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Home is Where the Guns Are

Molly McKim

Crack! I wake up startled, a sound ringing in my ears. I sit up and look about my room. What did I just hear? My heart races while I stand and walk into the hallway. Dad's door is open, the room empty. I check the time and roll my eyes, relieved but annoyed. *It's 5 a.m.* He's out hunting behind the house. I look at my phone and squint at the notification from him saying to come outside and try to scare deer into his path to shoot. I type back, "No, I do not feel like leaving the warm house."

I walk back to bed, cover myself back up in blankets and try to fall back asleep, hoping he shot something so he would stop waking me up so early. Another notification pings on my phone: "Never mind, get the hot chocolate ready... We got one," I guess he didn't need my help. Around my house and others in my hometown, this routine of hoping for a kill comes around when rifle hunting season starts at the end of October. I live in a small, mainly conservative town named New Oxford. Most likely anyone you talk to hunts or knows someone who hunts. It's one of those small rural towns outside of Gettysburg where most families leave their door unlocked, the local private club is the center for all town gossip and people know you because you are being the kid of someone. I got that one a lot working at that only private club in the area. "Hey, you're McKim's kid," and "Aren't you Shrader's granddaughter?" But the fall season tends to bring out the best in the little town of mine. Every year in the New Oxford square, we celebrate fall through a fall market, vendors sell their homemade items, the coffee shop on the corner sells their famous pumpkin spice, and kids yet again get their faces painted. Mom and Pop restaurants start selling organic pumpkin-themed food. Proprietors of local orchards build stands and sell their apples and produce. However, the fall season is also the time when my dad tries yet again, to convince me to practice shooting one of the various guns in his possession.

It started at 9 years old. I stand at the glass door to the back porch; one of my hands press against the door while the other clutches my blanket. Cold radiates in from the other side of the door and goosebumps flood my skin. I hear the gentle hum of the heating stove. I look out and my cat brushes against my leg, greeting me. The porch light glows in the morning fog. Multiple guns lay across the green table, bullets laid neatly in their respective boxes, and humongous gloves are ready for use. The frigid 37° wind blows into the house as I begin my ascent to meet my brother and father outside, my bare feet hitting the cold polished wood. I watch him as he puts on the gloves and picks up a gun and starts talking, supposedly about how it works. He flips his hand down and up quickly and a bullet flies out from the bottom. Where did that come from? What did that do? He puts the gun into my gloved petite hands, and I struggle to hold it steady as it almost falls out of my hands. I look up at him, scared I would disappoint him if I were to not accomplish his goal. I look at the gun. This gun, something half the size of myself, has more of a purpose than to look pretty or to sit alongside a bed or in a closet. People use these to kill things. Kill squirrels. Kill deer. Kill *people*. He tells me to point it at the artificial deer target further in the yard. The gun is moved to sit on my shoulder as I locate my target. But the deer down in the yard is real, why does it need to die?

The hunting supplies are housed in the basement, hidden away from attracting attention. Walking down the spiral staircase tiled floors, false wood walls, the coal-burning stove, the pool table and dartboard, the minibar with respective glasses and drinks, and two separate rooms begin to come into focus. My drawing-room, and my dad's room utility room, in the secluded

part of the basement. I step into my favorite room in the house and breathe in the stale scent of pencils, hands at my hips as I sigh at the mess that will never get cleaned up. My desk is covered in colored pencils, brushes in cleaning cups, half-size erasers, and shuffled around drawing and paintings still wet. Further into his room, the buzz of the dehumidifier familiarities me. His desk is filled to the brim with hooks, flies, artificial bait, screwdrivers, and several tackle boxes. To the left, his gun closet. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 guns line up in a row with no safety lock.

On the rare occasion I brought friends to my house, one of the only joys is showing them my dad's mysterious room. Thundering down the staircase, we arrive at the only hangout spot in the house. Past the bar, the TV, the couch, the cat, the game boards littering the floor, and past my drawing-room; we arrive in his room. I say, "Now, I'm not usually allowed in here, but..." as I push open the swinging saloon doors to his room.

There it is, in all of its glory. Friends gasp and question its purpose. "He hunts," I state. To the right, a closet of harmless entities. Camouflage and bright bulky orange hats, sweatshirts pants, bulky blankets folded in boxes. Past and future Christmas décor, waiting a month to brighten up the house. Bins of items unknown even now. But no one asks to see that.

Growing up, even before my parents got divorced, my dad tended to be more active in teaching my brother and I "important life lessons." The fundamentals of driving a go-cart at a "they're too young to drive those things" age. How to change the oil in a car. How to play different sports, my brother football and baseball, myself, baseball, softball, soccer, field hockey, cheerleading, track and field, and basketball. Making friends in sports proved difficult because all of the other players were from the local public school. Before coming to public school in seventh grade, I went to a Catholic school named Immaculate Conception. Before I left, I had nine other classmates, and we had a close-knit relationship until puberty hit in sixth grade when everyone started acting according to their hormones. One of my friends always talked about how he loved hunting and spending time with his dad. After, he joked about the possibility of bringing his gun to school. My other classmates and I questioned him, why? There are no deer at school. Coming to a public school, there was no lack of the threat of violence. I couldn't begin to count the number of bomb and shooting threats the school received my seventh-grade year. Although, even as a twelve-year-old, it did not seem unusual when the teachers said this was the year with the most threats they've seen in a while.

The conversations today about anti-gun or pro-gun control make me uncomfortable. All throughout high school I couldn't escape looking down the end of that barrel; in economics class, English class, journalism class, and even technology classes, the impact of guns were the topic of discussion for at least one day. When I decided to pursue a career in education, one of my first thoughts was, "How am I going to protect my future students from the potential threats?" I thought about the harmless drills, students huddled in a corner on their phones, the fake shooter roaming the halls. But is that the circumstance everywhere? Coming home and seeing that gun case glare down at me, I cannot come to a conclusive judgement. I can't tell if I am brainwashed by either side of the spectrum. So now, when the guns come out, I stay in.