

Peppermint and Gunpowder

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It was 2 a.m. The rest of the New Year's gunfire had ceased. I gripped the pistol loosely as I aimed it at the alley below.

"Hold the damn gun right!" My father snapped. "Don't make me look bad."

The laughter and taunts of his friends grew. They were three fools known as the Drunk Brothers. And that's what they were, all the time.

"No way he gonna hit that can! That's like a hundred feet away," Drunk Brother Number Two slurred.

My father betted the brothers that I could drink four shots and hit a trashcan from our back porch with his twenty-two automatic. Fifty dollars was on the line, which was the same as a day's pay. My father folded his massive arms and told me what was at stake.

The Drunk Brothers didn't say what type of liquor. So, my father poured four shots of peppermint schnapps, lined up in a row on the porch railing. They protested. "A little girl could drink a whole bottle of schnapps," said Drunk Brother Number Three. But my father cussed them out until they gave in.

My hand hung over the first glass as I turned and looked back into the apartment. I imagined my mother hiding behind her bedroom door, too afraid to do anything. I guess I couldn't blame her. When she didn't appear, I took each shot straight to the head. It didn't burn my throat much.

"Steady yourself. Squeeze the trigger and hit that can." I saw tornados in my father's eyes.

I had seen the gun in action a few times and those same tornados whirled. The twenty-two once caught a kid who'd cheated at craps in the thigh. He was only a few years older than me, maybe even in high school.

I was afraid of the pistol. But I was afraid of my father more. He sucked his front teeth and I tightened my grip on the handle.

The only light in the alley was right over the trash can. It was bathed in yellow like some treasure in a museum. I closed my left eye and concentrated. The babblings of the Drunk Brothers fell away and echoed like I had descended into a cave. I licked my lips and tasted the slick residue of the schnapps. I pulled the trigger.

Pop.

The shot tore through the night sky as the gun tried to jump out of my hand. The bullet hit the can dead center, and the Drunk Brothers rolled over in disgust.

“Now pay me my money!” my father bellowed. They handed my father lumps of bills and cursed bitterly.

“I guess that boy of yours ain’t such a Poindexter after all,” said Drunk Brother Number One.

“Yeah,” chimed in Number Three, “I guess you gonna start claiming him to the fellas down at the pool hall.” All three brothers howled and cackled.

My father shook his head and smiled as he counted the money. I stood there waiting for a high five, or for him to say, “that was good, boy.” Nothing. He went on counting the cash.

I felt a rush of hot air. My skin smoldered like the bottom of a steam iron left on too long.

I squeezed the trigger and lit up the air. When a bullet hit the trashcan, it jumped, flipped and danced like the tail of a kite in a stiff wind. Bullets struck the ground, the light post, the Johnson’s garage. I kept squeezing until the gun went silent.

The weight of my father’s hand lowered the gun slightly. He slid the pistol from my grip and grabbed my shoulder. His lips moved but I couldn’t hear him. The gun smoke hung heavy in the air as the brothers coughed. They stared like I was the drunk one. Number One flapped his arms wildly and spit out some words. I looked down at the alley. The Johnson’s lights burst on. Several other houses followed. My father shoved me inside. The Drunk Brothers tripped out the front door. My father pointed to my bedroom.

I laid in my bed, head throbbing, still feeling the weight of the gun inside my hand. I waited for my mother. But she never came. I finally drifted off to sleep as the sun rose, with the sweetness of peppermint schnapps on my lips and the taste of gunpowder in my throat.