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Happy Days

The Pursuit of What Matters in Troubled Times



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Warm Gun

By [Nathan Schneider](#)

I've always really liked guns. Growing up, I fantasized about them endlessly, though my parents discouraged it every way they could. I came to agree with them in principle — that violence doesn't solve much of anything, that the world would be better without weapons — though it didn't keep me from stockpiling toy armaments. In the years since, I've become a partisan in pacifist causes, around which congregates a community that has no patience for packing heat. But I continue to feel that old attraction. I can still get swept away in fantasies of firepower. So nearly a decade into legal age with nary a shot fired, I decided it was time to test my reveries against the real thing: would a gun really satisfy them or cause me to recoil in horror?

It was with this purpose that, together with my indulgent friend, Rachel, I set out for a nearby shooting center, an unmarked building hiding in a quiet Long Island neighborhood, around the corner from a front-yard shrine to the bravery of firemen. The staff, though curt on the telephone, were perfectly gracious in person — perhaps owing to the presence of a lady. The man behind the counter was a towering retired cop with a viscid local accent and a talent for awkward jokes.

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"Women tend to shoot low," he explained, showing us the waist-up silhouette on the paper target. "I don't need to tell you why."

I also learned that shooters from my home state have a reputation for lousy aim. He took our IDs and handed over eyewear, ear muffs, a box of bullets, and the hallowed, heavy contraption to shoot them with.



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My choice of firearm couldn't be avoided. The AK-47 was among the most expensive options, but history's most horrifically lethal gun suited my mission. It still amazes me that the AK's ugly Russian body can be fondled so easily and legally under the pretense of recreation, even if only in semi-automatic form. Its shape conjures nightmares of the 20th century's bloodbaths, as well as their ghostly mystique.

Under the tutelage of a staff member with gray hair and a light gold necklace, I loaded one bullet at a time into the unmistakable curved magazine. Relishing the sound of deadly hardware, I clicked it onto the stock. Even more titillating was, after switching off the safety, pulling back the charging handle to load the first round into the chamber. Raising its butt to my shoulder and the business end forward, I took aim as best I could at the humanoid target's midsection, my face held solemn and straight. In the weapon's weight I began to feel a tingle of the power it provided me and the damage it could do. Apart, the gun and I were each inert; together we became capable of decisive things.

I squeezed the trigger, and the first shot jarred me. It was not the recoil or noise, which were manageable, but that my expectations had yet to coincide with what had happened. I kept on firing, one shot then the next, in a jagged rhythm that sounded like a symphony. The gun was no longer a foreign guest; body and mind accepted it as a limb. With each bang came the exhilaration of release, of freeing a captive long held within me. But soon, as I braced for another shot, it only clicked. A disturbance. The magazine was empty, so the gun and I were done. With slow, deliberate breaths, I tried to guide my ecstasy gently back down to earth.

For me, that weird, dark shooting gallery had become a temple, suffused by the holy jangle of equipment and bang of fire. I walked out with deliberate steps as if treading on holy ground. It didn't do anything for Rachel. After sharing the box of bullets between us, she was ready to go to the beach.

Back in the shop, we got to talking with the staff about the guns for sale.

“What’s your favorite?” I asked.

“Depends on my mood,” one of them replied.

We saw wooden-stocked AKs, Glocks, AR-15s, six-shooters, and .22 rifles. Which is most accurate? Well, it depends on the shooter, they said. Ammunition matters too, so we reviewed the varieties. Again, it depends.

“Want to shoot straight through someone? That’s one thing. Otherwise, with a hollow tip, it’ll take the guts along with it and make a big hole in their back.”

“Only if you shoot ‘em in the front,” added another.

The store took on a mood of comradeship. We looked at more guns. They told us how much they enjoy customers, and I enjoyed being one.

“You know,” the man behind the counter surprised me by saying, “I’m nonviolent. I believe in nonviolence.”

“Me too!” I blurted. I felt relieved to discover that someone else, perhaps even more fully than I, could share in this cognitive dissonance of ammo and ahimsa that has followed me since childhood. Then he continued.

“But if someone messes with me, that’s different. I’ll defend myself. If I go down, I go down kicking and screaming and taking as many of ‘em down with me as I can.” For that reason he keeps a loaded 9-millimeter Glock at the ready in his home and, most days, on his belt.

My enthusiasm faltered. His kind of nonviolence made me realize that I still clung to mine: one in which no real victory comes through harm and the solution to fear is not to inspire it in others. The allure of the guns on display around me dissolved into revulsion. Before long, Rachel and I thanked them and left.

But, at least until all the swords are beaten to ploughshares and we study war no more, I may find myself in a shooting gallery again from time to time. Such mortal arts hit a nerve more ancient than civilization. They remind me what we’re up against, latent within: these insane fascinations that, generation after generation, threaten to do us in for good.



*Nathan Schneider is an editor of the blog WagingNonviolence.org and a senior editor of [Killing the Buddha](#), an online magazine of religion, politics, and culture. His writing has appeared *The Boston Globe*, *The American Prospect*, *The Guardian* and elsewhere.*