

GUNS

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A Kindle **Single**



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By Stephen King

I. The Shake

Here's how it shakes out.

First there's the shooting. Few of the trigger-pullers are middle-aged, and practically none are old. Some are young men; many are just boys. The Jonesboro, Arkansas, school shooters were 13 and 11.

Second, the initial TV news reports, accompanied by flourishes of music and dramatic BREAKING NEWS logos at the bottom of your screen. No one really knows what the fuck is going on, but it's exciting. You get your still photo of the location; you get your map from Google or Bing. The cable news producers are busting their asses, trying to get some local news reporter on the phone.

Third comes confirmation that it's not a false alarm; there are casualties! American blood has been spilled! Planes with reporters and video crews onboard begin rolling down runways in New York and Atlanta, bound for whatever Podunk just got lit up by a psycho with a gun.

Fourth, the first video. It's always from a cellphone. You know this because it's short, and everything is all crooked and jittery. Mostly what it shows is people running.

Fifth, the first on-scene news reports, filed by those local reporters who must sub until the A-team arrives. All of them are bullshit with excitement at their unexpected turn on the national stage, although some hide it better than others. One or more will use the phrase "as many as," followed by a number. This linguistic construction will be used dozens of times in the first hour, as the reporters slowly close in on the shooter's final tally. It's like watching a carnival game of chance. *As many as six.* No, *as many as twelve.* No, *Witnesses who fled the shooter say it's at least eight.*

Sixth, the correct equation: X dead, Y injured.

Seventh, the first cop interview. Cop One says nothing substantive, and doesn't have to. His job is to look stalwart and use police jargon.

Eighth, the shooter is indentified incorrectly.

Ninth, the first stand-up report from outside the local hospital, preferably with an ambulance in the background. Bonus points for an arriving ambulance with lights and siren.

Tenth, the shooter is identified correctly, and we get to look at a yearbook photo in which the guy looks pretty much like anybody. The search is already under way for a photo where he will look like your worst nightmare.

Eleventh, the first Talking Head interview. Said Head talks about gun violence. He or she may also bring up America's famous culture of violence, but it's probably too early. The culture-of-violence thing usually has to wait until the third or fourth Talking Head interview.

Twelfth, interviews with eyewitnesses, most of them weeping and inarticulate (the phrase "popping sounds" will be used). A reporter who makes actual money for asking

questions so dumb they are surreal will inquire, “How did you feel?”

Thirteenth, wall-to-wall cable news coverage begins. By now producers will be assembling the best clips, and you will see them more often than Fred Thompson flogging reverse mortgages.

Fourteenth, recaps of previous shootings begin. We will be shown the superstars of America’s unbalanced and disaffected time and time again: Harris, Klebold, Cho, Mohammed, Malvo, Lanza. These are the guys we remember, not the victims. News producers are especially fond of Aurora movie theater shooter James Holmes’s booking photo, ’cos gosh, that motherfucker just looks so *crazy*. He really *is* your worst nightmare!

Fifteenth, interviews with people who knew the shooter. They all agree that he was pretty weird, but no one expected him to do something like *this*.

Sixteenth, what cable news does best now begins, and will continue for the next seventy-two hours: the slow and luxurious licking of tears from the faces of the bereaved. We’re treated to interviews with weeping mothers and fathers; interviews with stunned siblings and classmates; fleets of hearses rolling from church to cemetery; memorials featuring flowers, teddy bears, photographs, and signs saying WE WILL NEVER FORGET YOU. The best part of Number Sixteen is that the cable networks are now free to resume commercial messages. As a result, you can go directly from a funeral to info about adult diapers, or products to stiffen your penis, or how if you follow a certain green line across your kitchen floor, you’ll be able to spend your retirement living in Fat City.

Seventeenth, the NRA announces they will have no comment until the details become clear. Also out of sympathy for the victims. Pro-gun legislators neglect to return calls from news organizations.

Eighteenth, politicians decree a national dialogue about gun control. This dialogue centers on automatic and semiautomatic weapons, plus high-capacity clips and magazines for same. (The gun Adam Lanza used at Sandy Hook to murder almost two dozen little kids was a Bushmaster AR-15. He also carried a Glock .10, a pistol so big it’s issued to rangers in Greenland, should they encounter polar bears.)

Nineteenth, the NRA drops the other shoe (only it’s more like a combat boot), proclaiming itself dead-set against any changes in existing gun laws. In their official statement, they blame the shooters and America’s culture of violence. They also single out the failure of mental health professionals to ID potentially dangerous persons, even though most US senators and representatives with A ratings from the NRA don’t want to see a single dime of federal aid spent on beefing up such services. (Gosh, they’ve got that pesky deficit to think about.) The NRA doesn’t come right out and say the victims are also to blame for thinking they could live in America without a gun on their person or in their purse, but the implication is hard to miss.

Twentieth, there’s a killer tornado in Louisiana, or an outbreak of hostilities in the Mideast, or a celebrity dead of a drug overdose. Out comes the dramatic music and the BREAKING NEWS chyrons. The shooting is relegated to second place. Pretty soon it’s in third place. Then it’s a squib behind that day’s funny YouTube video.

Twenty-first, any bills to change existing gun laws, including those that make it possible for almost anyone in America to purchase a high-capacity assault weapon, quietly disappear into the legislative swamp.

Twenty-second, it happens again and the whole thing starts over.

That's how it shakes out.

II. *Rage*

During my junior and senior years in high school, I wrote my first novel, then titled *Getting It On*. I suppose if it had been written today, and some high school English teacher had seen it, he would have rushed the manuscript to the guidance counselor and I would have found myself in therapy posthaste. But 1965 was a different world, one where you didn't have to take off your shoes before boarding a plane and there were no metal detectors at the entrances to high schools. Also a world where America hadn't been constantly at war for a dozen years.

Getting It On concerned a troubled boy named Charlie Decker with a domineering father, a load of adolescent angst, and a fixation on Ted Jones, the school's most popular boy. Charlie takes a gun to school, kills his algebra teacher, and holds his class hostage. During the siege that follows, a kind of psychological inversion takes hold, and gradually the class begins to see Ted rather than Charlie as the villain. When Ted tries to escape, his supposedly well-adjusted classmates beat the shit out of him. Charlie caps his final day of public education by trying to commit what is sometimes called "blue suicide."

Ten years later, after the first half-dozen of my books had become bestsellers, I revisited *Getting It On*, rewrote it, and submitted it to my paperback publisher under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. It was published as *Rage*, sold a few thousand copies, and disappeared from view. Or so I thought.

Then, in April of 1988, a San Gabriel, California, high school student named Jeff Cox walked into his English class, declared that "urban terrorism is fun," and held his fellow students hostage with a Korean-made .223 assault rifle. He had a few modest demands: sodas, cigarettes, sandwiches, and a million dollars in cash. He fired several shots, but into the walls and ceilings rather than at the kids. "I don't think I can kill anyone," he said. "I don't think I can do it." One of the students jumped him while he was gabbing on the phone, and disarmed him. When police asked where he'd gotten the idea, he told them from an airliner hijacking story on TV. Oh, and from a paperback novel called *Rage*.

Seventeen months later, a shy 17-year-old named Dustin Pierce burst into a World History class at Jackson, Kentucky, High School with a .44 Magnum and a shotgun. He shot into the ceiling and told teacher Brenda Clark and about a dozen of the students to leave. He held 11 others hostage while police surrounded the building and a SWAT team was flown in by helicopter. Pierce, meanwhile, flipped through Clark's grade book and remarked, "Look how smart I am. Why am I doing this?" One by one, Pierce let his hostages go, and by 4 p.m., it was just Dustin and his Dirty Harry revolver. "I became increasingly afraid he would kill himself," said hostage negotiator Bob Stephens. "He seemed to be carrying out the scenario of a book he had been reading." The book was *Rage*. Dustin Pierce didn't kill himself or anyone else. He threw out his guns and emerged with his hands up. What he really wanted, it turned out, was to see his father. And for his

father — maybe for the first time — to really see *him*.

In February of 1996, a boy named Barry Loukaitis walked into his algebra class in Moses Lake, Washington, with a .22 caliber revolver and a high-powered hunting rifle. He used the rifle to kill instructor Leona Caires and two students. Then, waving the pistol in the air, he declared, “This sure beats algebra, doesn’t it?” The quote is from *Rage*. A physics teacher, in a commendable act of heroism, charged Loukaitis and overpowered him.

In 1997, Michael Carneal, age 14, arrived at Heath High School, in Paducah, Kentucky, with a Ruger MK II semi-automatic pistol in his backpack. He approached a before-school prayer group, paused to load his gun and stuff shooter’s plugs in his ears, then opened fire. He killed three and wounded five. Then he dropped the gun on the floor and cried, “Kill me! Please! I can’t believe I did that!” A copy of *Rage* was found in his locker.

That was enough for me, even though at the time, the Loukaitis and Carneal shootings were the only *Rage*-related ones of which I was aware. I asked my publishers to pull the novel from publication, which they did, although it wasn’t easy. By then it was a part of an omnibus containing all four Bachman books. (In addition to *Rage*, there was *The Long Walk*, *The Running Man*, and *Roadwork* — another novel about a shooter with psychological problems.) The Bachman collection is still available, but you won’t find *Rage* in it.

According to *The Copycat Effect*, written by Loren Coleman (Simon and Schuster, 2004), I also apologized for writing *Rage*. No, sir, no ma’am, I never did and never would. It took more than one slim novel to cause Cox, Pierce, Loukaitis, and Carneal to do what they did. These were unhappy boys with deep psychological problems, boys who were bullied at school and bruised at home by parental neglect or outright abuse. They seem to have been operating in a dream, two of them verbally asking themselves afterward why they did what they did. As for what was going on with them before they acted:

- **Cox** spent several weeks in an LA County psych ward, where he spoke of putting a gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger.
- **Pierce** was collateral damage in an ugly divorce; his father left and his mother often talked to the boy about killing herself.
- **Carneal** was bullied. In addition, he suffered from paranoia so great he would cover the vents and windows in the school bathrooms, because he believed people were watching him pee. When sitting in chairs, he lifted his feet so no one hiding beneath could grab him.
- **Loukaitis** wrote poems about how worthless his father was, and how he wished the man were dead.

All four had easy access to guns. Most of the weapons they used were in the home.

Cox bought his at Wolfe's Gun Shop in his hometown of San Gabriel, for \$400 — easy-peasy. The clerk had no reason not to sell it to him; the boy said the semi-auto was a present for his father and was old enough under California law to buy a firearm.

Ryan Lanza's mother bought her guns, as so many people do, for home defense. When young Lanza wanted them, he killed her.

My book did not break Cox, Pierce, Carneal, or Loukaitis, or turn them into killers; they found something in my book that spoke to them because they were already broken. Yet I did see *Rage* as a possible accelerant, which is why I pulled it from sale. You don't leave a can of gasoline where a boy with firebug tendencies can lay hands on it.

Nevertheless, I pulled it with real regret. Not because it was great literature — with the possible exception of Arthur Rimbaud, teenagers rarely pen great literature — but because it contained a nasty glowing center of truth that was more accessible to me as an adolescent. Adults do not forget the horrors and shamings of their childhood, but those feelings tend to lose their immediacy (except perhaps in dreams, where even old men and women find themselves taking tests they have not studied for with no clothes on). The violent actions and emotions portrayed in *Rage* were drawn directly from the high school life I was living five days a week, nine months of the year. The book told unpleasant truths, and anyone who doesn't feel a qualm of regret at throwing a blanket over the truth is an asshole with no conscience.

As far as I'm concerned, high school sucked when I went, and probably sucks now. I tend to regard people who remember it as the best four years of their lives with caution and a degree of pity. For most kids, it's a time of doubt, stress, painful self-consciousness, and unhappiness. They're actually the lucky ones. For the bullied underclass — the wimps, the shrimps, and the girls who are routinely referred to as scags, bags, or hos — it's four years of misery and two kinds of hate: the kind you feel for yourself and the kind you feel for the jackwads who bump you in the halls, pull down your shorts in gym class, and pick out some charming nickname like Queerboy or Frogface that sticks to you like glue. In Iroquois rituals of manhood, naked warriors were sent running down a gantlet of braves swinging clubs and jabbing with the butt ends of spears. In high school, the goal is Graduation Day instead of a manhood feather, but I imagine the feelings are about the same.

I had friends in high school — including a girlfriend who stood up for me when I needed standing-up for, God bless her — and I possessed a certain sophomoric wit that gained me respect (also a few detentions, which were a very acceptable trade-off). Those things got me through. Even so, I couldn't wait to put high school behind me and meet people who did not consider giving wedgies to losers a valid part of social interaction.

If that was how it was for me, a more or less regular dude, how must it be for kids like Jeff Cox, Dustin Pierce, Barry Loukaitis, or Michael Carneal? Is it really so surprising that they would find a soul brother in the fictional Charlie Decker? But that doesn't mean we excuse them, or give them blueprints to express their hate and fear. Charlie had to go.

He was dangerous. And in more ways than one.

III. Drunks in a Barroom

If I could wave a magic wand and have one wish granted, I'd wish for an end to world hunger; the small shit could wait in line. If, however, the god or genie who bestowed the magic wand told me my one wish had to do with American politics, I think I'd wave it and make the following proclamation: "Every liberal in the country must watch Fox News for one year, and every conservative in the country must watch MSNBC for one year." (Middle-of-the-roaders could stick with *CSI*.)

Can you imagine what that would be like? For the first month, the screams of "*What IS this shit???*" would echo high to the heavens. For the next three, there would be a period of grumbling readjustment as both sides of the political spectrum realized that, loathsome politics aside, they were still getting the weather, the sports scores, the hard news, and the Geico Gecko. During the next four months, viewers might begin seeing different anchors and commentators, as each news network's fringe bellowers attracted increasing flak from their new captive audiences. Adamantly shrill editorial stances would begin to modify as a result of tweets and emails saying, "Oh, wait a minute, Slick, that's fucking ridiculous." Finally, the viewers themselves might change. Not a lot; just a slide-step or two away from the kumbayah socialists of the left and the Tea Partiers of the right. I'm not saying they'd re-colonize the all-but-deserted middle (lot of cheap real estate there, my brothers and sisters), but they might close in on it a trifle.

Isn't that a lovely dream? Not up there with the dream of my soul uncle, Martin Luther King, but still lovely. Think of the quiet that might ensue if all that shrill rhetoric were turned down a few notches! Think of the dinner table arguments that might not happen! There might even be (o lost and shining city) a resumption of actual dialogue.

There's sure none now. American politics has managed to catch itself in one of those fiendish Chinese finger pullers we used to buy in the dime store when we were kids, and as a result, two muscular and capable hands can do no work. The wrangle over American fiscal policy is one example; the wrangle over immigration is another; the argument over gun control is a third. Political discourse as it once existed in America has given way to useless screaming. On second thought, forget the finger pullers. We're like drunks in a barroom. No one's listening because everyone is too busy thinking about what they're going to say next, and absolutely *prove* that the current speaker is so full of shit he squeaks.

That makes my task in writing this essay dispiriting. Given my liberal creds, those of a blue persuasion are already forming a choir, ready to say *amen* and *right on, brother*, as I preach the Gospel of Gun Control. And those of a red persuasion have already moved on (possibly to the comforting scripture of the Rev. Rush Limbaugh), or come to this essay with their shoulders hunched and their fists clenched, itching to begin long-winded blogs that will explain how naïve I am, how wrong my facts are, and how I should stick to writing books.

Drunks in a barroom.

Jesus wept.

Only I'm not a drunk, and although I'm a blue-state American now, I was raised a red one, and I've spent my life with at least half of one foot still in that camp. It gives me a certain perspective. It also allows me to own my handguns — I have three — with a clear conscience.

Even if I were politically and philosophically open to repealing the Second Amendment (I'm not), I don't believe that repeal, or even modification, would solve the problem of gun violence in America, particularly violence of the sort that's at the root of that problem. Although I need to add that I also believe strict gun control would save thousands of lives. Later, we'll talk about Australia, where that has happened.

Pass it for now, though. Let's talk about reality. The death toll at the Sandy Hook school was 26, and I mourn every one of them, but the number of homicides in Chicago last year exceeded 500. That's 200 more than the number of American troops killed in Afghanistan during the same period. And let's remember that our troops volunteered to go in harm's way. Their bodies come home to parades and flag-draped coffins. The dead of Chicago — 107 of them children, some just waiting to get on the school bus — don't get the hero treatment, but they are just as dead. Gun control would do little to change that situation, because the guns are already out there and the great majority of them are being bought, sold, and carried illegally.

The best we can do for handgun violence is to impose strict mandatory prison sentences on those who use them or carry them concealed without a license to do so (plus background checks, which I'll get to). Los Angeles and New York (other cities, too) have tried the carrot as well as the stick, in the form of gun buyback programs. Good luck to them. In LA, over 8,000 guns — and two rocket launchers — have been turned in for cash since 2009. Sound good? Maybe, until you add this: in 2012 alone, Californians bought *three-quarters of a million* rifles and handguns. Honey, that's a lot of firepower.

Liberals and gun control advocates (they are not exactly the same, no matter what paranoids like Mr. Wayne LaPierre may try to tell you) understand that a great many horses have already left the barn, and that's one reason why the gun control issue flares, then dies until the next high-profile shooting. The libs think of the millions of guns already out there, and their shoulders just slump. Even those most passionate on the subject give off a faint what's-the-use vibe.

You might think things would be different in Newtown, Connecticut, where the Sandy Hook shootings took place, but it's not; it's still drunks in a barroom. After all, Colt Firearms is just up the road, in Hartford, and honey, that's a lot of jobs. The starry blue dome marking the old Colt factory is a city landmark for good reason.

IV. Culture of Violence

I also don't believe the NRA's assertion — articulated by Mr. LaPierre each time there's another mass murder by gun in a school or a shopping mall — that America's so-called "culture of violence" plays a significant role in kid-on-kid school shootings. That this idea has gained even a shred of acceptance simply proves what George Orwell knew when he wrote *1984*: if you say a thing often enough, it will be accepted as truth. Let me be frank: The idea that America exists in a culture of violence is bullshit. What America exists in is a culture of Kardashian.

Of the ten most popular works of fiction published in 2012, only two feature any kind of violence: George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (no guns, just swords) and John Grisham's *The Racketeer* (your basic chase story, no shooting necessary). *Gone Girl*, by Gillian Flynn, is a beautifully constructed mystery. The rest of 2012's big winners are romances, all but one (*The Lucky One*, by Nicholas Sparks) of the sexed-up genre now known as "mommy-porn." There are plenty of shoot-'em-up American novels, but they rarely make the bestseller lists, no more than *Rage* did when it was published.

American movies have always been a violent medium — remember James Cagney brandishing a gun atop a natural gas tank at the end of *Public Enemy* and proclaiming, "Top of the world, Ma" — but if you take a close look at the dozen top-grossing films of 2012, you see an interesting thing: only one (*Skyfall*) features gun violence. Three of the most popular were animated cartoons, one is an R-rated comedy, and three (*The Avengers*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man*) are superhero films. I think it's important to note that Iron Man, Spider-Man, Batman, and others of their costumed ilk don't carry guns; they use their various exotic powers. When those fail, they ball up their good old all-American fists. Superhero movies and comic books teach a lesson that runs directly counter to the culture-of-violence idea: guns are for bad guys too cowardly to fight like men.

In video gaming, shooters still top the lists, but sales of some, including the various iterations of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*, have softened by as much as 4 percent (gaming companies like Gamasutra are notoriously coy when it comes to reporting sales figures). There's no doubt that teenage boys *and* girls like to blow off steam with games like *Hitman: Absolution*, but when you look at the bestseller lists, you find they're also loaded with sports games like *Farza Motorsport 4* and *Madden NFL*. Old standbys like *Super Mario Brothers* and *Pokémon* enjoy perennial success. When it comes to Wii, the 2012 bestseller was a pop-music sweetie called *Just Dance 4*. I'd be willing to bet no kid, no matter how disturbed, was inspired to go out and shoot up a classroom by boogeying around his living room to "Moves Like Jagger."

There are violent programs on television — *Breaking Bad*, *Justified*, and *Boardwalk Empire* all come to mind — but the only one that seems to appeal to teens is AMC's *The*

Walking Dead. There's plenty of gunplay in that one, but almost all of it is directed at people who have already expired. The Nielsen ratings for the pre-Christmas week of 2012 shows football, football, and more football (violence, yes; guns, no). There were also two sitcoms and three CBS detective shows, two from the *NCIS* franchise, where the emphasis is on detection.

The message is clear: Americans have very little interest in entertainment featuring gunplay. In the 1980s, filmmakers even introduced a new ratings category, PG-13, to protect younger children from graphic violence. The first film to be so rated was the original *Red Dawn*, and I would argue that it and all the PG-13 shooters that have followed propagate their own form of gun-porn by suggesting that shooting people equals wholesome adventure, and by refusing to acknowledge what happens to people who take a bullet in the stomach or the head. There's little or no blood in films like *Skyfall*, and certainly no torn flesh — show those things and you get slapped with an R, which keeps millions of early adolescents from getting past the box office (contrary to the belief of many conservatives who go to the movies but once a year, exhibitors tend to be quite strict about enforcing the R rating). The result has been action movies that hark back to the old *Hopalong Cassidy* days, where the baddie would simply clutch his chest and topple over. All very sanitary.

As my gun-toting friends will tell you, real death by gunshot isn't like that. If you want to see what it *is* like, check out Sam Peckinpah's Western, *The Wild Bunch*. Peckinpah shows more realistic consequences of gun violence. It's not pretty, and that's putting it mildly. A large-caliber gunshot wound is horrifying. If you think the outcry against guns was loud following Sandy Hook, imagine what it would have been like had the public been exposed to pictures of what those gore-splattered rooms and hallways looked like when the first responders entered them.

The assertion that Americans love violence and bathe in it daily is a self-serving lie promulgated by fundamentalist religious types and America's propaganda-savvy gun-pimps. It's believed by people who don't read novels, play video games, or go to many movies. People actually in touch with the culture understand that what Americans *really* want (besides knowing all about Princess Kate's pregnancy) is *The Lion King* on Broadway, a foul-talking stuffed toy named Ted at the movies, *Two and a Half Men* on TV, *Words with Friends* on their iPads, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* on their Kindles. To claim that America's "culture of violence" is responsible for school shootings is tantamount to cigarette company executives declaring that environmental pollution is the chief cause of lung cancer.

V. From My Cold Dead Hands

When I think of the politically conservative gun enthusiasts who are opposed to any form of gun control, no matter how many innocents die in acts of gun violence, I remember something a Democratic member of the House of Representatives is reputed to have said about Gerald Ford: “If he saw a hungry child as he walked to work, he would give that child his bag lunch without hesitation, then go ahead and vote against school lunch subsidies without ever seeing the contradiction.”

Most anti-control firearms enthusiasts have similarly split personalities, and the slogan you sometimes see pasted to the bumpers of their station wagons, campers, and SUVs — YOU WILL TAKE MY GUN WHEN YOU PRY IT FROM MY COLD DEAD HANDS — does not make them bad people. It only makes them walking contradictions, and which of us does not have a few contradictions in our personalities?

Most Americans who insist upon their right to own as many guns (and of as many types) as they want see themselves as independent folk who stand on their own two feet; they may send food or clothes to the victims of a natural disaster, but they sure-God don't want charity themselves. They are, by and large, decent citizens who help their neighbors, do volunteer work in the community, and would not hesitate to stop and help a stranger broke down by the side of the road. They are more apt to vote for increasing law enforcement funds than they are for increasing school improvement funds, reasoning (and not without some logic) that keeping kids safe is more important than getting them new desks. They have no problem with drug and alcohol recovery centers ... as long as they are in someone else's neighborhood. They can weep for the dead children and bereft parents of Sandy Hook, then wipe their eyes and write their congressmen and women about the importance of preserving the right to bear arms.

They declare they must keep those arms — not excluding those of the semi-automatic type — for home defense. They're plenty worried about home defense. They see the world as a fundamentally dangerous place and their homes as castles that crazy people of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* type may try to invade at any time. Ask them if they have ever actually been a victim of a home invasion, and most will say no. And yet all of them *know* of someone who has been thus victimized. *If only they'd had a gun*, they're apt to mourn.

Sometimes they do. In late 1959, two drifters, Dick Hickok and Perry Smith, invaded the Kansas home of farmer Herbert Clutter, looking for money they believed Clutter kept in a safe. They killed Clutter, his wife, and the two Clutter children still living at home. Clutter had guns, but was unable to get to them; so far as we know, he never even tried. Most home invasion victims with arms find themselves in Herbert Clutter's position: surprised and overwhelmed. Unless you sleep with your .45 auto fully loaded and under your pillow, you're apt to find yourself in the same position if the bad guys ever should show up in your bedroom, enquiring as to the location of your safe.

I guess the question is, how paranoid do you want to be? How many guns does it take to make you feel safe? And how do you simultaneously keep them loaded and close at hand, but still out of reach of your inquisitive children or grandchildren? Are you sure you wouldn't do better with a really good burglar alarm? It's true you have to remember to set the darn thing before you go to bed, but think of this — if you happened to mistake your wife or live-in partner for a crazed drug addict, you couldn't shoot her with a burglar alarm.

Exactly this sort of accident took the life of Sacramento resident Desire Miller in October 2012, when she was mistaken for a home invader by her boyfriend and fatally shot in the stomach. In the same month, retired Chicago policeman James Griffith mistook his son Michael for a burglar and killed him with a shot to the head. In New Orleans, a month earlier, Charles Williams was shot to death by his wife, who mistook him for a burglar.

These are three of hundreds in the last four years.

Those who stand firmly, even hysterically, against any kind of gun control love their neighbors and their communities, but harbor a distrust of the federal government so deep it borders on paranoia (and in some cases passes that border without so much as a howdy-do at the checkpoint). They see *any control at all* imposed on the sale and possession of firearms as the first move in a sinister plot to disarm the American public and render it defenseless to a government takeover; accidental shooting deaths, they argue, are just part of the price we pay for freedom ... and besides, that sort of thing would never happen to *me*; I'm too cool-headed. These guys and gals actually believe that dictatorship will follow disarmament, with tanks in the streets of Topeka and armed security guards in metro airports. (Oops, forgot — we already have those, and most gun advocates are in favor.) “Take away the people's right to bear arms and totalitarianism follows!” these Jeremiahs cry. “Look what happened in Germany!”

No, no, no, no.

It's true there were strict gun laws in Germany immediately following the end of World War I because, ahem, *they lost*. German gun laws had been relaxed considerably ten years after the war ended. By 1938, when Hitler was riding high, those laws were pretty much the same as American gun laws today (although I will admit American gun laws vary wildly from state to state): you needed a permit to acquire and carry a handgun, but you could have as many rifles as you wanted. Unless you were a Jew, of course, but that was the annoying thing about the Nazis, wasn't it? They killed lots of Jews, and they didn't need restrictive gun legislation to do it; it was the government that armed the killers.

Guys, gals, now hear this: No one wants to take away your hunting rifles. No one wants to take away your shotguns. No one wants to take away your revolvers, and no one wants to take away your automatic pistols, as long as said pistols hold no more than ten rounds. If you can't kill a home invader (or your wife, up in the middle of the night to get a snack from the fridge) with ten shots, you need to go back to the local shooting range.

Men (it's always men) who go postal and take out as many innocents as they can may be crazy, but that doesn't mean they're stupid. They don't arrive at the scenes of their

proposed slaughters armed with single-shot .22s or old-style six-round revolvers of the sort Jimmy Cagney was waving around at the end of *Public Enemy*; they bring heavy artillery to the gig. Some back down, but when they don't, carnage follows, the kind that gives cops and EMTs nightmares for years afterward. One only wishes Wayne LaPierre and his NRA board of directors could be drafted to some of these scenes, where they would be required to put on booties and rubber gloves and help clean up the blood, the brains, and the chunks of intestine still containing the poor wads of half-digested food that were some innocent bystander's last meal.

Jeff Cox — one of those who had a moment of clarity and backed down — was carrying a .223 assault rifle, probably a Daewoo with a thirty-round capacity.

Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, carried a Glock 19 with a mag capacity of fifteen rounds. He had nineteen clips for it. In addition, he carried a Walther P22 with a ten-shot mag. In all, he was carrying four hundred rounds of ammo. He killed thirty-two students and wounded seventeen more before killing himself.

Dylan Klebold, one of the Columbine shooters, carried an Intratec DC9M machine-pistol, more commonly called a Tec-9. With an extended box-type magazine, the Tec-9 can fire up to fifty rounds without reloading. Harris and Klebold killed thirteen and wounded twenty-one.

Like Seung-Hui Cho, Jared Loughner carried a Glock 19. He killed six, including a child of 9, and wounded fourteen. According to one witness to the event that seriously wounded Congressman Gabby Giffords, Loughner was able to fire so fast that the killing was over before many of the horrified onlookers realized what was happening and opened their mouths to scream.

James Holmes, who killed twelve and wounded fifty-eight in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater, was carrying an M-16 rifle (thirty-round capacity) and a .40 caliber Glock, with a clip that can hold up to seventeen rounds.

In addition to the Glock 10 Adam Lanza used to kill himself, he carried a Bushmaster AR-15, a light, easily handled, pistol-gripped semiautomatic rifle that can fire thirty rounds in under a minute. In his war against the first grade, Lanza fired multiple thirty-round clips.

As for the Glock: it was pried from his cold dead hands.

VI. No Solutions; Reasonable Measures

I have nothing against gun owners, sport shooters, or hunters (as long as it's varmints they're after, or, in the case of bigger game, they eat what they kill), but the weapons noted above are not used to shoot skeet or kill deer. If you used a Bushmaster on a deer in anything but single-shot mode, you'd turn the poor thing into hair-covered meatloaf. Semi-automatics have only two purposes. One is so owners can take them to the shooting range once in awhile, yell yeehaw, and get all horny at the rapid fire and the burning vapor spurting from the end of the barrel. Their other use — their *only* other use — is to kill people.

In the wake of the Sandy Hook shootings, gun advocates have to ask themselves if their zeal to protect even the outer limits of gun ownership have anything to do with preserving the Second Amendment as a whole, or if it's just a stubborn desire to hold onto what they have, and to hell with the collateral damage. If that's the case, let me suggest that *fuck you, Jack, I'm okay* is not a tenable position, morally speaking.

I read a jaw-dropping online defense of these weapons from a California woman recently. Guns, she said, are just tools. Like spoons, she said. Would you outlaw spoons simply because some people use them to eat too much?

Lady, let's see you try to kill twenty schoolkids with a fucking *spoon*.

Guns are not tools — not unless you reverse a pistol and use the butt to hammer in a nail. Guns are weapons. Autos and semi-autos are weapons of mass destruction. When lunatics want to make war on the unarmed and unprepared, these are the weapons they use. In most cases, they are bought legally. These killing-machines are for sale on the Internet as I speak. The real question is hackneyed, but I suppose it has to be asked: How many have to die before we will give up these dangerous toys? Do the murders have to be in the mall where you shop? In your own neighborhood? In your own family? One hopes for a little more public spirit and citizenship than that, even in this politically double-fucked country. A gun is not a bit like a spoon. A gun is like a gun.

In January 2013, President Obama announced — to the predictable howls of outrage from America's right wing — twenty-three executive orders and three major initiatives to help curb the spread of guns and stiffen penalties for illegal use and possession. (The NRA's response was a vile ad suggesting that Obama's daughters were receiving special treatment, as though a terrorist attack on the Chief Executive's family were not even a possibility ... don't these guys watch shows like *Homeland*?) What it all boils down to is a trio of reasonable measures to curb gun violence. I list them in ascending order, from the one most likely to happen to the one least likely.

- *Comprehensive and universal background checks*. This probably will happen, and not a moment too soon. For one thing, it would entail a waiting period, and that alone might

stop a number of would-be mass killers. Remember that two school shooters, Dustin Pierce and Michael Carneal, expressed incredulity at what they had done only moments later. James Holmes, the movie theater shooter, was apprehended as he stood beside his car, in a daze. Violent emotions (especially in teenagers like Pierce, Carneal, and Loukaitis) are like spring tornadoes in the Midwest: their departure is as sudden as their violent arrival. Given a chance to think, even for 48 hours, would be enough to stop at least some of these guys. Not all — Harris and Klebold planned for months, and only an act of God would have stopped them — but some; the ones who look at what they've done and express disbelief at how disastrously their lives have changed. As a corollary to these background checks, there have to be stiff penalties for those who lie about their pasts in order to obtain weapons, and the penalties have to be enforced. Not just a slap on the wrist, either. We're talking jail time here.

- *Ban the sale of clips and magazines containing more than ten rounds.* I think that's too many; to borrow the title of an old sitcom, I believe eight is enough. But I'd happily accept ten. It's better than thirty. Or fifty. Or a hundred. I believe the NRA's idea of putting armed guards in schools is ridiculous — think of the last elderly, truss-wearing crossing guard you saw — but suppose it happened? If I'm a shooter with enough sanity left in my haunted brain to choose a high-capacity weapon, I'm going to scope out the guards first, and they're going to be the first ones to go. But a shooter with only eight or ten rounds at his disposal really might be taken down, if not by an elderly rent-a-cop, then by a brave teacher or bystander. Dawn Hochsprung, the principal of the Sandy Hook school, died apparently in an effort to subdue Adam Lanza. If Lanza had been reloading after shooting his way in, she might have succeeded. He was crazy, but he was also a scrawny wisp of a kid. The Bushmaster was his equalizer, he had plenty of ammo left, so he shot and killed Hochsprung before she could get to him. I wish with all my heart that she had tackled him, beat the crazy little fuck's head bloody against the floor, and gotten a medal from the President on national TV. She was too brave to die the way she did.
- *Ban the sale of assault weapons such as the Bushmaster and the AR-15.* This is the one that probably won't happen, partly because of the NRA's influence on a great many congressmen and senators, but also because plenty of gun advocates cling to their semi-automatics the way Amy Winehouse and Michael Jackson clung to the shit that was killing them. There are rationalizations but very little actual discourse on the subject of banning assault weapons. What we get mostly are incoherent screams of outrage and furious references to “the liberal agenda.” When I listen to gun advocates and NRA brass on this subject, I get an image of a little kid doing a tantrum in the dirt, rolling around with his hands plastered over his ears. *No! No! No! No! Also, La-la-la-la, I can't HEAR you, can't HEAR you, can't HEAR you!*

What they can't hear — because they don't want to — is that the restriction of heavy

weaponry works, possibly because most of these yo-yos are so dismally screwed up they probably need a map to put their pants on in the morning. James Holmes may have *thought* he was the Joker, but he really wasn't; he was a dope with a few very large screws loose in his thinking machinery. Most of them are.

Here's a dope for you: Martin Bryant, of Port Arthur, in Tasmania. On April 28, 1996, he went on a spree with an AR-15 he purchased through a newspaper ad — easy-peasy. This happy asshole mowed down over a dozen in a crowded café, moved on to a gift shop where he killed some more, then moseyed to a parking garage where he killed yet more. The final tally was thirty-five dead and twenty-three wounded. He called his spree “lots of fun,” and in court laughed wildly when the judge read out the charges and intoned the names of the dead. He is now serving 1,035 years in Ridson Prison, and that should probably be enough. For him, at least. Maybe still not quite enough for the grieving relatives of the dead and the maimed.

For Australia, though, it *was* enough. The government either banned or restricted automatic weapons (as well as pump shotguns of the sort Eric Harris used at Columbine). As for those autos already out there, the government authorized a huge buyback that eventually netted 600,000 weapons. It amounted to about twenty percent of the country's private firepower. Since the Bryant killings and the resulting tough gun laws, homicides by firearm have declined almost 60 percent in Australia. The guns-for-everyone advocates hate that statistic, and dispute it, but as Bill Clinton likes to say, it's not opinion. It's arithmetic, honey.

In the end, this sort of ban can only be accomplished in one way, and that's if gun advocates get behind it. I can hear people laughing and saying pigs will whistle and horses will fly before that happens, but hey, I'm an optimist. If enough American gun-owners urge Congress to do the right thing, and insist the NRA climb aboard, the results might surprise you. Gun owners aren't dragons, and they don't have to practice Gerald Ford two-mindedness, simultaneously mourning the victims and denying the role speed-shooters play in these tragedies, forever.

I didn't pull *Rage* from publication because the law demanded it; I was protected under the First Amendment, and the law *couldn't* demand it. I pulled it because in my judgment it might be hurting people, and that made it the responsible thing to do. Assault weapons will remain readily available to crazy people until the powerful pro-gun forces in this country decide to do a similar turnaround. They must accept responsibility, recognizing that responsibility is not the same as *culpability*. They need to say, “We support these measures not because the law demands we support them, but because it's the sensible thing.”

Until that happens, shooting sprees will continue. We will see the BREAKING NEWS chyrons, the blurry cellphone videos of running people, the tearful relatives, the rolling hearses. We will also see, time and time and time again, how easy it is for the crazies among us to get their hands on portable and efficient weapons of mass destruction.

Because, boys and girls, that's how it shakes out.

Epilogue

Shortly after I finished this piece, a New Mexico teenager gunned down his parents and three younger siblings. He intended to take the AR-15 he found in his parents' closet to a nearby Walmart and shoot people until "eventually killed while exchanging gunfire with law enforcement." (His statement.) A friend talked him out of that part.

About eighty people die of gunshot wounds in America every day.