

Mary get your gun

A Portland man agonizes over an heirloom firearm and the conflict between protection and peace

There was a time when a gun was my closest friend. I could have been a poster boy for the National Rifle Association. This is a difficult admission coming from a pacifist, veggie, granola-eating hippie sympathizer. So an explanation is in order.

My father gave me a gun when I was 13. It was an old .22 bolt-action rifle with nicks in the barrel, the wood backing well-worn in places. It was the first gun he ever owned, purchased at the Gascozark General Store with money earned working on the McDaniel farm.

Although I was less than excited by the offering, the gift of a gun was a coming-of-age tradition in our family, so I accepted it, listened to his safety instructions and took off into the woods. After firing a couple of badly aimed shots at a little gray squirrel high up an oak tree, I returned the gun to my father.

"Don't think I'll be using it," I said.

Maybe dad could make better use of it. My father, an experienced and skillful hunter, and

perhaps in possession of some unspoken wisdom about his middle son, graciously took back the rifle without comment.

Some 30 years later, as he lay dying, he again offered me the gun. After all, it was the first gun he had owned, important to him and now a family treasure. This time it was a special gift. I took it, banishing the aging piece along with a handful of tarnished bullets to a closet.

Two years later I took out the gun, dusted it off, put six .22 longs in the clip, cocked it and put it under

the bed. I was scared. An anonymous caller was making nightly calls threatening my life. He graphically described the macabre way he would do it. "I know where you live," he had said one night in his gruesome 3 a.m. message. "And I'll get you."

The phone company was not helpful. The police told me they could do nothing.

"Most of the people who make those threats never carry them through," the officer said, eroding any thought I had of official support.

But the knowledge that the gun was nearby was very reassuring. Maybe, just maybe I could do something. Perhaps I could defend myself.

I had not thought about this unpleasant period of my life for some years until recently, when I was vividly reminded of the experience while talking with another gay man about his new pistol, which he purchased for personal protection. He was anxious to try it out at a firing range the next day, and I was suddenly faced again with my own ambivalence about self-protection and particularly about gun ownership.

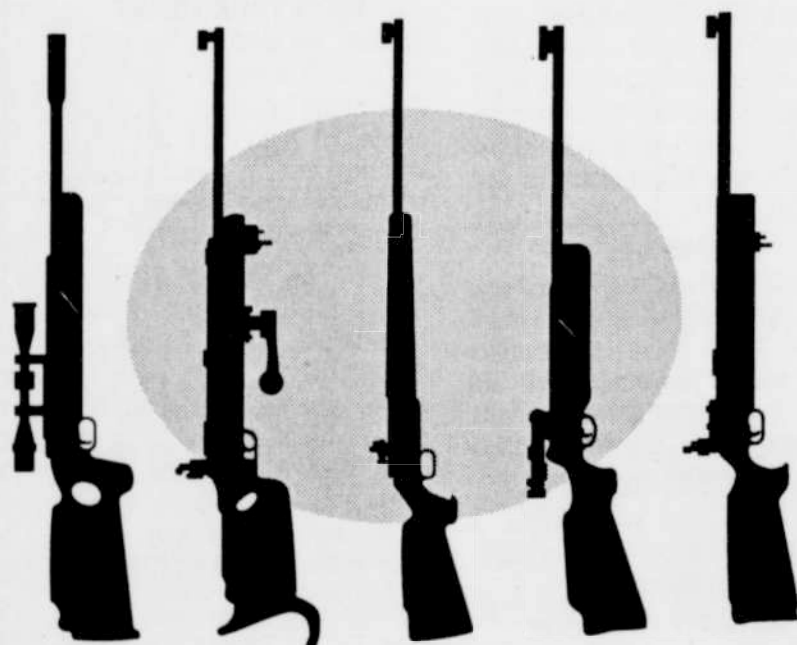
I abhor violence and am appalled at the idea of everyone walking around with a per-

sonal weapon, ready to draw and shoot, Old West mythical-style, at any infraction of boundaries. I admire Gandhi. I am attracted to the Quaker tradition, peace, love and inner light. I also have a great allegiance to the system, education, growing public consciousness and the democratic political process.

There are contradictions. On one hand, the scion of an old pioneering family, the recipient of all the old values that make for the so-called American spirit of independence, I believe that my person, my family, my home are all sacred, and I'll be damned if anyone is going to threaten their security. Not without a fight, not without somehow making the playing field more level.

On the other hand, I know firearms often do far more harm than good, that with their use innocent people frequently suffer, and the fewer guns in circulation the better. Neverthe-

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less, my agonizing and terrifying personal experience testifies that, when confronted with the threat of overwhelming personal violence, nothing added more to my sense of security than ready access to a gun.

The full measure of responsibility for a violent act lies with its practitioner, not the target. No amount of preparation guarantees safety, and paranoia just complicates matters. Still, I sometimes wonder whether my response to the question of personal protection, and specifically to gun ownership, has been naive, a predictable liberal stance, just a tinge out of touch with reality.

One day the threatening calls simply stopped coming, so my firearm was never put to the test. But I learned that there are times when neither the police nor laws can protect me from potential deadly physical assault. I secretly wonder if my gun-toting friend's .38 pistol, safely tucked away and deftly advertised at the opportune moment, just might be the best defense.

■ JACOB CLARK is a member of Portland Gay Men Writing. For more information about the group, call Patrick at (503) 231-8866.

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