Breaking the Chain

by Gary Lark

It was after my final Army National Guard meeting, after I received my final discharge papers. After Basic Training followed by monthly meetings and summer camps, the killings at Kent State, almost being deployed on the University of Oregon campus, practicing the movements to kill or maim for six years. After confronting the moral ambiguity of wearing the uniform of an organization that perpetuates war when it has unknowingly instructed me of its utter futility. All the layers of conditioning informed my need to find peace. From 1966 to 1972 I was privileged to look through the dark glass to see my part in the war machine and the society that spawned it.

Four years after the fall of Saigon, I found myself in the driveway surrounded by firearms. It was a fine spring morning, white puffs of cloud drifted in from the Pacific before an indifferent azure sky. The guns were within easy reach: a 12 gauge double barrel, a sweet little Remington .22 semiautomatic, a Stevens .410 shotgun, a lever action .308 Savage, a European Mauser and a 12 gauge pump.

I'm taking them apart one by one, then backing over the barrels with my pickup to bend them useless. Pieces of each go into the regular trash bin, some are dropped in the bay, others thrown into the dump, stocks are splintered. The pieces will not be reassembled. I haven't talked about this to anyone except my wife and a Buddhist friend. He's staying with us for a few days on his way from a two year stay in a monastery. He is a little like a stunned animal, assaulted by the perversity of human culture that surrounds him.

Reincarnation has always been metaphorical to me. But it isn't to him. We talk into the night about my concept of the living fabric of atoms and energy compared to his infinite karmic web. We talk of action and reaction, his multiple planes of existence housing the millions of lifetimes we live to wear away our mountain of sin, the chances we have in every moment. We talk of the struggle to pull free from the morass of conditioning and the uselessness of struggle.

His literal beliefs reinforce my abstractions. I had been thinking about my small arsenal, as my personal connection with the military recedes, and the war in Vietnam wheels through our past like a diseased planet. I don't plan on hunting again. Although I have wondered about keeping a survival gun, perhaps the .22. What if there's an intruder? What if I need to hunt small game? What if... There are fears everywhere. On the other hand, there are enough guns in the world. If I destroy these they will not kill anything again. I can break this chain. Will I break the chain inside me?

Memories zigzag through time with each gun I pick up.

At the same time as I feel the tiger pacing inside me, my hand slides under the belly of the .308 and I remember hunting the wild beauty of Steens Mountain: The aspen lined creek bottom where, on the first day, we caught dark rainbow trout with our hands; the second day waiting by a ravine that cut through the rimrock, fully alive in that light air, watching a yearling buck slip away from the hunters in the canyon below, not raising my gun; walking into manly power at age 14 in 1959. The third day I pull down on a trotting deer, fire, watch it crumble, watch it die with a broken spine. We will cut it into quarters and carry it two miles back to camp.

I put the .308 aside for now and pick up the 12 gauge pump. It was my wife's father's. Is it the one he put to his chest in the alley behind his apartment? I don't know for sure. I don't want to know.

That shot in an alley in Boise will echo in my wife's ears as she walks out the door, out of our marriage a year after the guns are destroyed. She said something had changed inside her. For the better? For the worse? Were my changes threatening to her? You'd think that after ten years we would have found a way to speak our darkness, but we hadn't. I hadn't learned to speak mine. The fear I have at being in the middle of large groups, the need to sit on the edge in theaters, the need for an escape route, I will carry in me to the grave.

The Mauser, also her father's, is the next to go. Then the .410. A Stevens single shot, often a boy's first gun, I acquired by trade while I was still in high school. The boy lived on a ranch down the road from our river-bluff house. He much admired my crossbow and one day offered a trade: his .410 for the crossbow. When I hesitated he added twenty dollars. For a moment I though he was asking me for the twenty, but then I realized it was coming my way. I was still a little amazed when he handed me the shotgun and a twenty dollar bill. The crossbow, while it worked well, didn't have the power of this little gun. Why did I own a crossbow? That's not a question I ever asked.

I remember killing a pheasant with the .410, carrying it with slugs during deer season, and carrying it broken down in my car. Two weeks after my twenty-first birthday an older friend, Don, and I were making the rounds of the five bars in town. We came out of one, got in Don's Volkswagen bug and were starting the engine when a "58 Chevy, with Texas plates, came around the corner and bumped us from behind. We got out to

assess the damage. We were immediately surrounded by five guys. Naïve and drunk, I didn't perceive the threat until two of them started pounding on me. I warded off blows as best as I could, but eventually found myself on the pavement curled against their kicks. The blows stopped. I sat up, vomited.

Unbeknownst to me Don had, carrying one guy on his back, dashed around the corner of the next block and yelled into the police station that we needed help. When they saw where he was headed our assailants decided to split. Somewhere past midnight we tried to identify them at an all-night diner. Were the guys in the booth, eating ham and eggs, the same ones? Probably. Could I swear to it in court? I hadn't had time to memorize their faces. We left.

At home I could see my swelling, distorted face. On the phone the sleepy doctor said it could wait till morning.

In the cold light of day he leans over me with a stainless steel probe. He looks into my eyes.

"Now this is going to hurt."

He sticks the probe up each nostril and tries to straighten the deviations, but the nose is swollen so he can't tell what progress he's made. I assure him that it's as straight as it needs to be.

For the next three months I carry the .410 in back of the passenger's seat. I have found a rifle scabbard at the Army Surplus store that, when the gun is broken down, it fits into nicely. I practice putting the gun together quickly. It's easy.

I cruise the area and spot the Chevy in a neighboring town. I pull into a near driveway, put the gun together and wait. Nobody comes out. I decide to try another time.

I do, with the same results. Eventually my life goes back to normal, I give up the watch. Would I have shot somebody? I don't know. Probably not. Without eminent threat my calm everyday life resumes. I was working at the VA Hospital, taking care of the gassed, the tormented, the insane and knew I had to find *something*, even thought I didn't know what it was. That fall I entered Oregon State University.

My first National Guard meeting was one week after the beating. The swelling was going down but tape still crisscrossed my nose. We went to the rifle range to test our accuracy. It was very mundane: firing at human silhouettes and hours of standing around.

When we finished at the rifle range we crawled back into the two and a half ton troop truck for the hour ride back to the armory. The person who would become a lifelong friend sat beside me. It was his first day as well. We started talking about books. We would go through all six years together, forming a deep trust.

Next, the 12 gauge double-barrel. I had picked it up in a second hand store. It was cheap, short barreled and carried no guarantees. Even though it fit tightly together, the first time I shot it I wondered if I would blow my head off. But it worked fine. I spent many pleasurable hours hunting quail in the river margins, jump-shooting ducks on feeder creeks, spending time with my friend and his Springer Spaniel as the morning mist clung to blackberry thickets, the outside world distant.

The .22. The first rifle I ever fired was my father's .22 with a bolt action and a peep sight. This one had a flat sight and would fire every time I squeezed the trigger. The tubular feed held well over a dozen rounds. I bought it with my own money in my last year of high school. I was well past the age of killing song birds; I wasn't sure what to

shoot with it, but it worked so well. I saw it as a survival gun, a basic need like a car or a pair of boots. Its semiautomatic quality was attractive.

A few years later I was on the .50 caliber machine gun range. The weapon would fire as long as you held your finger on the trigger. My friend and I were in Advanced Infantry Training. Unlike Basic Training we could now go to the enlisted men's club and the night before we had eaten fried oysters. It was our first time there. We felt almost civilized having fried oysters and beer in civilian clothes. There was a meningitis scare on several military bases and we hadn't been off the base in nine weeks.

We arrived at the range the next day, set up the guns and started firing, it hit us. Our stomachs churned. Between firing bursts of .50 caliber ammo that rose across silhouette targets, we took turns running to the latrine. It was a long day. The image of heavy machine gun fire cutting through the target bodies stayed with me.

Was there some mention that using a .50 caliber on humans was against the Geneva Convention? Was it a joke?

Another thing I remember was the bored captain who was in charge of the range, sitting on the top bleacher reading a book. He, too, was waiting for his release. It was the only book I saw in four and a half months.

On an earlier day, on the M60 (7.62 mm) machine gun range, we had fired all day, cleaning weapons well into the night. We learned the weapons well, as well as you can, preparing for the time when you're dodging bullets and running though muck. We had only a taste of that, crawling across a field with simulated artillery shaking the ground and the M60's firing three feet above our heads. It was night, with every fourth round a tracer. No one stood up during our exercise.

When I first returned from training I would be driving down the road and suddenly a billboard would be cut in half by machine gun fire. In the classroom professors would be ripped apart by .50 caliber machine gun fire. It seemed to be the random synapse of a little corner of my brain.

One morning as I was driving to the monthly meeting, I felt an itch on my nose, scratched it, looked into the mirror and hallucinated that my nose had come off. The hole was seething with maggots. I told myself that during wartime maggots are sometimes used to clean wounds. Could they reach the wound I had?

That night, after the meeting, I put on the Rolling Stones, smoked half a joint, poured a water-glass full of wine and sank into a hot bath. But that wasn't enough. Later, I would find myself in a bar dancing in front of the loudest speakers in town, hoping the music would blast something away. And I didn't even know what it was.

I wondered why no one talked about what goes on in military training. I returned to college, taking several years to learn how to concentrate again. The ROTC people were mixed among the student population, officers to be, the seduction of becoming the upper class. No one talked about how soldiers are made; who we become.

The year is 1979, seven years after my last National Guard meeting and I am in the process of finding myself. I'm quitting alcohol, tobacco, marijuana and caffeine. Walking the beach every day. The drum of the waves and the drum of my feet are opening a door to a new, unknown, life. I will go through another relationship or three, but also learn to contra dance. And slowly, as I move to the daring music of a jig or reel in a swirling roomful of people, wounded all, I will glimpse the open door of compassion.

I walk up the sloping, mile-long bridge, the wind whispering around me. The seasons cycling toward summer. The north wind will be back soon. I drop the trigger housing from the .308 and watch it fall down and down, as if through a thousand lifetimes, into the brine.

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