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Indulging in America's gun fantasies

Emotional triggers

By Joan Wickersham

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THERE THEY were, just below Martha Stewart and Paula Deen and Allure in the magazine rack at the supermarket: the gun periodicals.

I bought three.

Back at the place where I was staying — this was in upstate New York, a week ago — I pored over the ads and the editorial content, trying to understand what they were saying, and to whom.

First, they want you to buy a gun. It will probably not be your first gun; it will be an addition to, and an improvement on, the gun or guns you already own. It may deliver “precision firepower,” and allow you to “be victorious.” It will fit almost any need, including “tactical applications.” It may allow you to “wield the power of an entire arsenal.” If it’s a rifle, its optics can help to “deliver consistently repeatable accuracy at extreme distances and in stressful situations.” If it’s a .357 Mag six-shooter, it will “deliver the message loud and clear.” If it’s a handgun, it needs to be light enough to bring with you any time you leave home, “where presumably [you] have more substantial firepower at the ready than a concealable handgun.” If you’re a woman, you can get something lethal in pink.

Then there are the accessories. You may be “overseas on a covert op or here at home as part of a tactical team,” in which case you’ll want a silencer, to help you “get it done — quick and quiet!” Consider purchasing 30-round magazines for your Kalashnikov pattern firearms, or ammunition that “will not clog when piercing thick or heavy clothing.” You may want to order a day planner called “Hidden Agenda,” which has a storage compartment for your firearm and additional magazines. And don’t forget to stock up on concealed-carry underwear.

In addition to merchandise and specs, you’ll find tips. If you’re going to use a handgun to shoot at a car, you’ll need to learn where to aim to “enhance bullet penetration through doors” and “ricochet bullets across hoods and trunks to hit targets beyond.” Look for a good tailor who can alter your pants and reposition your belt loops to accommodate your holster. Learn how to cope with the stress that follows having shot someone, even in self-defense. Training in advance can help, since “the repetition serves to desensitize you to the employment of your

skills, so that if you have to employ them for real, you will be ready.” But still, you may have a tough time of it psychologically, since “society will not let you feel good after you have killed someone even if the person you killed was a raging madman trying to murder you.”

Post-Newtown, post-George Zimmerman, when so many people are baffled by America’s gun culture and the failure of Congress to push back against the gun lobby, maybe we can learn something by looking at the gun periodicals and the stories they tell, both explicit and implicit. The gun books are full of the fantasy of being the aggressor, of wielding power (the Kalashnikov upgrades, the silencers). But there’s also the fantasy of being the protector. There’s talk about hunting and competition, but the real story is about an America whose currency is violence and whose message is shoot or be shot. In this story you are Clint Eastwood, or Rambo. You need to be prepared — for a burglar, for someone else’s road rage, for an attack that will require you to ricochet bullets across trunks, for the end of civilization (“My wife has more freeze-dried food than I do, and my son has more ammo,” says an article titled “What Gun is in Your Bug-Out Bag?”). One of these days someone is going to threaten to use deadly force against you or your loved ones. Maybe you’ll need to use your AK-47 or Sig Sauer P226, or maybe brandishing it at the guy who is pointing his AK-47 or Sig Sauer P226 at you will actually prevent a gunfight.

The only person I’ve ever known who died of a gunshot wound was my father, who shot himself with a handgun he’d had for 20 years; he bought it to protect his family. The really dangerous fantasy is thinking that despite, or even because of, all this deadly firepower, no one will get hurt.

Joan Wickersham’s column appears regularly in the Globe. Her latest book is “The News From Spain: Seven Variations on a Love Story.”