Gun Love

by David Ackley

Camp Pickett, where we were stationed when I was ten, was tens of thousands of acres, near the town of Blackstone in central Virginia. The place was so evacuated of troops then, two years after the war, that we had the 2nd floor of a barracks to house our family of four: our living room which would have been home to 30 or 40 G.I.'s was as long as a pistol range. A squad-bay it was called, when I lived in one again, among another generation of G.I.s at Schofield Barracks, Oahu, eighteen years on.

That was the year I got my Daisy bee-bee gun for Christmas, momentarily satisfying my gun love, and my father and I took target practice on the bulbs and lights my mother had painstakingly hung on the tree at the far end of our living room—until she quietly called us off.

In the abandoned post movie theater, piled with debris, army brats played war with pipes and sticks and bee-bee guns. Mayhem was unintended but possible. The first casualty of my Daisy was a goldfinch I hadn't meant to kill; I was stunned when it fell dead at my feet. I'd just meant, I thought, to come close, to scare it. Its stillness appalled me, and I threw it into the bushes from shame.

In the movie theater I shot just as an enemy unexpectedly raised his head and hit him square in the left eye with a lead pellet. He held his hand over it. Can you see, I said. I don't know, he said. It hurts. You better go home now, I said. Okay, he said. I expected that his father would come to see mine and one of the two would kill me, or I'd be sent to prison. The kid, I supposed, would be one-eye blind for the rest of his life; I wasn't scared, surprisingly, merely numbly fatalistic at the sort of thing I always felt I had coming for one reason or another. But I never saw him again, nor heard anything more about it. Of course, I didn't tell my parents.

Not long after, at another base, Harry gave me a single-shot twenty two rifle with a defective ejector someone had swapped him

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for some midnight requisition from his supply room. He might have thought better of it, if he'd known about the kid I'd hit in the eye.

A year or two after Harry died, when we were back in New Hampshire, my best friend aimed the rifle at my face, pulled back the bolt to cock it and jokingly offered to pull the trigger to prove it was empty. I remember looking straight into the black hole of the barrel.

Russian roulette: Right, wrong: live, die.

“Put it down,” I said. You never knew, the ejector mechanism didn't work and you had to pry shells out of the chamber with a fingernail.

“Ah, it's empty,” he said, laughing. “I looked.”

My mother looked up from her sewing and said, “ Don't,” so he put it down.

It had been loaded. The funny thing is, I don't remember feeling one way or the other about whether he'd pull the trigger.