


Fallout Shelter

by *Laura S. Jones*

 **N** F I WERE TALLER, it might have worked. I knew the head and the heart were the only acceptable targets, but my arms just weren't long enough to point the barrel squarely at either one and still be able to reach the trigger. I thought about sawing off the barrel, but not for long. I'm not even sure we have a saw. I guess I could have tried harder to jury-rig a set up. My one effort was to sit on the floor and put my right big toe on the trigger, aiming and steadying the barrel with my knees and hands. It was a disaster. The barrel was pointing at my left shoulder. I tried to nudge it closer to my chest which made the gun slip out of my awkward embrace. As we toppled, it or I knocked the lamp and the trash can over and ripped off part of my toenail. Our fat tabby cat screeched and ran for her life from the noise.

I don't care what people say; suicide is not the easy way out. Even attempted suicide is damn hard. If it wasn't going to be easy, I wasn't going to do it. That realization made me laugh, since refusing to take the easy path is what got me here.

I put the gun down lengthways on the desk. It served nicely as a giant paperweight, for now anyways, even though it teetered a little. My desk was cluttered with files and papers that came home with me when I was fired last week. The mounded white pile looked like frosting, transforming my walnut desk into a chocolate cupcake. The bay window was open, letting in a breeze that stirred the leaves of the ficus and would have made hay with the papers but for the gun. I pondered the photos along the back edge of my desk. They were the same as those that graced offices everywhere, except now in duplicate. Two photos of me and Mary, Mary and the kids, and each child separately.

"I'm sorry, Mary," I said, scanning all the images of her before settling on the driftwood framed photo of us on the beach in Maine. It was taken five years ago, I think. That was the last time we took a vacation together. Not for lack of money or time, but rather lack of desire.

Neither of us seemed to want a break from the safe routine of life, until now. "But I did what I had to do."

Mary and I bought this gun soon after we moved into our first house, a whole lifetime ago. The house was a rental that had seen better days but that we were lucky to get. We had just gotten engaged. With a home and a yard, an almost-wife and a new puppy to protect, as well as my own manhood to define, the gun seemed an appropriate response to our sketchy neighborhood. Our bedroom was on the side facing the alley where the strange, scrabbling noises often came from. Probably raccoons or opossums, people said, but this was still the south, and I knew it wouldn't hurt to be prepared for the worst. The old house wasn't easy to secure; the windows were low to the ground and some didn't lock properly. We had an alarm system, but we couldn't afford to buy the equipment to arm each of the windows, and we couldn't set it at night because the puppy might set off the motion detector. I loved that house, though. It came with great neighbors. The kind who were open-minded about us and threw lavish parties and shared flowers and vegetables from their gardens over the back fence. Mary and I didn't have one green thumb between us.

The house sat on a hill. It was one story with a white painted brick exterior and a carport instead of a garage. It looked as if sometime in the mid 1950s, a Midwestern ranch house met and married a Louisiana shotgun house and produced 320 Beechnut Lane (It was the perfect address since I studied trees at the time. Mary and I reveled in meaningful coincidences like that when we were young, as proof of the perfection of our bond.). There was only one hallway, about two-thirds of the way to the back, sort of a square on the east side of the house. It separated the master bedroom from the other two bedrooms and from the kitchen. Other than that, the rooms opened directly into one another. You would think it would be weird, but it was perfect for us. The oddities made us feel special and clever, like our house was a tiny maze for which only we had the map. It would be horrible now. We have grown to need rooms that can more easily be closed off.

A policeman friend advised us that a shotgun was the best weapon for home defense, especially since neither Mary nor I knew how to shoot or wanted to learn. He explained that only the most determined or whacked-out criminals would stick around once they heard the

sound of a shell being loaded in the chamber. Kah-chek. That made sense to me, so one Saturday I went to a gun show in a convention center somewhere in one of our northern suburbs. It seemed best that Mary not go. I remember that I paid less than two hundred dollars cash for the gun and two boxes of ammunition. The gun is black and shiny and surprisingly heavy with what seems to be a fake wood handle, and it has a shorter barrel than those shotguns you see in westerns. But still not short enough for my purpose today. Maybe those really long guns in the movies were rifles anyway. I don't know.

We kept it close by in that first house, under the bed. When we moved a year later to a bigger house in a better neighborhood, it went into a box in a hall closet. It has lived in hall or basement closets in each house ever since. Recently Mary confessed that for years she would take the box and slide it under the bed whenever I went out of town on business. Maybe that's what made me think of it today. I've never shot it and neither has Mary, as far as I know. We were both tempted early on, just out of curiosity, but not so much as the years went by. Curiosity died along with a lot of other things.

I put the gun and its ammunition back into their box and onto the top shelf of the hall closet next to the study. The ammunition is probably bad anyway. Because Mary likes the gun hidden, it lives under the old beaver fur hat I got in Russia on a student trip decades ago and Mary's father's navy coat. Mary used to wear the coat when we were camping or working in the yard or when she was trying to look particularly bohemian during a phase she went through in the late 1980s. I loved her in it. I've never worn the hat; it doesn't get cold enough where we live. But I won't get rid of it even though a big hat like that on a man as slight as I am would probably look a little funny. Not only am I short, I'm thin. I don't take up much space.

Thirty years and three houses ago, she might have been on my side. Hell, ten years, even. But things have changed. Now we spend our time apart even when we are in the same room. Somewhere along the way it went from occasionally not liking something the other person did to actually not liking the other person. Was it a piling up of little differences or a lightning bolt we managed not to notice? Was it more me than her, or her than me? I don't know. Not that the answer really matters, I guess. I would say I have changed by shedding the

non-essential parts of me. The parts you pick up to function in a society you no longer believe in, the experimental parts and the parts you craft to please others. She, I guess, would say that those parts of me were essential to her. Mary likes civilization and its rules.

I wish we were still close enough to weather this storm. Change is as inevitable as death, and losing a job is not the worst thing, even though it did drive me to dig out the shotgun. I think it was more curiosity than a real death wish. I had time on my hands, and I was alone in the house. That must be how kids get in trouble. I don't want to die. I have sacrificed enough to be able to keep my life.

A few friends from work took me out to lunch last Friday, the day after I cleaned out my desk when emotions were still raw. Lunch was a nice gesture, but my friends were clearly uncomfortable. They were either ashamed they didn't support me or they suffered from the effort of hiding their opinion that what I did was stupid and wrong. We weren't really close friends anyway. It was a nice enough lunch, though, and the group paid for mine. We walked to the parking lot in a flurry of handshakes and back slaps and good lucks. Frank lingered and then asked me to come to his car with him. I wasn't sure what to expect.

"Shelly made you this," he said as he pulled a frozen, foil-wrapped dish from a cooler in the backseat of his old Honda. "It's a chicken lasagna."

I held out my hands to take the dish, which was quite heavy and still icy cold. "Frank, we're not destitute. I've got some savings and investments..."

"I know, I know. And it's just what she does, whether you've had a baby or a death in the family or moved into the neighborhood. It's a disposable pan."

"Or got fired."

"Or lost your job." Frank looked down and shifted his weight. He is a mountain of a man with two bad knees. He could have worn my fur hat, I thought. "Maybe something will come up after things settle down."

"Maybe. Thank you, Frank. Really. And tell Shelly thanks too. I'm sure Mary will appreciate a night or two off from cooking. We probably won't be going out much."

"You're welcome. Well, I'll see you later, right?" Frank said as he opened his door and lowered his bulk into the driver's seat.

"Sure."

Frank closed his door and rolled down his window and sighed. I waited a full minute for him to speak while he stared straight ahead. I am getting good at waiting. "God, I'm sorry."

"About what, Frank?" My hands were starting to freeze.

He paused again. "About....about your getting fired, about no one standing up for you, about what that jackass son of mine did at school, about having to suck up, about not knowing Mary, about creating a life and then being a prisoner in it, about the world having gotten to this place. About all of it. I'm just sorry. It's so hard to care about anything because when you do, it just makes you angry and sad when it doesn't work out, and it never works out. Then you go and do what you did, and it makes me feel a little hope, which is almost worse somehow. I thought I'd figured out the world and how to live in it to get by." He looked up at me. "And I'm tired, I guess." I put the casserole down and put my hand on his giant shoulder and gave it a squeeze as best I could.

"Okay. Bye," he said, recovering his composure, and starting his car. "We'll be thinking about you."

I picked up the lasagna and tucked it under one arm and waved. We probably wouldn't see each other again, but he gave me a gift I needed badly. I felt a little better. I sat in my car for a while trying to decide what to do with my freedom. I realized the lasagna would thaw if I didn't get home, so that's where I went.

I called Mary the day it happened, last Thursday, right after I talked to Ernest. I explained what happened and what I had to do. Mary urged then begged me to change my mind. Ten minutes into our conversation, she exploded from the frustration that had probably been building for years. "Life is more than black versus white. We've proved that. We live it. You used to be flexible and understanding, like me, like we all have to be to survive. What happened? Why this? You could have written a letter to the editor or something. Expressed your disapproval without risking everything. It isn't that important. What a stupid, stupid thing to make a big deal out of." She stopped for air. I could picture her pacing in the hall, shaking with emotion, picking up

things and putting them down. I felt badly I had upset her so much, but I thought she would come around, if not in this conversation then eventually. But my confidence slipped when she continued. "It just doesn't matter. You did this for nothing. You know I don't care about him. I don't know who you are anymore or why I loved you. Now what are we going to do?" she cried and hung up. I drove around a long time before I came home that night, falling into a loneliness so deep it didn't have a bottom. I wanted to tell Mary that surviving wasn't enough, that we all deserved more, but she was already asleep when I got to the bedroom.

Until that Thursday morning, I hadn't thought about Jimmy Holmes for years; he had become less and less relevant with age. Just before the e-mail came, I was looking out the window at the gorgeous grounds of this place. The sun was glinting off of the sculpture garden and the wind made the flags dance. Pat had brought her dog to work; they were the picture of joy playing Frisbee on the grass.

My computer beeped. "Senator Holmes passed away last night," the e-mail began. "All government agencies are directed to lower the State and US flags to half-mast pursuant to Section 7m of the Flag Code, US Code Title 4, Chapter 1, Proclamation 3044 by President Eisenhower, and the Governor's Proclamation of today. If any assistance is needed in understanding or executing these procedures, please call our office." My stomach lurched and panic shot me out of my chair before I knew I had decided what to do. I sprinted three flights downstairs to catch Ernest before he could carry out the order. My heart was pounding furiously when I got to him. He was bent over, looking for something on a bottom shelf in his office.

"Ernest, don't even think about it," I panted, my hands planted on his desk.

"Don't think about what, sir?" Ernest turned around and looked up but stayed crouched on the floor. He didn't feel my panic. I wished someone would.

"Lowering the flags."

He stood up, with a quizzical look on his face. "But the e-mail... It's what we always do."

"Not this time. Not for this man."

"I don't think we get to pick ..."

"I'll take responsibility. Just don't do it. Tell them I threatened your job. I am your boss, right?"

Ernest smiled. "Yes, sir. You always did like to do things your own way, but this is a doozy. Times have changed you know. Are you sure?"

"Ernest, he was a racist who used his power to further that agenda for forty years. To honor that hatemonger is to rewrite history."

"Not really. We're not having a party or anything. It's just a formality." Ernest was trying to placate me.

"Not to me." My heart was still pounding.

"Okay. I won't do it. But someone will."

"No, they won't."

Ernest cocked his head and studied me for a while, then stuck out his hand. I took it with relief and Ernest shook mine so vigorously it hurt my shoulder.

Someone must have overheard us and reported me. Otherwise, it would have taken at least a day for my boss to hear about it. Maybe that would have been enough time to figure something out. But it was all over by late afternoon. The federal marshals watched me clean out my desk and walked me to my car. The sun was low in the sky by then, glinting off the pond, but I could still see through the glare the flags at half mast. It was just a symbol, Ernest was right, but *for God's sake*, it's a symbol that means we all join together to honor *that* man and his legacy. One of the marshals shook my hand when we got to my car at the far end of the lot, and I was grateful.

It doesn't happen to everyone, but maybe it should: the chance to face the one choice that could ruin your life but will save your soul. If you're lucky, the choice is so obvious that you feel no emotion, think no thoughts. Mine was. Whatever made me rush downstairs felt chemical, not conscious. I was an athlete in the zone, a priest hearing the voice of God, a fighter pilot dropping a bomb. It was the easiest decision ever; I think it came from some level before decision. Nobody understands why a white man cares that much about an old racist because I am not eloquent enough to be able to explain. Those who knew about Mary figured it was because of her, because of what her family went through, when that could not be further from the truth. I felt like a bird trying to justify its migration.

To lower the flags to half-staff for that man's death was not something I could do and still remain who I am. He had done so many horrible, racist things, lowering the flag was a lie. A government-supported lie. How could I, a scientist taught to look for the truth, be part of that? How could Mary think I could? If I had gone along, followed the order and put on an agreeable face, I would have split in two. I don't have that much time left to be who I should be, to be whole. I deserved to be fired; I accept that as the consequence of my action. The other consequence, though, losing more of Mary, and maybe the rest of her, was not something I had considered. But then, as I said, I really didn't consider anything.

I did get support from liberal bloggers once my story hit the papers. They wanted to build me a shrine. I was their martyr. They called me a patriot and a moral giant. I was Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all rolled into one. I printed and saved the posts. The right wingers wanted me flayed. Firing wasn't enough; to a person, they wanted me to go to jail for my protest. But within a few days, a new crisis replaced me. A new hero, a new goat. I didn't get my shrine, but I didn't go to jail either.

We preach to our kids that nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than getting along. We live under the tyranny of nice. Smile and shake the devil's hand or else you're the bad guy. Lower the flag for the senator because his status deserves respect. Everything is relative, so don't judge. But judgments are necessary, unless you just want to float down the river like a rotten log, your beliefs replaced by air. Some things are unforgiveable. Once done they cannot be zeroed out by placing good deeds on the other side of the scale. These unforgivable things, these actions or opinions, are different for everyone. We may not even be conscious of what they are until we face that choice. I found out what mine are, before it was too late. I guess that may be all I get out of life.

Mary is different. She doesn't have to act on what she believes. She doesn't lose herself every time she has to do or say something she doesn't agree with. She says she doesn't want to live like her parents did, fighting all the time. She says being pragmatic and ignoring the worst of the world is how she learned to survive. I understand that. But more and more, that trait has turned her into mush. Hate and love,

action and calm, judgment and acceptance are all pairs that need their opposites.

"Holmes was a racist," I reminded her in that phone conversation last week.

"So? He's dead. You didn't do anything or change anything or save anybody. You just lost your job and someone else lowered the flags."

"I showed the world, or at least our part of it, that racism matters, even to me, a white man."

"Exactly. A white man. You're not black," she reminded me. "Why not let us pick our own battles?"

I was horrified, and she could tell by my silence. "I didn't mean it that way. You are so damn sensitive." She spat the words at me. My silence continued, so she filled it. "None of this can be undone. It was a whim, a grand, selfish melodramatic gesture. Everyone has a boss. Why did you think you didn't? You had to know you'd lose your job. You were looking for a way out, that must be it. You're having a late mid-life crisis."

"His life was spent fighting against justice, against human rights. He was evil. How could I honor that man and still love you?"

"Is that why you love me? Because I'm black? Does it make you feel better? You know, it's not about what some senator did or didn't do or about loving me. It's about you and your need to be noble, to be noticed, to sacrifice something. I don't know why you picked this as the vehicle, but that's all it is, a vehicle. To what, I don't know."

She hasn't really talked to me since that phone call. I had thought she would be proud of me. But at least she hasn't left. As I recalled her words for the hundredth time today, I thought for the first time that maybe she is partially right, that I was looking for a way out. Maybe I knew at some level I needed a crisis, and this was the first one to come along that fit. I still think it was more than that, that it was a magical, pure, selfless act, but maybe not. Maybe it was both. It has certainly exposed the fault lines.

What's left of my hair has gotten much grayer over the past week. I look exhausted, but I feel spry, ready to run a marathon. It's a strange mix of contradictory images and sensations every time I look in the

mirror. I look in the mirror a lot lately, sometimes for up to an hour when Mary's out, trying to reconcile the images with my feelings. I see nakedness when I look at my face, and I like it. I wish Mary liked what she saw. I wonder how she feels when she looks at her face, the face she arranges to suit so many other people. Is she whole, is she happy? Shouldn't we know that about each other when we're old as well as when we're young?

I did what I needed to do and paid a price. Mary thought I was wrong. It's deeper than that, but it also isn't. Let's move on and see what's around the corner, I've wanted to say to her. There must be parts of us left that we love. But the time has never felt right. I need to stop.

I hear Mary's car on our gravel driveway. She's been waging a campaign to have it paved. Emily and David are grown, so her argument that it would be good for a basketball hoop doesn't make much sense. I think she's just tired of pulling weeds out of it, plus the edges are ragged, not neat like the rest of the manicured yard. I think the gravel softens the otherwise severe look of the yard with all its geometric beds and trimmed and plucked vegetation. And I love the way her car sounds pulling up on the rocks. It makes my heart leap, even now when I know there is a gulf between us so wide we may not be able to cross it. A car on pavement doesn't sound like it is coming home. I probably wouldn't even hear it. Gravel makes me happy. It makes her unhappy. That's our marriage in a nutshell lately. I'll win this one by default, though; we'll need to avoid unnecessary expenses.

I righted the lamp and the trashcan and turned the computer on. Mary turned the key in the lock out of habit I guess, since she must have seen my car. I heard her come in and the slap of the mail landing on the hall table. Her footsteps left the marble of the entry and stopped on the hall carpet.

"Bill?"

"In here." I moved a few papers around on the desk to make some working noises. I'm supposed to be job hunting, not wasting time thinking about killing myself.

Mary reached her head around the door frame, the symbolism of which was not lost on me. Lately, she can't fully enter any room where

I am. I'm not sure she's even aware of it. Her coat hung open, and I saw that she had put the lining in it.

"I got lamb chops for dinner. On sale." She pulled her head back around the corner and headed for the kitchen where I heard her unloading groceries.

"Sounds great. Any other bags in the car?" I remembered to ask, raising my voice so she could hear me.

"No, thanks though."

I got up, put my sock and shoe back on and shut the closet door.

"I saw Emily at the grocery store."

I waited for the rest, but any more seemed to require my presence. This first conversation wasn't going to come easy, but I wanted it badly. I tied my shoe and walked down the hall, through the great room and into the kitchen. We redesigned the kitchen a few years ago. I still remember our debates over countertops. It all seemed a little extravagant to me at the time, but the granite does look nice.

Mary was in the middle of putting a bag of apples into the refrigerator's lower drawer when I came into her line of sight. I don't make loud footsteps in these shoes. I waited for a few minutes.

"It's starting to rain," I offered.

"It's supposed to rain the rest of the week," Mary said.

"I should check the gutters."

"We had those guards put in last year, remember? They should be fine."

"How was Emily?" I asked.

Mary returned to the counter and continued to empty her purchases. I waited, because it seemed the least I could do, and I was good at it. She finally stopped with one hand still in the bag and spoke without looking at me. "She said she cut out the Herald's story on what you did and made a laminated copy for each of her kids. She said to tell you thank you." The way she was hunched over, talking to the bag, let me see the back of her neck. Mary looked up at me and half smiled, like she was waiting to see if that was enough. I kissed her on the cheek and helped her put away the rest of the food.

"Will you turn on NPR?" Mary asked, setting the lamb chops on the broiler pan and rubbing them with spices.

"Sure." I reached up to the radio on top of the refrigerator and switched it on. "I'll be back in a minute. Should I get some wine?"

"That would be nice."

I walked back to the study and sat in my chair for a while, looking out of the window. It has a great view of the river. I should probably just get rid of the gun.