

Sam and Guns and Truth

a short story by Mary Jo Klingel

Chapter One – Sam and the Guns

I recently moved, sold my old house and found a wonderful 1959 brick ranch with a huge kitchen and a fair price. Nobody mentioned what came with a sixty-year-old house – repairs and more repairs. I was lucky to find a great handyman named Sam. He was prompt and friendly and knew how to fix anything. He charged a fair price and could even whistle on key while he worked.

One day he mentioned that he had gone hunting the past weekend. He must have seen my face, because he said, "I do hope you are not going to give me any of that liberal B.S. about taking away my guns." He did not whistle and we did not talk for the rest of the time he worked that day.

A good handy man is hard to find. I trusted Sam, and that meant a lot. I hatched a plan. The next time I hired him I asked him to sit down for a minute. I suggested that we talk it out – that we talk until both of us were happy and neither of us had given anything up or had anything taken from us. He looked at me like I had two heads and said he needed to get to work. At the end of the day, without my saying another word, he said we "might could give it a try."

The next time he came, he finished the work I had for him, and said, "So how do we do this?" I assured him that I did not intend to play any tricks, and that we both had to be happy with what we decided or it would not work. I said I would start, and I talked about the heart-stopping pain I felt at each new shooting, especially the ones at schools. He just looked at me, and then he said, "Well, do you think I am happy about kids getting shot?" So we came to our first place of agreement – we wanted the slaughter of children and their teachers to stop. We wanted schools to be safe again.

I needed to understand what his guns meant to him. He talked a long time. He talked about being a ten-year old boy and being able to go hunting with his dad and his uncles. He said he could remember his dad's face the day that he handed Sam his first real grown-up gun, and took the time to teach him to shoot. He talked about the smell of the farms and the woods in the morning before the fog lifted. He remembered the first time he saw a doe, and the way he felt like they looked into each other's eyes. He did admit that he was happy he missed that time. He talked about the pride of feeding his family, and the way he looked forward to taking his own sons to learn to hunt.

I understood that his personal history, his lessons about being a man, and the rich and cherished memories of family life were all part of hunting for him. I felt like I could honestly say to him that I would not want him to be forced to part with the guns that represented so much of what was good in his life.

That was a tremendous concession for me, and not easy. Once we got through that, the words came more easily. Sam agreed to his own set of concessions. He agreed that he would not want his guns to be stolen and used for harm, so he was willing to keep the ammunition separate and the guns locked up. He approved strict elimination of military guns – the AR 47's, anything that could fire repetitively. He was willing to register all of his guns, and have a police officer come to his house once a year to inspect the type of firearms he has and where he keeps them. He would purchase a (reasonably priced) license for each gun he owned. He would gladly volunteer to help out on community “Bring in your guns days” so the guns would be labeled and sold legally or destroyed. He was willing to volunteer at a local boy's and girl's club to make sure kids knew a man who would really see them and care about them with no guns involved.

Then we were silent for a while. Sam broke the silence, saying he could not understand people who killed in schools or churches or grocery stores. I agreed and said that we needed to listen to the wisest people we knew and see how our everyday lives hide the roots of such madness. What do we create or tolerate every day that says that taking another life for any reason cannot, must not continue.

We found our place of agreement. He was comfortable with strict controls to eliminate the horror of gunmen loose around children and families. For my part, I understood what his guns meant to him, and appreciated his commitment to responsible gun use and safe communities. We had listened deeply to one another, and it was possible to come to a place of agreement where neither of us gave away more than we could.

I do believe that he still thought I was a wacko liberal, but I still had a handyman who could whistle and did great work.

Chapter Two - The Truth

I made all of this up. There is no Sam. (There is a 1959 brick ranch, so if you are out there, Sam, I have some work for you) There was no such conversation. There was only me, writing this, thinking love could find a way, and we have to find a way.

I did not write a story about talking with a man who sells guns at a gun show or a parent who lost a child who died in a shooting incident. I made it the easiest story, but I did write about two people who found a way.

I have had exactly these intense and personal conversations about other topics. They work. If there is willingness and an effort to continue to listen and to see the other as a person who also believes they are right, it can be done.

We need to learn to do this and learn it now, before the next pictures of sobbing kids and candles and vigils. The time is now. It has to be now, and that is the truth.

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