

ATENAS TODAY



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ATENAS TODAY is a free English language newsletter for the residents and potential residents of Atenas, Costa Rica. It contains informative articles and creative compositions submitted by our readers, and is distributed via email approximately once a month to over 350 email addresses. To get on the distribution list or to submit material, please send an email to Fred Macdonald at fredmac222@yahoo.com.

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Walking the Dogs in the Canyon

by Diane Holman

The day is early, green and fresh and lovely. I can't wait to be off on my adventure with the dogs. I lift the leashes from their hooks in the broom closet and click them onto three collars. Once outdoors, Hecate and Hera and Beauregard pull me to the car, where I open the back door so they can pile in.

I pull out of the driveway and drive down Calle Zacatel, already alive with people. There are children in uniform, walking to school. There is the housewife watering the dirt road to cut down on the dust. There is the fellow bringing the cow up to his mother to be milked.

I pull onto the paved street, shift into low gear and begin the ascent into the world at large. Hecate pokes her head outside the back window as far as it can go, taking in the intoxicating air. I breathe deeply, too, and drive with an abandon that I can only indulge at 6:15 in the morning.

The dogs and I weave and wind past children and other dogs and the women who walk every morning until we finally reach the main road to central Atenas. At the bus stop there, many people are already congregated. I wave to them and they wave to me—out of sheer exuberance, I imagine, for what else is there to do with this incredible morning, this air and light and promise?

The dogs and I hurtle along to Vista Atenas, where we climb the mountain and pull into Julie and Michael's driveway. The dogs wait for me as I shut off the motor, open the door and walk around the car to get them. Beauregard—still new to the routine—balks at jumping out of the car, but eventually we are on our way to the backyard. I am propelled by the dogs, of course, who sniff and poke ecstatically at the prospect of THE WALK. Once on the back lawn, I unhook them from their leashes and they RUN. Beauregard makes a mad dash to the dog chow still remaining in Mookie and Susie's bowls. Hera and Hecate head for the hills.

I greet Julie and Michael and Carol who is there with Maya and—sometimes—A.J., who is there just for the walk. We grab our walking sticks and set off down into the canyon. The morning wraps itself around us as we descend along the path. Down, down we go, past trees of remarkable bearing and vines that we say Tarzan could have swung on and then over the bridge with rainwater beneath, water that Hera wallows in, rolling over and over in complete contentment. Eventually we begin to ascend, and Mookie and Susie and Maya and Hera and Hecate and Beauregard begin to regroup around us, falling over themselves, nipping and nudging, full of utter gratitude for it all. For a time there are only humans and dogs and trees and sky. Then Julie takes my walking stick and Michael collars Hera and I leash my three dogs and walk them to the car.

I drive home with a happy heart.

The Gun

by Fred Macdonald

He liked the feel of it, but at the same time it scared him. The gun was a brand new, 38 caliber revolver, and the bluish metal had a sheen and hardness that seemed to communicate power. When he held the weapon Robert experienced the sensation of invincibility that he imagined had been felt by warriors over the ages. Yet believing himself to be a prudent man, he had chosen a revolver instead of an automatic, because somewhere along the line he had heard that revolvers were safer. You could leave an empty chamber under the hammer, and it took more pressure to pull the trigger. And if you knew what to look for, you could see the bullets in the cylinder and tell whether the gun was loaded. He was determined to be very careful and think through all the issues before bringing this dangerous thing into his house.

The gun was surprising light in his hand. As he moved his arm in a sideways motion, he noted how perfectly balanced the weight felt. The deadly point swung as effortlessly as a compass needle. Sunshine coming through the open garage door reflected off of the barrel and painted an arching yellow line on the white wall of the garage. Robert thought of the incongruity between the tranquil scene and the potential danger in his hand.

“Hey, Daddy. What’ya doing?” His twelve-year old son Danny was coming into the garage from the sunny yard.

Quickly Robert hid the gun under a rag on his workbench. “Just putting some tools away,” he said.

Robert made it a point of honor never to lie to anyone in his family. He congratulated himself on disguising the gun as a tool without really lying. It was, after all, a tool. He would have liked to have shown the gun to his son and explained how it worked and why he had it. There was no doubt that Danny would have been interested.

“OK,” said Danny. “I would help you but the guys are waiting for me to play first base.” And he was gone as quickly as he had appeared.

A few weeks earlier Robert had brought up the subject of guns with his wife.

“Joan, honey, I think I should keep a gun in the house for protection. You never know when some maniac might threaten us.”

“Are you crazy?” Joan’s head snapped up. “We have a twelve year old boy who could easily kill himself or someone else playing with a gun. It happens all the time. There’s a much bigger risk of that happening than there is of us needing a gun to defend ourselves. No guns, not ever. Forget it.”

“Ah, honey, can’t you try to look at it from my perspective just once?”

“Your perspective? We’re not talking about perspective here. We’re talking about your male machisimo endangering our son.”

“Is it so unreasonable to want to be able to protect my family?”

Joan had walked out of the room without answering, and Robert had felt frustrated and angry. In his mind he always tried to understand her point of view on things, but she seldom reciprocated. To avoid conflict, he usually ended up going along what she wanted, telling himself that the issue wasn’t all that important anyway.

This time, however, he had been unable to convince himself that the issue wasn’t important. He had read a news account of a whole family in the next county being found murdered in their home by drug-crazed gang. How was he supposed to defend his family against armed intruders? His wife just didn’t understand a man’s need to be able to meet force with force.

After a few days he had calmed down; but then, as so often happens in life, something happened that reawakened his feelings and forced him to confront the subject again. He was rummaging around in his desk when he came across an old picture of himself as a boy cleaning a rifle with his father. In the background his mother was looking on approvingly. He thought fondly about the role model his father had been and how badly he wanted to be the same for his son.

At that moment he realized that the issue could not be ducked. He went in search of his wife and found her in the kitchen. Hoping he could make her understand, he chose his words carefully.

“Joan, I have been thinking more about the gun issue as it relates to Danny. He needs to learn about guns and how to handle them. That way there is much less chance of an accident when he comes across one, which could happen anywhere. My father had guns and taught me.”

“No way,” Joan said, “I will not have a gun in my house! I would be worried about it all the time. I’m surprised at you! I thought you agreed with me about gun control.”

Robert maintained a reasonable tone. “I do agree with you about gun control. But all the gun control laws allow responsible adults to maintain registered guns in their homes.”

“And those are the guns that end up killing children, registered or not. I know you had guns in your house growing up, but your father was lucky you didn’t kill yourself. I’m sorry, honey, but you will never convince me that we should have a gun.”

That night a trite old mantra ran through his head: *was he a man, or a mouse?* Women should not be the ones to decide critical issues like this. Somehow he had to assert himself without alienating his wife.

Finally, in the early hours of the morning he decided what to do. He would buy a gun and hide it so well that neither Joan nor Danny would ever know it was there. If he did have to retrieve it, the situation would be so grave that Joan would be thankful that he had been strong enough to go against her wishes and be prepared. He wouldn’t be teaching Danny about guns, but at least he would be a man.

He planned very carefully. There were several stores in town that sold handguns, but he suspected that there would be a lot of paperwork and maybe even registration renewal forms mailed to his house. Better to have an illegal gun than to take a chance on Joan finding out.

After all, this gun would never see the light of day unless it was a life or death situation, and then legalities wouldn't matter.

Fortunately in his state an adult could still buy a gun at a gun show without any registration process. The gun-lovers lobby had managed to keep this loop hole open, but even now a bill was pending in the legislature to tighten the law. Robert reasoned that he should act before it was too late.

Now he had the gun. He devised a hiding place that he was confident would never be discovered, but that would still be accessible in an emergency. Behind his workbench there was a hole in the plasterboard wall where he had run wires to power his tools. The hole was big enough to put his hand through and reach down behind the plasterboard. If your arm were long enough, you could reach almost all the way to the floor. But if you were a twelve year old boy, or a woman, you could not. By pouring saw dust into the hole he had built up the floor to where he could just reach it.

The gun would rest in darkness on an old shirt on the saw dust, like a vigilant guard dog. In the unlikely event he needed a weapon Robert could lean across his workbench and thrust his arm down into the opening to retrieve the gun. He tried it a couple of times with one of Danny's toy pistols, and he found that he could execute the maneuver in under five seconds. As an added safety precaution he moved his heavy bench sander to block the hole.

Robert had been undecided about whether to keep the gun loaded in its hiding place, but had finally concluded that the gun had to be loaded if it was going to be of any help in a crisis. Seconds would count. It was for this reason that he had rejected the idea of keeping the gun in a locked box.

He had bought the box of bullets that morning. Holding the box under the rag, he opened the lid and removed five smooth cartridges.

"I guess I'll keep the box with the extra bullets in the hole with gun," he thought.

Carefully he withdrew the revolver from under the rag and pushed the release to open the chamber. One by one he slid the five bullets into the holes in the exposed cylinder. He was pleased by their perfect fit. A quick motion of his wrist and the cylinder went back into place with a satisfying click. Then he rotated the cylinder so that the sixth, empty hole was under the firing pin, insuring that the gun would not go off if it was accidentally dropped.

"That's it," thought Robert. "I hope I am doing the right thing."

Several weeks went by and Robert had more or less forgotten about the gun. Then one Saturday while he and Danny were working on a project in the garage, Danny came up with one of those out-of-the-blue little boy questions.

"Dad, do we have a real gun?"

The hair tingled on the back of Robert's neck. "Why do you ask that?"

"My friend Johnny says that his Dad has a bunch of guns. He says that it is important for a man to have a gun for protection."

Johnny was the 14 year-old son of a neighbor down the street. He was the oldest kid on the block, and the leader of all the boys. Robert had jokingly referred to him as the neighborhood's alpha male.

Multiple trains of thought raced through Robert's mind. Should he lie to his son? No, he had resolved never to do that. Should he put him off or refuse to answer? No, that would be the equivalent of an admission. Should he tell him the truth? Could this be a little secret between father and son that would make them closer? Yes, that felt right. He wanted his son to be less influenced by his mother and more manly. Sure it would be deceiving his wife, but hadn't he already done that when he bought the gun?

Danny was watching him expectantly. He seemed to sense that his Dad was about to tell him something important.

"Son, can you keep a secret, just between us two men?"

"You bet," he said.

"OK, I will tell you that I do keep a gun in the house for protection. It is hidden in a very safe place, but I can get it quickly if I need it."

"Cooool." Danny drew out the word and his eyes were as wide as little toy cymbals.

"Now listen son, this is important. Your mom does not like guns and thinks it is dangerous to have them around, which it is if they are not well hidden. She will be very mad at me if she finds out. You have to promise to keep this a secret between us. Can you do that?"

"Sure, Dad. It's just between us men, right? Can I see the gun?"

Robert had expected this. "No, Danny. Maybe when you are older, but for now it's enough for you just to know that your Dad has the means to defend you and your Mom if necessary. I don't want you to know what the gun looks like or where it is. Just put it out of your mind."

"OK, Dad."

Less than 24 hours later Danny was proudly telling his friend Johnny about the hidden gun. For a brief moment he had hesitated revealing the secret to Johnny, but his father had said nothing about keeping the secret from anyone other than his mother. Johnny had told him about his Dad's guns, so it must be all right to confide in your friends. He couldn't wait to impress Johnny and get the older boy's approval.

"No way," exclaimed Johnny. "You know there is a gun in your house but you don't know where? Is it an automatic or a revolver?"

“I don’t know”, Danny said, surprised at the question. He wished he knew more about guns and had asked his father more questions. Now he was afraid he was looking stupid.

Sensing Danny’s discomfort, Johnny replied, “I think we should find out. We can be detectives and find your hidden gun.”

Danny was relieved to be on equal terms again, but he was wary of searching for the gun. “We could never find it,” he tried to explain. “Our house is too big with too many drawers and closets. And besides, my Mom is around all the time and she isn’t supposed to know about the gun. I promised my Dad. We can’t just start poking around.”

Johnny was not going to be put off. Here was an exciting challenge and a chance to be a detective like those he had been reading about.

“Your Mom’s not here right now,” he observed. “And if we’re smart about it, we can figure out just where to go, and no one will even know that we’re looking for something.”

Johnny turned the problem in his mind, thinking like the detective in the novel he had just read. In that story the detective had caught the bad guy by putting himself in the bad guy’s shoes. He explained the method to an eager Danny.

“What you have to do is put yourself in the other person’s place, in this case your father when he was deciding where to hide the gun.”

Danny was doubtful, but Johnny seemed to know what he was doing. The main thing was that Johnny was inviting him to be a part of the game.

“Now let’s think,” said Johnny. “What would be the important things you would consider if you were going to hide a gun?”

Danny had some ideas on this. “You wouldn’t want to put it someplace where someone might find it accidentally, like in a drawer under your clothes.”

“Good thinking,” Johnny said and smiled at him. “You are a good detective, partner. What else?”

Johnny was playing the role of the smart cop in the novel, helping the young cop think like Sherlock Holmes. “You would want to be able to get the gun quickly if you needed it,” Danny said with enthusiasm.

“Let’s think about that,” mused Johnny. “The only really fast way to have access to your gun is to carry it with you, and that’s not going to happen. My guess is that your Dad realizes he is going to need a few minutes to get his gun, no matter where he puts it. So it could be anywhere.”

“So where should we look?” asked Danny.

“I think there is another thing your Dad would consider about his hiding place,” Johnny said to his small friend. “He would want to be sure you couldn’t reach the gun if you found it. Parents are really afraid of kids getting a hold of their guns. My Dad keeps his locked up with a combination lock that only he knows how to open.”

Danny had visions of bank vaults with big dials on the front and his father frantically spinning them. “Dad didn’t say anything about locking up the gun.”

“You wouldn’t have to lock it up if you put it someplace where only a person with a long arm could get to it. Like down inside a wall.”

“Where could he do that?” questioned Danny.

“I don’t know, maybe in the back of a closet, or someplace in the garage.”

“Yeah, there are lots of holes in the garage wall. Let’s go look.” Danny was really getting into the spirit of being a detective.

The boys ran to the garage. It was a Sunday afternoon and the house was deserted. Robert had Joan had gone shopping.

The garage had pegboard and plasterboard nailed to various parts of the wall to create places for tools. There were some gaps, but no obvious holes.

Johnny scanned the walls looking for a place a man might put his arm in. There was an opening beside the water faucet, but there were solid wood two by fours just inside. Methodically Johnny walked around the room, inspecting each surface. Danny was enthralled. It was like looking for buried treasure.

When he came to the workbench, Johnny noticed that the bench sander was flat up against the wall, like it was hiding something. He pulled it aside.

“Ah, ah!”, he exclaimed. “Just the right kind of hole.”

The opening was big enough for him to put his arm in and feel around, but he encountered nothing on the sides but two by fours. The top and bottom, however, were open voids.

“Let’s drop something metal down this hole and see if we can hear it hit something else that is metal, like a gun,” Johnny said.

Danny rummaged around on the workbench and came up with an old hinge that his Dad had replaced on a kitchen cabinet. “How about this?” he asked.

“It will do,” said Johnny, taking the hinge and holding it inside the hole. “Now listen carefully as I drop it.”

Both boys leaned over the bench and pressed their ears close to the hole like they were expecting to hear the gun itself speak to them. Johnny dropped the metal hinge, and they both heard a distinctive clink as the hinge bounced off of the gun.

“Did you hear that?” Johnny exclaimed excitedly.

“Yeah,” breathed Danny. “Does that mean the gun is down in the hole?”

“There’s a good chance,” said Johnny. “Let’s get a piece of wire and go fishing. Do you know where there’s a metal coat hanger?”

“Sure,” said Danny, and he ran off into the house to get a coat hanger that he remembered seeing in the hall closet.

Johnny cleared off the bench so that he could lie on his stomach and put his arm down in the hole. By stretching as far as he could, he was able to just touch the surface of the gun with his finger tips. It was enough to convince him that they really had found the hiding place. He was quite proud of his detective work. Now all they had to do was hook the gun on the wire and pull it out.

“Here’s the wire,” said Danny.

“Great,” replied Johnny, and he pulled his hand out of the hole and sat up on the bench. “I’m pretty sure the gun really is down there.”

Danny for the first time was feeling uneasy. It was a good game to try to figure out where his Dad had hidden the gun, but actually handling the gun was a little scary. Still, he didn’t feel he could do anything to stop Johnny, who had bent the coat hanger so that it formed a long rod with a hook on one end.

Johnny inserted the hooked end of the wire into the hole and pushed it down until the rod disappeared except for the end he was holding. Then he got back up on the bench and once more put his arm into the hole, sliding his fingers down the wire. Immediately he felt the wire hit the metal of the gun. Now it was just a matter of twisting and probing until the hook engaged the trigger guard.

“Got it!”

Slowly the wire began to emerge from the hole. The gun clunked against the wall as it was drawn up, like some creature trying to find its way out of a trap. When the wire was almost all the way out, Johnny reached into the hole with his other hand and closed his fingers around the handle.

He was just extracting the lethal looking weapon from the hole when Danny’s mother came into the garage from the house. What she saw was a boy with the gun pointed at her son, who was only a few feet away.

“Oh my god!” Her scream was one of absolute terror.

Robert was just depositing some packages on the kitchen table when he heard the anguished cry from the garage. As he ran into the garage from the house, Johnny was bolting through the outside garage door toward the street. The lethal-looking revolver was lying on the garage floor at Danny’s feet. Danny stood paralyzed with a stricken expression on his face.

“What’s happened?” yelled Robert.

“That boy had a gun,” cried Joan. “He was pointing it at Danny!”

Danny finally found his voice. “No, Mommy, Johnny and I just found the gun. He was not pointing it at me.”

“Jesus!” exclaimed, Robert. “How did you find the gun?”

“You brought a gun into our house?” Joan was nearly hysterical.

Robert, clearly shaken, said nothing. Danny was terrified at the expressions on his parents faces, and with tears welling up and a lump in his throat, he ran into the house to the sanctity of his room.

The gun still lay on the garage floor looking like an omen from hell that was going to consume them. Finally, Robert picked it up and put it out of sight in his tool box.

“I’ll get rid of it this afternoon,” he said in a low voice.

“I don’t believe this! We agreed no guns in the house, and then you go right out and get one!” Joan paced back and forth like a caged tiger. Her face was red with anger.

Robert was still traumatized by what might have happened to his son, but felt he had to defend himself. “I was sure I had hidden the gun so no one could get it but me.”

“That’s beside the point! You lied to me. You put our son in danger. You ignored my feelings and went ahead and did what you wanted to do. I don’t know how I can ever trust you again!”

“Come on Joan. You said you would never agree to having a gun, but I felt I had to go ahead and do what I thought was right to fill my role as the protector of my family. By hiding the gun from both Danny and you, I thought I could have it both ways—keeping you happy and meeting my responsibility. Obviously I was wrong.”

“You were not only wrong, you destroyed my trust. How do I know you won’t do something like this again?”

Robert didn’t have an answer. He shook his head sadly and walked slowly out of the garage. His heart was fluttering like an out of control kite. Something important in his relationship with his wife had been irreparably damaged, and it was his fault. He felt sick.

Joan followed him onto the driveway, and when he continued to walk away, she shouted at him. “So you’re just going to walk away from all this? You’re going to leave that gun on your workbench where the boys can come back and get it?”

Ah yes, he had to get rid of the damn gun. He couldn’t take any more chances with that. At least no one had been physically hurt.

He turned and walked back into the garage, not knowing what he was going to do with the gun, or what more he could say to his wife. With tears welling up in his eyes, he saw again the picture of himself with his father and the rifle.