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by Jerry Ratch

His name was Gino. I'll leave out the last name, not that I think it matters anymore. He came into my dad's gas station on the near North side of Chicago to have work done on his fancy car. I was still a teenager. I accidentally opened the glove compartment and stumbled upon his snub-nose .38 caliber. He saw me looking at it and he smirked. "Protection," he said, picking his teeth with a wooden toothpick after lunch. "In my line of business, you gotta have that."

"What do you do?" I asked. I was a total innocent then.

"Oh, I collect coins from vending machines. You know, cigarettes, candy, that sort of thing. Condoms. You know."

"Yeah." I found that my head was bobbing up and down.

"I got two wives and a bunch of kids," he said. "I need protection. You never know, you know?"

"Yeah. I know."

"In my line of business, the life expectation's about as long as the caliber of your gun, you know?"

My head kept on bobbing. "Yeah," I said. Then I closed up the glove compartment and got the heck out of his car. I let my dad finish the rest of the work on the car, and I went into the bathroom to take a giant crap.

I don't remember Gino ever coming back in for service on his car anymore after that.

