

The Difference of a Bullet

“The red light is off, you may remove your safety flags and load.”

The smell of used bullets hangs tangible in the air. The lead, brass and soot mingle with the cold of the concrete around us... I breathe it in deeply as I lie flat on the carpet, the shooting jacket pressing into my stomach, my elbow digging into the floor as I hold the rifle up. My left hand is curled around its smooth wooden body, protected by a thick glove and I gently grasp the trigger guard with my right, taking care not to press my finger too far. Already I hear the sharp bangs, still not entirely muffled despite the industrial sized earmuffs we are required to wear. The familiar smell of gunpowder joins the others to hang in the air, and it smells like home.

‘In the end, we only regret the chances we didn’t take’, a decorative poster adorns the wall above a bed, upon which a boy lies still, trying not to move, blink or think. His left eye is bruised and settled into a deep putrid purple.

He can’t take it anymore.

His house, school, friends- or lack of them- it all weighs on his mind. He hates this place, but can’t think of leaving- or how to. Wincing, he rolls off his bed.

I breathe, peering through to the targets at the far end. Fluidly I slide a bullet into the bolt action and click it in, making sure the cartridge is locked and loaded. It takes a fair amount of effort as the rifle is heavy and made to fire with careful thought. After lining up the sights, I breathe rhythmically before closing my eyes. Once fully exhaled I open my eyes and curse silently as my natural point of aim is off. Adjusting my hips slightly to the right, I try to compensate. This time when I open my eyes the target stays centred. I grin slightly, satisfied but try not to alter position. I squeeze the trigger gently into first stage, exhale slowly and press. There is no kickback but the sound confirms my shot, and I glance into the sights.

Swearing loudly, he paces back and forth in front of the door of those responsible for his pointless existence. Suddenly he kicks the door in and begins to pillage the room. Wrenching the comforter off the bed, he opens and slams shut the drawers barely noticing what’s inside them. A younger set of parents dressed in white and black watch accusingly from the bedside table. Picking them up, he hurls the photo against the opposite wall, denting the light brown wallpaper. He digs his hands under the bed and jerks it up violently, flipping it over as he doesn’t have the strength to throw it. Under the piles of old newspaper clippings and browning photographs, the edge of a grey box pokes out. Sweeping the debris of memory aside he picks up the box, opening it.

His fingers tremble as he lightly touches the metal- almost as if it might burn him. When it doesn’t he picks one of the guns up, feeling the powerful weight within his hands.

“Locked and loaded” he mutters. He cannot see the shaking of his hand, nor the sweat dripping down the base of his neck. All he sees is the stupid smiling faces in that photo, resting on the ground where he threw it. He pulls the trigger and the faces go away. He smiles. The weight feels good in his hand- sturdy, trustworthy... He likes it.

I find myself falling into a pattern as I work around the card. Position, relax, breathe, close eyes, open, relax, breathe, and shoot. And then check the shot in the scope next to me. I seem to be making some progress, but I know I’m in danger of getting lazy with my shots as I start humming along to a song I heard on the radio before.

“Six minutes!” The range officer shouts from behind me.

Pretty much on track, I think as I shoot the sixth counting shot. The fresh shell pops out as I unload, falling over the edge to join the hundreds of fallen bronze bodies below. I place the new bullet in and close the action, securing it in place. I can feel the pins and needles in the hand holding the rifle up but I try to ignore the feeling- it will probably go numb soon if I'm lucky.

It's as if all of his feelings and emotions are forced out with each shot. His anger at his father disappears with the lampshade, his frustration with his mother splits into a thousand tiny pieces like the china bird ornament on her bedside shelf. He moves into the next room, their ensuite, but the only thing exciting enough to destroy is the mirror hanging over the sink. The face staring blankly back is ugly and disgusting. A red liquid leaks out from under a sharp cut on his cheekbone from where a shard must have ricocheted. He hates that face, and he hates the people who made that face. The stupid bullies, the stupid teachers, the stupid people... He raises the gun to the reflection. Again he does not notice the shaking. The face in the mirror stares back angrily as he pulls the trigger. Shards of glass explode in every direction and a lethal glittering dust hangs in the air like the ghost of a moment passed. A kind of numbness spreads over his body, quelling the shakes in his hand. It washes over him, so that he does not notice the glass on his clothes or in his skin. He doesn't notice anything anymore.

I adjust my position a little more as I move clockwise down the targets to avoid getting too sloppy with my aim. The ache in my left is intensifying, but I try to forget about it. The physical urge to finish the card quickly in order to regain blood flow in my hand battles the mental need to shoot well, and for that I know I have to take my time. Picking a different song to distract myself, I try to relax as I know the seventh target is always the trickiest. I pull the trigger and check my scope, realising I shot a little high and to the right. I try relaxing my left hand and adjust myself again to the bottom row, setting the rifle down while I move my elbow a little closer underneath. This is also a part of the card I used to struggle with, but readjusting my position tends to do the trick.

He moves quickly, determined. He grabs the rest of the guns and ammo stored in the box. None of them have the safety latch on, it was as if they knew what he was going to do and let him. Motion without emotion, he bundles them up in his t-shirt and carries them downstairs; the cold metal - bar one hot gun - presses into his stomach as he cradles them.

Shooting the next target, I realise that although this shot and the previous one look pretty centred, they seem slightly to the left. I bite my lip and check the scope again. Definitely slightly out. I glance to the card sitting next to me and read-

“Skinny 10: 1 click. To go left: Side screw clockwise.”

I reach up to the screw on the side of the rifle - “two minutes!” - and twist it forward one click.

He piles the weapons haphazardly into the passenger seat beside him. Almost dropping one of the guns, he looks frantically around to see if anyone had noticed. But he doesn't see anyone. That doesn't mean that they weren't there though... He shoves the keys into the car-time was of the essence. Years and years of torment and rumours, violence and heartbreak weighs the accelerator down. He drive carefully, white knuckles gripping the black steering wheel. Pulling into the parking lot, he stops for a brief moment to survey the scene. In moments he spots them, his class. His bullies, playing soccer on the top field. He wonders for

a split second if it was odd that the one he identifies with the most was the ball. Kick. Kick. Kick.

The next shot is in the exact same place as the last, despite the alteration. I frown but know that it therefore must be my position- despite feeling relatively comfortable. I wonder if I was lazy and mentally berate myself as I hoist the rifle butt back up onto my shoulder and try as hard as I can to relax.

“Thirty seconds!”

Okay, calm down... concentrate. You’ve got this. Breathe and -

“Ten seconds!”

- Fire. I check the scope for the final time and grin. Bullseye.

I hear the Range Officer shout behind me.

“Time’s up.”