

The Shooter

Mary Beck

Half way to Dallas driving in a borrowed car, something, I can't say what exactly, just something, told me to turn around and go home to the small house on the highway just north of Terrell, Texas. Nineteen years old and a cashier at Safeway I was staying with my parents to save money. I didn't get to Dallas that night.

The house was empty when I got home so I sat in the kitchen tired, bored, sipping on coffee and a menthol cigarette at a pink kitchen table held up by black metal legs. The kitchen was still new to me since it wasn't long since my parent's latest move. I liked the look of the dark-green blown glass vase set with shells that was a favorite of my mother's. Scattered around were my step-dad's metal and wood projects in various stages of perfection: the carved gunstock, leather straps for something or other, and a clock in the midst of repair. I was soaking in the peaceful, quiet, kind of familiar and kind of different atmosphere and taking in how the cabinets were too shallow for plates and the stove wasn't. Then the back door banged open so hard it slammed against the wall and a neighbor, someone I had met, fifty-something-year-old Tom stood there all bloodied and flushed.

"Mary, call the police and an ambulance," said Tom, "and get me a cigarette, someone just tried to kill me."

Tom was a Camel's man.

"You'll have to smoke menthol," I said.

There was no "911" in those days, just a frantic call from me to the operator, dial O, and my tumbled directions for her to give to the ambulance and Sheriff.

"Go to the white house past the white house past the pink house, past the red house next to the cemetery on the north side of town," I said, or something like that. It was enough I guess and since I didn't know the address it was all I had. Tom was pacing and dripping blood all over the place. He had a bullet bulging out of the side of his neck and his skin between his thumb and forefinger was ragged and torn. He said he thought he had been shot in the chest. I told him to lie down on the old couch the dogs slept on and tore the front of his T-shirt open. I didn't see any bullet holes so I told him he was okay. At that time I didn't know that a bullet through a nipple didn't really show up.

"What happened?" I asked, as if nothing did.

"I walked into my house carrying some groceries and someone came out of my bedroom and shot me."

I pictured old Tom with two paper grocery sacks and a surprised look. Tom said he didn't know the shooter. He said he pulled out his own gun and tried to shoot back but his gun misfired so he ran down to our house. He had to climb a couple of fences at the pig lady's house. He said he thought the man followed him 'cuz he heard him going over the fences behind him but he didn't stop to look. The baying of the hounds behind our place and the neighing of horses made me think he was right about being followed.

Sirens blared and the Sheriff Modine Sanders and an ambulance pulled up outside. I had convinced Tom that he didn't get shot in the chest and that the groceries probably stopped the bullet, that he just felt an impact. But, when the paramedics pickup him up the rest of his T-shirt fell off and there was a hole in his back.

Modine got a statement from Tom and then left me there, just north of town with the dogs and horses still tracking the gunman. As he drove off he said he wasn't going to look for the man alone.

When Tom was loaded into the ambulance he told me to get a gun and shoot anything that moved. It became quiet, too quiet. I focused on the blood that had to be cleaned up before my mom and little sister and brother got home so I took towels and swabbed the floor and rinsed them in the bathtub and did that several times until you couldn't even tell someone had been bleeding all over the place. The drain gurgled when I pulled the plug and I watched the tub of blood disappear down the drain, it was really, really red. It was kind of hectic when I finally got in touch with my mom and she drove home from her friend Shirley's house. We ran tumbled steps back and forth from the house to the car loaded down with arms full of Civil War guns, and locked the keys in the house. The un-hunted man may have run off by then, perhaps scared by the sirens and animals, or maybe he saw us with all those guns. Later I learned someone had ordered a hit on Tom, who by the way had invented the first change-maker on Coca-Cola machines. That's all that happened. I don't know why really that I turned around from that trip to Dallas that night. You might say I have good instincts or maybe, just maybe someone was looking out for Tom that night.