

When I Shot My Neighbor

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A true Story by Drew Coons



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Do you remember your biggest ever surprise? Mine came on a pre-dawn Christmas morning not long after my eighth birthday. Under the Christmas tree I found a brand new 20-gauge shotgun. You might be thinking, *That is a surprise*. Some may shudder at the thought of giving a real gun to an eight-year-old. My father, however, had a plan. As a gun enthusiast himself, he wanted to teach his oldest son responsibility.

That afternoon he took me into the country to try out my new shotgun. But no paper target or old can would suffice for us. Instead, Dad started flinging a round, flat target called a clay pigeon into the air. In flight, the clay pigeon looked like a thin, black line. The target flew away from us so fast that if I blinked, it was gone. At barely eight years old and small for my age, I could hardly hold the gun up. The best I could manage was trying to cover the clay pigeon with the muzzle of the gun and pulling the trigger. After each shot the shotgun's recoil hurt terribly, worse than any spanking. I didn't know much about shooting. I did know instinctively that a man wouldn't acknowledge any amount of recoil pain. And so neither did I.

Eventually I managed to clip a couple of the targets and even smashed one. Dad shouted out with pride in his son. Then my father gave me an unexpected instruction. "I want you to shoot that tree." And he indicated a little pine tree about the size of a baseball bat handle.

"Shoot the tree?" I asked.

"Yes, shoot the tree," he repeated.

Now this still target was more to my liking. No way that this pine tree could fly away. Carefully taking aim and firing, I hit the little pine squarely at my eye level. The damage to the tree shocked me. All the bark had been torn away and the strong wood riddled. "Now, what do you think would happen if you accidentally shot a man?" my father asked. No answer was necessary. I fully

understood the gun safety lesson.

A couple of weeks later our whole family had gone on an outing in the country. My dad pointed into a little gully. "I'll bet there are some quail in there," he predicted. Then he pulled my shotgun out of the car trunk and handed it to me along with a couple of shotgun shells. My mother, little brother, and sister could watch me get my first birds. Dad pointed to the right. "I'll go around here. The birds will flush out that way," he explained, waving to the left. "You know what to do."

And I did know what to do. There I stood, an eight-year-old with his finger on the trigger of a loaded gun. With the others watching, I couldn't let those birds escape. My father started around the gully and the birds flew up, but not as he had expected. The birds flew directly between my father and me. Rather than fire, I calmly watched the quail fly away with the gun pointed safely skyward. The safety lesson of the pine tree had saved my father's life. As he came walking back, my mother felt understandably shaken. She screamed, "I thought you were dead! He could have shot you!"

"It's just a good thing he didn't," Dad answered with gruff pride in his son. That day I felt like a man for the very first time.

Nearly thirty years later, my wife and I lived at the edge of a subdivision with large overgrown fields behind us. On a beautiful crisp fall afternoon, I was enjoying a walk around the backyard. To my surprise a covey of wild quail flew over my head and spread out in the fields. I got my shotgun and went to find the hiding birds. The man who owned the fields was a friend from my church. His son, a young man of 22, heard me shooting at the quail. He brought his shotgun and joined me. As we walked and talked, some quail flew up back toward the subdivision. Without thinking, I fired at them. Immediately, I knew that I had made a mistake. *Nobody will ever know*, I thought.

We continued hunting a while longer but saw no more birds. I invited him back to my house. To our surprise, my young friend's

wife was waiting there in our kitchen with my wife. “You guys stay inside!” she pleaded. “Somebody in the neighborhood has been shot. The police are looking for who did it.”

Looking out the front window, I saw a sheriff’s patrol car cruising slowly down our street, trying to get a bearing on the shooting. Overcome by guilt, I threw open the front door and ran to catch the police car. Grabbing the door handle, I confessed, “It was me! I shot toward the houses!”

The patrol car stopped, the door opened, and a huge deputy emerged. He was an African American man big enough to wring my skinny neck on the spot. At that moment, a neck wringing would have come as a relief. But he stood there with his hands on his hips just looking at me. “Son, you are a grown man. You should know better than to be so careless. Now, you go tell that lady that you’re sorry.” And he pointed to the house of our best friends.

Apparently, a few of the shotgun pellets had struck our friend Sherri. Fortunately, those pellets had been spent and hadn’t penetrated her skin. The deputy didn’t have to force me. Being truly repentant, I approached her, confessed, and asked for forgiveness. When Sherri saw who had shot her, she said, “If it had been anybody but you, I would give them a piece of my mind.” Then she proceeded to give me *all* of her mind. She was understandably more upset because her baby had also been outside and could just as easily have been hit. I deserved every bit of her ire. I stayed silently nodding as long as she had anything to say. Her tirade seemed to last forever, but probably was only twenty minutes. After releasing her emotions, Sherri did fully forgive me and sent me home. Our friendship was unaffected.

As I walked home in shame and relief, I realized, *You did better handling a gun when you were an eight-year-old boy*. To this day, I am extremely cautious using firearms and have taught many boys and girls to be the same.

Plus, I learned a deeper lesson. Sometimes we learn the right

thing to do from a young age, but when we are grown, we seem to forget or get careless. Perhaps overconfidence is a danger that comes with being an adult. To truly be men, we frequently just need to remember to do what we know is right, and what our fathers taught us.