

Gunsmoke

One of the smells of my boyhood I'll never forget is that of a recently fired roll of caps from a silver toy pistol. I always wondered if there were boys in that era who used cap guns in a responsible manner to imitate a wholly imaginary but courteous skirmish between cowboys and Indians. I imagine each side would later put down their weapons, shake hands and come up on the back porch to share a pitcher of Kool Aid. But I knew very few boys in our neighborhood who might pass for such gentlemen. Maybe well behaved children lived elsewhere in the city, or on television shows that my parents liked to watch, or in some kind of parallel universe populated by angelic little darlings who probably didn't even play with guns.

But a typical young gunslinger on our block would have been my little brother Jesse. In 1959 when I was sixteen, he was eight years old and, when he wasn't holstered up with two six-shooters hanging on his hips, he carried a small derringer cap pistol in his pocket wherever he went. Unfortunately, he had a habit of pulling it out and firing off a few rounds at the most inappropriate times. He almost turned our baby cousin's baptism ceremony into chaos when a kid from school he didn't like showed up at the church. Jesse jumped up in the pew and cussed the kid out with G-rated invective from a favorite cowboy movie ... something about a lily livered polecat, I think. Jesse had the derringer half out of his pocket when Dad quietly disabled his gun arm with a pincer-like grip that left him with a sore elbow for the rest of the day. Too bad my father had not been present to save a quartet of Gospel Witnesses on our front porch the previous week.

On the other hand, Jesse was lucky Dad missed his shootout with Mr. Lynch, the mailman. In his grey Postal Service uniform, the big Irishman soon tired of serving as a regular target for Jesse. Mr. Lynch was also running out of G-Rated curses and he had raised the bar to just below four letter words, rebuking Jesse with Biblical denouncements such as, "you little son of perdition." Jesse repeated many of these and even called Mom a Daughter of Darkness the night she sent him to bed early for refusing to stop shooting at our canary. On a Saturday morning when my brother sprang out from the bushes shooting and hollering, "Die, you whited sepulchre of a storm trooper!" Mr. Lynch had had enough. He reached into his mail bag, pulled out a starter pistol loaded with real blanks and shot Jesse at point blank range. The shots were incredibly louder than those from a mere cap pistol. Jesse twirled around twice and fell to the ground, playing dead in case Mr. Lynch wanted to finish the job. Then the boy burst

into tears as Mom came running out of the house to find her youngest son shot by a government servant.

"Are you all right?" she screamed at Jesse.

"So far," he whimpered as he sat in the dirt feeling all over himself for bullet holes.

Mom was livid and the postman was apologetic, but the starter pistol served its purpose. With Jesse neutralized, the U.S. Mail courier was no longer stayed from the swift completion of his appointed rounds. Mom hid the cap pistol where she thought Jesse would never find it. She probably should have driven a stake through it and buried it.

"Why do you carry a gun all the time, Jesse," I asked him as we helped with the dishes that night. "What are you afraid of?"

"Jack booted storm troopers," he said.

"Jesse, that was back in the War, and in another country," I said. "You don't even know what jack boots are, anyway."

"No," he replied, "but Uncle Jimmy got punched by a trooper last New Years."

"Uncle Jimmy was drunk," I said, "and that was a STATE trooper." He appeared unconvinced.

When I began to notice a certain swagger creep back into his eight year old demeanor, I assumed he had found the gun in whatever secret place my mother had hidden it. I didn't want to inquire and then have to squeal on him, however. I remembered from my younger days that a boy forms a special bond with his cap pistol, but I had to admit Jesse's attachment to his Riverboat Gambler Derringer seemed obsessive. And the recent incidents of gunplay were worrisome. Shooting up a church offended only God, who I always figured had a sense of humor, but if for some reason Jesse carried his cap pistol into a bank, he might get himself into real trouble. As it turned out, on the following Sunday afternoon Jesse got all of us in a lot of trouble.

We were out for a ride on a lazy Sunday Afternoon Car Trip To Nowhere. It was a beautiful fall day in October and Indian Summer had brought a break in the cool temperatures normal for that time of year. Dad rode in the copilot's seat and allowed me to drive the old Ford as long as I heeded his commands as soon as they were issued. All the windows were rolled down to catch the warm afternoon breezes and my left arm hung out the driver's window in a hallmark teenage style designed to impress any young woman who might be seriously lacking discernment. (Who knew there were so many!) Jesse squirmed around in the back seat while Mom smoked a Chesterfield and happily hummed a tune to herself, pleased to be out of the house for a ramble of an hour or so through the countryside. A great idea occurred to me and I suddenly wanted to know how many seconds it would take for the

Ford to accelerate from zero to sixty miles per hour. Every teenage boy in America has conducted that experiment on his family car and I was no exception. When there were no cars up ahead, I hit the brakes and brought us to an abrupt halt in the middle of the highway, stopping quickly before the traffic behind us caught up. As I slammed on the brakes, Mom and Jesse lifted off the back seat like a pair of seagulls and began to fly forward. In that exact instant, I kicked the accelerator all the way to the floor and we were whipped backwards and flattened against our seats as if blasted off in a rocket ship.

Mom's head snapped to the rear. She disappeared in my rear view mirror, leaving a puff of cigarette smoke where her face had been. Jesse was elated to find himself weightless for 2 seconds, he said, just like an astronaut. Had I not been driving, Dad would have swatted me. Shaking his finger at me, he missed what was brewing behind us. Jesse was first to sound the alarm as a red light began flashing in our back window.

"Oh, dear," said my mother, "it's a trooper."
It occurred to me that "policeman" might have been a less incendiary description of the fellow now after us.

"Pull over," said my father, "you're about to get your first ticket."

"For what?" I asked innocently.

"How about a dumb, stupid stunt?" he replied.

"I think he just wants to pass me," I said hopefully.

"He would have done that by now," said my father. "Pull this car over NOW!"

I drove off the highway into a small rest area and the pursuing cop parked to my left across the narrow lane of macadam. New York State Troopers are often quite impressive in their dark grey uniforms and this fellow fit the role magnificently. Seemingly ten feet tall and square jawed, he exited his door and walked around the front of the police cruiser, marching over to greet us with his hands poised just above his hips. John Wayne could not have done it better.

From behind me in the back seat I heard a metallic clink and my heart stopped.

"Jesse!" I shouted, "don't"

But it was too late. He was already firing at the trooper. Bang, bang, bang ... in rapid succession Jesse pulled the trigger of his cap pistol. "Take that, trooper, you sodomite son of a harlot!" he bellowed. "Here's some lead from Uncle Jimmy!"

The trooper dropped to the ground on one knee and pulled his service revolver from its holster. It was just like in the movies, but I lost sight of him as I quickly slid down to the

floor of the old Ford, hoping against hope the door would stop any bullets coming my way at almost twice the speed of sound.

I don't remember what Dad did immediately, but Mom grabbed Jesse in an arm-lock around his neck and pulled him down on her lap.

When the shooting stopped, I was still slumped down near the pedals on the floor. To this day, I have never forgotten the sight of my father getting out of the car with his hands up, trying to explain to the trooper what had just happened.

Lucky for us, the State Policeman never fired his weapon. He quickly recognized his nemesis was no more than a eight year old with a cap pistol. But even if the trooper had put only one shot over our heads, charges may have resulted along with a tremendous amount of paperwork and lawyers and defense fees. The only costs that day were the Trooper's pride and all of our near heart attacks. And that's not counting my father's underwear. We did have to endure a very stern lecture from Trooper McAllister, which he bellowed out once and then a second time as he continued to let off a lot of steam. Then he gave a great sigh, got back in his cruiser and left. He'd been tremendously upset to think he could have killed an entire family, but was now relieved to be ending his shift without having executed anyone.

Dad took the pistol and with all his might threw it into a neighboring field. Jesse wisely remained subdued and quiet. I suggested we all calm down by going for ice cream. Maybe Dad would like to buy. But my father said we were going directly home and I was not welcome to drive. It seemed unfair I should be punished when it was Jesse who had probably committed a felony. Mom asked, "What's a sodomite?" Dad looked at Jesse and the boy shrugged his shoulders.

We all piled back into the Ford with Dad behind the wheel and Mom lit another cigarette in the back seat. My father pulled the car onto the roadway and came to a dead stop. "You time it," he said to me. "I bet I can get this Ford from zero to sixty in under eight seconds."

He stomped on the accelerator and Mom again flew backward. Jesse stopped crying and seemed to forget about his lost firearm. But he knew where to buy another, as we would discover in a few weeks on Christmas Eve at Midnight Mass.

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