

THE GUN SHOP

BEN's son Murray looked forward to their annual Thanksgiving trip to Pennsylvania mostly because of the gun. A Remington .22, it leaned unused in the old farmhouse all year, until Murray came and swabbed it out with oil and begged to shoot it. The gun had been Ben's. His parents had bought it for him soon after they moved to the farm, when he was thirteen, Murray's age now. No, the boy was fourteen, his birthday was in September, Ben resisted keeping track. Murray still looked small and beardless, but several months before, when, at the noisy dinner table, Ben had tapped him on the back of the head to silence him, the child had pointed his steak knife at his father's chest and said, "Hit me again and I'll kill you."

Ben's feelings had been hurt. The tap hadn't been meant unkindly; one struck children as one struck animals, to get their attention, to give them direction. In bed, Sally explained, "It was his way of saying he's too big to be hit anymore. He's right. He is."

But the boy, as he and Ben walked with the gun across the brown field to the dump in the woods, didn't seem big; he carried the freshly cleaned rifle under his arm, as hunters do in illustrations, and the barrel tip kept snagging on loops of matted grass. And when, at their destination, with the tin-can targets neatly aligned, the gun refused to fire, Murray threw an infantile tantrum. Tears filled his eyes as he tried to explain, "There was this little *pin*, Dad, that fell out when I cleaned it, but I put it back, and now it's not *there*!" Ben, looking down into this small freckled face so earnestly stricken, couldn't help smiling. Murray, seeing the smile, pronounced a word Ben would never have said to his own father—not out of fear of punishment but fear of shocking him. The boy hurled the gun into the underbrush (yet with a certain care, so the gun was cushioned by saplings) and threw himself onto the cold leaf-mold floor of the woods. He writhed there and repeated the obscenity as each fresh slant of anger, of embarrassment, and of injustice struck him; but Ben couldn't quite erase his own disastrous smile. The boy's tantrums loomed quite impressively in the intimate scale of their

Boston apartment, amid fragile furniture and eavesdropping neighbors, but out here, among these mute trees—indifferent second growth edging into dying farms and abandoned right-of-ways—his fury was rather comically dwarfed. Also, in retrieving and examining the .22, Ben bent his face close into the dainty forgotten smell of gun oil and remembered the Christmas noon when his father had taken him out to the barn and shown him how to shoot the virgin gun; and this kept his smile alive.

The dainty scent. The dangerous slickness. The ribs of burnishing on the bolt when it slid out. The amazing whorl, a new kind of star, inside the barrel when pointed toward the light. The snug clicks of reassembly. The docile look of the lead-headed, copper-jacketed bullets, like a toy platoon in their box and then aligned like sleeping soldiers in the clip. The less than deafening slap of firing and the acrid perfume that floated, as the spent jacket spun, from the bolt. His father had thrown an empty oilcan into the snow of the barnyard and propped the gun on a windowsill and taken the first shot. He was forty-five when Ben was thirteen, and a schoolteacher; to see him commit this physical act—the oilcan jumped, punctured—and to smell, at his side, the gunsmoke and the dry wood and chaff of this barn had been for Ben a precious moment, a revelation: his father could shoot a gun. Ben remembered the cold of that day pressing on his bare hands and the way his father's mouth, seen from the side, sucked back a bit of saliva that in his concentration had escaped. As, now, he pulled the trigger and slid out the bolt to see why the old .22 was broken, he remembered his father's arms around

him, guiding his hands on the newly varnished stock and pressing his head gently down to line up his eyes with the sights. "Squeeze, don't get excited and jerk," his father had said.

"Get up," Ben said to his son. "Shape up. Don't be such a rotten sport. It doesn't work, it doesn't work; I don't know why. It worked the last time we used it."

"Yeah, that was last Thanksgiving," Murray said, surprisingly conversational, though still stretched on the ground. "I bet one of these idiot yokels around here messed it up." He seemed relieved that because of the woods he could not intimidate his father.

"Idiot yokels," Ben repeated, hearing himself in that snobbish phrase. "My, aren't we a young city slicker."

Murray stood and brushed the sarcasm aside. "Can you fix it or not?"

Ben slipped a bullet into the chamber, closed the bolt, and pulled the trigger. A limp click. "Not. I don't understand guns. Why don't we just point our fingers and say 'Bang'?"

"Dad, you're quite the riot."

They walked back to the house, Ben luggering the disgraced gun. He noticed in the dead grass the little rusty serrate shapes of strawberry leaves, precise as fossils. When they moved here, the land had been farmed out—"mined," the local phrase was—and the one undiscouraged crop was the wild strawberries running from ditch to ridge on all the sunny slopes. They were still here.

And his parents were still in the square sandstone house. His mother looked up from the sink and said, over Sally's shoulder, "I didn't hear the shots."

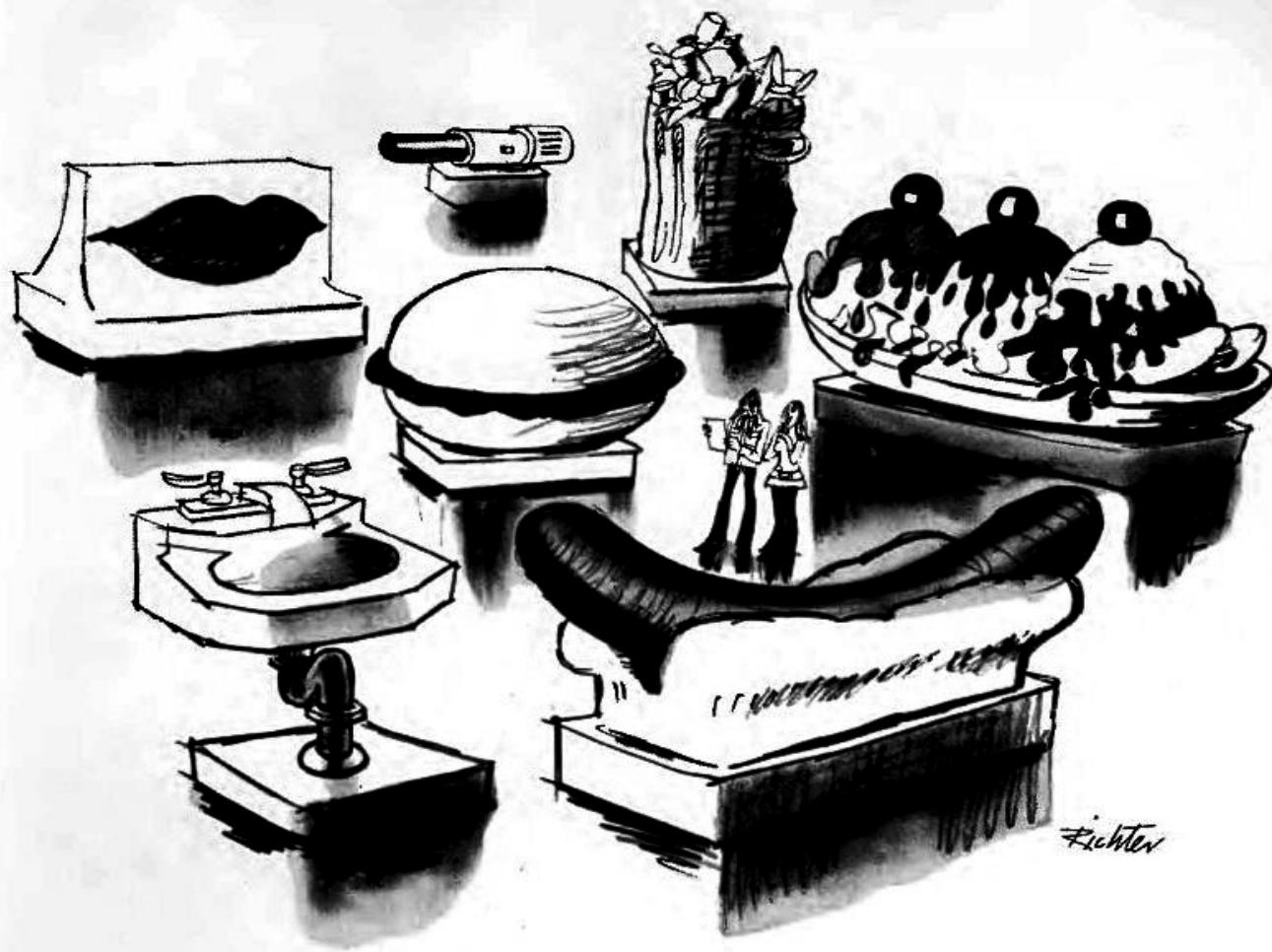
"There weren't any, that's why."

Something pleased or amused in Ben's voice tripped Murray's temper again; he went into the living room and kicked a chair leg and swore. "Goddam thing broke."

Sally froze, plate in one hand and dish towel in the other, and called weakly, "Hey."

That she was afraid of the boy irritated Ben; he went in after him. The living room was heavy with the torpor that follows a feast. The two girls were watching the Gimbel's parade on television. The older glanced over at Murray and said, "Spoiled." The younger merely sniffed. Their grandfather was sitting with them; obligingly he had taken the chair with the worst angle





"Wow! You mean they got all this in exchange for just one van Gogh?"

on the television screen, watching in fuzzy foreshortening a flicker of bloated animals, drum majorettes, giant cakes bearing candles that were really girls waving. "He's not spoiled," Ben's father told the girls. "He's like his daddy, a perfectionist."

Ben's father had become an old man, but a wonderfully strange old man, with a long white face, a blue nose, and the erect carriage of a child who is straining to see. His circulation was poor, he had been to the hospital, he lived from pill to pill, he had uncharacteristic quiet spells that Ben guessed were seizures of pain; yet his hopefulness still dominated any room he was in. He looked up at Ben in the doorway. "Can you figure it out?" He was hopeful that his son, who had snubbed tools all the years they lived together, had become a mechanic in the years since, when he had merely become a lawyer.

Ben said, "Murray says some pin fell out while he was cleaning it."

His father stood, prim and pale. He was wearing a threadbare overcoat, in readiness for adventure. "I know just the man," he said. He called into the kitchen, "Mother, I'll give Dutch a ring. The kid's being frustrated."

"Aw, that's O.K., forget it," Murray mumbled. But his eyes shone, looking up at the promising apparition of his grandfather. Ben was hurt, remembering how his own knack, as father, was to tease and cloud those same eyes. There was something too finely tooled, too little yielding in the boy that Ben itched to correct. Even as a baby Murray had been pure bone and muscle, as hard to hold in your arms as a struggling cat.

The two women crowded into the doorway to intervene. Sally said, "He doesn't *have* to shoot the gun. I hate guns. Ben, why do you always inflict the gun on this child?"

Ben answered sharply, "Nostalgia."

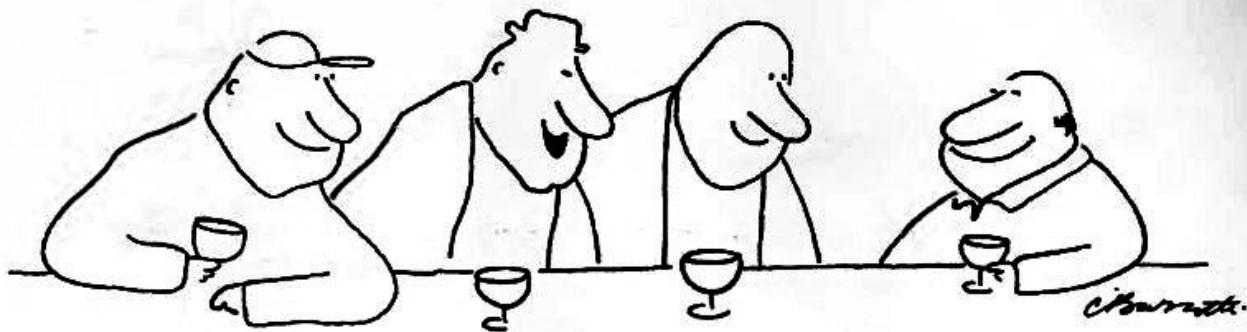
His mother called over Sally's shoulder, "Don't bother people on Thanks-

giving, Murray. Let the man have a holiday."

"This man never takes a holiday," Ben's father said. "He's out of this world. You'd love him. Everybody in this room would love him." And, irresponsibly, he was at the telephone, dialing with a touch of frenzy, the way he would scrub a friendly dog's belly with his knuckles.

Ben's son had looked up, startled, at the sound of his name pronounced rebukingly. They tended to forget he had been named for his grandfather. Two Murrays: one small and young, one big and old. Yet alike, Ben saw, in a style of expectation, in a tireless craving for—he used to wonder for what, but people had a word for it now—"action."

AFTER a supper of leftovers, they went out into the night, the two Murrays, Ben, and the gun. The house of women was left behind. Ben drove his father's car, at his father's direction. Under the headlights the road wound



"Let's ask Harry here what 'viable' means. He's the goddam intellectual."

off their hill into a valley where stone farmhouses had been joined by wooden ranch houses, aluminum trailers, a wanly lit Mobil station, a Pentecostal church built of cement block, with a neon "JESUS LIVES." "JESUS SAVES" must have become too much of a joke.

"The next driveway on the left," his father said. "There isn't any sign." It was a ranch house, but not a new one—one of those built in the early fifties, when the commuters first began to come this far out from the city. They walked up the flagstones to the front door in order of age; Ben could feel his son's embarrassment at his back, deepening his own. A woman in a pink wrapper answered, and, with sinking stomach, Ben decided that there had been a mistake; this was a rural brothel, his father had humiliated them once again. But no, the woman greeted them pleasantly, as her husband's customers, and led them across the front hall, with its braided rug and over-dusted knickknacks, to the cellar stairs. As they climbed down, Ben's father said loudly, "I shouldn't have done that, that was embarrassing to her, I wasn't thinking. We should have gone in the side, but then he has to disconnect the burglar alarm. When you get to be my age, Ben, it hurts like the devil just to try to think. Just to try not to annoy people."

The cellar seemed bigger than the house. Cartons, old chairs and sofas, a refrigerator, piled newspapers, gun racks lined an immense cement room. At the far end, there was a counter and, behind it, a starkly lit smaller room, a workshop. Ben saw his son's eyes widen; Murray's boyhood had known no gun shops. Whereas in an alley of Ben's boyhood, before the farm, there had been a mysterious made-over garage called "Ammo & Repairs"—sounds of pounding and grinding came out of it, and on dark winter afternoons, racing home with

his sled, Ben would see blue sparks shudder in the window. But he had never gone in. So this was an adventure for him as well. There was that about being his father's son: one had adventures, one blundered into places, one *went* places, met strangers, suffered rebuffs, experienced breakdowns, exposed oneself in a way that Ben, as soon as he was able, made impossible, hedging his life with such order and propriety that no misstep could occur. He had become a lawyer, reducing the embarrassments of others to formulas, hiding himself in that unimpeachable mass of distinctions called the Law. Even in his clothes he had retained the anonymous stiffness of the fifties, while his partners blossomed into cherry-and-peach stripes and plum-colored bell-bottoms. Seeing his son's habitual tautness relax under the mystery of this novel, potent cellar, Ben regretted that he had been so much less a father than his own had been, a father's duty being to impart the taste of the world. Golf lessons in Brookline, sailing off Maine, skiing in New Hampshire, the "right" schools insofar as any were right anymore—what was this but captivity compared to the wealth of openings poverty and misadventure punch in one's existence? In this cave the metallic smell of murder lurked, and behind the counter two men bent low over something that gleamed like a jewel.

Ben's father went forward. "Dutch, this is my son Ben and my grandson Murray. The kid's just like you are, a perfectionist, and this cheap gun we got Ben a zillion years ago let him down this afternoon." To the other man he said, "I know your face, sir, but I've forgotten your name."

The other man, blinking, said, "Reiner." He was a pale mild-looking man, wearing a Day-Glo hunting cap, and a dirty blue parka over a clean shirt and tie. The mild look may have

come from his spectacles, which were rimless. He seemed to be a customer, and the piece of metal in the gunsmith's hand apparently concerned him. It was a small slab with two holes bored in it; a shiny ring had been set into one of the holes, and Dutch's gray thumb moved back and forth across the infinitesimal edge where the ring was flush with the slab.

"About two-thousandths," the gunsmith slowly announced, growling the "ou's. It was hard to know whom he was speaking to, his eyelids were so remarkable. They looked swollen—leaden hoods set slantwise over the eyes, eclipsing them but for a glitter. His entire body appeared to have slumped away from its frame, from the restless ruminating jowl to the undershirted beer belly and bent knees. His shuffle seemed deliberately comic. His hands alone had firmness—hands battered and nicked and so long in touch with greased machinery that they had blackened flatnesses like worn parts. The right middle finger had been shorn off at the first knuckle. "Two- or three-thousandths at the most."

Ben's father acted as interlocutor to make the drama clear. "You mean you can just tell with your thumb if it's a thousandth of an inch off?"

"Yahh. More or less."

"That's incredible. That to me is a miracle." He explained to his son and grandson, "Dutch was head machinist at Hager Steel for thirty years. He had hundreds of men under him. Hundreds."

"A thousand," Dutch growled. "Twelve hunnert during Korea." Ben saw that their routine was practiced; his father had been here often.

"Boy, I can't imagine it. I don't see how the hell you did it. I don't see how any man could do what you did; my imagination boggles. This kid here has what you have. Drive. Both of you have what it takes."

Such compliments used to come Ben's way; now they passed through him, on the way from grandfather to grandson. He had ceased to exist and resented it. For who, in this cellar of yokels, was as important as he? He had dickered with Cabots, he had cowed mayoral assistants, he owned a closetful of gray suits. Dutch was the reigning presence here; Ben struck up a collusion with him. In a few crisp phrases he explained how the gun had failed to fire.

His father said to the man in spectacles, "It would have taken me all night to say what he just said. One thing I'm grateful the kid never inherited from me, his old man's gift for blarney."

Ben felt himself relax. His insides had been waiting for it: recognition.

Dutch slipped out the bolt of the .22 and, holding the screwdriver so the shortened finger lay along a groove of the handle, turned a tiny screw that Ben in all his years of owning the gun had never noticed. The bolt fell into several bright pieces, tinged with rust, on the counter. The gunsmith picked a bit of metal from within a little spring and held it up. "Firing pin. Sheared," he said. His mouth when he talked showed the extra flexibility of the toothless.

"Do you have another? Can you replace it?" Ben, in this acoustical cellar, heard his own voice and winced at the way it had become an advocate's—high-pitched, pushy.

Dutch declined to answer. He lowered his lids to gaze at the metal under his hands; one hand closed again around the curious little slab, with its gleaming ring, touching it as if for strength.

Ben's father interceded, saying, "He can make it, Ben. This man here can make an entire gun from scratch. Just give him a lump of slag is all he needs."

"Wonderful," Ben said, to fill the silence.

Reiner unexpectedly laughed. "How about," he said to the gunsmith, "that old damascus double Jim Knauer loaded with triple FG and a smokeless powder? It's a wonder he still has a face."

After a pause, Dutch chuckled.

Ben recognized in these pauses something of courtroom theatrics; at his side he felt his son taut with suspense. "Shall we come back tomorrow?" Ben asked.

He was ignored. Reiner was going

on, "What was the make on that? A twelve-gauge Parker?"

"English gun," Dutch said. "A Westley Richards. He paid three hundred for it yet, some dealer over in Royersford. Such foolishness, his first shot yet. Even split the stock." His eyelids lifted. "Who wants a beer?"

Ben's father said, "Jesus, I'm so full of turkey a beer might put me to sleep forever."

Reiner looked amused. "They say liquor is good for bad circulation."

"I'll be happy to sip one, but I can't take an oath to finish it. The first rule of hospitality, don't look a gift horse in the face." After the effort of forming these sentences, the old man sat down, in a concave easy chair with exploded arms. He had gone paler; his nose was livid as a bruise.

"Sure," Ben said. "If they're being offered. Thank you."

"Son, how about you?" Dutch asked the boy. Murray's eyes widened, realizing nobody was going to answer for him.

He said at last, "I guess I shouldn't."

Ben wondered, Had he ever? Aloud he explained, "He's in training for his ski team."

Dutch's eyes stayed on the boy. "Then you should have good legs. How about now going over and fetching four cans from that icebox over there?" He gestured with a loose fist, turned his back, and fished through a shelf of cigar boxes for a cylinder of metal that, when he held it beside the fragment of firing pin, satisfied him. He grasped it and the beer that Murray brought and shuffled from the counter into the little room behind, that brimmed with cold light and dirty machinery.

As the boy took the other cans around, his grandfather explained



"Erskine, you know that different drummer you're always marching to?"

to the man in parka and glasses, "This youngster is what you'd have to call an ardent athlete. He sails, he golfs, last winter he won blue medals at—what are they called, Murray?"

"Slaloms. I flubbed the downhill, though."

"Hear that? He knows the language. If he was fortunate enough to live down here with you fine gentlemen, he'd learn gun language too. He'd be a crack shot in no time."

"Where we live," the boy volunteered, "my mother won't even let me get a BB gun. She hates guns."

Ben heard the strained intake of breath between his father's sentences and tried to ignore the words. "Anything competitive, this kid loves. He doesn't get that from me. He doesn't get it from his old man, either. Ben always had this tactful way of keeping to himself. All the time he lived with us, you never knew what he was thinking."

Pained and embarrassed, embold-

ened by the beer, Ben walked around the counter and into the workshop. Dutch was turning the little cylinder on a lathe. He wore no goggles, and seemed to be taking no measurements. Into the mirror-smooth blur of the spinning metal Dutch delicately pressed a tipped, hinged cone. Curls of silver fell steadily to the scarred table. Sparks—not blue or red or even pink, but a kind of radiant tan—flew outward to the radius perhaps of a peony. The cylinder was becoming two cylinders, a narrow one emerging from the shoulders of another. Ben had once worked wood, in high-school shop, but this man could shape metal. He could descend into the hard heart of things and be among friends. Dutch switched off the lathe, with a sad grunt pushed himself away, and comically shuffled toward some other of his tools. Ben, fearing the love he felt for this man might burst his face and humiliate them both, turned back to the larger room.

Reiner was talking. "...you know your average bullet comes out of the barrel rotating; that's why a rifle is called that, for the rifling inside, that makes it spin. Now what the North Vietnamese discovered, if you put enough velocity into a bullet beyond a critical factor it tumbles, end over end like that. The Geneva Convention says you can't use a soft bullet that mushrooms inside the body like the dum-dum, but hit a man with a bullet tumbling like that, it'll tear his arm right off."

The boy was listening warily, watching the bespectacled man's soft white hands demonstrate tumbling. Ben's father sat in the decrepit armchair, staring dully ahead, sucking back sputtle, struggling silently for breath.

"Of course now," the lecture went on, "what they found was best over there for the jungle was a plain shotgun. You take an ordinary twenty-gauge, maybe mounted with a short barrel, you don't have visibility more than fifty feet anyway, a man doesn't have a chance at that distance. The spread of shot is maybe three feet around." With his arms Reiner placed the circle on himself, centered on his heart. "It'll tear a man to pieces like that. If he's not that close yet, then the shot pattern is wider and even a miss is going to hurt him plenty."

Ben asked him, "Were you there?"

Reiner took off his Day-Glo hunting cap and displayed a bald head. "You got me in the wrong war. Navy gunner, World Rumpus Two. With those 40-mm. Bofors you could put a two-pound shell thirty thousand feet straight up in the air."

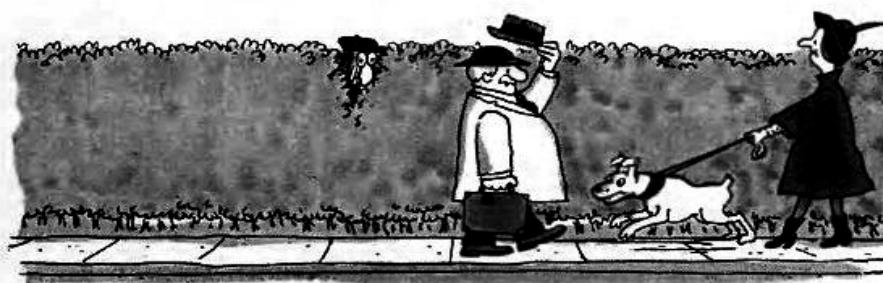
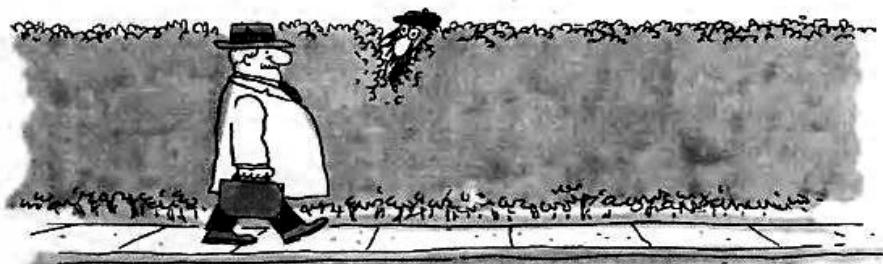
Dutch emerged from his workshop holding a bit of metal in one hand and a crumpled beer can in the other. Then he set the cylindrical bit amid the scattered parts of the bolt, fumbled at them, and they all came together.

"Does it fit?" Ben asked. The prosecuting edge had returned to his voice.

Dutch's clownish loose lips smiled. He slipped the bolt back into the .22 and turned back to the workshop. The four others held silent, but for Ben's father's breathing. In time the flat spank of a rifle shot resounded. "That's miraculous to me," Ben's father said. "A mechanical skill like that."

"Thank you very much," Ben said, too quickly, when the gunsmith lay the mended and tested .22 on the counter. "How much do we owe you?"

Rather than answer, Dutch asked Ben's son if he had ever seen a machine



like this before. It was the device, operated by hand pressure, that assembled and crimped shotgun shells. He let the boy pull the handle. The shells marched in a little circle, receiving their allotment of shot and powder. "It can't explode," Dutch told Ben.

Reiner explained, "You see what this here is"—holding out the mysterious little slab with its bright ring—"is by putting in this bushing Dutch just made me I can reduce the proportion of powder to shot, when I go into finer grains this season."

Murray backed off from the machine. "That's neat. Thanks a lot."

Dutch studied Ben judgily. "I guess two dollars."

Ben protested, "That's not enough."

Ben's father rescued him from the silence. "Pay the man what he asks; all the moola in the world won't buy God-given skill like that."

Ben paid, and was in such a hurry to leave he touched the side door before Dutch could switch off the burglar alarm. Bells shrilled, Ben jumped. Dutch laughed from the far side of the basement, and then everybody laughed, even—though he had hated, from schoolteaching days, what he called "cruel humor"—Ben's father.

IN the dark of the car, the old man sighed. "He's what you'd have to call a genius and a gentleman. Did you see the way your dad looked at him? Pure adoration, man to man. That's the kind of father he should have had, a real doer."

Ben asked him, "How do you feel?"

"Better. I didn't like Murray having to listen to all that blood and guts from Reiner."

"Boy," Murray said, "he sure is crazy about guns."

"He's lonely. He just likes getting out of the house and hanging around. Must give Dutch a real pain in the neck." Perhaps this sounded harsh to him, or applicable to himself, for he amended it. "Actually, he's a harmless sort of customer. He says he was in



"Do you think I might have time to make it big on the Wankel engine?"

Navy artillery, but you know where he spent most of the war? Cruising around the Caribbean having a sunbath. He's like me. I was in the first one and my big accomplishment was surviving the flu. We were going to board in Hoboken, when they pulled off the Armistice."

"I never knew you were a soldier, Grandpa."

"Kill or be killed, that's my motto."

He sounded so faraway and fragile, saying this, Ben told him, "I hope we didn't wear you out."

"That's what I'm here for," Ben's father said.

In bed, Ben tried to describe to Sally their adventure, the gun shop. "The whole place smelled of death. I think poor Murray was a little frightened."

Sally said, "Of course. He's just a boy. You're awfully hard on him, you know."

"I know. I'd like to be nice like my father, but he was so nice I can't be. Anyway, what did it get him? Chest pains." Asleep, he dreamed he was a boy with a gun. A small bird, smaller than a dot, sat in the peach tree by the meadow fence. Ben aligned his sights and slowly, exquisitely squeezed. The dot fell like a stone. He went to it and found a wren's brown body, neatly deprived of a head. There was not

much blood, just headless feathers. He awoke, and realized it was real. It had happened just that way, the first summer he had had the gun. After breakfast, he and his son went out across the dead strawberry leaves to the kiln again. There, a dreamlike thing occurred. Though Ben steadied his middle-aged trembling against a hickory trunk and aimed until his open eye burned, the cans and bottles proved impervious to his bullets, ignored them. Whereas when Murray took the gun, his little freckled face foreshortened into such concentration that the very muteness of the trees seemed willed. The cans jumped, the bottles burst. Ben had to laugh, out of pride and relief.

—JOHN UPDIKE

IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH USAGE

No matter how intelligent you are or how interesting what you write or say may be, a big part of the impression you make depends on how well you use the mechanics of English sentence construction....

IRREGARDLESS OF YOUR AGE YOU

MAY NEED OUR HELP

—Adv. in the Stamford (Conn.) Advocate.

Irregardless of your age, you're in the wrong business.