



**GENDER & SEXUALITY**

# Guns in the Family

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Image: [Tina Shaw/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#)

It is impossible for me to remember my father without thinking about guns. My first was a child-sized Winchester 20-gauge shotgun. It was a hand-me-down from a kid across the street. I think I paid twenty-five dollars for it, saved from my allowance and advanced to me by my father for doing yardwork. I was eight. That summer, after I bought it, I remember getting my dad to go down to the basement with me after dinner to “practice.” He would open up the gun cabinet and we would get out my shotgun. My dad would coach me into a stance. Then I would cock the hammer and pull the trigger. My dad would jam the barrel back into my shoulder so I could prepare for the recoil—“the kick”—when I fired live ammunition. I worried a lot about the kick: would I be up to it?

I went hunting for the first time that fall, for geese. My hometown was near the Mississippi Flyway, the massive bird migration route that roughly follows the track of the Mississippi River. Every fall hundreds of thousands of Canada geese made their way southward overhead, arrayed in their instinctual V formations. We woke up at two in the morning, and my mother made us a full breakfast—bacon, eggs, toast, coffee for my father—before we

drove to Swan Lake, the wildlife refuge in northern Missouri. Reservations to hunt at Swan Lake were lotteried at the beginning of the season. If you were fortunate enough to get one, you were assigned a date and told to be there that morning before six.

**I have told many of these stories before, and laughed along, but I have rarely told the stories of the undertow, those that are not so much picaresque as they are morality tales.**

I remember that long drive in the early hours of the morning, before the rest of the world was awake. The warmth of the heater in the car, the homey familiarity of AM radio, the lonely glow of the lights left on overnight outside the farmhouses across the fields from the road. There was one sharp turn in the highway, near Mendon, Missouri, which my father had warned me about, and I stayed alert the whole drive waiting for it to come up on us.

In the parking lot at Swan Lake, thin sheets of ice had been shattered and ground down into muddy ruts by cars and trucks belonging to other hunters. Inside the hunter check-in, it was bright and almost warm, bare light bulbs hanging from the pitched wooden ceiling, a furnace burning at either end, and men of all ages in their rubber boots and camouflage gear. They spoke to one another in the low tones of the early morning; occasionally someone would laugh. My father and I did not talk to anyone else. I remember his gentleness with me in that foreign place—so longed for and so strange all at once.

At six the service window at the far end of the building opened, and an officer started assigning the blinds. He had a hand-cranked bingo cage, out of which rolled balls corresponding to the numbered blinds situated around the edge of the reserve. Behind him was a poster that tracked the daily totals of each blind over the course of the season. We drew A-4, which according to the poster was pretty good.

It was hard to find, though, and the sun was coming up by the time we parked and dragged the decoys across the stalk-stubbed field, setting them up in what we imagined to be a pattern that would appeal to passing geese—it was important that they face into the wind, I remember my father saying. Before long we heard the roll of distant gunfire.

The “goose pit” was a plank-lined rectangular hole, maybe a little more than four feet deep, with a wooden bench long enough to sit four across. Most of the time in it was spent trying to

keep quiet and still, whispering when there were geese nearby, and eating year-old chocolate bars and Vienna sausages. The pit had a low roof and a hinged gate that partially hid the entrance, making it possible to peek out without being visible. When geese flew into range, you threw open the gate, stood, and took aim.

I killed my first goose that day. Or at least that is what we said, and what I have said ever since. I know I popped up and shot at a goose, and my father did, too, at the same time, and we both agreed that the one that fell was the one I had been aiming at. After my father had shot one, too, we carried our dead geese, swinging by their long necks, back to the car and drove to check out in the same building where we had been that morning, so that our totals could be posted on the board: 2/2.

Along the road back to the highway, there was a spray-painted sign advertising goose processing, and my father followed the arrow to a small parking lot in front of a large white all-weather tent. Inside a couple of women stood behind a folding table wearing winter coats and elbow-length yellow rubber gloves. They had white plastic aprons on over their coats, and the aprons were already flecked all over with red. One of them had a strand of hair that kept falling down into her eyes; she used her forearm to push it back into place. While my father and I sat in metal folding chairs at the other end of the tent, the women dipped the birds in paraffin wax, which when hardened pulls off easily, taking all the feathers with it. Then they decapitated and gutted the carcasses. I will never forget the way that place smelled: humid, oleaginous, nauseating. After a while, the women brought our geese back to the table in the front. They were wrapped in butcher paper, and the light red watercolor stains had already begun to seep through in several places.

The aspects of my psychology and constitution that might make me recoil from a place like that today, the things that still lead me to feel a little queasy when I see chicken legs in the store or cooked up for dinner, or people put to bloody work, had a simpler name that day. I experienced them as personal weakness, as not being quite “grown-up” enough.



When I was ten, I was first allowed to carry a gun during deer season. I had been deer hunting with my father a couple times before that, sleeping in the old farmhouse with the rest of the men and sitting two shifts a day on a freezing bench nailed about ten feet up a tree. My gun was a Savage Model 99 lever-action rifle that my father had inherited from his

mother. In the hands of a skilled hunter, the gun I carried has a range of at least 800 yards. My hunting license for the year 1977 records that I was 4 feet 11 inches tall and weighed 82 pounds.

## **I remember my father's gentleness with me at the hunters' check-in—so longed for and so strange all at once.**

My grandmother had grown up on the Miramachi River in New Brunswick, Canada. She met my grandfather when he hired her father as a guide on a bear hunting trip and she went along to help out. In the world of the National Rifle Association, my grandmother was a formidable woman, a national champion in several sorts of riflery. Every year my grandparents drove from Virginia to Ohio so my grandmother could compete at Camp Perry. All of their five children shot, too. In 1954 my father became a national champion, the “High Junior” in the small-bore rifle category, and received a huge, heavy silver bowl that was prominently displayed in the house where I grew up. Also in the house was a photo of my grandmother, smiling, standing next to the carcass of a leopard she had shot, which had been hung from a tree.

None of that helped me get very far as a deer hunter. The trick to ambushing deer in the woods is to sit still and keep quiet, and I couldn't do either. On the last day of my first deer season, my father came to get me off my stand a couple of hours before dusk. He pointed me along a trail back to the car, and then set out on a parallel line through the woods, hoping to startle a deer into running across my path. Before long I heard a rustling in the woods to my right, a crashing, really, because the quiet of a forest in winter amplifies sounds—there were many occasions, sitting out there, that I froze at the sound of a squirrel crunching over dry leaves, thinking I was being stalked by the ten-point buck of my dreams. My heart began to pound.

A light-footed doe peaked out of the edge of the woods and stopped to look at me. She was about fifteen feet away. I froze. Not because I had any conscious objection to killing, not even in the odd mutuality of that single beat, as we both stood there trying to figure out how to respond. I just did not know what to do. And then she was gone. I don't remember how I explained it to my father. Just the silence as we drove home.



As well as being a poor deer hunter, I was dangerous. There were a couple of years when, bored and cold, fiddling with my gun, I accidentally squeezed off a shot. If I had not later done the same thing in my parents' basement while playing with a loaded handgun, I would say that the unanticipated sound of a high-powered rifle in the woods is the loudest sound that I have ever heard.

I always lied about the reason. "My gun went off by accident" was not an acceptable hunting story. Nor, really, was "I saw a huge buck and took aim but missed." And so I settled on wild dogs. Three different years, I came in from the woods with a tale of shooting at a dog. One year, I somehow found a tuft of hair, perhaps from a squirrel, which I passed around as evidence that I had managed to graze one. Another year, standing in a long line of hunters at the edge of a field as another group walked through the woods to drive the deer toward us, my gun went off when I was trying to catch a falling snowflake in my mouth.

## **As well as being a poor deer hunter, I was dangerous. When I was eleven or twelve, I almost shot a kid named Mark.**

When I was eleven or twelve, I almost shot a kid named Mark, whose father owned the farm where we hunted. We were all heading out to drive "the back forty," a piece of ground across the gravel road from the main farm. I was standing down at the end of the driveway, ahead of the group, with my muzzle pointing at the ground. I raised the gun as I cranked the lever to chamber a round, and my muzzle traced a line upward from Mark's feet to just above his head, where it was pointing when it exploded in my hands.

I stared at the gun in my hands, uncomprehending, and put it down on the ground. I did not hunt that afternoon. That night, after a council of the men had met to talk about what happened, including looking at my grandmother's old gun to make sure nothing was wrong with it (nothing was), my father took me aside and told me that they had decided it was still safe for me to be armed in the woods with them. Somehow my complete surprise had convinced them that I would not make the mistake again. "You turned *white*," my father said to me, as if it were almost a compliment, as if it said something about my redeemable soul even though I had violated virtually every precept of the Hunter's Safety Classes I took every fall.



I finally killed a deer when I was thirteen. I was in a stand they called the Texas Tower, an enclosed platform that was set out in the middle of a field. Around 11:30 in the morning, something flashed to my right, and I turned to see a doe running across the field. She stopped at the tree line to look back. I braced my rifle—by now a Winchester Model 70 7-millimeter magnum that I had bought with money I earned from the paper route I delivered at 5:30 every morning—sighted through the scope, and pulled the trigger. I got down out of the stand and walked to the spot where I thought I had seen her fall. Before long, I found a small smear of bright red blood on the leaves on the ground.

I tried to track her, following the broken branches and small spattered drips of her blood, into the woods where she had run to hide. But I lost the track, and so I walked back to the farmhouse, where I knew my father would be. Once we drove back over there, it did not take long for my father to track the dying deer through the woods. She had died heading up hill, about a hundred yards from where she had stopped to look back after crossing the field.

**The day I killed the deer is the only time my father hugged me between the age of five or six and when I went away to graduate school. “Well done, son,” he said.**

I was surprised and a little bit scared by what I had done. By the way her brown eye stared up at me from the floor of the forest, by the bubbles in the puddle of blood that had flowed out of her lungs, by her glandular smell. As we stood there, before we cut into her and left her steaming viscera in the woods, my father took me in his arms and hugged me. It is the only time I remember him hugging me between the time I was five or six, and the day I went away to graduate school. “Well done, son,” he said.

My father was one of the loneliest people I have ever known. My brother and I used to joke that it was a deer that killed him. He kept up the hunt long after I moved away. He would dutifully go out and sit in his stand, and it became kind of a joke that he would never shoot anything. But finally, one year, on a freezing cold day right around Thanksgiving, a big buck walked across his stand, and he shot it. The photo someone took shows him looking pleased, but very cold, his face and hands bright red; the light of the camera caught the eyes of the dead buck somehow, making them look like small flashlights shining off into the distance. A week later my father was in the ICU with pneumonia; he was a lifelong smoker, and the cold and the exertion that day had been too much for his enfeebled lungs. He lived a few more years, in and out of the hospital, and finally died in November of 2001, close to the

anniversary of his last kill, and three weeks before the birth of my second child, his first grandson. On the floor by his chair in the living room, in a way that now seems as weirdly unaccountable as it once did a natural fact of my father's existence, sat his AR-15, bump-stocked and fully automatic.



I have told all these stories before, back when I used to drink, at parties when I was a graduate student, or at dinners with my colleagues later on. I have told them, and laughed along with the others, but with an intensity edged with anger: at my fancy friends for their easy unquestioned sense of superiority; at my emotionally foreshortened childhood and the fact that my father died without me ever really having talked to him; at myself for selling out my father for a few laughs from a bunch of academics, for playing the hick, and for never having been that good at it in the first place.

But I have never really told the stories of the undertow, the ones that are not so much picaresque as they are plain old morality tales, in which I was often an anxious acolyte at the gunners' conclave, and rarely—if ever—had the courage to be anything more than a stupid, smiling bystander. The story of watching the other kids shooting swallows in the barn with a .22, and not participating but only because I thought I might miss and reveal myself to be unworthy. The night we sat out in the freezing cold with a hunting knife and the frozen-solid head of a decapitated doe, and cut away at her features. The hour I spent with a friend of my father's who had taken me dove hunting, and, raising none, had shot at a large turtle sitting at the edge of a farm pond; the turtle paddled out into the pond, and my father's friend shot it again, and then again and again and again, as it kept surfacing to breathe, fighting for life. "Fucking thing won't die," he said, at first bemused, and then finally angry, like it was ruining his whole fucking day.

Very rarely have I told anyone about Virgil, the boy who lived across the street, who was my first hero, perhaps my first love.

Virgil was a lithe and beautiful boy; crew-cut tan and freckled with narrow brown eyes. He was a tree-climbing, jack-knife carrying, dirt-bike riding sort of boy. He had all the best things. A Nishiki bicycle and Adidas shoes—one pair, green with neon yellow stripes, I admired so much and so openly that he gave them to me when he was done wearing them. He was the sort of boy who knew about the things that boys like me feel they are supposed to

know about: Black Cat fireworks, cherry bombs, and Roman candles; condom machines in service station bathrooms.

A long straight scar bisected his left eyebrow, a memento, he said, of a shotgun that had exploded in his face, the self-same Winchester 20-gauge shotgun with which I had killed my first goose, a shotgun whose continued existence I could never fully square with the scar on the left side of my right-handed friend's face.

I spent summer afternoons at Virgil's, a stolid two-story brick house with a pool in the backyard. It was dark and cool and quiet inside the house, a contrast to the purposeless noise of the failing AC window unit in our living room. Virgil's house had dark olive wall-to-wall carpeting with an undulating pattern perfect for deploying tiny armies of plastic soldiers. It also had a player piano in the front hall and a huge wooden console television, on which we watched *Ironsides* every afternoon.

Sometimes Virgil's father came home early from work and sat at the dining room table drinking bourbon. Barrel-chested and beer-bellied in a plaid snap shirt, he was all topside: his jeans hung loosely from his waist, and he walked with the rolling bowlegged swagger of a man who always wore cowboy boots. He had blunt, hairy forearms and thick fingers. As he sat at the table and drank his whisky, the cat—first a grey tabby and then a black Siamese, after the first cat was hit by a car—would jump up in his lap, and he would stroke her head. Try as I might, I cannot recall his face, and it makes me wonder if I ever had the courage to look him in the eye.

Virgil's father was a banker, the scion of one of my hometown's first families, the owners of a local bank, and the last generation of that sort of local elite, as it turned out. But I mention that now not to frame the changing fortunes of the Rivers family in light of the shifting, deregulated economy that would soon force them to sell out to St. Louis-based Boatman's Bancshares, which would soon enough be sold off to NationsBank and then, finally, to Bank of America, but simply to explain the gun that Mr. Rivers brought home from work, a snub-nosed .38 that he unclipped from his belt and placed on the credenza in the dining room where he sat and drank and stroked the cat.

Mr. Rivers drove a black Ford Thunderbird with a license plate that read "BLKBRD," a novelty in those days, and was the loudest man I have ever met. My parents sometimes told the story of a time when he was in our house, looking at something—my father's classic Parker 12 gauge, maybe, or some hunting trophy—when suddenly he bellowed for his wife.



Across the street, in the kitchen in the back of their house from the living room in the back of our house, she heard him calling and came to see what he needed.

When his mother went out, Virgil showed me his father's things. Mr. Rivers had been a major in the Army, and his uniform hung in an upstairs bedroom, where he and his wife slept in separate beds. Downstairs, his study was a museum of dark wonders. Antique tin soldiers and old books. Weapons of all kinds: small throwing stars, brass knuckles, heavy bone-handled hunting knives, flint-lock dueling pistols, a Colt .45 Peacemaker, and a 20-gauge shotgun with the barrel sawed down to about a foot, the stock refinished into a pistol grip. One day I went over to Virgil's house and found that the television was out of commission. Mr. Rivers had been sitting in his study playing with one of his guns and it had gone off. The shot splintered the edge of the front door, which had been half open, and blew up the television across the hall in the living room, where the rest of the family had been sitting, watching *The Hollywood Squares*.

It was not until much later that I figured out the riddle of my friend's scar. I knew Virgil's father beat him. It was no secret. I remember one time where he had Virgil out on the front porch, spread eagle with his hands on the seat of the porch swing kicking him in the ass and screaming at him, his words rhymed to the kicks. For all the world to see. Like that scar on his son's face.

**I have known several men like Mr. Rivers, and they always hid their machine guns and pornography together, so proximate were the lonely pleasures of fantasizing about mastery and violence.**

The things that Mr. Rivers wanted to hide were behind the books on the built-in shelves that lined the front wall of his study. Magazines with pictures of naked women. There were no men in Mr. Rivers's magazines, only women and knives. I spent many hours of my childhood wondering how the things I had seen in those magazines were possible, how the women could have survived. Mr. Rivers's "Grease Gun" was behind those books, too. I have known several men like Mr. Rivers, and the fact is that they always hid their machine guns and their pornography in the same place; so proximate, perhaps, were the lonely pleasures of fantasizing about mastery and violence.

The Grease Gun, properly known as the M3 submachine gun, was introduced by the U.S. Army at the tail-end of World War II, and could fire 450 .45 caliber bullets per minute. As far as I could tell, Mr. Rivers kept his close to hand in case of an uprising. Some sort of zombie-hippie-commie-black-homo apocalypse that he was convinced was gathering right around the corner, waiting to come down the street and assemble on his front lawn.

When the threat finally materialized, it was more familiar, closer to home. We were in our living room watching the 1980 Winter Olympics—Eric Heiden, Ingemar Stenmark, “The Miracle on Ice” U.S. triumph over the Soviet ice hockey team—when one of Virgil’s sisters, Sarah, called from across the street. She had heard someone outside the house, tangled up in the duck decoys by the side of the garage. She had tried to call her father, but he was out at a party. Could my dad please come over? And so he did. Went down to the basement, got the pistol—an old, long-barreled .32 that I would very shortly misfire into a wall down there—and went over to help. In the meantime, Sarah had been able to talk to her father, and so he had come home, armed with his .38. In the backyard, in the hard dark of winter, he saw my father, silhouetted with his gun, and drew on him. When my father came home he was laughing, although it wasn’t really funny. The agreed-upon moral of the story, the one that framed and reinforced the hierarchy between our two families, between the two men, and between Virgil and me, was not that having handguns around is stupid or likely to lead to mayhem, nor that someone should have called the police, nor even that it was actually a pretty big long shot that the Revolution would begin with someone trying to steal duck decoys. It was that Mr. Rivers had got the drop on my dad.

There was, I have to believe, as much tenderness in my father as there was rage in Virgil’s. But I will never really know. My father knew much more about killing than he did about loving. It was only in violence, dressed for the hunt, carrying a gun, that he could face the terrifying feeling of having a child, of loving someone whom you can neither control nor protect.



My memories and my stories, I have sadly concluded in later life, lead inevitably toward the machine gun hidden in my friend’s father’s study, or lying next to my father’s easy chair. The heady and uniquely American blend of martial culture, white paranoia, and toxic masculinity—which makes stories of so many U.S. families and childhoods illegible without guns—possesses an insistent teleology, a sense that all this perceived threat is leading us to

someplace inevitable, a battlefield on which one will not stand a chance of surviving without a gun.

When I hear the NRA people going on about how guns are just “tools,” I think, absolutely, you are right, guns are tools: tools for making emotionally stunted men feel whole; tools for guiding lonely boys along the bloody pathway to becoming violent men; tools for spreading the fearful fantasy of the coming race war; tools for enflaming urban areas in rural states, and making the argument for more cops and more prisons; tools for reproducing male dominance and white supremacy; tools for white male parthenogenesis.

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So I am with the Parkland kids, truly. And yet, when I hear people talking about raising the age at which someone might buy their first gun or banning bump stocks or assault weapons, I have got to admit it leaves me wondering why they are stopping there. True: there is no reason in the world for someone to have an AR-15 except to kill people or indulge in the fantasy life of white survivalism that I learned about at Virgil’s house. And we can start by banning the tools, but we are not going to be finished until we dismantle the house they have been used to build.

In her new history of the Second Amendment, *Loaded* (full confession: I loved the book enough to blurb it), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz shows that the history of gun owning and use in the United States has always been connected with imperial genocide and racial slavery. Notably, the constitutional provision for the keeping of a “well-regulated militia” was (contrary to the ahistorical reading prevalent today) not about defending the country from outside threat but rather aimed at arming white men against Native Americans and the threat of slave insurrections. In other words, the defense of gun ownership has always been rooted in anxieties about the need to defend white homesteads and households against a racialized, gendered threat: blacks, Indians, women who threaten their husbands’ masculinity, kids who won’t obey their fathers.

Add to this that the rising generation of school shooters has come of age over almost two decades of continuous war. They are an imperial generation. And we wonder that they fetishize force. They live in a society that deals with social problems by putting people in

cages. That thinks that the “first response” to any problem should be to add a gun to it. We send armed police officers to deal with mental breakdowns and drug overdoses and old ladies who lock their keys in the car. We send them to deal with kids who shoplift cigarillos and then walk down the middle of the street.

Until we deal with the admixture of toxic masculinity and white supremacy that produces such pornographic inequality; until we stop using armed police to guard the border between the haves and have-nots; until we recognize that imperial violence and police violence and school violence are related aspects of the same problem, we are going to keep producing killers. The cause of the United States’ problem with guns, to paraphrase Dunbar-Ortiz, is not guns, it is United States.

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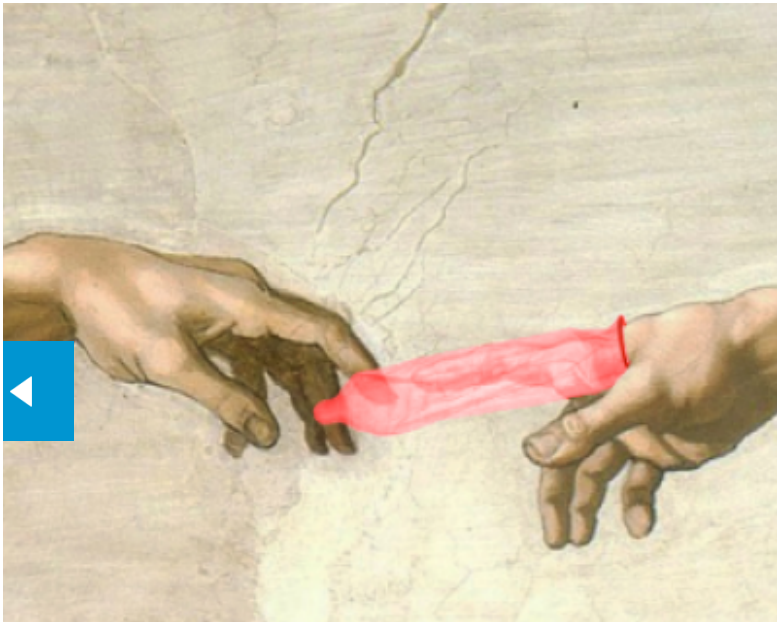
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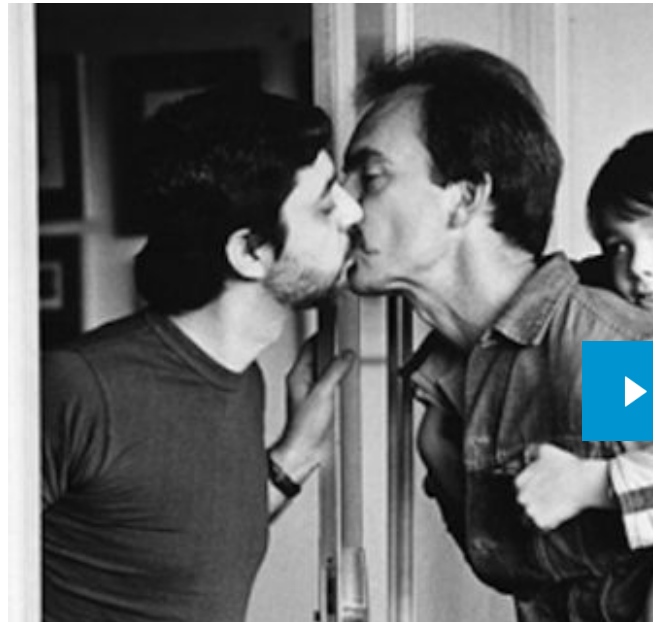
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