

AARON PEYSACK

Living

The first time I tried to shoot myself I missed. I still don't know how I managed it. I bought the gun from a man in a bar a few days earlier. I paid \$500 for it, which seemed like a lot of money for something I was only going to use once, but I told myself it was no time to be cheap. If things turned out the way I intended I wouldn't need the money.

We agreed to meet in the car park behind a liquor store. When I got there the only other car belonged to a pair of teenagers parked on the other side of the lot. I watched them for a little while, resurrecting old memories—bonfires on the beach, skinny-dipping in someone's pool, evenings at the drive-in. At first I didn't know what they were doing, then I knew and it bothered me. For a man contemplating death, it's the last thing you want to see, and since our cars were facing each other it was impossible not to look.

The boy noticed me and grinned; a moment later he gave me the finger. Why does he mock me, I wondered. Because he's young and has a girl on his lap? The young didn't invent fucking, I felt like telling him, it's been around a long time. But young people are kings; they listen to no one.

It was freezing out there and the heater didn't work so I went into the store to warm up. I wandered up and down the aisles, looking at all the bottles, marvelling at the variety. The place was like a warehouse. There must have been twenty different brands of gin. It seemed crazy to me, but things do at times like that. The world shrinks to the size of a pin and there's only room for one thought. I picked up a bottle of apple brandy and took it over to the counter. "Cold, huh?" the man said to me. It sounded so stupid, so empty. He was looking at a man who would be dead in a couple of hours and that was all he could come up with. I was disappointed. I wanted him to say something memorable, something poetic.

We make unreasonable demands, I've done it all my life. As a kid I asked my mother to turn the lights off on the freeway so I could sleep, and now I was asking a shop assistant for something he couldn't possibly give.

While he fumbled with the register, I stood there looking at the girl on the poster above his head, her blonde hair and smoky eyes staring out at me. If I had a girl like that things wouldn't be so bad, I thought. I could bury my face in her dress and sleep like a child again. Which is all I ever wanted. I was never ambitious, never wanted to get ahead of anyone; I was happy just to wait my turn. Only my turn never came. I knocked and knocked but the door didn't open.

He handed me my change and I went back to the car. The wind was blowing and I only had a shirt on; I'd lost my jacket in a theatre the night before. I opened the bottle and took a sip. It tasted bitter and nothing like apples. A girl on the radio was singing of a broken heart. What do the young know about broken hearts? At that age you don't even have a heart, you have longings, dreams, grievances. Wait till you're fifty, I thought, and your looks are gone and your marriage is over, then sing something.

I turned the dial all the way to the end where there were no voices, no music at all, just the silence of the stars on a night with no moon, and I listened. All my life I've been waiting for something to happen, something strange that would reveal itself to me in a lonely street or an empty bar, but this thing, this vital experience, has never found me and now I'm lost.

An hour later I was still sitting there. The attendant had gone home and the lovers had moved on; mine was the only car in the lot. I watched a homeless man lay out his bed in a doorway and go to sleep.

Static from the radio disturbed my thoughts; those little waves from outer space that seem to be straining to say something only you don't know what it is. There was a throbbing in my ear and I was cold again; the brandy was wearing off. On the other side of the car park the sign of a fast-food restaurant glowed in the dark. I got out of the car and walked across the lot, thankful that these places exist, that you can drive into a town at two in the morning and find somewhere to sit and eat. I ordered a burger and fries. The girl smiled and said she'd bring it over when it was ready. She reminded me of the women on aeroplanes, the hostesses who stay up all night while the passengers sleep. I love those women, they seem so kind. They bring you coffee and pillows and ask nothing in return.

I sat in the window where I could see my car. It looked odd out there by itself, with the car park all lit up like an empty stadium. For some reason I thought of baseball, a sport I'd never had any interest in. I pictured a white ball soaring into the outfield, lost in the glare of the

floodlights. As a kid I wanted one of those gloves they wear, but the closest I ever got was a cap my aunt brought back from a holiday. I don't think I ever wore it.

My food came on a little tray. Maybe it was because I was hungry or because it was my last meal on earth, but the burger tasted particularly good and the fries were hot and salty like they should be. As I sat there I couldn't help thinking of my parents and what they would have thought of their son sitting in a fast-food restaurant waiting to buy a gun to shoot himself with. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I came from decent stock: simple, healthy human beings. I was one myself once; I remember it. It was only later, after my parents died, that things started to go wrong. I didn't realise I needed them so much. After they were gone I could feel myself slipping. I stopped socialising, kept to myself. Somewhere along the way I lost the knack for friendship. You get out of the habit, start drifting, then one day you turn around and you can't even see the shore.

It was almost midnight when he showed up, a brutal looking person with hands like spades and a mouth that barely moved. He sat beside me, talking about his mother.

"Did you bring it?" I said.

He reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a brown paper bag.

"What about the bullets?"

"They're in the bag," he said.

It was smaller and lighter than I expected, more like a toy than a weapon. It was hard to believe there was enough force in that little thing to end a man's life.

"What are you going to use it for?" he asked.

"To shoot someone," I said.

"Who?"

"Myself."

His response surprised me. I didn't think a man like that would be so easily shocked. I had pushed him beyond his realm of experience and it unsettled him.

"I wouldn't have sold it to you if I'd known you were going to do something like that," he said.

"What difference does it make?"

He shrugged. "It just doesn't feel right. There are some things you shouldn't do. It's ..." He paused, searching for the word, and when he couldn't find it he repeated what he'd said before.

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes then he started talking about a kid he'd known in high school who had jumped off a building. "He seemed like a normal person, the same as you or me, then one day he climbed onto the roof and stood there with his arms above his head like he was about to dive into a swimming pool, and let himself fall. No one knew why he did it."

While he was talking we both watched a dog trot across the car park in the direction of the homeless man who was lying on his side with a blanket wrapped around him. It sniffed at the shape on the ground then moved away.

The man beside me shook his head as if it was all too much for him, then, strangely enough, he wished me luck and stepped out into the night.

It's not so easy to kill yourself; you have to build yourself up. Like the man said, it's not a natural thing to do, there are instincts to overcome. For three days I drove around with the gun in the glove box, visiting old haunts: the house where I grew up, the school I went to, the streets I lived in. I don't know what I was looking for, maybe confirmation, maybe something else. Odd thoughts go through a man's head at times like that; things you haven't thought of for years come back to you in extraordinary detail: the fish you caught in a mountain stream, a red balloon drifting over a farmhouse. The years accumulate right before your eyes.

One evening I took a walk through a city park. It was warm and I could smell the flowers in the garden beds. Joggers were running in pairs around the perimeter while others did push-ups in the grass. It all seemed so strange to me, this obsession with the body, so modern. I watched them for a while, wondering what it was they were running from, then walked on towards the pavilion. As I penetrated deeper into the park I came across a group of boys drinking beer on a bench. Instinctively, I averted my eyes, but my presence alone provoked them. Like a troupe of angry baboons they taunted me. I'm not a violent person; confrontations like these upset me, leave me distressed for days. Why can't people leave you alone? It's not much to ask. I don't want deference or admiration, just a little decency. But the milk of human kindness has gone sour and we're left fighting for our lives in the strangest places.

I tried to talk to them but they just laughed at me, and there was something about their laughter that unhinged me. I thought of the gun sitting in the glove box a few hundred metres away and for a moment I considered my options. Images of violence danced in my head, a late-night holocaust in a municipal park. Then it passed and I felt something hot and wet running

down my face. I was crying like a child, and I couldn't stop. The boys turned away, embarrassed, and I walked back to the car.

There's something wrong with me, I thought, as I sat behind the wheel watching the cars come over the hill. A few weeks earlier, in a supermarket, I saw a little girl running into her mother's arms and had to turn away. It was like I'd lost my skin, the protective layer that shields you from the world and its intensity. I sat there a few more minutes, trying to compose myself, then drove out to my ex-wife's house and parked across the street, waiting for the lights to come on.

We were married for six years; we shared the same bed, the same rooms, the same cups, and now I couldn't even call her on the telephone. It was hard to accept. Once in a while I would go out there and watch. It gave me comfort to know I was still in the picture, somewhere in the corner of the frame where no one else could see me. I've always been like that. When I was young I would sit under the steps of the house, watching the legs of people passing by.

Around ten o'clock a car pulled up and she got out with a man I'd never seen before. They were laughing like a pair of kids. She looked happy, happier than I'd seen her in years. I watched the lights go on as they moved through the rooms of the house, rooms I used to live in and knew as well as my own face. After a while the bedroom light went on and I could see the outlines of their bodies through the curtains. Then the light went off and I felt sick at heart.

The motel was one of those awful places scattered along the highways with neon signs saying VACANCY and cars parked in neat little rows. I turned on the television and sat on the edge of the bed watching a pair of women wrestling in a pool of slime. I'd reached the end of the world and this is what it looked like.

Fetching a glass from the bathroom, I poured the last of the brandy into it and drank it down. I thought of all the people I'd known in my life—my parents, my wife, my friends—and wondered what they ever really meant to me. Then I put the gun to my temple and pulled the trigger. It made a terrible sound but the only damage was to the wall behind me, where a small dark hole appeared in the wallpaper like a cigarette burn on a tablecloth. Bells were ringing in my ears. I waited for someone to come, the man from the office or one of the other guests, but no one came. The only sound was from the television where the two women were still wrestling in quiet desperation.

It's hard being a man. Once an intruder broke into our house. I lay in bed, listening to him move about, a terrible thing to hear in your own home. "Do something!" my wife whispered. I was terrified but I couldn't admit it. Women are allowed to be afraid, but in a man it's a shameful thing. Eventually I picked up a vase and went downstairs. I'll never forget the expression on his face when I turned on the lights: pure horror. This wasn't supposed to happen, to either of us; we weren't up to it. We stood there, a few feet apart, for maybe ten seconds, completely absorbed in each other, then he turned and fled through the open door. And I went after him. Some long-buried instinct bubbled up to the surface and I chased him through the empty streets. After a couple of blocks my lungs were bursting and I felt a searing pain in my side, as if someone had stuck a knife in between my ribs, and suddenly I looked up at the sky and saw the moon, all curled up like a child in its cradle, and I felt wonderful.