

Rifle Girl

Joseph Hallman

©2012

Sara ran her finger along the concave arc of the trigger. She alternated: zoning out between taking in this sensation and staring into the quiet beauty of the dewy grass. Trying hard to focus on the individual blades of emerald, she ignored the scope and crosshairs. Her body was damp with dew from lying flat on her stomach in the grass. Memories of her stepfather taking her on hunting trips flooded her mind: *dew, grass, smoke, gunsmoke*.

Ed had married her mother two years after a head-on collision on I-90 killed her father when she was six years old. Her mother had been a beautiful and caring woman. She had loved Sara's father deeply. They had been high school sweethearts. She was still young when he died. She grieved for a few years and then decided it was best to find a man. To find love. To find someone to care for Sara with her. She always told people she had been lucky enough to find Ed. They had met at a market. She couldn't reach a box of Saltines on a high shelf. Ed saw this, laughed a little, and came over to her aid. The rest was history.

Ed had taken to Sara's shock of red hair and her intelligent and calm gaze. Her cool stare was intimidating to most. Her face was plain. She wasn't homely, but she didn't do much to "gussy up", as her mother would have said. Ed and Sara were a good pair. They liked, no-loved one another, and inasmuch as a girl can understand a father (even a stepfather) and vice versa, they did. Her mother helped her with her English and history homework while Ed tutored her in math. He had a knack for numbers, he'd tell her. Ed supported her canny way of thinking. He found her creativity and wit a comfort.

Her mother had died when she turned eighteen. In a cruel twist of fate, her mother followed her father's destiny. While driving to pick up a cake for Sara's eighteenth birthday, a

car crash landed her in the hospital. For two weeks she lay in a persistent vegetative state before she finally succumbed. Ed had loved her mother dearly and after her mother's death, grief had defeated him. She felt an incredible weight of guilt. It was her fault, in a sense. Her mother didn't want to bake a cake. She had wanted Sara to have *an exceptionally special cake for an exceptionally special birthday. After all, it's not every day that a young woman turns eighteen.*

Ed's retreat into isolation and alcohol left her in an abandoned solitude. She couldn't help him and he could no longer help her. She had to leave, to get out of here. Though she had never even left the county, she applied to colleges across the country. She wound up at Virginia Tech. She was an ROTC member and later a National Guard Reserve. She studied history and specialized in military science. She had always had a desire to serve justice. She had wanted to be a detective. She started working in the Baltimore City Police Department after graduating from the Academy.

The most vivid memory of that childhood home was of standing in front of it: a simple wooden structure. When she was thirteen, her parents had let her choose the color they would paint the fading house. She had chosen a milky gray-blue that had matched the sky on overcast days. They had 20 acres or so, and her mother had kept a garden. Tomatoes, peppers, watermelons, and other fruits and vegetables grew in the side yard. There had been an apple tree and what had seemed like hundreds of lavender plants. Her mother had always made lavender lemonade and shortbread cookies on Sunday. Ed had grilled then: corn, peppers,

burgers, franks, and for her mother, chicken. Even now, the smell of grilling triggered the comfort of those warm days with them.

Ed and she went hunting on Saturdays, in season, if the weather was cooperative. She never bagged anything, save once a small doe. She had felt guilty about it, but not averse to Ed's desire to take down a stag. She loathed venison and Ed never forced her to eat it. He gave most of the meat away and had jerky made for her mother.

My rifle girl. Ed called her when they lay next to each other, there in the dewy grass, his breath's warmth rising. She liked the sound of it and let her mind go still, watching his breath rise and disappear. It was time together with Ed and it made her feel more secure in herself and in her independence. Ed inspired in her a belief in her resourcefulness and ability. They woke well before the sun had risen and they would have a light breakfast. She almost always had eaten two hard-boiled eggs and some cottage cheese. Ed had liked thick-cut slab bacon and a sliced, salted tomato. She showered with an unscented soap, afterwards gathering her long hair into a high ponytail. She fit a camouflage hat on her head to match the old jumpsuit that fit her body a little too loosely. She loved the scratchiness of the rough fabric on her skin.

Sara savored the quiet and had often told Ed that going in to silence was her favorite part of their trips. Ed didn't take this wrong way. He relished the time with her but understood her love of the peace and quiet. He also loved the sanctuary the quietude had brought. In general, they didn't hit much as a team. She had only scored one doe, when she was fifteen. He had hit five or six stags, roughly one per season. But this didn't matter. The trips had been a ritual for them.

Her mother enjoyed the time alone and cooked all day. She'd clipped coupons, dyed her hair to try to hide the gray and if she got to it, she'd read a bit of one her Harlequin novels. She was a simple and proud woman. She was candid but caring. She'd almost always have some roast chicken or rump roast waiting for them on their return. The intoxicating smell of a cinnamon-y apple pie baking wafted through the house bringing welcome warmth to her family who had been in the damp, cool grass all day.

She was 38 now; laying in the same grassy patches she had been with Ed in all those years ago. She thought on him. When she was 26, he had died of cancer, a particularly vicious melanoma that rotted him out in a few years. She had come for the funeral and stayed for a month. She had thought about moving back, settling here in her old home, but those thoughts didn't last long. Ed's death left the house uninhabited. Within a few years the house was in a sad state. Abandon had rotted the house. Local boys, too young to drink or date, broke out the windows. She had kept in touch with Ed regularly, speaking once or twice a month. But there had been such a great sense of loss that neither could overcome. This loss influenced who she had become as a woman and a detective.

Ed would not be the only loss in her life. Her life seemed riddled with it. Loss became stability, the normal. The opposite of loss seemed abnormal.

These solo trips, simulating those in her childhood with Ed, were not only an indulgence, a nostalgic impulse, but also a chance to return to the quietude, to go in to silence once more. She felt selfish taking the trips, leaving her son, a moody fifteen years old, with her ex-husband. She didn't smoke and rarely drank and felt that this was not such a horrible vice; being alone. She'd pack her rifle, a cooler and a worn canvas duffel in the car and drive the eight hours with no stops.

One single tear rolled down her cheek. She resisted further, staring coolly at a doe about 30 yards away in a clearing. It was an easy kill. She had never enjoyed killing. But this was to be a kill. Something in her told her so. Seal the deal. Pull the trigger. Pull the plug.

Lightening broke the sky but she did not let the thunder didn't break her focus. To kill the doe was to reclaim some primal sense of the right to live. She had lost that right when she gave into contemplation of suicide. It was a trade, a sacrifice of sorts: this doe's life for the right to live again.

She wiped the tear and reset in a calmer collected pose. She relaxed her body: stretched her feet, her toes, and pulled her shoulders back. She let her jaw unclench and felt her face elongate in a silent 'o'. She found the doe once more in her sight. Lining up the crossfire, she shined a prayer: thoughtful unmouthed benediction.

She squeezed the trigger and then that crack, that smell, that flash. The doe stumbled and fell onto its side. In that moment, she let her mind wander to the most painful memory of her lost daughter. Her husband had been supportive and loving. A lesser man might not have accepted her silence and iciness. The mental ward she lived in for a two months overcame her brain. She cried for how weak she had been; she had considered suicide for God's sake. She didn't want to live. Drained of love, she had been numb and lost and alone. After breathing for a few moments, inhaling and exhaling, Sara's eyes were the first to give in. Tears streaked her dusty face. Heavy sobs roiled her frame.

She cried for her father. She cried for her mother. She cried for Ed. She cried for her first child, the stillborn daughter she birthed. She cried for herself and for the love she had lost for her husband the day that her daughter died. The specter of her suicidal self still haunted her. An empty pill bottle. A liter of expensive whiskey. So clichéd, but there they were, the props. Within her, there would always exist this weak woman who might have killed herself.

For this she thought she would never be able to reconcile with herself. Eventually, after almost 7 months, she had gotten her shit together after having become unhinged, after almost having lost her husband and son to her depressive state.

Here, now: She let the last tears fall and then dry with the light and fragrant breeze. She could detect smoke, floral notes, and dampness. She inhaled and exhaled and was at peace. She reset her posture and then placed the gun on the canvas tarp on which she lie. She rolled over her back breathing deeply and took in the clouds. Thin wispy trails of white. Her mind wandered once more and the clouds reminded her of her son's attempts to make pancakes with her once. He had dripped batter into these unsophisticated, strange shapes on the too hot pan. They burned but the smell hadn't been acrid. She pulled the pan off the flame and lifted the darkened little squiggles out of the pan with a red silicon spatula. Her son hadn't really understood he had burned them; he was too young. The boy was manic with joy for making his first pancakes. She drowned the little *snake cakes* (they had come up with that together) in Grade A maple syrup and they had eaten them, singing and laughing.

She pulled her mind back to the doe and walked over to field dress it. She made the necessary incisions and excisions and began removing the guts and blood. It felt almost ritualistic. In this gore was a sense of power and a sense of connection to that deep primal urge to live, to survive, to continue. Life was hard and life was death. Here she reaffirmed her mind's power of understanding the two.