

Gunplay

by Neil Serven

It was when the party hit a lull and a woman wearing too much rouge was going on about her parakeets that Tom decided to set down his bourbon glass and pull out his gun.

He had this theory that you could tell a lot by who left the room and who stayed. The ones who stayed were worth getting to know.

A tall man in an argyle sweater, one of those who immediately fled, called over his shoulder passive-aggressively: Whoa, pal, shouldn't we have kept the toys at home?

A few folks who weren't so uptight stuck around and asked questions: Is it loaded? Is the safety on? Tom showed them the switch, expertly flipped the chamber in and out.

Ingrid explained, Tom didn't care much for them until we had our break-in last year. Did Jill tell you about that? While we were up in Vermont someone made off with our flat-screen and a full jar of macadamia nuts.

Jill was the hostess. Coming in from the kitchen, she spied the gun in Tom's hand and almost dropped a whole plate of water crackers. Tom, she said, recovering her poise in front of everybody, is there something you need to talk through? Can I get you a stronger drink?

As people grew accustomed to the gun, a few asked to touch it. They set down their cocktails without using coasters. Hands dropped as they tried the weight, slipped their fingers around the walnut handle, lightly thumbed the cold trigger. They looked around for a safe place to point it, and when they couldn't find one, they instead struck *Charlie's Angels*-style poses, long enough for the other guests to snap photos with their smartphones.

The man in the argyle said to Jill, I'm sorry, I can't hang around with that thing here.

Someone said later she could feel the bullet tickling her hair as it whizzed by, but that was one of Jill's college friends, who had always been prone to exaggerations.

Tom was the one holding the thing when it went off. He had been standing near the bottom of the stairs getting ready to put it back in his pocket when he accidentally whacked it against the banister. Ingrid, standing next to him, shrieked and dropped her Manhattan; the man in the argyle, having never made good on his threat to leave, exclaimed, What the *fuck*, too dramatically for anyone's good.

By the looks of things the bullet had ricocheted off the wall by the armoire and then struck the back of the couch, near where Jill's black Standard Poodle had been resting. The poor thing had taken off like a firecracker up the stairs and nearly knocked over Jill's sister as she was coming out of the bathroom. Jill's brother-in-law found the slug buried between the couch cushions.

The wall now sported a fresh little gouge in the plaster the size of a golf ball, and the first-floor rooms smelled like burnt popcorn. Nobody knew where the dog went. Jill eventually found him hiding at the back of the linen closet, hyperventilating, his head buried in an overnight bag.

On the drive home, Ingrid said, I guess we should be relieved nobody was hurt. What do you suppose was that guy's problem, anyway?

Probably one of these types that doesn't lock the window to his fire escape, then wonders why he keeps running out of albuterol, said Tom. He'll go home and write four thousand words about this on his blog tonight. Most exciting thing that's ever happened to him. I thought the whole thing was pretty funny.

I told Jill she could send us the bill for the wall. I suppose the couch may need to be reupholstered too. I'll call her tomorrow.

Spackle and paint should take care of it. It was just a mark.

I know, said Ingrid. But it's the decent thing to do.

