

Hunter Ellis

Gunning for an End

It was developing so well until I got to the major moment of action. Now I am stuck.

I have been working on my second novel for a little over seven months as of last week. I have tried all sorts of methods to promote my writing including disconnecting my phone and taking up jogging again.

There is just one major problem. See, I have never in my twenty-nine years of life thought to put a gun in my mouth with the intention of blowing a hole through the back of my head. It just isn't something that rational mothers instill in their rational sons. So then, what would compel a character, my story's protagonist, to complete such as task? Is there no glory in going out by asphyxiation anymore?

"It's so good to hear your voice through again," says my editor, "I hope I never find out that you have disconnected your home phone line." My editor pauses for a moment. "You really need to renew your cell phone contract, Doug."

"I'm stuck," I say to my editor through the antiquated telephone, "I can't quite get the suicide scene down the way I want it."

"I recommend watching some films. Have you seen *The Royal Tenenbaums*? There is a good example of a suicide set to Elliot Smith in there," my editor says through the electronic hiss. "Such a hauntingly beautiful film."

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"My suicide is fundamentally different. It deals with a gun. You can't compare slit wrists to the immediate ecstasy of killing oneself with a firearm."

"What are you talking about, Doug?"

"Think of how Kurt Cobain or Hemingway went out," I say, "The thought that a single shot from a gun is enough to end a human being's entire history is beautiful and thoroughly depressing at the same time."

"Sure."

"I need to experience this all first hand in order to put it to paper."

"Doug, you are suggesting going down a road that I am not comfortable with."

I hang up the phone.

"Welcome," says the gun store owner as I enter the rundown shop across town. I notice a push pin board near the entrance with various flyers attached advertising gun safety classes. One of these flyers reads in all bold letters, "NOT KNOWING HOW TO FIRE WILL BACKFIRE. LEARN THE BASICS OF GUN SAFETY."

I walk through the aisles of the store observing the various holsters, shells and targets on display. One target sheet features the likeness of an Arab man wearing a large turban. Hanging next to it is a target with a picture of our current president.

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"How can I help you, Sir," says the man behind the counter. He is wearing a cream-colored long-sleeve shirt. He has a noticeable tattoo on the right side of his neck. The tattoo is a bull with clouds of smoke emanating from its snout.

"I am looking to purchase a handgun," I say.

"Do you have any idea what kind of gun would work best for you?" the cashier asks. He appears vaguely disinterested in our exchange.

"What handgun is most popular here?"

"What are you planning on using the gun for?" the cashier says.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, is it for self-defense or shooting at a firing range?"

"The two are mutually exclusive?" I say.

The cashier's brows furrow slightly. He doesn't seem particularly receptive to my line of inquiry.

"What I want," I say, "Is the most popular handgun you sell for self-defensive purposes."

"Oh, well, I would recommend a *Beretta*. A *Beretta M9*. It has 10 or 15 round magazine capacity so it should suit you needs, Sir," says the cashier, stressing the word "sir" in a sarcastic tone.

"I will take one," I say.

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"Do you have a gun permit?"

"I was told I could apply for one and purchase a gun simultaneously."

"Yeah, normally you have to wait a week or so," says the cashier, "But if you have the cash I'll let it slide."

The cashier looks upward. "Would you like to purchase ammunition too, Sir?"

I freeze for a moment. I had not planned to purchase live ammo.

"Do you have any blank rounds available for that gun?" I ask.

"No, Sir, not for that model."

The M9 is heavier than I imagined. Is it the gravity of the piece of metal between my fingers that belies the weight printed in the instruction manual? I am currently in the woods outside town with my gun pointed at the president. As it turns out it is more expensive to shoot at a terrorist than our commander-in-chief is.

I raise the gun towards my target, sighting my opponent. Applying pressure to the trigger, I release. Then again. And again. I need to get familiar with the newest addition to my story.

Walking towards the target sheet, I unload the exhausted clip and carefully fill it with more rounds. Operating a firearm

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is not difficult, and, yet it retains a great sense of empowerment.

I find myself struggling to write the pivotal chapter. My character, Trevor, is supposed to take the gun he finds in his father's closet and shoot his brains out. I can't come up with a solid justification for this action or wrap my mind around how someone could explode their own.

At seven o'clock, my phone rings. The called ID informs me that it is my editor. I let the phone ring several times before I pick it up off the receiver.

"How is the chapter coming?" says my editor.

The phone cord is tangled. This perturbs me. "I bought the gun."

"Jesus. Oh God. I thought you were kidding," my editor says sounding exasperated, "Doug, don't tell me you bought ammunition too."

"I did. The gun store did not have blank shells for the M9. I even went outside of town and shot a few clips this afternoon. This thing is powerful."

"I'm coming over tomorrow. We are going to bang this chapter out without the need of that gun," my editor says. The static grips the air around my ear. "Don't do anything stupid tonight. Promise me that. Get some rest."

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I hang up the telephone.

I am drinking a shot of tequila in memory of my stepbrother. I decided to buy a bottle of *Juarez Silver* on the way home from the gun shop earlier. My stepbrother's favorite type of liquor happens to be tequila.

The main character of my book, Trevor, is an alcoholic. He is modeled after my own step-brother who served a short stint in jail during high school after getting caught driving while intoxicated more than a couple of times. His family has a long history of alcoholism that I am culling from for this book.

After taking a shot, I feel the compulsion to write. The feeling of the tequila coursing through my veins pulls me towards my keyboard. I place the M9 on the glass desk next to my beer. I unbutton my shirt and place it on the back of my chair effortlessly.

Two new paragraphs appear on the computer monitor in the span of twenty minutes. I take another shot of tequila to celebrate.

My telephone rings as the liquor courses through my body. What is it about tequila that warms the blood so?

The caller ID lists it as my mother. I ignore the five rhythmic chimes while I continue writing the following sentence, "Staring at the gun before him, Trevor wondered just how many action movies this instrument played the starring role in." As I listen to the incoming recording on my voice mail, it becomes

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painfully obvious that my editor has informed my mother of my latest artistic liberties.

Thirty more minutes pass by in a whirl. Trevor has begun to finger the handgun, closely inspecting every serial number, manufacturing number and engraving lining the side of the gun's barrel. He has conceived of every possible manner to acquaint himself with the killing machine. Now all that is left is some conviction and a detailed account of the emotions he feels when placing the gun in his mouth.

Reaching for the handgun on the table, I am buzzed. My fingers move in a manner much faster than my brain is currently operating. I haven't noticed my current state of drunkenness due to the flurry of writing that I had just produced. I have already consumed four shots of tequila and two beers. I am not normally a heavy drinker.

The gun feels even heavier in my hand. The metal underneath my flesh is colder than when I was in the store. I move to my sofa from my computer chair. I want to devote my full attention to the following exercise.

I lift the gun towards my face. The darkened hole of the bullet chamber stares at me as a judge might while reading out the details of a criminal's sentence.

I place the gun in my mouth. As my teeth grip the top and bottom of the barrel, my saliva begins to coat the outside of the gun. I begin to think of the alternatives that exist to this form of suicide.

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My mind races to thoughts of the ritualistic disembowelment of *seppuku* to the painlessness of a government-issued cyanide capsule. It dawns on me; people don't select guns out of preference but for their accessibility. The gun's barrel has not gotten any warmer on my lips.

I pull back on the hammer. The gun is loaded. I triple check the gun. There are no sign of bullets in either the chamber or the clip. I put the gun back in my mouth, applying pressure to the trigger.

A click. Trevor is now dead.

I am not as inspired by this as I thought I would be. Why does Trevor want this?

I place the gun back on my table and save my work. I watch some action film on television. At commercial break, I discover that the film I am watching called *Point Break*.

The next day my editor is standing in my living room with his hand cupping his chin. We have been going over the pivotal scene in chapter seventeen for over three hours. My mother informs me that she is driving up to my house later this afternoon.

My mother is holding a cup of tea in her hands. Both of her hands shake violently as she sets the cup on the porcelain saucer on the table in front of her. It is painfully obvious

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that her nerves are shot. She does not normally appear as frail as she does now.

"I'm quite sane, mom," I say while shifting uneasily in my rocking chair.

My mother glances over to my editor, pausing before she says, "Why do you take such fascination in such morose subjects, Doug?"

"My first novel dealt with life, mom, in that I discussed the ideas of aging into one's thirties. This second novel based loosely on Seth and his battle with alcoholism. I have always written highly personal stories. You know that."

My editor motions that he would like to interject in the deeply personal conversation between my mother and me. I deny him this advance.

"What I am saying, mom is that you have no need to worry about my personal safety. The gun is not kept loaded. I'm an accomplished writer still paying off my college loans. If I shot myself that wouldn't solve anything."

Upon hearing, this mother takes another elongated sip from her cup. "How is your love life, Doug?"

"Acceptable. It's nonexistent." I light a cigarette inhaling the initial puff of smoke with great pleasure. The warmth of the first puff on the back of my throat causes me to cough.

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It is one week later and I am standing inside of a pawnshop downtown. All sorts of items fill the store. A trombone catches my eye. I played trombone in middle school. I wish I had kept up with it.

"How can I help you today, Sir?" the cashier says.

"I have a hand gun I would like to sell."

"I will need to see the gun, Sir."

The pawn store cashier writes down the serial number and manufacturer. He then walks into a room in the back of the store. He reappears in a few minutes holding a book of gun price lists. I notice that the number on the cover is from two years before. I say nothing.

"An M9 would normally be worth \$300. This one, however, appears brand new. How many times did you use it?" says the cashier.

"I used it twice."

"I'll give you \$400 or \$460 store credit."

"I'll take the cash," I say without a second thought.

The cashier checks my gun license before handing me the money.

"If you don't mind me asking, why did you decide to sell such a new hand gun?" the cashier says.

"I'm finished."

"How so?"

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"Oh, I just meant that I needed the money. That's all."

"Okay, Sir, have a nice afternoon," says the cashier.

As I walk through the store's front door, I think back to the evening my mom visited. I argued with her for hours. In the end, my mother laid it bare for me. My stepbrother, Seth, shot himself in the head with a deer-hunting rifle after his bills piled up two weeks ago. He saw no other way of reconciling his problems.

I had disconnected my telephone that week in order to concentrate on my writing. I hoped it would help me avoid my editor. It was only at my editor's persistence that I reconnected it, barely missing my mother's calls. Failing to reach my editor on his new cell phone, she thought I had gone off the deep end too. This all happened while she was busy arranging for the funeral.

I enter my car and drive towards my mother's house. I did not bring a draft of the novel with me. I am shelving my second novel for an indefinite period.