

THE LOS ANGELES GUN CLUB

Fiona Alison Duncan

IT WAS ALICIA'S IDEA TO GO

SHOOT GUNS. She and Michelle picked me up in front of the house where I was staying for the week. Since leaving Los Angeles a few years ago, my driving phobia had become as indomitable as my fear of public speaking used to be. I sat in the back seat of Alicia's Ford Taurus, relieved to be a passenger, as she drove us to the Los Angeles Gun Club, an indoor shooting range in a Downtown neighborhood recently dubbed by developers as the Arts District. Alicia was wearing a black skin-tight rubber bodysuit; an invisible zipper streamed from her navel to her throat. We had been warned to cover up since a friend of Alicia's had been permanently burned by an errant bullet fragment at this very range. Michelle's leather pants were smart but it seemed to me that her micro-mesh long-sleeve would melt under heat. It would melt into her skin, leaving a gnarly scar. Not that I said anything. In the car, Michelle seemed the most nervous about what we were going to do, and about life in general. She was the only one among us still in her twenties. Neither Alicia, Michelle, or I had ever shot a gun before. Inside, they had us sign security releases including a page that asked you to self-disclose if you had ever been institutionalized for or diagnosed with a mental illness. We lied ("no!") and signed—

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Michelle Parrott

—laughing at the absurdity, as if this could prevent a gun from getting in the wrong hands. Later, we realized this step had nothing to do with mitigating harm, it was about liability. Every year across America handfuls of people turn their rented guns on themselves at public ranges. The last reported suicide at the the Los Angeles Gun Club was in 2014. The deceased, Demetrio Ulloa Jr., was a twenty-nine-year old husband and father who wore black-rimmed glasses and a barbell through his left eyebrow. Like many contracts in America, all a release form like this served was to protect those potentially culpable of violence. In this case, it could dis-incriminate the Club in the event that the family of a suicide case, among other accidents and possible plaintiffs, chose to seek damages.

The men behind the counter asked us what kind of gun we wanted. I said, "Whatever's safest." They gave me a Glock. Michelle wanted a big gun, a riffle. Alicia chose something like mine, a petite pistol with a silver barrel. The "rangemasters," as their staff shirts read, packed our firearms, bullets, goggles, and ear muffs into a big plastic carrying case and directed us towards the entrance to the range. "Oh, we don't know anything," I replied. We had told him before that it was our first time. "Can you show us how to use these things?" One of the rangemasters rushed through a demonstration of how to load and discharge each weapon. I was distracted by the scene. The place was smaller and jankier than I had expected, like the gun they gave me. There were two rooms. The front one, where we were, had dusty pale yellow walls and dropped ceilings made of those styrofoam-looking rectangular tiles, where every tenth tile is a light. My sixth grade public school classroom in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada had ceilings like these. I remember staring at those ceilings, waiting for the recess bell to ring. The walls around the Club's door were decorated with framed target posters autographed by celebrities who had visited. Celebrity headshots were printed out and affixed to the targets,

putting faces to the names Mary J. Blige, Danny Trejo, Shia Leboeuf, and Ed Westwick, whose character on the show *Gossip Girl* was shot in Prague in a season finale cliffhanger; surviving, but with temporary amnesia. The second room was the range. You could see it from where we were; it was behind a wall of windows in what I hoped was bulletproof glass. The windows shined like the plexiglass in the prefab frames that the signed celebrity targets were encased in. Guns were going off in the distance. Crack! Bam! Boom! Pow! There isn't an onomatopoeia that can truly capture the sound. The sound hits you in the chest and between the ears.

We asked the attendant to demonstrate how to load and discharge the guns "again—and slower this time." He caught on and walked us step-by-step through the process, then had us try.

In her high heel boots, Michelle confidently stepped up to the counter. It was as if all of her anxiety had left her body—only to enter Alicia's—as soon as she laid eyes on the weaponry. Michelle was cocksure and focussed as I'd never seen her before. The three of us usually hung out in the realms of thought, emotion, and culture, engaging in floaty conversations within which Michelle would spin out, stressed that she couldn't land on definitive answers to life's big questions. In those situations, Alicia and I held court like queens of emotional intelligence, philosopher princesses, and goofy jesters all in one. But how the royal tables had turned! Faced with the reality of an imperialist arsenal, Alicia and I were moaning like domestic cats in the rain and backing up slowly as if a couple inches could protect us in the advent of a

misfire. We watched in awe as Michelle effortlessly loaded fifteen rounds into a magazine and then mimed loading the magazine into my Glock, releasing the slide, holding the gun outstretched from her face with two hands, and pressing the trigger. Michelle moved on to loading and faux firing her rifle as I tried my hand at the Glock. Finally, Alicia stepped up. Her hands and voice quavered as she asked, as I had, for reassurance that she was doing it right after every step.

I went to a jackoff booth in Toronto once that had the same caliber of architecture as the Los Angeles Gun Club. It was on the second floor of a porn store. You picked a DVD to rent and got a key that let you into one of many small booths upstairs where there was a bench and a TV that screened your selection. The plywood booths were nailed together in rows like bathroom stalls. There was nothing but a couple feet and a plank of wood between you and the shooter beside you. It was the same deal at the Gun Club. The range consisted of fifteen numbered aisles in a row separated by half-walls of painted wood. We were aisles three, four, and five.

Alicia and I stood back and watched Michelle's leather-clad ass clench with every shot as she unloaded multiple rounds from Alicia's rental.

"It's so fun!" Michelle hollered. "This could become an addiction!"

If this was ten or fifteen years ago, I might've been more like Michelle. In dangerous situations, I used to act real tough. I got a thrill feeling invincible in the face of cinematic threat: climbing over high ledges, doing doughnuts in a four-wheeler, riding on the handlebars of a drunk teenage drug dealer, taking random source-unknown drugs, and letting strangers into my home... You couldn't get me to wear a helmet when I used to bike commute from Brooklyn to Manhattan on a Bianchi that was an inch too tall for me or on the thrifted road bike I used to ride all around Los Angeles, where two-lane streets suddenly merge into freeways and frustrated drivers will deliberately try to run you off what they think of as their territory. I own a helmet now, and no bike. The elasticity of my youthful body is gone; it's become brittle with knowledge. I've known people who have died on their bikes, who have died falling off a ledge, who have become paralyzed after falling off a roof and been left with hundreds of thousands in medical debt and a mean addiction to painkillers. I'm surrounded by survivors of overdoses, car crashes, rape, and assault. "Accidents happen" is no longer an abstraction. Humans both incautiously and intentionally hurt one another all the time. None of it is cool. Because no matter how cool your willful mind tries to play it, trauma gets held in the body and in the psyche; it has a mind of its own. Trauma's mind wants you to relive it until you alchemize it

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into some other form. I used to believe that doing risky shit would make me powerful, that playing tough-as-cool was like, some magical disappearing act, as if the threats to your life will vanish if you run into them head-on, or if you don't believe in them... Now I think those narratives are given to people, strategically, to keep us down: distracted, self-sabotaging, in-fighting, controlled. But I'm also a team player and a firm believer in mindful experimentation—I wasn't going anywhere—so I said a prayer:

Please God, let none of these shooters be psychos.

One psycho could take us all out a minute.

In the furthest aisle from us was a good looking Chinese couple. The guy was instructing the girl, whose designer handbag color-matched her manicure, how to hold a gun with gentle touch instruction. Everyone else on this side of the windowed wall were white men who had brought their own firearms. They were exactly what you would expect: guys who looked like off-duty cops and guys who looked like gamers, with physiques that were either super scrawny, beefed up, or with beer guts. Loaded weapons in hand, they were acting like skaters. A pack of skaters—and they move in packs—will get so fixated on the tricks they're trying and on each other, it's like the rest of the world dissolves around them. Friends I know who skate off-and-on have told me that skating can supplant sex as it satisfies the same needs for focus, release, and togetherness. (Maybe that's why most skaters, if they have sex at all, are bad in bed: their libidos are otherwise exercised? One of the great tragedies of my generation is that our leading boyish sex symbol is, on average, bad in bed.) It's skaters' obsessional-cum-oblivious disaffected way of occupying public space that's so hot—the way they'll act like no one is watching them, when we are. What other opportunities do you have to watch boyish types wreck themselves or barely avoid it in feats of daring grace? The shooters at the Gun Club, on the flip side, put the gross in engrossed. Like skaters, they were going nuts for their phallic toys and talking only to each other—hooting about headshots, comparing their targets, using words like choke, action, cock, and recoil—but unlike skaters, whose intent play is modern masochistic ballet, the shooters' game had one pathetic aim: the practice of hurting and killing others.

Michelle was blasting away. The floor around us was covered in shells. Every so often, one of Michelle's shells would fly back and hit Alicia or I. The soundscape was unnerving. It's so loud inside the range, pregnant women aren't allowed because a baby in utero can't wear the earplugs and earmuffs that are required. Even with protective headgear, each shot resounds through your body. Banging at random intervals, eleven shooters on their own rhythms, with ear swaddled silence in between, the chaotic racket

could challenge even the most dedicated experimental noise music listener—like Alicia, who had finally decided she would take her shot.

I watched her load a magazine full of bullets. Her manicure was “coffin style,” long nails shaped like little coffins, narrower at one end than the other. Her nails were black. They clicked and scratched at the magazine as Alicia then proceeded to remove all of the bullets she had just

loaded. She put everything neatly away and walked to the furthest wall where we had been planted before. To still the shaking of her elegant hands, she crossed her arms around her chest.

“What’s so scary about this?” I asked.

“I’m afraid,” Alicia replied, “of making a mistake and inadvertently hurting somebody.” She had read my mind. I didn’t want the gun to blow up in my hands and make a mess or backfire and shred someone’s flesh. When the thing jammed—that’s exactly what I pictured. I had finally gotten into my aisle and pulled the trigger on the Glock that Michelle had been joyfully discharging. I pulled and felt something get stuck. A backwards thud. “Oh fuck.”

I flagged down a rangemaster to help. He was casual about the jam up.

“It was loaded correctly,” he assured me, rolling his eyes, bored or annoyed by my ignorance, though maybe he was only feigning indifference in self-defense. “It happens,” he repeated. “It’s normal.”

The rangemaster reordered the clogged bullets and handed the gun back to me. “It should work now,” he said, walking away.

I resumed my position in aisle number four. Parting my legs in a power stance, I gripped the Glock’s handle with my dominant hand, pointer finger free to reach for the trigger, as I wrapped my second hand around the first, just as the rangemaster had taught us. It was comforting actually, like when I learned I could hold my own hands, fingers intertwined, lying in bed, and that this locked palm-to-palm position would relax my nervous system such that I could fall asleep and not have nightmares. Back then, I thought of my nightly hand holding as quelling a loneliness that a lover would otherwise dispel. I thought it was about romance. Years later, I would realize my hands were in prayer.