



Bruce

Chapter 22

Guns

Winter, 1967

Boys, guns and hunting were commonplace in Golden, but guns in untrained hands can be extremely dangerous. My cousins always asked me to go deer hunting with them, but I never did. They were well-trained and very careful riflemen, but I didn't like killing animals so I didn't go. Later, I learned how deadly guns could be if you are, like my friend Bruce, careless or...lost. Here's what happened.

There were four of us that winter day—Dude, Larry, Bruce, and me—and we met at Bruce's house to start our adventure. We were seniors in high school and we were going rabbit hunting. We all liked and admired Bruce. He was a good friend; still he was not a usual member of our group. He was a great wrestler, undefeated that season at 185 pounds on the day we hunted. Everyone expected him to take the State Championship in his weight class. We wanted to share in his glow.

When everyone had assembled, Bruce led us into his bedroom. His parents weren't home. "Take a look at this," he said, spinning an army-issue .45-caliber pistol on his finger in the manner of an old west gunfighter. "My 'ol man gave it to me. This thing is so powerful," he went on. "My dad says if you shoot a man in the thumb, it will knock him to the ground."

"And, it would blow his hand clean off," I offered. "I hope that's not loaded."

"Not yet." With that, he put a round in the chamber, opened his bedroom window, took dead aim at a steel clothesline pole fifty feet away, and pulled the trigger. Boom! It was loud as well as powerful.

"Jesus, Bruce!" I yelled.

Larry added, "That's dangerous!"

Not to be left out, Dude put in "You can't fire a gun in the city limits! Do you want to get us arrested?"

I was amazed at Bruce's accuracy. The round had hit the three-inch-diameter pole dead center, leaving a deep crater with a quarter-inch hole in the middle.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm just showing you what it can do. No one knows where the shot came from."

Bruce put the .45 away and grabbed his .410 shotgun. "The .45's too much for rabbit hunting. Won't be anything left if you hit one," he explained.

We left Bruce's house, walked down North Ford with our unloaded rifles over our shoulders, breeches open, and bolts removed. With the clear exception of Bruce, the rest of us had been taught gun safety from an early age by our fathers, all of whom had served in World War II.

As we walked, we noticed a patrol car turning onto North Ford in front of us. "Shit, do you think someone called the cops?" Larry asked nervously.

The patrol car pulled up next to us. Officer Hal rolled down the window. "Where ya headed, boys?"

"Top of North Table Mountain, Officer Hal," Dude responded. "Rabbit hunting."

We weren't breaking any laws. The guns were unloaded, not concealed, and North Table, our hunting destination, was out of the city limits. From the comfortable seat of the patrol car, Officer Hal inspected our firearms. "We got a report of gun shots. You boys wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

"We heard shots, too," Bruce answered. "But we couldn't tell where they came from."

Officer Hal looked at Bruce suspiciously, then, satisfied that we were within the law, admonished, "Don't load them guns until you get to the top of the mountain. I don't like loaded weapons in town."

A chorus of "Yes sirs" followed. We understood.

We crossed a barbed-wire fence and started climbing the steep side of the mountain.

My first gun was a BB gun that Grandma Braun gave me for Christmas when I was eleven. Dad decided that eleven was the right age to be trusted with a BB gun and so on Christmas morning — also my 11th birthday — I became the proud owner of a Daisy Red Ryder BB gun. Later that day, Dad taught me to shoot: take a deep breath, line up the target with the sights, exhale slowly, and squeeze the trigger.

After several lessons shooting tin cans and bottles in the clay pits behind our house, Dad declared that I could take my BB gun out on my own. I called Dave, a friend whose father had delivered similar instruction, and we headed to the clay pits for target practice.

Boys, Here's What Happened

The clay pits were abandoned open trenches ten or twenty feet deep that stretched from the barbed-wire fence behind our house to the point where the front range of the Rockies jumped straight out of the clay-rich prairie, a distance of nearly a mile. Among the pits was a cave with a huge opening. It plunged into the earth at a steep angle, stopping two hundred feet from the opening and thirty feet below the surface. Light barely penetrated to the furthest reaches, casting the back wall in a gloomy haze. A pigeon sat sleeping in a nest in a cleft at the top of the back wall.

We entered the cave as quietly as possible, not wanting to disturb the sleeping pigeon. Halfway into the cave, I raised my BB gun, took a deep breath, lined the sights up on the bird, exhaled, and squeezed the trigger. The pigeon squawked, tried to fly, then fell to the ground at the back of the cave. We rushed to the fallen bird.

The pigeon was only wounded; blood dripped from a damaged wing. Guilt and remorse flooded my soul. I picked the bird up and held it in my hands; a sick feeling gripped my stomach. The bird's head rolled, but its eyes were open, still alive. I gave my gun to Dave and started running for home, holding the wounded bird as carefully as possible. Dave followed as fast as he could, holding a gun in each hand.

Once home, I found Mom, and with tears pouring down my face, I begged her to rush the wounded pigeon to the vet. She looked at me, and seeing the grief and misery on my face, sighed deeply and agreed to what she was sure would be a lost cause. She ran for her car keys. As I waited by the car still holding the bird, its eyes closed.

I closed my eyes and prayed. I promised God that if he saved the pigeon, I would never shoot another living thing. Then, for good measure, I promised to keep my room clean and to take out the trash without being asked.

And then a miracle happened! Just as Mom came out the door, I opened my eyes and the bird did the same. It looked at me, flapped its wings, and flew from my light grip. With deep relief, I watched as the pigeon flew away.

From that day on, I never shot another animal. However, I soon failed on my trash-removal and room-cleaning promises. When my friends and I went frog hunting with our BB guns, I did my best to shoot over the little heads that protruded from the swampy water. Later, when we went tweetie plunking with .22s, I always aimed to the left or right of the sparrows that hopped from tree to tree fifty yards away. At that distance I didn't need to aim away; hitting one would merely have been an unlucky coincidence.

So I had no intention of shooting a rabbit as we hiked up the steep side of North Table Mountain that winter afternoon. I planned to shoot cactus, fence posts, or maybe a few glass insulators that sat atop power poles.

After a sixty-minute hike and a breathless climb up the rocky cliffs that encircled the top of the flat-topped mountain, we reached the broad plain that was the summit. A herd of cattle grazed in the distance and a magpie alerted all forms of wildlife that we were about with its raucous call. We headed east, scanning the ground for signs of rabbit movement.

We walked for thirty minutes without any signs of rabbits, or any other wildlife for that matter. As we walked, Bruce entertained himself by throwing rocks into fresh cow patties, doing his best to cover us with the splatter. This, of course, produced a series of threats and curses as well as rocks thrown at cow patties in Bruce's direction. Other than us, the only things moving were the cattle that were now in close proximity. A large bull with its back to us watched over the herd.

Bruce was bored and, with nothing else to shoot at, drew aim on the rear end of the bull, one hundred yards away. He pulled the trigger and a second later, the .410 buckshot found its ample target. The bull jumped straight into the air and bellowed angrily.

While I was appalled at the shooting, the sight of a bull jumping straight into the air was hilarious, and we all laughed in spite of ourselves.

"Are you trying to kill it?" I yelled.

"Nah, at this distance, a .410 won't even break that bull's tough hide," Bruce explained.

Whether it broke the skin or not, it must have hurt, because the bull turned to face us. It scanned the horizon and found four targets — us. The bull lowered its head, blew hard from its flared nostrils, and started its charge. We exchanged frightened looks and started running back to the edge of the mountain and the cliffs we had climbed earlier. We spread out, forcing the bull to choose one of us. Then, with the chosen one running for his life, the others yelled, threw rocks, and fired guns into the air, diverting the bull's attention.

Boys, Here's What Happened

Eventually, the bull tired and slowed, allowing us to reach the cliffs, shaken but safe. We all cursed Bruce for shooting the bull as we descended the mountain, but he was unfazed. Later, after leaving Bruce at his house and as we walked home, the three of us agreed that hunting with Bruce was too dangerous to ever do again.

Three weeks after our hunting adventure, Bruce lost a wrestling match in the qualifying rounds to a boy he had beaten before. As a wrestler, Bruce had become predictable. He used the same moves in every match, and the other wrestler, knowing what Bruce was going to do, countered every move. Bruce was devastated by that loss.

Even without taking the state title that year, Bruce won a wrestling scholarship to Western State, a school in the Colorado Mountains renowned for its wrestling team. But Bruce struggled with college life, didn't do well academically, and was home within the year. A short time later, Dude, Larry, and I attended Bruce's funeral. He had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. No one was ever sure if he pulled the .45's trigger on purpose, or if he had just been spinning the gun on his finger when it went off.