

Shooting Tom King

Jack Harrell

The woman was home alone on a Friday night with her eleven-year-old daughter, Annie, while her husband and the boys were away on a weekend hunting trip. She and Annie had made pizza and seven-layer bars and watched movies before going to bed just before midnight. Waking suddenly from a sound sleep, she thought she had heard a crash. She sat up and listened for a moment, but the house was quiet. Thinking it was a dream, she lay back down and settled into her pillow. Then she heard pounding on the front door and a man shouting. She got out of bed, heart racing, her steps unsteady in the darkness. She wrapped a blanket around herself and went to the living room, stepping quietly, not turning on the lights.

The pounding came again, and the man barked out the name Tom King.

The woman stopped in the middle of the room, feeling something hollow in her gut. A flash of carnival lights and the smell of popcorn passed through her mind. She had known a Tom King once, in high school, the older brother of a friend. Fearing the man at the door might be Tom King, she clutched at the blanket and crept to the window. She parted the curtain an inch, feeling the cold air near the windowpane. A man stood in the porch light, someone she had never seen before, traces of his breath drifting into the cold October air.

“Tom King,” he shouted, “I got something to say to you.”

The man wore a brown coat with wool lining, his hair shaggy and disheveled, his nose bloodied. In his right hand he held a rifle with the barrel down, his arm slack. He pounded on the door once again, the vibrations rattling the windows.

She tried to think, tried to gather her thoughts. Something bad was happening, and she didn't know what to do. It was just like before, like that night at the carnival so many years ago.

The house had no back door, only a side door off the

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kitchen, opening to the carport where her car was parked. Her neighbors, the Bensons, were a mile away, and the Watsons lived another mile past that, over the Fox Creek Bridge. Could she get Annie into the car and drive away? Could she call one of the neighbors? Maybe it was nothing. The man might just go away, and it would be nothing at all. She thought she should get her phone, so she slipped back to the bedroom, not turning on the lights. When her phone screen lit, she held it against her chest.

Returning to the darkened front room, she heard a sound behind her. Annie was there.

“Mommy, I heard a noise.”

The woman wanted to keep her girl safe, keep her away from the man outside. She went to her quickly, shushing her. “Someone’s outside,” she whispered, turning the girl back. “Go to your closet, and put the blankets over you. Don’t come out until I say, okay?”

She shut Annie’s door and hurried back to the living room, where she put her ear to the door. In the darkness she found the door handle and moved her hand up to the thumb turn, checking the deadbolt. To her horror, it made a clicking sound when she turned it. Somehow, she’d forgotten to lock it.

The man pounded again, startling her. “Tom King,” he shouted, “open the goddamn door!”

The name made her shudder, brought her back to that night when she was just fifteen, when Tom King had given her a ride home from the fair and forced himself on her. She felt that sickness all over again. As the man outside pounded, she realized how thin and weak the door was, how unlikely it was to hold. Pressing her shoulder against it, she leaned hard, clutching at the gathered folds of the blanket. “You’re at the wrong house,” she said in a voice plain and hollow. The sound of her words exposed and frightened her. “Go away, or I’ll call the sheriff,” she said, speaking barely above a whisper.

She turned her back to the door, leaning hard, fumbling with the phone, and trying to keep the blanket over her shoulders. She punched in her passcode but got it wrong. She couldn’t think. Outside, the man fell silent, and everything was

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eerily still. She felt it all in an instant—her shoulders against the door, the man on the other side, Annie in her room. She remembered her friend that night, the night Tom King had driven her home, her friend saying, “It’s okay, I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” She remembered hesitating before getting into his car, the feeling of having just done the wrong thing. She didn’t want to do the wrong thing now. Outside, the blacktop road passed in front of the house, and beyond that, the looming emptiness where the neighboring homes sat scattered among farm fields and patches of woods, sectioned off by miles of fences and rows of power lines, all suddenly so surreal.

The pounding came again, harder than before, so hard that the doorframe rattled. “Tom King!” the man shouted. “I’ll shoot through this goddamn door!”

She tried the passcode on her phone again, and this time it opened.

Then, in a thunderous burst, the deadbolt splintered through the doorframe. The door flew open, throwing her forward with the man as they fell into a table. The table overturned, knocking the lamp and everything else to the hardwood floor. The phone slipped from her hand and went clattering to the middle of the room. For a moment the man was on top of her as she tried to scramble away. Her only thought was *Hide, Annie, hide!* as the man took her by the arm and pulled her to her feet.

His fingers pressed to the bone as he jerked her around the room, searching for a light switch. When he flicked on the ceiling light, the glare blinded him for a moment, allowing her to twist free. She stepped back a pace and saw the front door wide open. In the glow of the porch light she could see his car crashed in the ditch in front of her house. She gathered the blanket around her. She could have run into the night, but she wasn’t leaving Annie. She wasn’t doing anything that would draw this man toward her girl.

“You can’t come in here!” she said. “This is my house!”

The man held the rifle across his chest now, hands apart. His boots made a heavy sound on the hardwood floor. There

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was dried blood beneath his nose, his forehead scraped and bruised. He smelled of cigarettes and beer. "Where's Tom King?" he asked. "Where's he at?"

"There's no one here by that name."

The man lifted the gun, aiming it at her, his expression cold. "This is Tom King's house. And I come to settle things between him and me."

"Please, no." She stole a glance at Annie's bedroom door, as though she could will it to stay closed. "You're at the wrong house."

"Listen, I come—"

Then his voice broke off in a cough. The gun barrel dropped, and the cough bent him at the waist as he covered his mouth with his arm.

She stood there, unable to move, between the open front door and Annie's closed door. She didn't want to run to Annie's room, and she wasn't leaving her here alone.

She and Nancy King, both fifteen, had been friends just a few weeks when they went to the county fair together, their first time without a parent along. They played games on the midway and ate hot dogs and popcorn. They rode the tilt-a-whirl and the octopus and the Ferris wheel. They flirted with the FFA boys who had come to show livestock. It was exciting to see and be seen among the crowds, to feel the secret pleasure of wearing makeup and cute clothes and noticing when the boys noticed them.

The man before her coughed and coughed. She could see her cell phone and car keys on the floor, near the overturned table, but didn't dare reach for them. When the man recovered, he pointed a finger at her and said, "Listen, lady...you're Tom King's wife, and this is Tom King's house."

"No," she cried, "I swear."

The man pointed out the open front door. "That's the road to Kendrick. And Tom King lives on the road to Kendrick."

"That's Overton Road. It goes to Depew."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Don't lie to me."

"I swear," she said. "That's Overton Road. It goes from Chandler to Depew."

The man touched his forehead with two fingers and

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looked at them, seeing blood. “Goddamn,” he muttered. He looked around the room, like a man waking from a dream. On the wall was a picture of the woman and her family, all of them wearing jeans and red T-shirts, standing at the railing of a wooden footbridge. He went to the picture and looked at it. “That’s not Tom King,” he said, pointing at her husband in the picture. “Tom King’s got a mustache like a leach on his face.” The man coughed again, eking out the words. “And a shaved head like a damn-ugly cue ball.”

“I told you, he doesn’t live here.”

The man went to the open front door. He looked out at his crashed car in the ditch. Then he looked back at her, putting it all together. He blinked and shook his head. “Where’s your family at?”

“They’re not here.” She only cared about one thing: keeping Annie safe. She pointed to a spot on the floor, where her car keys lay next to the overturned lamp. “Those are my keys. Take my car, I don’t need it.”

The man picked up the keys. They were a jangling mass—keys and a remote fob on a red spiral wristlet. He slipped the keys into his coat pocket. He picked up the cell phone too, sliding it into his pocket with the keys. “Where’s your husband?”

“He went hunting and took the kids. Your car’s in the ditch. You can take mine.”

The man eyed her for a moment. “Maybe I’ll just take a look around first.”

“No,” she said, too anxiously. Then, more evenly, “No one else is here.” She knew it wasn’t smart, saying she was alone. She remembered that night before she got into Tom King’s car, a moment she had relived over and over. She had hesitated, just for a second. Why hadn’t she heeded that feeling? Why had she been so stupid?

“You stand right there,” the man said, pointing at her. “Don’t move. You got that?”

Rifle in hand, he went from room to room, turning on lights and looking around—the kitchen, the bathroom in the

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hallway, her bedroom, down the hall to the boys' room. Then he was at the end of the hallway, at Annie's door. He opened Annie's door, switched on the light, and disappeared into the room. The woman almost cried out, but somehow she kept quiet. A few moments later, he came back down the hallway, expressionless.

He didn't see her. He didn't find where she was hiding. Good girl, Annie. Good girl.

She glanced at the open front door. She could run. The man would chase her, and it would take them both far away from Annie. But she hesitated, just like before. Then the man was there, next to her, saying, "You move and I'll shoot."

That night at the county fair with Nancy, right before they went inside the fun house, they had met up with a boy named Gavin, a boy Nancy had liked for a long time. Gavin started tagging along, and when Nancy's brother Tom came to pick them up an hour later, Nancy opened the car door and asked, "Can you give my friend a ride? I'm going home with Gavin." Then Nancy turned to her and whispered, "Sorry, you know how it is, right?" Before she could answer, Nancy was turning to go off with Gavin. "I'll see you at school," she said.

Now the woman stood and watched as the man with the gun went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, looked in, then closed it. She took a small step, but her feet got caught up in the blanket. She pulled at the blanket, gathering it around her as she watched the man take an apple from a bowl on the counter. He came back into the living room and sat back on the couch. He took a bite of the apple. "I'm gonna find Tom King," he said, chewing the apple, "and I'm gonna shoot him. After that, I don't care what."

"What did this man do to you?" She couldn't say his name.

The man looked at her for a long time, deciding whether to answer. He took another bite of the apple. "What do you care?"

Gathering her courage, she said, "I know who you're talking about."

The man sat forward. He tossed the apple out the open front door. "Is that right? How do you know him?"

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“In high school. I was friends with his sister.”

“You seen him lately?”

“No, not for a long time.”

She had seen him, though, maybe a year ago, at a gas station. She had pulled up to the pumps and, before getting out of her car, she saw Tom King on the other side. So she drove away. She got her gas somewhere else after that.

“If you haven’t seen him, you’re not missing much.”

The man went to the open front door. He stood there for a while, his back to her. She heard the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. She felt the cool air coming in the doorway. “Why would you want to shoot somebody like that?”

The man turned. He looked her in the eye for the first time. “I had a sick boy, an angel boy. He had bad kidneys. Tom King said it was okay if I missed a few days at work.” He turned to the portrait of her family, lifting his gun to sight it, pointing it at the portrait. “Me and that boy’s mom, we ran the wheels off that car.” He let the gun barrel drop and looked at the woman once more. “We went from one hospital to the next. We saw every kind of doctor there was.”

“I’m sorry.”

His gaze fell to one side. “When that little boy died, his mom said what we had between us wasn’t love.”

“She didn’t mean it.”

He looked at her now. “I was there every time, running back and forth. How was that not love?”

“She didn’t know what she was saying.”

The man laughed. “That’s right. Half the time she didn’t know what she was saying.”

The night when Tom King drove her home, they left the fairgrounds and headed in the direction of her house. Then he turned down a street she didn’t know, saying, “I need to go this way real quick.” He drove to a new subdivision—streets with curbs and driveways and empty lots, all waiting for houses not yet built. Turning into a cul-de-sac, he said, “You’re just a freshman, like Nancy?” When she didn’t answer, he said, “You girls sure have grown up.”

The man went back and sat on the edge of the couch. He

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let the butt of the rifle rest on the floor, holding the rifle like a staff. “Tom King said it was okay, missing work for my boy. But after that little boy died, after that woman said what we had wasn’t love, Tom King comes up to me right there on the shop floor, right in front of everybody, and he says I missed too many days. Then he says he’s got to let me go.”

In the cul-de-sac, Tom King had parked and killed the engine. He slid toward her and started kissing her and touching her. She tried to push him back, but he kept going. “Come on, baby,” he said, “you know you want it.” She tried to stop his hands from going everywhere. She told him to stop, to get away from her. But he only said, “Don’t be like that, honey. You’re so beautiful.”

“But I had dirt on Tom King,” the man said to her now. “That was the reason he let me go. He was changing numbers on the reports, making some people look good and others look bad. I told him what I’d figured out. So the next day, he comes up and says I missed too many days and he’s got to let me go, right in front of everybody. So I start telling them what I know, and he says it’s all lies. Then his buddies manhandle me out the door.”

The woman felt Tom King’s hands on her, how his hands moved quicker than she could fend them off, undoing zippers and buttons and slipping inside her clothes as he kissed and touched her, saying, “Come on, baby. Let’s go.”

She didn’t want to think about it. She didn’t want to remember. She had tried for all these years to make it go away.

“There are other jobs,” she said to the man holding the rifle. “You can go somewhere else. Jobs are good right now.”

The man stood, anger in his eyes. “I won’t be a welfare case. I’ll shoot Tom King and everyone down at that shop before I ask for welfare!”

“This man you want to shoot, he’s not a good man. He’s not worth you throwing your life away.”

“If it’s not Tom King, then it’s somebody else. That’s the way the world is, and I’m tired of it.” Then he raised his voice to a shout. “You hear me, woman? I’m tired of it!”

Tears came to her eyes. She tried not to cry. She couldn’t remember how long Tom King had touched and kissed her, how

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long she had fought him off. For a while it seemed she had gone away somewhere, slipped away, as though she were no longer in her own body. But after a while she realized he was on top her. She was crying out, his hand on her mouth. Then he stopped, suddenly angry. “You little bitch!” He grabbed her shoulders and shook her hard. “You prick-tease little bitch!” Then he pushed himself off of her. She was weeping, pulling her clothes on. He started the car and threw it in gear. “I know ten girls right now who’d put out for me!” He peeled out of the cul-de-sac. “That was your one-and-only chance. You understand? You get that?” She couldn’t stop crying as he drove her home. She kept saying, “I’m sorry,” not knowing why. When he pulled up in front of her house, she cowered as he reached over her and flung the car door open. “Get out,” he said in an angry whisper. Then, grabbing her arm, “And don’t you dare tell anybody.”

The man stood with the gun at his side. “Don’t cry, lady. I didn’t mean to yell at you. But you’ve got to understand. This is the end of my life. First my little boy, then that woman, and now my job—that’s all I had. You’ve got to see that.”

“I know, but—”

“No,” he said, his voice raised once more. “I’m gonna find Tom King, and I’m gonna shoot him. That’s what my life is gonna be.”

He took the car keys from his pocket and held them out, dangling them by their spiral wristlet. A mean grin came to his face. “So thanks for the car.”

“I don’t care about the car.”

The man put the keys back in his pocket. “Have you ever wanted to kill somebody? I mean, really been mad enough to kill someone?”

She thought about the question. “No,” she whispered. She shook her head. “No.”

The night Tom King had let her go, she didn’t go in the house for a long while. Instead, she went to the backyard, where she lay curled up on the grass, sobbing, thinking she didn’t want to live anymore. After Tom King had hurt her, Nancy never spoke to her again.

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“Maybe you’ve never had a reason,” the man said. He came toward her, holding out the rifle, offering it to her. “If I gave you this gun right now, would you shoot me?”

She didn’t move, didn’t reach for it.

“You know how to use a gun?”

After a moment, she answered. “I used to go shooting with my husband. I know how.”

“Go ahead then,” the man said, offering the gun.

She reached out and put her hand on the gun but didn’t take it. For a moment they stood there, each with a hand on the weapon. Then he pulled it away. “You should have done it. That was your chance.”

Hearing those words, she felt a sick taste in her mouth. Sometimes she wondered why she hadn’t just gone along with Tom King, giving him what he wanted. Was it happening now? Was she going along with this man, doing what he wanted? Like flipping a switch inside her, she turned and started down the hallway, toward Annie’s room. She only wanted to get her daughter and get out of there.

But the man was on her in an instant. He grabbed her with one arm around her waist and lifted her off the floor, bringing her back to the center of the room.

Kicking and flailing, she cried out, “Run, Annie, run!”

The man set her down hard and grabbed her by the back of the neck. She felt the length of the gun barrel against her, crushed between his body and hers. “Listen,” he hissed, his spittle on her face. “I saw your little girl’s empty bed. The blankets were all messed up. I saw her window open too. Did you tell her to run to the neighbors? Is that what you did?”

“No,” the woman cried. “No, I told her to hide.”

He squeezed her neck harder.

“Maybe she ran away,” the woman said, hoping it was true. She hoped Annie was not still in the house, not seeing all this.

“You want to see your little girl again?”

“Yes, please.”

The man relaxed his grip. “Then don’t give me any trouble!”

She nodded, holding back tears. “I’m sorry.” It felt like

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before—a man and his strength, her crying, saying she was sorry.

The man stood back and took the phone from his pocket.

She pulled the blanket up around her once more.

“Look up Tom King’s address,” he said, handing her the phone, “on Kendrick Road.”

She held the phone, her hands shaking. She clenched at the blanket as she typed in the name. She scrolled up and down until she found something. “5287 Kendrick Road.” She held out the phone for him. “Is this it?”

He took the phone and held the gun in the crook of his arm as he touched the screen, scrolling and looking more closely. He held up the phone, showing her a map. “Where’s that from here?”

“The other side of Highway 60,” she said. “Straight down this road.”

He put the phone back in his coat pocket and took out the keys, jangling them in front of her. “Is this the key?” he asked, holding them by a single key.

“Yes,” she answered, eager for it all to be over.

He turned and went to the open front door. It was cold now in the living room. The cold October air showed their breath in faint wisps. She knew that Annie wasn’t in the house. Her little girl had been strong and brave. Her girl had slipped out the window and would probably be at the neighbor’s house soon. The man stood at the front door. He had what he needed. She thought he would just disappear, that he would go to the carport and get in her car and leave. Instead, he glanced back at her, fear in his eyes, caught between forces he could neither fight nor understand. “That woman, she said what we had wasn’t love.”

“It was her boy too.”

Framed by the door, the man looked smaller now—dried blood beneath his nose, the bruise on his forehead, his hair a mess, loss showing in his wounded face.

She was just fifteen when Tom King had hurt her, barely a woman. She hadn’t known the love of her children then, the love of her husband. She hadn’t borne the burden of working and being

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a wife and mother. She hadn't yet watched her grandparents die. She hadn't helped a best friend through a divorce or walked with another to the end of her battle with cancer.

The man stood in the doorway, bitterness in his expression. "All those doctors and hospitals, and she said it wasn't love."

"Your little boy knows you loved him."

The man's head jerked to one side. "I don't need any sympathy from you!" He lifted his chin. "I'm gonna do what I've got to do." He stood with the rifle across his chest and eyed her up and down. "Now, ain't you a brave little thing. Look at you, all wrapped up, strong as you can be."

"You don't have to shoot that man."

"Tell me something. What you got on under that blanket?"

Beneath the blanket she wore of one her husband's T-shirts, panties, and no bra. She was barefooted. Even if she got out of the house, she wouldn't be able to run. She couldn't run as fast as a man wearing boots and carrying a gun.

"Come on now," he said. He lifted the sight of the rifle to his eye, aiming at her. "Show me what's under that blanket."

She could feel herself slipping, like she might drift away from her body. But she couldn't do that now. Not this time. She had to hold on.

"It's no time to be afraid," the man said.

Standing before him, she knew something she hadn't understood before. With this body she had given birth to three children. She had loved and fed and cared for them. She and her husband had made a life together, creating good things to stave off the wrongs of the world. With this body she had drawn her husband to her, quickening his love time and again, building in his heart and hers a treasure this man could never reach with a gun, could never defile. She understood this now, so many things she couldn't have known as a fifteen-year-old girl.

The man stepped toward her. He put the point of the gun barrel at her chest. "Let's see what you got, then I'll go."

She stood tall, looking the man in the eyes. She didn't resist as he pulled the blanket from her, letting it fall to the floor. She

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stood, fists clenched at her sides, eyes welling with tears.

The man stood back and looked at her. “Now, that’s all right. That’s real nice.”

“You can go now,” she whispered.

He broke her gaze and looked away. “My daddy had it worse than me. But he never complained.”

She bent slowly, watching the man. She reached for the blanket and pulled it around her once more.

“How did he do that? How did he hold on like that his whole life?”

“Don’t shoot that man. He’s not worth it.”

“I said I would, and now I’ve got to.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

He held the gun at his side with one hand, his arm slack, as though he might drop it. “My boy’s mother, she wasn’t strong. That’s why she had a sick child.”

“That’s not why.”

The man looked at her, considering this, but gave no answer. Then he looked at the picture on the wall. “Those kids, you had them all by your husband?”

“He’s their father.”

Still looking at the picture, he said, “You tell them they got a good mama.”

She said nothing as he stepped outside. Then he stopped, his hand on the doorframe. “When they come, tell them I’m not the kind of man who does these things.”

Then he was gone.

She didn’t move as she heard the car start, as she heard it back down the gravel driveway and disappear up the road. She held on until then, held on to the strength of her own body, her body and spirit that had built love and a family and a life. She only slipped away for a moment, perhaps, collapsing there where the sheriff and his deputies found her, their cars crowded in front of her house, the flashing lights dancing on the trees. The house rattled once again with their voices and their boots on the hardwood floor as a female deputy lifted her to the couch, saying, “It’s okay now. Everything’s going to be okay.”

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Later she would hear about Annie, her strong little Annie, who had heard the man yelling and knew she had to do something—Annie, who had pushed out the window screen and run for a mile through the darkness to the neighbors.

And later she would learn that authorities had found her car on Kendrick Road, near Tom King's house. The man had pounded on Tom King's door in the predawn hours, and King had come to the door in his underwear. Seeing the gunman, recognizing him, Tom King had fled through the house, out the back door, into his backyard—a disorderedly compound of outbuildings and junk cars. When authorities arrived, King was crouched behind a toolshed, crying like a baby, a shallow gunshot wound in his leg. Police ordered the gunman to put down his weapon. But he turned on them instead and fired several rounds before he was shot and killed.

For months afterward, the woman would wake in the middle of the night, thinking she'd heard a crash. The silence that followed was like that moment between waking and hearing the man pounding on the door. In the darkness, she would reach for her husband in bed. She would fold herself into his sleeping embrace. Even in his sleep, he would wrap his arms around her. She knew how fragile these moments were, how precious—this love, stronger than any kind of wrong.

“Tell them,” the man had said, “I'm not the kind of man who does these things.”

Those were the words that haunted her, long after the man was dead.