says, *You heard him, fag, you better do what's good for you and get in.*

- When I tell my father about being harassed by a car of teenage boys who called me fag, then followed me laughing and cursing to the end of the street, his first question is: *What were you wearing?*

His second: *Why don't you carry a gun?*

- When I was nine, my father locked himself in his bedroom with a pistol and wouldn't come out. I remember the gun in his hand, the locked door-knob rattling as I tried to turn it, then the ominous silence that followed. My mother was at work, but my grandfather appeared on the porch, still wearing his work overalls. (Had my father called him? Had I?)

Son, my grandfather said, knocking on the bedroom door, *you've got to open up.*

After nearly an hour, he did. He stood in his underwear, half-visible, red-eyed, pistol in his hand. Behind him, a can of beer had tipped over, soaking into the beige carpet. My grandfather pushed into the room and shut the door behind him. I put my ear to the wood: more silence, then my father weeping.

My brothers and I sat in the living room building a house out of Lincoln Logs, knocking it down, then building it again. Later that night, my mother made TV dinners with fried chicken legs and little apple pies. She let us stay up past our bedtime and gave us each an extra dessert. When we brought our dishes back to the sink, without looking up, she said, *Sometimes it's hard for your dad. The war.*

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- According to FBI statistics, five gay men and lesbians are attacked each day.

My father tells me this one night on the phone a couple of months after my run-in with the car of teenagers.

He's seen an episode of *20/20* about the rise of hate crimes across the U.S. He tells me twenty percent of all hate crimes are motivated by the victim's sexuality.

Have you put any more thought into getting a gun?

When I say no, that it's not something I'm comfortable with, he says, *If Matthew Shepard had carried a gun...*

- In Vietnam, my father carried a .223-caliber M-16, a semiautomatic/automatic with a selector switch. The stocks of that particular weapon were made by Mattell, which, as my father likes to point out, was also at the time making Barbie dolls. Still, he admits, it was a fine gun. Of the forty-four men in his original platoon, he was one of only a handful to survive. If you ask him why, he'll tell you it's because he was lucky, and because he was a good shot.
- The week before I came out to my father, a college counselor talked me through all of the possible scenarios. What would I do if he hit me? What would I do if he threw me out? Was there a place I could go? Was there someone I could talk to? Did my father own a gun?

I pictured his army chest of bullets, his rifles and pistols, his hunting knives and switchblades, the Japanese bayonet hanging over the door. My father used *homo* as a punch line. He made gay jokes with his friends, called my aunt's ex-husband a stupid queer, called a pair of shoes I wanted for Christmas *fag shoes*.

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When I said I needed to talk, he asked, *Did you get someone pregnant?*

As I stood in his den, the stuffed deer head he'd mounted over his desk stared back with its cold black eyes. My palms sweated, my mouth gone cottony. To stall, I asked him about the new German Mauser he'd picked up at a show in Indianapolis.

I thought you wanted to talk, he said, picking up the gun. Soon, he was explaining gunpowder, how it originated in China and Turkey, that early hand cannons were ignited with a "slow match," that the first American gun design was the classic Kentucky rifle. He took one down from the wall and passed it to me. I held it in my hands, wondering if I should pick another day to tell him, once I'd practiced more, once I'd really gotten up the nerve. Better yet, I could just send him a letter, or wait until I was back at school and tell him over the phone. Finally, I turned to him, heart pounding, gripped the rifle, and came out.

- I was twelve when my father told me it was time I learn to shoot a gun. *When I was just a little older than you*, he told me, *I once bagged thirty-six rabbits in one day*. He smiled proudly and straightened his Chicago Cubs baseball cap. He woke me at dawn, having already packed his red Ford, guns and orange hunting vests, a cooler of beer and pop, a shiny coil of beef jerky. On the way, he told me if we made a kill, he'd show me how to field dress it, cut off the head and feet, how to check the liver for disease. I felt queasy as the truck rumbled down dirt roads. At the woods, we stood, our breath making clouds in the cold November air, while he patiently showed me how to load the rifle, how to know when the safety was on or off.

When he was my age, he'd skip school each year on the first day of rabbit season. I could imagine him carrying his 20-gauge Smith & Wesson, kicking up rabbits from fallen treetops and cane breaks, brush piles and honeysuckle patches, immune from thorns, hunger, and cold.

Tall and gangly, I, on the other hand, wore chunky brown glasses and had been forced to give up my pet canaries when my mother learned I'd been wheezing for months in the haze of their molting dust. *Get your nose out of that book*, my father always said to me. *Blow the stink off yourself. Go play outside.*

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In the woods that day, I held the rifle awkwardly. When I practiced shooting, it kicked back hard. I tried not to wince. When my bootlaces came untied, I tripped in the snow. After combing the woods for three hours, my hands and feet were numb, my nose running. Finally, as we were walking back to the truck, he spotted a black squirrel in a leafless maple. *There*, he pointed up at it, *it's yours*.

Dutifully, I lifted my gun, held the small dark creature in my sights—and fired.

- When, months after my run-in with the car of teenage boys, my father calls to say he has a friend selling a SIG Sauer P250 with a seventeen-round magazine for three hundred bucks, I want to tell him that I'm a college-educated man: I don't carry a gun. I want to tell him guns are Indiana.

Guns are country roads and cattail swamps. Guns are birdshot and buckshot and his makeshift blinds.

Instead I say: *A gun in the home is twenty-two times more likely to be used in an unintentional shooting than to be used to injure or kill in self-defense.*

I say: *Gunshot wounds are the second leading cause of injury and death for men and women ten to twenty-four years of age.*

I say: *Thirty percent of gunshot wounds are self-inflicted.*

He says: *If a man's coming at you with a switchblade, you won't be thinking statistics.*

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- My grandmother picked shrapnel from my father's back, coating the raw skin with salve and Vaseline. This was months after he'd been discharged for combat injuries. When he married my mother, he couldn't sleep, waking from nightmares, combat ready, flailing his arms. Once he took her by the throat, threw her against the wall that separated my bedroom from theirs. Sometimes he'd rail against the government. It was run, he said, by seven wealthy families—the Kennedys, the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, and others I'd never heard of. Some days he'd wrestle with us on the floor, tickling us, telling stories about fishing trips to Canada, massive salmon the length of his arm. He'd tell jokes one moment, then yell, throwing dishes off the kitchen counter. For punishment, he'd strip us naked and spank us with his belt. Once he lifted my little brother off the ground by his neck, pushed my middle brother on the ground and kicked him. When he drank, he'd be apologetic, warm, and affectionate. He'd go through a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon, suddenly sad, scratching his dark beard, shelling peanuts into a paper sack: *I'm sorry if I'm too hard on you.*

He'd line us up on the couch. If America was ever invaded, he warned us, we had to be prepared to fight.

What would you be willing to do to save our family? he'd ask.

Other times, he'd hug and kiss us, the only father I knew who kissed his sons on the mouth. *I would die for you*, he'd say over and over, eyes shiny and wet.

- It's Christmas, almost eight months after my run-in with the car full of teenage boys. Snow is falling outside the window of my childhood home. When my father grins and hands me a gift, I can already guess what's inside. I open the box and take out a semiautomatic Colt .32 with a bone-white handle. It's smaller than I'd have thought, almost petite. It would slip easily into a pocket or a sock.

It can drop a man at twenty feet, my father says. *Merry Christmas*.

He shows me how to clean the gun with Hoppe's No. 9 Solvent and Remington Oil, how to balance it with one hand. He says it's not like the one he had in Vietnam, then tells a story about water buffalo, about holding a dying soldier whose head bled all over his lap. He talks of C-rations, monsoon rains, flak jackets, rash, and rot.

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In another house, I might be holding a leather wallet or a shirt. But my father has given me a piece of cold metal. One bullet could clip an artery. One bullet could sever the spine. While my father talks, I consider my options. I could say no. I could give it back. But my father is smiling. The snowflakes are falling...

- Would Matthew Shepard have been a good shot? If armed, would he have stood on that rural road in Laramie and pointed it at Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson? Would they have backed away, saying *sorry*? Or would they have rushed him? Would he have fired, the bullet making a huffing sound as it passed through abdomen, stomach, spine to lodge in the crude fence post? Would he still have been beaten, tied to a fence, left to die? Or would he have walked home, turning the key in his door, shaken but grateful as he climbed into bed, knowing their terrified faces?
- From Vietnam, my father wrote my grandfather back in Indiana, explaining that he wanted a smaller gun to use for guard duty. *Dad*, he wrote, *I need something easier to hold than a rifle. I tried to get it through my squad leader*,

but no luck. It was illegal to mail a firearm, but it was perfectly legal to mail firearm parts, so my grandfather bought a Smith & Wesson .38-caliber revolver, separated it into three pieces, and mailed it, along with ammunition, in four separate boxes. To protect the gun parts and to disguise them, he carefully wrapped each one in brown butcher paper and filled the boxes with popcorn my grandmother had popped on their woodstove. For the remainder of my father's tour, he and the other members of his squad used the gun whenever they stood guard. He says it saved their lives over and over and over.

- As a kid, I used to sit in my bedroom and daydream that my real father was Dr. Sanders, who wore silver glasses and had such soft, clean hands when he'd stitched up my arm. Or Mr. Roberts, who painted watercolor portraits in a room over his garage and took his daughters shopping at department stores in Chicago. Once I stayed with my friend Simon at his dad's apartment over the bowling alley in town. We ate pizza and watched cable TV and played Yahtzee with his dad's girlfriend. He worked on the cleaning crew for the offices of a honey company. He could bring home as many free jars of honey as he wanted. I imagined him taking me with him, lifting me up to see the beehives, helping him scrub the company floors until the rooms shined.

When, years later, I went to college, a doctor diagnosed my father with post-traumatic stress disorder. Once a week he went to therapy, got pain treatment, took antidepressants. I tried to imagine him sitting in a therapist's office, silk flowers on a bookshelf, a box of Kleenex on the end table beside his chair. It seemed impossible. But when I called home, he'd mention his therapist: *That guy's got more problems than I do.* And my mother assured me that things were better. At night he'd watch the History Channel, trolling eBay, taking his pills for high blood pressure and diabetes, Darvocet to manage pain from the shrapnel still embedded in his ankle. Because his snoring kept my mother awake, he'd sleep in his den surrounded by his guns.

- The night I came out to my father, he'd been in therapy for over a year, but I was certain he would hit me or throw me out. Years before, I had seen him punch a man at a wedding reception, and I could still see the man's mouth

bleeding, his hand cupping broken teeth. I was prepared to take the blow, final proof of all I had feared. At least then I would know, I told myself.

At first he didn't say anything, just looked at me, letting what I had said sink in. Carefully, he took the rifle back and replaced it in its rack on the wall. He scratched the scar on his elbow, his airborne eagle tattoo half-visible beneath the right sleeve of his white T-shirt.

He asked questions: How did I know? When did I know? Was it just a phase?

I answered the best I could, sitting across from him on his army cot. I kept my hands in my lap so they wouldn't shake, my mouth so dry my tongue stuck to my teeth. On the bookshelf beside me, vintage *Playboy* magazines lay beside *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* and a framed photo of my mother at fourteen, taking her first communion.

You're sure? my father kept asking. Finally, after nearly an hour, he put his hand on my shoulder. He looked me in the eye, and, as if he'd read a book on the subject, said, *To be honest, I don't get it. But no matter what, I still love you.*

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- Nearly a year after my run-in with the boys in the car, I stand at a firing range with my father. He begins by choosing our paper target from a group that includes a standard circular target, a bear with raised claws, a large bird with its wings spread, and the black, featureless shape of a human torso.

My father picks the human target: *You might as well face it head-on.*

Once we've paid for our booth, we step inside, and he takes out a box of ammunition and the Colt .32 he gave me for Christmas. He begins by explaining handgun safety, then, handing me a set of noise-cancelling headphones, demonstrates how to load, aim, pull back the trigger, and fire.

When it's my turn, I look at the torso suspended twenty feet from us, just hovering there, anonymous, ghostly.

When I hesitate, he simply adjusts my grip, helping me to position the gun correctly, steadying my arm.

Defend yourself, he says.

With his hand on my back, I look out of the shooting booth. I take a breath. I fire. Although I miss the target, it's a strange rush, part fear, part excitement, and it seems as if everything has been leading me to this moment, my father standing to my left, the gun now warm in my hand. Maybe it's the novelty of it. Maybe it's Jacob Snider's blood in my veins. A year ago, I would never have imagined holding a gun again. But people, as my father has shown me, can surprise you. I try again. I miss.

Hold it steadier, he says, *like this*.

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He takes the gun from me, holds it in front of him, finger on the trigger. It's what he must have looked like in Vietnam, but nineteen then, just a boy. When he hands me back the gun, I adjust my aim, then fire. It's all too fast to see, but I imagine how the bullet travels, leaving the gun's chamber, moving toward the human-shaped target. It takes a nearly invisible path, but I'm amazed at how effortlessly the bullet cuts through the air, so certain of where it's headed. I shoot again, then again and again. I go through all the bullets. The gun is warm, my hands buzzing. I look at my father, who scratches his graying beard. He hands me another round. I reload.