

Circles

THERE'S NOTHING ON EARTH so dispassionate as a gun.

That's because a gun is just a tool like any other. What matters is how it's used, how it's wielded. The thing itself, when left alone, has very little power.

Like the lens of a camera, a gun has no judgment, no means with which to make a decision, no point of view of its own.

It just is.

It doesn't do anything.

And yet, it feels like it should.

I hold the gun in my hand, feel the weight of it, the coldness. And something else. A vague sense of anticipation. But this is my emotion, not the gun's.

The gun is empty, save for the bullets.

I fill in the rest.

I sometimes forget that my brother is into guns until I stumble on one in the back shed or the garage. He hides them in random places—someplace out of reach where only he usually goes. He isn't cautious about it—it's just him and Sara out here in the country, no kids. So his collection dots his property like spiders might congregate behind forgotten things, just waiting to be of use.

Just waiting to jump out and scare you.

I set the pistol back on the shelf and return to the task at hand.

The lawnmower needs me again. It always needs me. But I'm not really doing this for it.

I'm doing it for the beer.

There are certain activities a man does that require a cold cerveza nearby.

Grilling a dead animal over open flames.

Greased up and under the hood of some muscle car.

And fixing a shitty lawnmower. Yet again.

I haven't cut the grass all summer. I've tried. The blade needs changing is all or sharpening, one of the two. It's not a difficult job, I always tell myself. And so I head out back, pull the beast from the old yellow shed, flip the whole damned thing over, and get right up under the mower deck. I pry the matted swaths of tawny-green grass, thick like shag carpet, from every nook and cranny, trying to find the nut I need, trying to simply clean things up. But then my allergies ignite, and I reach for that cold one, and I find myself distracted again, smoking a cigarette and staring out into nothing.

Thinking.

It's usually about that time that Alex finally shows up, whistling a tune and walking across the back acreage, bleached corn husks crunching like bones beneath his feet. He grins that boyish grin of his.

"You're late," I yell to him. He shrugs, as he always does, though his faded blue jeans, blood-red t-shirt, and worn baseball cap speak more to his casual nature than any shrugging could.

"Sorry, brother," he replies as he reaches the edge of the field. "I got held up."

"I know," I say. "Your wife called."

I notice now that Alex is already eying the bottle in my hand.

"Got one of those for me?" he asks.

It's my turn to shrug.

"Maybe. But ya gotta earn it."

Alex looks down at the mower now, sprawled there pitifully in the grass behind the shed, all up-skirt. He scowls back at me.

"At least let me catch up."

I grin and pull a beer from near a stack of old tires. It's my on-deck; I was gonna crack it in no time, but I'm a nice guy. Besides, there's plenty more in the mini-fridge.

I toss the beer to Alex. He pops the top and takes a long, refreshing swig.

"That's money," he says, wiping his lips with the back of his wrist. He appraises the situation. "So, what's on the docket today?"

I look at him then for the first time—really look at him. I hesitate too long, though, an actor who's forgotten his lines, and it confuses him. So I kick the lawnmower. There's no natural feeling in it; I do it because it's what I do next to keep the scene chugging along.

"The usual," I say and take another drag. I stare at Alex, afraid of what comes next. I try to hide the apprehension in my eyes as I always do. It's impossible to tell if it works.

His smile fades from his face like a setting sun, perplexed by my seriousness. Silence pushes its way in between us, the type of silence that only arrives between family members when shit's about to hit the fan.

Alex shifts his weight and clears his throat. "Okay..."

I plaster on a smile, break the tension in an instant with a slap to his shoulder. "But first, I gotta show you something."

I turn and walk away, around to the front of the shed, gesturing for Alex to enter before me. He does, and I go in after.

"So, what's up?" he asks.

Without answering, I take a final drag from the cigarette I forgot I was smoking, flick it out the entryway, and close the shed doors on us, inviting in the darkness.

When I open the doors again, we're no longer outside. The lawn, the lawnmower, the sky above, and the sound of birds have all been left behind. And I've opened not shed doors, but the heavy double doors to a church, and they are somehow glass instead of wood, and I can see right through them. No longer in the sun, we are bathed in the candle-orange glow of a sanctuary.

Just like that, the scene has changed.

Alex shakes his head, standing there stunned, though I am already entering the narthex.

"Sweet Jesus," he whispers.

I'm at the back of the narthex already, looking up at a stained glass window: A colorful depiction of Jesus the Shepard tending his flock, a lamb at his feet.

Sweet Jesus indeed.

The sunlight kaleidoscopes across my shirt. Alex is standing by me now.

"How did we get here?" he asks, looking around. "And where the hell is here?"

I smile, wistful.

"We've been here before."

"When?"

"Yesterday. Last week. A month before that..."

I let my voice trail off, but Alex has already moved on. He's wandering towards

the center aisle and into the sanctuary proper, where the whole circular space opens up with its high ceiling. I turn and watch him. He looks around like a child waking from a dream. The beautifully ornate organ, its great pipes reaching toward the heavens, sits quietly to the right, the sacristy and sound booth balcony to the left. Golden butterflies hang from the ceiling on wires, shimmering in the dim glow of candlelight and a skylight far overhead.

And then there's the woman in black. Alex has yet to spot her, though, sitting in the front row, has yet to hear her barely whispered prayers, her lips quivering.

I begin to follow him slowly, my eyes on the empty wooden cross hanging behind the pulpit. I question the existence of anything higher, as I always do in these moments before Alex sees her, bracing myself for when the scars are punctured again, pierced like a nail to my wrist.

"Who's she?" Alex says simply, nodding his head towards the woman as he kneels in front of her. He's studying her face, there behind a sheer black veil. Her eyes are closed, and tears mar her makeup, painting her cheeks in runny black rivulets. She clutches a crucifix in her lap.

"You really don't remember anything, do you?" I marvel. He usually figures it out on his own.

"Why's she here?"

I take a deep breath.

"It's a funeral," I say, my voice already beginning to shake. "For her husband. She can't bring herself to leave yet."

Alex stands and walks towards me, that boyish smile playing at his lips.

"Okay, smart ass, then where's the coffin?"

My heart plummets even more. I hate this part.

"Oh, it's there," I explain, pointing towards the pulpit. "By the flowers. I'm not

surprised you can't see it, though. The last time you were truly here, you were inside it."

He whips his head back to me, his eyes wide.

"What did you say?"

I want to grab him and shake him like the wind shakes the dead leaves from a tree. I want to scream in his face. But I keep my cool, resigned to sadness rather than anger, exasperation rather than outrage.

"You're so clueless this time around," I say, shaking my head. "You're fading. Don't you remember anything? Don't you remember her?"

I point at the woman in black. Alex returns to her and kneels again, studying her face, searching for a clue.

All at once, like a dam breaking, realization floods over him.

"Sara?" he whispers, still not believing his own recognition. "Sara, honey?"

He's piecing it together now, what it all means. I watch it unfold like a map in front of me. He rises slowly and turns back towards the pulpit. He sees the coffin now; I can tell by how his shoulders shudder as the breath escapes him.

He turns on me then. "No way, man. No way. This is stupid." He charges towards me, determined to pass. "Let's go; you're freaking me the fuck out."

But I place a firm hand on his chest to keep him from going any further. He looks at me like I've just plunged a knife into his back, an ultimate betrayal.

"Come the fuck on, man!"

"Every time I remember what it was like to lose you," I say, my voice low, my words measured. "I try to figure out some way to stop myself from reliving it, to say goodbye once and for all." And I look my brother dead in the eyes.

"But I can't. I'm sorry."

Alex looks back at me on the verge of tears and laughs without meaning to—the nervous laughter of the crazed.

"You're so full of shit," he insists. But he's really only trying to assure himself.

"I wish I were," I say with sincerity, for I mean it more than any other words I've ever spoken. "But I'm telling you, Alejandro, you're gone." I put my forehead to his head as he looks down, overwhelmed.

"You're gone."

He stumbles away from me like a drunk, woozy after too many shots. He clutches his head, looks back towards the coffin, and cries out—an unearthly animal wail. I speak to ignore him, to fill the space inside my mind and in the room, pacing away from Alex as I do.

"You creep up on me whenever I'm alone. At work. At the store. When I'm out back trying to fix that stupid fucking lawnmower of yours for the eight-hundredth time. It doesn't matter what I'm doing. Wherever I go, there you are. Invading my head. And like water circling a drain, I sink back into this memory... right back to this terrible day."

I reach the center of the sanctuary, Alex still behind me, and I look down. There, on the chair to my left, sits a pistol—the pistol from the shed.

There's not once been a gun in this scene. Something, somehow, has broken the cycle.

But what does it mean?

I turn back to Alex and away from the intruding firearm. There's silence between the three of us now, heavy as new-fallen snow and just as cold. Alex's eyes look lost in some cascade of emptiness, glassy and reflective in the candlelight. The gun seems heavy and cold. Sara has vanished.

Finally, Alex looks at me.

"How did I die?" he asks.

I swallow hard.

"You were held up," I say. "Shot in a robbery."

"My God," he groans, reaching for his chest, and I think for a moment he must feel it, that phantom pain of the bullet passing through his ribcage again. He staggers, whirling.

"My God, why? This can't be... I just... fuck!"

And I'm there with him now, catching him as he collapses into my arms, sobbing into my chest. I hold him as my own tears come.

"What do I do, Miguel?" he asks, his voice muffled, buried in my shirt. "Tell me what to do."

"We'll figure something out," I lie. "Maybe we can—"

And then it hits me.

Try something new...

He looks up at me then, expectantly, like only a little brother can. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes red. He sniffs snot away and wipes his nose with the back of his wrist. He looks so small. I forgot how young he really was when his light went out. My words have comforted him some, though, and for that, I'm grateful.

I turn from him gently, making sure he can stand on his own, and walk back towards the weapon—the tool. The one instrument I may be able to use to finally rid myself of this revolving, revolting, repeating nightmare of a memory.

After all, it's what took him away in the first place.

I pick up the pistol and turn to face Alex. He has also shifted, staring at the coffin again, letting it all settle in on him like soil into the grave. His breathing is slow and calm.

After a moment, he looks back at me. It takes him only a blink to see the gun in my hand. His face flushes with fear and confusion, an expression that rips through my senses like the coldest winter wind imaginable. I'm hollowed out by it and by the fact that I caused it, even if none of this is real at all.

"What are you doing?" he breathes. I want to run.

But I remain resolute. I lift the pistol.

"Trying something new."

THE GUNSHOT STILL RINGS in my ears as I swing open the wooden shed doors. There's no pistol in my hand, no sign of Alex.

I'm back in the yard again, alone.

I reach for the mini-fridge near my right, grab another cold one, and exit the shed. The day is as bright and as calm as I had left it.

And the lawnmower needs me again. It always needs me. But I'm not really doing this for it.

I sip my beer and light another smoke. I inhale deeply, closing my eyes, a peaceful horizon there in my mind like a portrait.

I think I did it.

I open my eyes again, and it's then I see Alex. He's whistling a tune and walking across the back acreage, bleached corn husks crunching like bones beneath his feet. He grins that boyish grin of his—as if I hadn't just shot him in the chest with his own pistol.

As if nothing's happened.

And for him, nothing had.

In reality, Alex is gone. He's beyond all this.

But I am not. And so the circle begins again.

"You're late," I yell to him, obligatory, my voice fit to crack under the weight of the tears I'm choking down. He shrugs, as he always does, though his faded blue jeans, blood-red t-shirt, and worn baseball cap speak more to his casual nature than any shrugging could.

"Sorry, brother," he replies as he reaches the edge of the field.

"I got held up."

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