

A FIREWORK OVER LAKE MICHIGAN
By Shaun Spalding

Sam Reynolds bought a rifle because he thought it would make C. Everett Edwards listen, but he had to take it back before they charged his card or his account would overdraft. To replace the rifle, he borrowed Ester May Billings's one-shot derringer pistol. It looked like a Happy Meal toy. It could fit inside a pack of cigarettes. "EMB" was etched in calligraphy on the side.

Sam put Ester May's tiny gun on his bedroom bureau and cracked open an Old Milwaukee. He paced around, watching his wife, Julia, watch Dr. Phil out in the living room. She was lying on the couch in powder-blue exercise pants, with her blond hair in a pony tail, holding a glass of André strawberry merlot. She sipped her wine stiffly.

Julia was a twiggy little squirrel-faced girl who always looked like she had marshmallows stuck in her cheeks. Her shoulders were like the wire hangers she hung dresses on. Sam couldn't wait until they had kids, so it would put some meat on her. He wasn't sure her scaffolding could even support children.

His eyes wandered from the doorway to admire the painting of the horse on the bedroom wall that Julia had bought at the art fair that came through town. He liked how it classed up the entire room, but she still couldn't convince him that anybody should pay \$200 for just one picture. The horse looked a little bit like a donkey in the face. Kind of like Everett.

Sam and Everett prided themselves on gentility, so neither Julia nor Everett's wife, Milly, knew anything about their husbands' feud.

Sam and Everett had been impassed for two months. The impassing began with questions about the ownership of a shed they'd built together on the neighborhood's common property.

Sam owned the wooden walls; Everett owned the metal frame.

The argument had retooled itself into a feud when Everett did something shameful and unrepeatable. Sam never got that stain out of his car seats.

Everything about Everett was shameful. Everett couldn't help it. He was an eggplant covered in hair. His chin was doubling. Sam's was, too. Sam's body wasn't shameful, but his face was unfortunate looking. He had white teeth though, which was a rarity in the town he grew up in.

Their presence – shirts off, sweating like roasting hams in the July heat while hammering the boards to build their shed – had been unsettling to their working-class neighbors' middle-class sensibilities. Sam had forgotten about the towel he'd used to soak up his sweat and clean the grease off of his fingers. He'd thrown it into Ester May's hedge. It had marinated there in secret for the two months since the feud started. A raccoon had begun using it to keep its babies warm. If Ester May only knew.

Ester May didn't know what Sam wanted to borrow her gun for; she just let him borrow it. She was an old woman and figured that she would die soon, so she'd stopped asking questions about much of anything. If she had asked, Sam would've told her that he didn't plan on shooting Everett. He was just going to knock on Everett's door while brandishing it and make him aware of a few things: that not even bleach could get the smell out of his car seats and that neighbors should solve their differences by talking face-to-face like rational people. Waving around pistols was traditional and effective. If Sam didn't wave a gun around, Everett might just shut the door

on him before he could finish his points or before Sam could get an eyeful of his wife, Milly, cooking in the kitchen in her tight little house shorts.

Milly walked around with two chicken cutlets spilling out of her blouse and two flank steaks tucked in her back pockets. Sam would see her and get hungry. He wanted to pour barbeque sauce all over her. They always said she had a little bit of Spanish in her. He wanted to take her south across the border and taste her chili.

When Sam thought about his own wife Julia, he couldn't help but compare her to Milly and wonder. What did Everett have that he didn't have? Everett had a stack of hundred-dollar bills he hid under his bed for retirement. Everett had big, strong hands and bedroom eyes. He had a degree – Public Administration. He carried his bulk with the grace of a fat Venus de Milo. His bookcase was the size of a staircase. Girls started to like that kind of stuff when they got to be women.

Everett didn't know all the good things he had. If Julia were a prize heifer like Milly, Sam would turn her ass into hamburger meat every night, God willing. Sam cracked open another Old Milwaukee and thought about the wake-up call he was going to give to Everett. He walked through the living room past Julia on the couch to get to the front door – gun and beer in hand.

He walked in front of the television. Sam read somewhere that Dr. Phil wasn't even a real doctor. Everett must've bought his degree from the same place Dr. Phil did.

Julia looked up at Sam and then down at the hand.

“Where are you going with Ester May's little toy gun?”

“Out to teach Everett a lesson.”

“Well, while you're teaching Everett his lesson, can you get me some Chinese? What's the one I like?”

“The shrimp with the vegetables?” he asked. She nodded. “The shrimp is a dollar extra. You really want the one with the shrimp?”

“Mhmm.” She waved him away from standing in front of the television. “Don't let them put too much of the brown sauce on it this time.”

“Can't you just pick it up yourself? It's right across the way.”

“You know I can't miss my Oprah.”

“Damn it, Julie. I've got something really important to do.”

“Looks like it.” She sat up, put down her glass, and thumbed through her coffee table book of black-and-white photography when the commercials started.

Sam thought about putting up a fight, but he was a gentleman. He heard, “Love you,” coming from the living room right before he closed the door behind him.

His life would've been so much easier if he didn't love his wife as much as he did. There wouldn't be any more book-club meetings at the house or photography workshops at the community center or monthly trips to Detroit to see the musicals that toured through. There'd be less Norah Jones and more Van Halen. He wouldn't have been saving all his money for the last six months to pay for that couple's-only Great Lakes cruise. But it made her happy, so he did.

Damn Julia. Daylight was half gone already, and Everett wouldn't be able to see the gun as well in the dark.

Sam took the long way to Everett's house, passing by the Chinese takeout shop. He passed a lot that bought used tires on one side of the road and a lot that sold new tires on the other side. When Sam saw Officer Jimmy Stockwell on his regular patrol, he threw what was left

of his Old Milwaukee tall boy into the bushes and tucked the gun into his pocket . It was a tight squeeze next to his wallet.

“Keeping busy, Sam?”

“Hunting.”

“Good man. You still on to read scripture at service tomorrow morning?”

“The Lord wouldn’t forgive me if I wasn’t there.”

“It’s not like we’re Catholic, right?”

Jimmy had a good laugh. Julia grew up Catholic, so Sam didn’t find it funny. He laughed to keep up appearances.

They were standing a block away from Jimmy’s brother, Robert Stockwell’s, store. Jimmy always tried to sell Sam on the idea of shopping there. “My brother is having a big sale. You should check it out. Get something nice for Julia, maybe?”

The only thing Julia needed was a roast beef sandwich. The only thing Julia ever wanted was another glass of strawberry champagne. Stockwell’s sold neither.

They’d repeat Robert’s “Always in Stock at Stockwells” commercial three or four times during the 5 o’clock news because he was one of the only advertisers. Sam had a special kind of contempt for people who shopped there.

When Sam entered Wok 360, there was a woman at the counter finishing her order. She looked imposing, like she was a big bronze statue, but in the good way – like the Statue of Liberty. It was Milly. She turned and walked over surprised to see Sam.

“That’s a pretty dress you’ve got on.”

“This?” she was trying to be modest. “Guess how much I paid for it.”

“I’m not much in the business of knowing the prices of women's clothes.” He leaned back on his heels with his hands in his pockets.

“\$7.50. On sale.” She was proud like she'd sewn the dress herself. “I got it over at Stockwell’s.” She beamed. He winced.

“Well, by the looks of it, you should shop there more often.” He'd been shaking his leg the whole time. “A girl like you would look pretty in anything, though.” He was imagining her wearing nothing.

Milly smiled. They looked at each other actively searching for something new to talk about. Milly shot first. “So, what are you up to? Were you just itching for some chicken chow mein, or what?”

He considered telling Milly about his feud with her husband. “Just getting some Chinese for Julie.”

“That's real sweet of you.”

“Oh, it's nothing.”

The cashier at the counter called her order. Milly signaled Sam to give her a second while she went to the counter to pick it up.

When she turned around, his eyes followed the curve of her spine from her shoulders to her waist. The print on her dress was something an elementary school teacher would wear: big red apples with cartoon worms boring holes in them. It made her look as smart as she really was. You'd need an X-Acto knife to get that dress off her. Sam wanted to be that dress.

He cursed his lack of refinement when he couldn't think of something interesting and cultural to impress her with. He just stared at her back blank-faced, ashamed at how his tongue

wagged. He fell out of his stupor just in time. Milly had finished looking through her bag, picked it up, and turned back toward Sam and the exit.

“Well, I gotta get back to Everett. His food gets even a little cold, and he gets furious. It’s like he thinks we don’t have a microwave.”

Sam hooked his thumbs in his pockets and leaned back on his heels. A cartoon worm smiled at him from inside an apple. Under the worm’s head was a nipple – a pronounced nipple – that made the worm seem even happier to see him.

She continued, “You and Julie are welcome to come by any time you want.”

He put his hand in his pocket and firmly gripped his gun. She leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek.

He shuddered. His lips plumped. His chivalry expanded. His spine grew diffident. His fist clenched around the derringer in his pocket. Its single shot went off like a glorious Fourth of July firework over Lake Michigan, and Sam saw red. The bullet buried itself in his foot and he collapsed.

On hearing the gunshot, all the customers in the restaurant fell to the floor and prayed silently to the Lord. A wok hit the floor in the kitchen. Two cooks hid in the freezer and held their breath while the smart one ran out the back door. The store’s owner entered the dining area from the kitchen brandishing a shotgun. An anarchist in the corner secretly dreamed the Revolution was beginning.

Officer Stockwell was on the scene almost immediately and called for an ambulance on his radio. It wasn’t the first time someone had shot himself in the foot while he was patrolling, and it wouldn’t be the last. He asked Sam how he was feeling.

The pain gave Sam the overwhelming feeling of falling out of the sky. Eddie Van Halen was playing the guitar solo from “Eruption” inside his foot while David Lee Roth kept turning up the volume knob. Then, suddenly, a wave of calm radiated up through his back. He was filled with the same sense of childlike wonderment and infinite possibility that he felt the first time he’d seen a football game on a high-definition television.

He thought about that July, on top of the shed with Everett, hammering his wood into Everett’s unshakable metal frame. He thought about Everett’s bulges and curves – the sheer mass of his body – and how he rippled each time he struck nail into wood. He thought about all the pounding and sanding and grinding he’d done with Everett. And oh how Everett glistened like a bronze Colossus in the afternoon sun from the sweat that his chest hair couldn’t soak up. Sam just couldn’t shake the smell of the sweat – like roast beef under a hot lamp at a buffet.

Sam’s index finger curled – a mix of endorphins and adrenaline and ecstasy – and for just a split second, he thought he might be in love with Everett.

And if the wound didn’t prove fatal, if somehow Sam managed to survive long enough to see Everett again, he didn’t know what he’d say to him – about the shed, about being men with wives, or about Milly. And then the pain came back and all he could think of was Julia.

Julia had rushed over as soon as she heard the news. She brought along a pie that she’d baked earlier that morning in case Officer Stockwell, the ambulance driver, or anyone else wanted a slice.

Milly told Julia what had happened between bites of pumpkin pie. The restaurant owner got them whipped cream from the refrigerator that he’d propped his shotgun on. He watched out for health inspectors.

Before they carted Sam off to the ambulance, an EMT shot him full of painkillers, and Sam used his last conscious moments to tell Julia he loved her... or thought he loved her. The sun went down.

Milly stayed with Julia in the hospital while a tech removed the bullet from Sam's foot. They talked about *A Million Little Pieces*, *Tuesdays With Morrie* and other books from Oprah's book club. By the time Milly got home, she'd spent so much time catching up with Julia and filling out police reports that Everett's lo mein was cold.

Biography: Shaun Spalding is a law student in San Diego, CA who may be a full-blown attorney by the time you're reading this. Having worked as a commercial video producer, web designer, and freelance writer, he seems to have done a little of everything except find time to create a real online portfolio. Until he creates one, you can read his highly personal ramblings at isitobvious.com . You can contact him for incorrect legal advice or to read his unfinished screenplays at saspalding@law.cwsl.edu