

## Little Gun

By Mike MacLean

Two hours ago, I killed a Mexican man. Now, I sit on the edge of my bunk. I watch TV and eat the cookies Ray gave me. They're the big Pepperidge Farm ones. My favorite.

Ray's at the little sink, scrubbing the gun with bleach. The smell fills up the whole RV. Wish Ray didn't use so much. Wish he waited until I was done with my cookies. Can't taste nothing with all that bleach in the air.

The TV in the RV is too small. Nothing good on anyway. Just Oprah and some dumb cartoons for kids. Backyardigans, Sponge Bob, shit like that. I'd be all into Sponge Bob a few years ago. But I'm 12 now. Small for my age. Skinny and short. I look younger, like maybe 9 or 10. But I'm really 12, and that's too old for cartoons.

I keep flipping the channels. Flip. Flip. Flip. Big fucking nothing.

Ray finishes scrubbing and takes off his thick gloves. He puts on a different pair, thinner ones. Takes apart the gun. Puts the little pieces in a garbage bag. The whole RV rocks when he walks over to me.

Ray's a big, scary looking guy. Has skulls and snakes tattooed all over his arms. But he talks all soft. Almost like a woman. "Give me your clothes," he says.

I put down the remote and take off my T-shirt and jeans, then my socks. They're all black. I always wear black when we do a job. In case I get blood on me. Can't see blood on black clothes. Ray told me that my first time.

I drop the clothes in the bag. Stand there in my white underwear. The RV's air conditioner makes the whooshing noise. Makes my legs feel cold.

Ray says, "Shoes too."

I look down at my shoes on the floor. I really like this pair. They're New Balances. Black like always, but with cool silver trim. I want to keep them this time.

"Shoes," says Ray. He's shaking the garbage bag now. Not angry or nothing—Ray never looks angry. Just serious.

I drop the shoes in the bag. Ray swings it over his shoulder. "There's a pizza in the freezer. Pepsis in the fridge." He opens the door and steps outside. The RV rocks a little. "I'll be back tomorrow."

I listen to his motorcycle start up. Sounds like a lion roaring.

Drink the rest of my chocolate milk and walk to the back of the RV. There's a little bathroom there with a skinny little shower.

I go and turn on the water. Get it real hot. A couple months ago, I started growing hair on my arms. Thin blonde stuff. I look at the hair now and see specks of blood sticking to it. The blood must've sprayed my arms when I shot the Mexican in the face.

I need to wash it off.

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I burn the pizza, but eat it anyway. Drink lots of Pepsi to wash down the black taste. Try to watch TV again but get bored. Ray said he'd get me a Playstation 3 one of these days. Won't hold my breath.

Wish I had a cell phone like the kids on TV. Wish I had a computer so I could do that online thing. Never been online. Ray says if I go online, the police might be able to find us. I think he's lying. Don't know why. Just a feeling I get.

I go and sit in the RV's cab, behind the steering wheel. Look outside the big front windshield. We're set up in a campground in the desert, way down on the bottom of Arizona. Sometimes we go to California or Texas, but we usually stay close to Mexico. Once I asked Ray why.

"Because that's where the Mexicans are."

"Do you hate Mexicans, Ray? That why we shoot them?"

"I haven't hated anyone in years," said Ray. "No kid, we kill Mexicans because the cartels pays us to kill Mexicans. If the cartels paid to kill Swedes, we'd kill fucking Swedes."

I've shot eight men. Six of them were Mexicans. None of them were Swedes.

Outside, the sun is going down. Looks like the whole sky is on fire, like it'll start burning up the mountains and cactus and dirt. It's pretty.

I'm not the only one in the camp. Another RV is parked a few spaces down. It belongs to an old couple. They sit in lawn chairs and cook burgers on a barbeque. A girl sits with them. She's my age. Their granddaughter or something. She has dark hair but pale skin. I like the way that looks, the dark and light together. She wears headphones and holds one of those Ipod things in her hands. She's bored like me. I see it in her face.

The girl looks up from her Ipod. Sees me watching her. Looks at me for a long time. Then she looks back down at her Ipod.

I get up from the driver's seat and go to the RV's door. Stand there with my hand on the handle, frozen. Ray says I shouldn't leave the RV when he's out cleaning up. Says it's not safe. But there's nothing on TV, and I'm so bored. The RV feels like it's getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

I go out and walk towards the old people's camp. My gut feels funny. I want to talk to that girl, but I don't know how to start. I go up to them, say hey. They all look over at me. The old people smile and say hello back. The girl doesn't say nothing. She still looks bored. Her lips make a flat line.

My face and my ears get all hot. I want to say something else, but my mouth won't work. I turn around and walk back to my RV.

Behind me, I hear the girl say, "What a fucking loser."

The old woman yells at her for using a bad word. I climb into the RV and shut the door. Shut out their voices.

I go back to my bunk and the TV. Flip. Flip. Flip. Still nothing.

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Ray comes back the next morning. The garbage sack is gone. Instead, he holds a great big bag from Wal-Mart.

"Got a surprise for you," he says. "Since you did such a good job."

"What is it?"

He pulls a big box out of the bag—the word PLAYSTATION on the side.

*Yes. Yes. Yes.* I grab the box, set it on the floor, and pull my stiletto. *Click.* The blade springs up.

Ray watches me cut open the box. Something like a smile is on his face. Reminds me of when Mom wasn't dead. Ray came over Christmas Eve sometimes, bringing me presents. Toy guns or G.I. Joes. Nothing big, like the Playstation. But it was nice.

Ray's cell phone rings. The sound bounces off the walls of the RV. I stop ripping open the box.

"I'm here," Ray says into the phone. He's talking soft like a woman again. He nods. "Yeah."

Ray gets a new cell phone every few weeks. Never calls anyone with it. But once in a while somebody calls him. When he gets the call it means I have to shoot someone again.

"It's too soon," Ray says into the phone. "We just fucking did a..."

He shuts up and listens a while. I watch his face, until he turns his back on me, saying, "Yeah... Yeah.... Okay."

Ray shuts his phone and tells me to put the Playstation away for later. He reaches into the tall cabinet and pulls down the gun case. Opens it up and hands me a pistol.

"Get ready," he says.

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I don't know nothing about cell phones or Ipods or computers, but I know guns. Ray makes sure of that.

The pistol is a .32 caliber Beretta, Model 84. Holds thirteen bullets in the clip. And the gun has a real short barrel. This is important. I like the Ruger .22 better than the Beretta. I can shoot real straight with the Ruger. But the Ruger's barrel is too long. Might get caught on my shirt or something when I pull it. That wouldn't be good.

Ray is up behind the wheel, all quiet. He's always quiet before a job. I stand in the back. It's hard to stay still with the RV bouncing all over the road. But it's good for practice.

The Beretta is tucked in my pants, in the special holster Ray made for me. I lift my shirt. Pull the gun out. Fast but not too fast. Ray says sudden movements draw people's attention. Better to pull the gun slow. Be smooth about it, and no one will see you coming.

I bring the gun up and pull the trigger. The gun is empty so it goes *click*. The slide slides back.

Ray yells at me from the RV's cab. "How many?"

"Sixty-seven," I say. I tuck the gun back into its holster and hide it with my shirt.

"Keep going. I want two-hundred."

I do it again. And again. And again. Each time I pull the gun, I picture my target. Another Mexican guy. I've seen his picture. Memorized his face. He doesn't look like much, but Ray says he's a bad man. A drug dealer who cheated his boss out of lots of money. So his boss called Ray.

I pull the trigger and imagine the guy's head jerking backwards. A red hole right between his eyes.

The picture in my head doesn't make me happy. Doesn't make me sad either. Ray says that's a gift.

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My skateboard goes *click, clack* over the cracks in the road. I'm kicking hard and rolling fast. The board is a Birdhouse Silver Series—a Tony Hawk board. Cheaper than some others, but I still like it.

It's a shit town. Gas station. Grocery store. A Dairy Queen that needs new paint.

I turn on a side street. Houses on both sides with dirt and weeds in the yards. I'm going downhill so I don't have to kick anymore. Both feet on the board, rolling even faster now.

My heart goes *thump, thump, thump*. The bright sun makes me squint.

I see a man walk out of a little house. The house is falling apart. Some windows are broken and the roof is all saggy. Ray called the place a drop house.

The man doesn't look like he belongs with that house. He looks clean, like a rich person on TV. Nice pants, nice shirt, nice shoes. Big sunglasses. He holds a cell phone to his ear and walks to a car. It's big and black and shiny—a rich man's car.

My heart keeps thumping away. My throat closes up. I swallow a gob of spit and go for the Beretta.

The man is getting into the black car. He's still talking on the phone. Doesn't notice me jump off my skateboard. Doesn't notice me pull the gun and run up to him.

I get close, like Ray taught me. Shoot him in the body.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

He arches his back and yells. I keep pulling the trigger, fast as I can. The man slumps over the nice white seats. Gets them all bloody. He yells some more, sounding all scared and shit.

I keep shooting. The man's body jerks every time a bullet hits him. Makes me think of a fish flopping on the ground. More blood on the clean white seats. He tries to crawl away. Then he stops.

His body looks all loose. Like someone pulled his skeleton out. Only thing left is a bag of skin.

I step closer and shoot him some more. Taking my time now, going for the head. Ray says always put two bullets in the head. Not one—two. He calls that second bullet the “insurance bullet.”

I tuck the gun back in its special holster. Grab my skateboard. Roll down the rest of the hill.

Around a corner, Ray waits for me on his motorcycle, engine running. I ditch my board and jump on.

“Hold tight,” says Ray. I give his body a big hug and we zoom off.

Looking back, I see my Tony Hawk skateboard lying in the street. Wish I didn't have to leave it. I really liked that one.

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Ray takes away my clothes and my gun and leaves again. He comes back to the RV the next night, holding a duffle bag. He unzips the bag and let's me see inside. It's filled with money. The bills are all dirty and used up, but it's still money.

Ray zips the bag up then puts it on the top cabinet with the guns. Then he gets behind the wheel, and we pull out of camp.

"Where we going?"

"North," says Ray. "It's no good on the border anymore."

I sit in the seat next to him. Look out at the dark desert. "How come?"

"Before, the bad guys never saw you coming. Never guessed a kid would take a shot at them. But now you've earned a reputation. Understand?"

I want to say yes. But I don't get it. I look down at the RV's floor. My face feels hot, like it did when the camp girl called me a loser.

Ray keeps his eyes on the road. "You've been doing good work, kid. But everyone knows about you now. And that's bad. Real bad. So its time to leave."

"Where will we go?"

"Anywhere we want," says Ray. "It's a big country. Plenty of people who need shooting."

I don't have nothing to say about that, so I keep quiet. Pretend to look out the windshield.

Ray shifts in his seat. Pulls a Pepperidge Farm bag out of his pocket. Hands it over.

"Here," he says. "Have a cookie."

*Mike MacLean's first Thuglit story, "McHenry's Gift," went on to appear in The Best American Mystery Stories and Thuglit: Hardcore Hardboiled. From there, it gained the attention of independent film legend Roger Corman. Now, Mike writes screenplays for Mr. Corman's company New Horizons Pictures. Needless to say, Mike owes the Thuglit crew a few dozen beers.*

*A teacher by day, Mike lives in Tempe Arizona with his lovely wife, beautiful daughter, and two lazy dogs. His other stories have been featured in The Deadly Bride and 21 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Crimespree, Thrilling Detective, and Plots with Guns*