

We Are All Bullets

By S. Craig Renfroe, Jr.

On the day after the kids in the black trench coats shot up their school out West, Mr. Godfrey wears his black London Fog overcoat to his high school class, keeping it on while he teaches. He knows his time is up, his days numbered, his check almost cashed (he talks this way now, despite the fact he teaches English). His pedagogy has dissolved into in-class movies and vocabulary tests, so he at least has a measure of his lack of effort. His peer reviews are dismal, the parents call the school demanding to see their tax dollars in action - the parents always talk this way, but it isn't their fault; TV teaches them to talk this way - but the kids like him. And Mr. Godfrey likes the kids. They are better than the amoeba he and his wife were sent to Micronesia to study seven years earlier, fresh bio-chem majors, married, and eager - he left the islands alone, tan, and certain there were easier ways to not make a living. The part he loves most about his job are the girls, young and optimistic, even the jaded ones are cynically optimistic, having an earnest faith that bad things will happen. The girl he loves the most is Nona. That's what she calls herself, though Mr. Godfrey has his doubts.

Nona is a foreign exchange student from a former East Block country, Lithuania, he thinks. She is tall, incredibly tall, a foot or more over most of the girls, 6'3" or 6'4", taller than Mr. Godfrey himself. In her homeland she was a model, (oh yes, they have models there) having appeared on billboards and print ads. To class, Nona wears Levis and a Nike pullover and she keeps a pack of Marlboros on her desk at all times, often slipping a cigarette out to roll it between her long fingers, a movement Mr. Godfrey never misses. Nona was a child in the Square when the tanks, the Soviet tanks, came, when one of the tanks rolled over a man, his body disappearing under the machine as if he'd never been there at all. She says she no longer cries about it.

The bullet waits for its destiny, its telos, its *raison d'etre*, its hot ticket, its plan to get down (this is the way Mr. Godfrey puts it). Designed as it is to be shot, to have that hammer trigger that blasting cap to hurtle the little projectile so fast, so very fast, that burning moment of purpose, that time it could live, and then the end, to fly and then to land, to puncture and to embed in something, anything, that's what it wants; it's what we all want.

We love the gun in America. We like to make the bullet happy.

On the day Mr. Godfrey wears his overcoat, he doesn't have a film to show in class, so he figures they can discuss guns. He teaches in the Great Deep South here at Sumerville High, where they all hold the Bible and the gun close, evangelizing and shooting, a sort of stationary crusade. Mr. Godfrey figures he'll rile them up, tell them they should have all their guns taken away, all the guns put in a rocket and blown into space. On the board, he writes, "Guns: what are they good for?"

The class hems and haws as usual, angry at not having a movie to watch or sleep through. Finally, after Mr. Godfrey calls on a few of the ones he knows will talk, he gets

the typical answers. Guns don't kill people, people kill guns (or something like that). Guns can be used as tools. One of the students recounts a daring tale where he wounds a fourteen point buck with his 30.06 rifle and after stalking the hurt animal, he shoots it to death with his .457 Magnum. What else? Protection, a few students venture. Protection from what, Mr. Godfrey wants to know. Burglars, car-jacking, race riots, stalkers, rape, the nightly news. How many of them own guns, he asks. Over half raise their hands. He asks them if they have any other experience with guns besides hunting and the NRA.

From his continual slouch, his laid-back posturing, Mike (of course, his name would be Mike) draws himself up, pushes the backwards baseball cap away from his forehead, little bristles of his blonde buzz-cut springing up, and as he speaks, his oversized Adam's apple vibrates, "I shoot people."

"Really?" Mr. Godfrey walks behind his desk.

"To relax," Mike says.

"You relaxed now?"

"I play paintball."

"Paintball?"

"You got these air guns that shoot paintballs, and you splatter people with them."

No one seems to know what to say to this, so Mike continues, "I went to the Nationals in D.C."

"There are Nationals?"

"Yeah, these guys had Angels - total preppie-boy high-tech guns with LCDs that can download firing-sequences off the Internet, completely automatic, backpacks with 3000 rounds. They go up against this team with ten-round pump, single-fire pistols. David and Goliath. Those bastards with the pistols took out the Angels, swear to God. And they made it look easy."

Firing-sequences? Mr. Godfrey wonders what the hell a firing sequence is but has no doubt it's on the Internet. "That's good."

Mike takes off his hat. "I'm all about respect, man. And, man, I respect that."

"Anyone else have any gun experiences?" Mr. Godfrey asks.

Nona raises her hand, an unlit cigarette in it.

"Yes, Nona?"

"Roulette."

"What?"

"Russian."

"You've got to be kidding."

"No, not kid."

She tells a story. Her boyfriend back in Lithuania belongs to the Russian mafia - but then so does her basketball coach and her uncle and two of her neighbors - so she has occasion to see the wilder side of Vilnius night-life. One of the fave activities of the mafia is Russian roulette; as cliché as it may seem, mobsters are not above clichés. Nona laughs though, at what people in America think of Russian roulette: that people sit around a table and pass the gun around one after the other like a game of musical chairs - Mr. Godfrey says hot potato is a better analogy. Nona says the real game is played very differently. For starters, only one person has a go with the gun. That person, the player, has high stakes. Often the player is in terrible debt to the mafia and puts up his debt to be forgiven if he wins and for the creditors to split his worldly possessions if he losses. But

sometimes brave or equally desperate souls will put up so much money, a million say, which are matched by a group of bettors, five of them say, each putting up two hundred thousand a piece. If the player wins, he gets the bettor's million, double his money, and if he losses, the bettors split his million five ways, doubling their money. Nona has been to five games but only stayed through to the end of one. He won. The last one she had watched, her boyfriend had to take her home and go out on a job. Later, she heard that the player lost, but he had cleverly cheated the mafia, giving away all his possessions beforehand and only left them worthless documents. It took the mafia a month to collect their due.

When Nona finishes, the class sits in silence, not their usual bored silence but an awed quiet, full of excitement. Mr. Godfrey, at a loss to know what to do with a class rapt with attention, is saved by the proverbial bell (he makes this observation as the class makes their reluctant exit).

Dr. Joyner sits stiff in her hard wooden chair; she runs the school more like a warden than a principle - her father was a warden, killed in a prison riot, complications from being shot with a zip gun, made from a length of tiny pipe, a rubber band, a tack, and a stolen bullet. "We've had complaints," she says, reminding him of the director of the amoeba project.

"About me?"

"Yes. Some of the parents have called because they are concerned that you are paying undue attention to the female students."

He thinks how hackneyed, cockeyed, euphemistic "undue attention" sounds.

"One girl in particular."

Here it comes, he thinks.

"A Robin Tooley."

"What? I don't even find Robin attractive."

Dr. Joyner, every bit, part and parcel, the whole kit and caboodle a Dr., raises herself even more in her hardback chair. "We do not find any of our students attractive."

That's the royal "we," he thinks.

"Considering your past performance, your contract will not be renewed, and if there are any more complaints, you will not finish out this term."

"Okay."

A week passes and the end grows near.

After class, Nona waits for all the other students to push and scrape out. She leisurely walks up to Mr. Godfrey's desk, Marlboro in hand.

"You want me, no?" she says.

"You would say it, 'Do you want me,' or 'you want me, right?'"

"You not answer a question."

"The,' not 'a'." (It could go on like this). "Yes, Nona, I want you."

She puts the cigarette in her mouth and lights it. "Jesus." She has a cute way of cursing. "You not say that."

"What is it I could do to get you, Nona?"

"Play."

"I like to play."

“Russian roulette.” She smiles, like all the cartoon characters he was afraid of as a child. “You win, I yours.”

“And if I lose what do you get?”

“All your money.”

“You’d be the loser in both cases.”

“It enough. Enough to stay here, no?”

He isn’t sure how he got there, but he is standing in the sporting goods department of the local Wal-Mart, standing, in fact, right in front of a glass case with six or seven gleaming, cold pistols (all the pistols he ever read about, in all the noir novels, were always cold to the touch). These are also amazingly cheap.

“Can I help you?” A middle-aged man wearing his blue smock as if it were a pair of overalls takes his place opposite Mr. Godfrey, the glass case between them.

“I want to buy a handgun.”

“Not in Wal-Mart you don’t.” He scratches his chin. “Except in Texas.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, they really sell them in Texas.” He sounds wistful.

Mr. Godfrey looks down at the pistols under glass.

“Pellet guns. Look real as hell, don’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“Not long ago, black kid got shot to death by the cops cause they thought the one he had was real.”

“Where can I get a real one?”

“Blackmon’s Pawn is a good place.”

Blackmon’s Pawn promises “Free Credit” and “Over Twenty Kinds of Live Bait” and, of course, “Guns.” The first thing he sees as he enters is a basket of overripe peaches, their color sickly, the air pungent with their smell. How could he be here? What had lead a card-carrying ACLU member to buy a handgun from a hick pawn shop? True, he only joined the ACLU to get in the pants, jump the bones, pop the cherry of a lush hippie-chick. Still, he believed, at the time and continues to believe even now, in the abolishment of the handgun, the repeal of the 2nd Amendment or at least reinterpretation of that “Right,” and the disbandment of the NRA. Yet, he’s standing in Blackmon’s Pawn in front of several hundred guns - the type of guns that are used to puncture holes in paper targets, used to finish off wounded deer, used for the protection of his students.

He looks from one gun to another, reading all the letters and numbers though they mean nothing to him. What kind of gun does he need? A revolver, he realizes; not as sporting if you play Russian roulette with an automatic. He examines the thirty or so revolvers while he waits to be approached, but the more revolvers he looks at the more apparent it becomes that he isn’t going to be waited on. Various people behind the counter move papers and boxes to and fro but none of them even glance at him.

Pretending not to be ignored, he makes his way down the case as if he were absorbed in their selection. In the corner, with his back to the wall, a grey-bearded man slumps in an office chair, his feet up on some Smith & Wesson packing crates, his eyes slits under a wide white straw hat; he seems more a part of the decor than a person.

“Excuse me,” Mr. Godfrey says.

His slitted eyes slowly cut toward Mr. Godfrey, but the man makes no other movement.

“Excuse me, sir. Excuse me.”

“Yeah.”

“I was wondering how you buy a gun.”

“Got a permit?” The last word is barely audible, as if he doesn’t have the strength to carry the sound any farther.

“No.” He can see the man’s eyes drift away from him. He waits for the man to respond in an awkward silence; at least, it’s awkward for Mr. Godfrey. “Um, where do I get a permit?”

“Sheriff’s office down at the…” the man fades out.

“Is there a waiting period?”

Clearly at the end of his patience, the man lets out a long sigh that shakes his grey beard. “Get a permit, and I’ll get you as many guns as you want.”

“Can we do it in a couple of days?” Mr. Godfrey asks Nona as she stretches over his desk.

“Why?”

“I don’t have a gun.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Not land of guns?”

“Well, maybe, but not for me.”

“Mike.” Mr. Godfrey stops him as he’s about to dodge his way through the hall to his next class.

“Yeah.”

“How much does it hurt to get hit with one of those paintballs?”

“Like the devil.”

“Like the devil?”

“Yeah, hurts like shit - excuse my language.”

“What about getting hit in the head at close range?”

“We wear helmets. You’d have to be an idiot not to. And there are distances rules. About thirty feet. Usually, if a player gets closer than that and has the drop, the opponent will surrender. Once I was outnumbered by these four--”

“Fascinating. Where do you get these things?”

“What?”

“A paintball gun.”

“Do you want a semi, or an auto, or a pump? Then you got to look at quality. You get what you pay for, man. Then you need your helmet, padded clothing for an old guy like you, air cartridges, tanks to hold extra rounds, a squeegee to clean the gun, paintballs, of course.”

“Okay, that’s all I need.”

Mr. Godfrey has never been to the County Sheriff Station, and the gates with barbed wire and the high walls around the jail make him nervous. He keeps thinking they'll see his thoughts, see his lustfully malicious intentions carved into his throbbing temples, so plainly about to break the laws of God and man that they'll save time by throwing him in jail straight away. But the deputy just hands him a form and politely asks him to fill it out. Mr. Godfrey runs through it, indicating "target shooting" as the purpose of purchase instead of the unlisted "attempted suicide for sex." He pauses at the part of the form where he has to undersign that he "is not an unlawful user of nor addicted to Marijuana or any other depressant, stimulant, or Narcotic Drug including alcohol," and wonders if there will be a drug test. After reading over the Gun Ownership Information sheet which sternly states, "We urge that you receive the proper training as soon as possible," he takes the application up to the deputy who asks for a five dollar processing fee and promises she'll have his permit tomorrow morning. Mr. Godfrey can wait.

That day, the day, Mr. Godfrey teaches with abandon, he teaches like there is no tomorrow, he teaches as if he believes everything he says. And the class still doesn't listen. They still talk amongst themselves about their malls and clothes, their teams and lays, their cars and cell phones, their day-trading. Written words, put down by the living or dead, have no impact on their lives. He sees them like the cold gleaming pistols, each with its own distinct character but all ending in death. He carries the metaphor into his lecture. He's telling them all that they are guns. He's telling them all that they are bullets. Their lives are propelled faster and faster to explode in a pointless end. You'll study amoebas for years only to learn your wife loves the amoeba more than you. You'll live with your parents and see them disappear. You'll watch infomercials to feel less alone. Some of them stop talking. Some of them are laughing. He doesn't care. He writes the words on the board: You are all bullets.

The grey-bearded man hasn't moved, his legs still propped up on the Smith & Wesson crates. There are fewer people moving around. A slow Thursday. The peaches still sit by the door, their smell reeking.

Mr. Godfrey goes back to the corner and lays his permit on the glass counter. "Hey."

"Yeah," the man says.

"Remember me? I was in here before. I wanted a gun."

The man looks away.

"I was looking for a revolver. Cheap but reliable."

His feet come off the boxes. The man stands up to an astonishing height, so much so Mr. Godfrey moves back to allow him room despite the case between them. He throws open the cabinet door and reaches in. The gun he pulls out is stubby, a dull metallic color. "Here."

It does feel cool to the touch; all the noir detective novels are right. The handle - is that the right term, he wonders - fits snug in his palm. Could he shoot himself with this gun? He resists the urge to put it to his head.

He thinks about comparing the feel of another gun, but the man is filling out some paperwork already, copying something off the permit. “How do you go about getting bullets?”

“You buy them.” He slaps his pen down, walks over to a shelf, and comes back with a small box.

They are in a Comfort Inn room as the light dies outside. Nona sits on the bed, wearing a red halter top with a green bear monogrammed between her breasts. Mr. Godfrey feels better believing she’s nervous as she kicks her crossed leg up and down, slowly exposing more thigh as her skirt retreats. He watches the swing of her dark-haired ponytail in rhythm with her leg. Would he kill himself for her? Would he kill himself for his wife? Or the lab assistant that helped them with the amoeba? He doesn’t think so, on all accounts. But it’s all ending.

Nona gets up, pulling down her black skirt. She comes over to sit across from him at the imitation wood table. Between them sit an envelope containing the \$11,584 he took out of the bank, his car keys, the stubby gun, and the little box. She roughly picks up the pistol, switching it from one hand to the other. Quicker than he likes, she flicks her wrist and the chamber flips out. She spins it around and around. As he listens to the spinning, he wonders how many guns she’s held before, her beautiful fingers - model fingers - caressing the handle (is that the right word?). She opens the box and dumps out the bullets. They hit the table and somersault, turn, and bounce in joy. Their time is now.

“You know God?” she says.

“Not personally.”

“No God.”

“I don’t know him.”

“No, there are no God. No God in the Square. No God at the table. No God.”

“Right now, I hope not.”

Nona puts a bullet in the chamber, spins it, and snaps it shut. She places the gun gently before him.

Cutting a melodramatic figure, he grabs the pistol and brings it to rest on his temple. It’s cold. Breathe, he thinks, just breathe and keep on breathing. What is he doing? He closes his eyes, though he can still feel Nona there, her teddy bear covered breasts; he imagines them bare. In the dark of his mind, he can hear a rhyme he used to chant out on the playground: “On top of Old Smokey, all covered with blood, I shot my poor teacher with a .44 slug.” He giggles. Why can’t he be serious? Why can’t he be real even in the most real moments? His mind wanders to Chekhov. Chekhov says if you have a gun on stage in the first act, by the final act it has to be fired. Our lives are bullets, searching for purpose at frightening speed but finding only a final resting place.

He pulls the trigger.

Mr. Godfrey wakes up in the hospital, surfing the tides of pleasant drug-induced euphoria. He can feel it waning, just slightly, and must have come to consciousness to insist on another dosing. Nona is the first thing he sees out of his left eye - is his right eye gone? She rises from a flat back chair and towers over him. Clearly, he hadn’t died, but he had passed away, in a way. He passed out of the scope of his life; he’d hurtled,

recklessly, and now he'd landed. The bullet, his bullet, should have ended him, should have brought him to his destination, just as it found its own. How are his stocks doing? His Roth IRA? He realizes he has never bought a vanity license plate, a pink flamingo, or a Chia Pet. He is completely surprised he has to keep on living. He thinks about the amoeba dividing itself, creating itself anew. Not just changing itself, but actually forming a new entity, a new life. The bullet's destiny had been fulfilled, but his hadn't. He had been cleaved from his old self, a new being.

"I save you," Nona says. With an unsmoked cigarette, she pokes him in his white-sheet-covered chest. "You marry me. I stay."

They were both victims of the bullet. She bends over and lightly kisses him on his cheek. He tries to say, "Let's call it a draw."

S. Craig Renfroe, Jr is the author of the short story collection YOU SHOULD GET THAT LOOKED AT (Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2004). He was a finalist for the Novello Literary Award and the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Currently, he teaches writing at Queens University of Charlotte. Also, his work has appeared or will appear in McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Cemetery Dance, Monkeybicycle, The Pedestal Magazine, The MacGuffin, The Potomac, and others.