

LOADED GUN

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My father-in-law's rifle leans against the wall of his study, a stack of ammo boxes by its butt. It wasn't there a week ago. "It's usually in the closet," my husband Dev says.

But there's so much going on—new overnight help to interview, lunch to make, Dev's mom repeating, "My! But it's windy!" three times in thirty seconds. So much that Dev forgets to check if the gun is loaded. I myself don't know how.

The room with the gun is where my father-in-law, Phil, watches the news at full hectoring volume. At ninety-seven, his hearing is almost as bad as his eyesight. The news he favors taps into his fear of the big bad world and anyone who isn't him. He feels safe huddled with others who fear difference.

Phil berates his wife for repeating herself but tells us again and again how dirty and dangerous the streets of San Francisco are. We live there, but he doesn't want our opinion. He knows it's dangerous because he saw it on Fox News.

Despite having a fraught relationship with his dad, Dev and I are doing what we can to honor his parents' wish to stay in their own home. We're in our early sixties, with full schedules and demanding work. But now our lives seem to be on hold as we manage theirs. It's a mostly thankless task. Our oft-invisible labor feeds their delusion of self-sufficiency.

Tonight, we're the overnight help, as we often are. We're in the guest room, in twin beds with comforters that slide to the floor, a lamp too dim to read by, and a baby monitor on the nightstand between us. In the past two months Phil has fallen three times trying to get to the bathroom at night, leaving pools of blood and wondering the next day why there's a gash in his head. So now he's in a hospital bed, its sides ratcheted up, and when he needs to pee, he wakes up Dev over the monitor to help him to the bathroom. My husband's parents are now the kids we never wanted.

But tonight, instead of Phil's crackling voice over the intercom, we startle awake to his screams. Dev is out of bed and down the hall before I've even sat up. I hear Phil from the bedroom. "I was having a nightmare." He sounds embarrassed. "Someone was breaking in." I wait for Dev to come back, grateful that the rifle wasn't within his father's reach. He could easily have mistaken Dev for an intruder. *Bang!* One son down, one to go. Although the other son never comes around, so I guess he's safe.

Dev returns to bed, half-asleep and fully stressed.

"First thing in the morning," I tell him, "check that gun, okay?" The rest of the night, I lie awake, cataloging the ever-growing list of what I'm afraid of: my health situation, a waning of purpose, the dwindling of my daring.

Once I was known as adventurous. Not bungee-cord-off-a-bridge adventurous, but the travel kind where you live in places that don't make people's bucket lists, like Peru when the Sendero Luminoso was bombing buildings, and Guatemala as the civil war was winding down. I braved the unknown, foolishly perhaps, to get as far away from people—my family of origin, say—as possible. In retrospect, those moves may actually have been a bid for emotional safety. But no one—myself included—saw it that way at the time. How many times was I cautioned: *but isn't that dangerous?*

In my late twenties, I ran into someone I'd known in college. "I heard you were working as an exotic dancer in Nicaragua," he said. I had to laugh at the idea of me ever showing that much skin. But I wasn't unhappy that rumor had me out on the edge. The edgy details didn't matter. These days, I'm so low on audacity that it's me asking others: *but isn't that dangerous?*

My father-in-law is hard to love but I do my best to be calm and reassuring. I ask him about his model ships, his time in the navy, when he met his wife. I don't ask if he's always belittled her, or why he took a belt to his sons. I can be nice because he's not my father, and because I smell his fear.

Phil is afraid of losing his ability to manage his own life, not realizing the extent that he already has. He's afraid of getting old, though he

already is. He says he doesn't want to live but he's obviously terrified of dying.

Empathy works its not-always-welcome alchemy, and suddenly I am that dying, frightened man. And his wife and son. And yes, even his daughter-in-law, the self that so often gets lost in caregiving scenarios.

A nurse shows me to my third waiting room of the day, a narrow alcove with three metal chairs. Each waiting room is smaller than the last; not many women make it as far as I have. When you've had breast cancer and they find something, they don't send you home. They make you wait. It's been three hours since the clerk with orange hair and a sharksmile face mask checked me in.

My mammogram had necessitated a sonogram, and now they've called in the radiologist to weigh in on an anomaly near my surgery scar. The tech showed me on the screen what the doctor would look at: a black spot in a fibrous landscape of gray and white.

A nightmare from a few nights ago comes rushing back. Dev and I had bought a house. But excitement turned to alarm as we discovered hole after gaping hole in the floor. A stench drifted up through the floorboards. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something that scuttled and whooshed, its endless limbs undulating, its tiny head held high. It could fly, legs glued together to form wings, and I knew it might spring at my face and latch on. It was terrifying but also strangely beautiful, which didn't stop me from having to clench so I wouldn't shit myself—for fear of this monster invading my home and cancer reinvading my body. Another gowned woman is shown to the waiting area. We exchange grimaces, then stare at our own patches of wall. Another memory comes up through my psyche's floorboards. A week earlier, I'd videoconferenced with a psychiatrist, looking for relief for my insomnia. Drugs, that is. "No wonder you can't sleep," the psychiatrist said. "You're living with the stress of a chronic illness."

"I was fully treated," I said, "and there's no evidence of disease now." "But you're still on cancer meds," she countered.

"Yes, but it's not chronic," I replied. "My oncologist calls it survivorship."

The psychiatrist had the gall to laugh. "Most oncologists are in denial," she said. "I think they encourage the same in their patients." At least she gave me the drugs in the end.

A nurse in flowered scrubs appears. She scans her clipboard but doesn't speak. The other woman and I freeze in our chairs. This is not the time to pause, however briefly.

She finally turns to me. "Everything looks fine," she says. "There's something there, to be sure—likely a pocket filled with liquid. But it's benign."

I ask reasonable questions but can't hear the answers for the blood pounding in my ears. I leave the building and return to regular life, fully clothed, body parts my own. Back to where distraction or denial lets me get on with life, which suddenly feels so monstrous and so beautiful at the same time.

I confide in a friend about the strain of caring for Dev's parents, how it feels like I don't have much choice. The brother isn't stepping up and Dev needs help.

"Of course you have a choice," she snaps. I'm taken aback, then remember she's chosen to steer clear of her aging dad and his awful wife. A guard for her own mental health. Her siblings have taken up the slack.

I assure her that I'm no saint. I didn't visit my father that often when he was in decline, not wanting to face my own shaming stepmother. We talk about how gender roles and societal expectations still loom large. The pressure to be a dutiful wife, daughter, whatever female role you can think of, is internalized in ways that squeak out when you least expect it. I'm the one, for instance, who took Dev's mom to the bathroom when she had her first accident. I never imagined I'd be rinsing excrement out of another woman's underwear.

When I tell my own still-youthful mother what's going on with Dev's parents, she says, "Good. You can use what you're learning for when I get there."

I frown, hoping my mother doesn't notice. Are we fated to choose between guilt for not doing enough and resentment for being asked to do more than we can handle?

In our tiny apartment, Dev and I recover from our latest parental visit. We're both utterly depleted. I'm drunker than I've been in years, and I want nothing more than to get even drunker. Turns out being the adult in the room is hard work, especially if you're faking it.

I love Dev. Otherwise I wouldn't be helping out and I wouldn't be able to say terrible things, like what I say right now: "Your parents are killing us." It's the truth, though not the whole truth. Sometimes we're even proud of how we're handling this, and hope that it's making us better people—deeper and more empathetic. Still, I feel like I'm drowning, Dev right along with me, neither able to rescue the other.

I have to get out into the cool night air. It's dark but the streetlights show the way to a busier part of our street, with bars whose chatter and stale-beer smell pour out onto the sidewalk. I imagine sitting in one, sipping a house white that tastes like sucking on a dime. But bad wine really isn't the problem; it's that everyone's so damned young. I'm probably their parents' age.

Dev welcomes me home with open arms. Together we agree: yes, his parents are killing us. They'll keep killing us until they're dead. But also, they're not. We can set boundaries. We agree not to make our relationship a victim of our sapped energies. More importantly—and on a practical level—his parents have enough savings to hire people to help. We might be spending down any future inheritance, but agree that

a current livable life is more important than whatever might come our way later.

Decades ago, at an emotional low point, I had to remind myself regularly that I wasn't a piece of crap. These days, I have to remind myself that even though death is all around me, and that yes, everyone dies, I myself am Not. Dead. Yet.

In letters to fellow writers, Anton Chekhov, the Russian playwright and short-story master, wrote that if you introduce a gun in the beginning of a story, it needs to be fired by the end.

Chekhov's Gun Law. The idea is that you need to make good on the threat. But I think the real threat is the moment—which may last years—*before* the gun finally goes off.

My father-in-law's gun sits idle, but its purpose is to go off. To shoot, and maybe kill. A cell hides within it the seed of cancer. Will it be triggered? If it did once, will it bloom again? A body lives and breathes and suffers and loves, but it is designed to die.

It's really our lives that are the loaded guns; we're all waiting for the final *bang*. The wait is what gets us. The endless moment before it happens. The suspense.

In the meantime, we lie awake, anxious but astounded to be alive, listening through the static for news of what comes ne