

Shooter

by Gary V. Powell

When I was in eighth grade, a boy on our road shot his sister in the face with his father's pistol and killed her. We lived in the country, where no city lights penetrated after dark, where no traffic noise protected our sleep from the thrash of feral animals in the thicket that surrounded our little house and threatened to overrun our garden and lawn. They said the shooting was an accident—a sibling conflict that got out of hand, a weapon unexpectedly loaded. No one knew what to do.

My father kept a double barreled shotgun, inherited from his father, by the back door and a box of shells in a kitchen drawer. A hunting rifle, never used by my father, leaned against the wall of the hallway closet. Sometimes, in the pink light of a long summer's evening or the bitter cold of a January dawn, a gunshot's roar split the silence—a farmer protecting his chickens, a homeowner scattering pilfering raccoons.

The boy who killed his sister was younger than me, attended elementary school and rode a different bus. Once, I'd gone sledding with him, a bucktooth with thick, black-rimmed glasses that kept sliding down his nose, rivulets of green snot frozen on his upper lip. His sister, a high school student at the time of her death, I'd seen fetching sheets her mother had hung outside to dry or leaning against the car of some boy come to visit, skinny, white legs gleaming in the summer sun. After the shooting, they sent the boy away. He returned taller and heavier, a sulkier version of his earlier self.

He made few friends—other loners and strangelings. Classmates whispered “Shooter” when he passed in the hall. He and his parents remained in the house, but the place deteriorated into a ramshackle. Weeds choked tomato plants and flowers, and paint peeled. When a tornado felled a willow branch, collapsing the garage roof, repairs were never made.

After graduating high school, I left home, only rarely returning to visit. Eventually, the house where the killing had occurred was bulldozed, a bigger, fancier house with a neat, square yard erected in its place. My father said the boy's parents suffered dementia and lived out their days in nursing homes. He said the boy found work in the area and could be seen around town, at grocery stores and taverns.

At my father's funeral, several childhood friends I hadn't seen in years stopped by to pay their respects, among them the boy who'd killed his sister. Like all of us, he'd aged, but I recognized him. Balding, never married, his chest and belly collapsed in an avalanche down his front. He still wore thick glasses and couldn't look me in the eye. We shook hands, but an introduction to my wife faltered, Shooter being the only name I recalled.

