

## Guns along the North Fork

Melvin stepped out his front door, yelled something about the goddamned goats, and fired several shots. In the cabin 150 feet east of him, closer to the North Fork of the Burnt River, Cindy put her baby, Jamy, on the floor and upended both her tables against the front wall for more shielding from possible bullets. She grabbed John's .357 magnum pistol, scooped Jamy up with her left hand, supported her on her left hip, and ran into the kitchen just as Melvin fired four more shots.

"I don't think he's shooting at us." She put Jamy down on the kitchen floor. "You stay there and be quiet. I'm going to try to see what he's doing."

She looked out the window, her pistol covering her view, ready to fire or to hit the floor if Melvin fired again. The goats were all right. She couldn't see any damage to anything. She picked Jamy up. "We got to try to intercept your Daddy."

They slipped out the back door. Cindy kept her cabin between them and Melvin's cabin until she reached dense willows by the river, twice as tall as she was. Carrying Jamy tightly against her, she ran on a trail through willows and emerged from the willows where only a few ponderosa pine trees, grass and flowers of the meadow stood between them and Melvin's cabin.

From there, she ran full speed across the meadow to the highway. Mountain dusk deepened toward dark. She slowed down and watched her feet. She gained the shoulder of the highway where the long gravel road to the cabins turned off, and she stopped John as he turned off the highway. When Cindy finished telling him what had happened, John said, "Let's go up the river and in the back door."

"Maybe we shouldn't go back yet."

"That's where we live."

They walked the gravel road, off the road and down through dense willow bush toward the river and then up to the back of the cabin. The goats munched hay in their pen, dark shadows in deep dusk. Their dog came to meet Cindy and John and Jamy, not particularly nervous. The animals were used to lots of gunfire, with all the shooting practice that went on at the place. John and Cindy, with Jamy riding Cindy's hip, went in the back

door of their cabin.

Melvin stepped out on the porch of his cabin and fired six shots. He yelled, "I'm a logger-killing son-of-a-bitch and I can't stand close neighbors."

John dove for his rifle and scrambled to the window. "Shit. He went back inside before I could get lined up to shoot."

John watched Melvin's cabin for a while. He said, "I don't think he was shooting down this way. He'd have to step farther out and turn this direction. I'm going up the hill. Keep lined up on his front porch. If he starts to shoot this direction, shoot him."

It was quiet for more than a half-hour. John slipped in the back door, under the .357 magnum Cindy held ready. He said, "Watch that thing. It has a hell of a hair-trigger."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Here comes somebody. Might be Jon. He said he'd come to visit about dark. I'll get him in here."

He caught me before their driveway. He said, "Shut your lights off and keep down. Melvin's been shooting, and I don't know what he'll do next."

We left my pickup down by the river and went in their cabin's back door. As we went in, cut off by John's cabin from a view of Melvin's, Melvin fired several shots. When we got inside, John said, "Cindy, why didn't you shoot him?"

"He was shooting into the hill. He isn't shooting down this way."

"He's shooting. How soon will he be shooting down this way? These thin walls wouldn't even slow a bullet down. Listen Jon, I went around the hill and down behind those two big aspens. I lined this forty-five up on his front door and cocked it and waited. He opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. He's drunk. I almost squeezed the trigger before I realized he didn't have a gun in his hand. Now I wish I'd squeezed it anyway, because I'm going to have to kill him, and then it would have been finished."

"And you'd be facing a murder charge."

"I think a jury would let me off, if they knew everything leading up to it."

"If I was a jury member, I'd want to know you did everything possible to avoid a shoot-out. Killing him because he's shooting at the hill isn't going out of your way for peaceful settlement."

"If he starts shooting into the house, he can drop some people in a hurry. He knows the lay-out of this house."

“He hasn’t fired this way.”

“As far as we know, he hasn’t. I’ve already decided Melvin’s dead. He is such a threat to me and my family, I can’t let him live. There’s no effective defense against him if he starts shooting into our house.”

“Judge, jury, and executioner. Define the crime, the intention, and the punishment.”

“I don’t care about punishing him at all. Just about being damn sure none of my family gets killed. Cindy thought he fired down toward the goats the first time.”

Cindy said, “I don’t really know that. I wasn’t looking at him or them. Seems like if he’d been shooting at them, he’d have hit one of them. He just shouted something about the goats before he started shooting. I didn’t hear all of it, just something about god-damned goats.”

John took a deep breath. let it out, shoved his pistol into its holster belted to his side, and pushed the tables closer to the wall. He said, “I don’t know what comes next.”

I said, “You could pull out until things calm down.”

“You could store snowballs in hell, if you wanted to keep some through the summer.”

“You can’t shoot neighbors because they might pose a threat. I think he’d have to be threatening great bodily harm or death before you could kill him and get clear on self-defense.”

“He is threatening great bodily harm or death. What the hell do you think’s gonna happen if one of those bullets he’s firing off hits somebody? I can’t stand guard twenty-four hours a day, waiting to see if he does shoot down in this direction.”

“He might not intend to try to shoot you at all. He’s drunk.”

“We might never know what he intends. Listen, Jon, when I was up there on the hill, I could see through the window. He stood in front of the mirror doing quick draw, saying, ‘go for it Atchley.’ He’s got dreams of gunning me down in a quick-draw shoot out.”

“Aren’t you glad for all those hours you spent teaching him to get the metal out of the leather faster?”

“He learned a lot, too. But he still wouldn’t stand a chance against me. He knows that. That’s why he’s drunk doing quick draws in front of the mirror instead of facing me. He’s nuts. Last spring, fifteen bird watchers walked through the willows down by the river. Melvin jumped out of the willows, a pistol on each hip, carrying a rifle. He said, ‘This is private property.’ Then he went back into the brush and fired several rounds. They were so scared, it’s a wonder some of them didn’t die of a

heart attack.”

John kept talking, “You know as well as I do, he doesn’t take care of this place. He’s got nothing more than permission to use a cabin, same as me. He’s nuts. Gene’s been preaching to him how civilization’s going to break down, and mobs from the cities will come up to the mountains and try to take everything away from us. Melvin wants it to hurry up and happen, because he wants to kill some people. He says he can’t stand not knowing what it feels like to kill a man.”

“Talking it isn’t doing it. It isn’t legal to kill people because they’re crazy.”

“If I could get him to come out and face me and go for his gun, I could do it. But he wouldn’t do it. He’d be chicken to face me like that.”

“Call the police. Call the sheriff. Get them in on it.”

“Then what happens when they won’t do anything, and I have to kill him anyway, and they have all the evidence against me that I’ve given them? I’d like to call my Dad. If I kill him, I’m going to need help getting out of here or getting a lawyer or whatever I have to do. I can’t leave here to go to the phone. Melvin had Cindy scared out of her mind.”

Cindy said, “He still does. But I don’t want you to do anything that’ll put you in prison.”

“Jon, will you guard the place? Cindy’s got the three-fifty-seven. There’s the ought-six and the shotgun.”

“Get ready to kill my neighbor as the culmination of another’s quarrel?”

“It isn’t a quarrel. I never said or did anything at all to him to bring this on. You’re the one saying go phone and bring the law into it. I’m ready to just shoot him and be done with it.”

“I don’t think he’s going to shoot anybody, but I will stand guard in case he decides to try. Give me the shotgun and a dark blanket. I’ll lie by the trail under the blanket. If he starts down here, or if he starts to shoot down here, I’ll tell him to stop. If he doesn’t, I’ll squeeze both barrels off head high, and then I’ll try to figure out what comes next. But you have to call the police.”

I didn’t think much about what a strange situation I was in, opposed to violence, but ready to kill a man. I was sure I wasn’t going to have to shoot anyone. Melvin had been quiet for quite a while.

A long time passed while I lay on the ground in the dark night under the pines. I heard John’s pickup leave the highway and stop down the gravel road a ways and the door shut. After a while, he spoke from the darkness under the pine trees. “He

doing anything?"

"Nothing."

"Come on." We went in. "Dad and Jerry and Jim are coming over. They should be here in a couple of hours." John looked out the window as he talked and kept his pistol ready to fire.

"Did you call the police?"

"The state police say they can't do anything. He didn't damage or endanger life, limb, or property. We could file complaints, but if he was locked up at all, it wouldn't be for long. They won't come out. They say a police car pulling in here might blow it up, when otherwise it might calm down. He says if I have to shoot him to defend my life or the lives of any of us, shoot him. Try to have witnesses to prove self-defense."

"I wouldn't say he had a gun in his hand if he was just picking his nose. I wouldn't lie about what I saw."

"Yeah, I know. One way or another, Melvin isn't going to be alive this time tomorrow."

John's dad and brothers showed up at midnight. They walked up the river, came in the back door, through the kitchen, and into the front room. Jerry poked a rifle out the front window. He had a pistol in a holster on his hip. John's dad leaned his rifle in a corner and took off his jacket. He had an automatic holstered under his arm. Jim had a single-shot two-forty-three with a scope.

I said, "Did you guys leave any guns at home?"

"This isn't all the guns we own, but we brought enough."

"See if you can make your heads work like you can make your guns work. See if you can come up with something other than killing somebody. There doesn't seem to be any hurry. You have enough guns lined up to dance him fifty feet off the other side of the porch if he makes a wrong move. And if he never does make a move, you're stuck with coming up with something anyway."

John's dad said, "The sheriff said if he really is a threat to your life, you'll probably have to shoot him. There isn't much they can do about it with him doing no more than he's done. There's no law against having a lot of guns around."

"Lucky for you guys."

Jerry said, "Who the hell are you, you got so much to say?"

"I paid my dues. I was the front line while John went to Austin Junction to phone you and the police. I made the commitment to kill Melvin if he attacked or came toward this house. If he was going to do anything, he would have done it then."

John said, "He's right. I don't like a lot of what he's saying, but he earned the right to talk. Maybe we need to hear what he's saying."

I said, "I think he's passed out."

Cindy lit a kerosene lamp and turned it low in the kitchen. She said, "I could fix something to eat. Does anybody want something to eat?"

John's dad said, "Coffee would be good."

We waited in the nearly dark room. A little light came through the doorway from the kerosene lamp in the kitchen. Cindy brought coffee out, and we drank coffee. John's dad smoked a pipe. Then he said, "What are you going to do?"

John said, "I can't stand guard and work. I have to work. I have to have a place my family can live in peace. So I have to kill him. Who knows when he'll go from shooting around to shooting someone? I worked hard to put this logging operation together, make a living and have a place for my family to live. We're staying, and he's going. He's going feet first."

I said, "I'm going home. I think I dampen the high spirits of this party. I'm saying the solution isn't to kill him. The whole world is too ready to jump into terminal violence to solve any problem. We need a few hold-outs for peace. But I don't live here, and I'm not you, and I don't have to deal with Melvin. If you kill him, I don't want to see it happen and have to testify in court in a way that might add to your problems. When it's over, come down and tell me what happened." I walked out the back door and down the river, felt the trail with my feet through the darkness, with a little bit of light from stars in the mountain sky, got into my pickup, and drove home.

John told me later he waited for Melvin to do something. He hoped to finish it that night, but nothing happened the rest of the night.

Late morning, the state police showed up. Melvin was hung over when they woke him up. He was contrite and emotional. He said he didn't even remember most of what he'd done when he was drunk. He wanted the police to take his guns, but they wouldn't do it. He hadn't broken any laws, as long as he didn't shoot anyone or damage anyone's property. He didn't directly threaten anyone. He had legal rights to own his guns. If shooting was illegal, nearly everybody would be in jail.

The police did help line up some counseling for drinking, but by the time Melvin's appointment came around, he didn't want to give up his guns anymore, and he didn't want counseling. He'd had time to recover from the hangover and to

realize nobody was going to put him in jail. He packed up and moved. He probably never knew how close he came to getting killed. Maybe John and Cindy, even Jamy came close to getting shot, too. I never understood what was in Melvin's mind that night or any time.

John and I cut firewood together the next year. John said once in a while, he saw Melvin, sitting in his rig, watching him. John didn't do anything about it. He already packed a revolver everywhere he went. He figured he was ready for whatever Melvin tried to do.

I drove up to see John and Cindy and Jamy late one afternoon. Melvin sat in his rig, reading a newspaper, across the highway from the road into John's place, parked out in the meadow with nothing but cows for company. I didn't say anything to John about it. When I left, just about dark, Melvin was gone.

In Sumpter, I heard Melvin quit drinking. He moved a trailer up on Pine Creek and prospected for gold. Last time I saw him, at the Laundromat in Sumpter, he was more rational than I'd ever known him to be, willing to allow two sides to a conversation, still sworn off drinking.

John and I talked about violence. Once John asked me, "How come I never feel like fighting you? Just about every other friend I ever had, I fought with him some time."

I said, "Because I never attack you personally. I'll talk about what you do however I want to, but I won't talk bad about you or treat you bad."

"I guess I don't understand the difference."

"People tell me, 'That John is a bad man.' I always say, 'No. He's not bad. He just acts bad sometimes.'"

"Sometimes I do wonder why I've been in so many fights."

"That's easy to answer. Because you're so ready to fight. That's your perspective. Isn't it obvious? Anyone who packs a forty-five everywhere he goes, for example, probably has a high consciousness of the propensity toward violence in other people. Wouldn't that be safe to say?"

"Seems like it."

"Awareness of it stimulates it. People respond to your expectations of them. I refuse to respond to your expectations of violence, so you've stopped expecting it of me."

Over the next few months, through a number of visits back and forth, we had a lot to talk about and quite a bit to argue about. He shot hawks to keep them from killing his chickens or sometimes, after they'd already done it. I said, "John, it's your

responsibility to make it so hawks can't get your chickens. Don't shoot hawks. What do you have sex-link chickens for out here anyway? They're totally insensitive to predatory birds. Fence them so hawks can't get them, or change the kind of chickens, or both."

"Why are a few hawks so important?"

"Because somebody has to care. Somebody has to make a difference in the way we approach wildlife. Leave the predators alone. Change what you're doing so they aren't a problem to you."

"Any predators?"

"Any predators."

"How come you think you can tell me that?"

"You need telling. You know it's the truth. You read enough. You talk the language. You speak fairly intelligent conversations. Act out your intelligence."

"Can you shoot?"

"Yes. I haven't owned any guns for a long time, but I still know how to shoot."

"Let's see what you can do with a few rounds through my forty-five."

"We'll have to go by the house for ear protectors."

We did. I told Laura and Juniper and Amanda, "We're going to do some shooting down behind the phone house," so they wouldn't be alarmed by the shots.

The sun dropped toward the hard, black rock surmounting Greenhorn Mountain. Hot summer dust blew in the afternoon breeze. We set up targets in the ravine close to the river. I placed six shots from a rest, six standing, slow fire, and six standing, as rapidly as I could cock the revolver and pull the trigger, in tighter patterns than John could achieve that day, which might have done the hawk population some good; I wasn't sure. I think he quit killing hawks. It wasn't long before his chickens were gone anyway, eaten by the family or by predators; I didn't pursue the details.

John finished his logging operation that fall. Cindy packed up the family and their material possessions, and they moved over the mountains to western Oregon.

Last time I saw John, he still carried a pistol in a holster belted to his side. His reason for wearing a gun wasn't just Melvin. Several people John had tangled with swore they'd kill him. He considered them serious enough about it that he wouldn't go unarmed, and, "You could run into someone you didn't even know who wants to kill you," he said.



Last time I saw John, I still didn't carry a pistol or own guns. Man's world might be deteriorating into more and more violence, but I think we influence everything around us by our thoughts, by our expectations. If we prepare for violence, we're likely to find violence.

Before I learned my state of mind strongly influences my surroundings, before I learned the power of peace and love, I lived with expectations of disorder and violence, and I found disorder and violence.

I changed the way I think.

I don't carry a gun and practice getting it out quickly and shooting it rapidly and accurately.

I practice peaceful, orderly existence. I practice to realize peaceful, orderly existence surrounds me. My existence becomes more peaceful and loving. I like the existence carefully cultivating my thoughts and expectations toward peace and love brings me.