MAKING IT SAFE

Charlie started thinking maybe I'm losing it when he got afraid to turn left across traffic. He froze with his foot on the brake, knuckles choking the steering wheel. Other cars drew a smoking line behind him; he waited for a station wagon to bear down and go by. It did -- Charlie turned left into a parkinglot that was barren as a stripmine.

Wet March wind blew across unprotected asphalt. Coming north off the Indiana prairie, it felt lost, vicious. It picked up Charlie's hair as he climbed out of his car to go buy cigarettes and a pint of apricot brandy at Walgreen's. Charlie had parked abruptly, and left himself a long walk to the shopping center entrance.

Earlier in the day Charlie had walked on the beach of Lake Michigan. Having called in sick to his job, he decided to walk down to the edge of the great frozen lake and he stood there a long time with both hands pressed behind him. He wondered how far you could go on the ice. The winter was mild: probably not very far. He turned and began making his way along the shore. His boots crunched frozen bits of sand. Charlie's wife had left him the week before; he was learning to realize how unhappy he was. He was afraid.

Charlie's wife made slender arrangements of brittle winter sticks. She did them in stone vases that were glazed dark green, jet, brown, and placed them in the right windows to catch afternoon light and throw shadows. Charlie observed the intent look on her face as she did this; watched her hands tremble, her falling posture. He asked her if anything was wrong and she, preoccupied, said "nothing."

Later she would say she felt vaguely ill, then that she was depressed. For weeks the ice on the lake made everything preternaturally quiet. Charlie's wife left him.

To keep warm, Charlie kept walking. He listened to the water rustling, shifting its mass beneath the ice. He looked for birds, but did not see any. Finally, he made his way back up the short distance to where he and his wife had lived together. He called his friend, Spalding.

Spalding had been a soldier. He blew people up, he said, and Charlie believed him. Spalding's wife gave him a .45 automatic for Christmas and Spalding spoke of shooting it out-of-doors. He told Charlie how he delighted in taking his stepson to a range they discovered and blowing away generations of tin cans. He sought and purchased a .22 rifle for the eleven year-old boy; he wanted him to learn to use weapons properly.

Charlie told Spalding that he had never fired a handgun before. In fact, he had held one only once -- at his best friend's house. He tried to remember. It was during a college

break; his friend's parents were away and Charlie was invited over for the night. Toward dawn, after the whiskey was gone, Charlie asked where he should sleep and his friend led him to the parents' vacant room. Charlie dropped his bag at the foot of the bed and his friend brushed the air with a dissolute hand, "look at this..." He backhanded a pillow away and pulled the right corner of the mattress. Impressed in the floral boxspring was a Colt .45 service automatic. A green metal ammunition clip was laid beside. Charlie was allowed to take the gun. He was nervous about pointing the barrel anywhere but at the bed, about gripping the handle too hard. He thought this gun was the most objective thing he had ever seen; it could change a world immediately, he thought. Purity and violence. Suddenly he felt so ignorant and drunk there was nothing left for him but sleep.

Spalding got Charlie drunk. He took Charlie out and bought him a series of drinks in several of the roadhouses that were out along the highway. In one of them the bartender talked about all the guns he had owned since his schooldays. He broke off to answer the phone -- it was a guy who had picked a fight earlier in the evening and been bounced. It sounded like he was trying to make some threats, but the bartender was having none of it. "She doesn't want to be with you anymore," he said -- he listened -- "Come back here tonight and you'll deal with me for the last time; it's over

for you, man." The bartender put his hand over the telephone mouthpiece and rolled his eyes. Spalding put some paper money on the bar and guided Charlie out. In his car, driving to their next stop, Spalding asked Charlie if he would like learning to use his .45. Charlie was gazing out the window, watching blackness rush by.

"Sure."

Alone in his car in the vast parkinglot, Charlie took a deep swallow of apricot brandy. He wondered if Spalding had counted on the wind when he had agreed over the phone to meet at the range. He shivered. The brandy went down. When he felt its heat behind his sternum, Charlie started his car and ventured into traffic again.

The sky was congested with clouds; they were heavy, long and gray, some tipped with traces of silver and violet. They moved fast across Charlie's hood. Spalding had given him directions to follow: west on 20 until you saw a handpainted sign on a board that read "ROLLY'S." Turn right, a gravel road -- the shooting range was on the other side of a sand dune.

Spalding and his stepson were in their car with the heater going. Spalding jumped out when Charlie pulled up, smiling and carrying a blue vinyl case about the size of a properly folded flag. His boy followed after him -- shy, looking seriously at the narrow case he held his rifle in. Spalding's

hair grew down to his shoulders and he wore a pirate's bushy beard. His long legs covered ground swiftly. He had on a golden parka trimmed with coyote fur, there were calfskin gloves on his hands. He called, "Ready for some shooting?" Charlie waved.

Spalding's boy proceeded to the marksman's shelter -- a roof on four legs with a shelf for ammo and steadying running round three sides. Spalding looked from the boy to Charlie and hollered against the wind, "You two set up some cans. I'll pay the man, get some ammo and some paper targets."

Old railroad ties and treetrunks were laid end-to-end along the foot of the sand dune in a cock-eyed chain. Several fenceposts had been sunk; they were so raked from gunfire, the wind made them hum and twang. All kinds of debris was strewn around: blasted soft drink and beer cans, broken glass, torn shreds of target, splinters of wood, broken stones, chicken wire. The boy was collecting cans and trying to make them stand in the wind. It was hard. Charlie, trying to do the same thing, felt like a stooge setting up a third, a fourth can, only to see his first and second being blown over. All the cans had rusty bulletholes in them.

Spalding was cradling a white and green box. He set it on the shelf of the marksman's shelter and pulled it open. Bullets were packed snugly inside. Lead and brass. The .45

was in Spalding's palm; he held it up for Charlie to see. His breathing made frosty clouds that came out of his mouth and instantly vanished. He said, "Watch carefully," and pressed a button near the trigger guard. A dark green metal sheath slid from beneath the butt. Spalding gestured with it, "This is your clip -- it holds the bullets. Now I've got to load it." He handed the empty automatic to Charlie. Charlie was surprised: the gun was lighter than he remembered or expected. Spalding took seven bullets from the box and put them in his pistol case, "I want to save these to keep the gun loaded at home," he explained. He squeezed seven more, one on top of the next, into the spring-action clip. He took the pistol back from Charlie and inserted the clip in the butt. "There," he said.

Charlie had seen it in movies. Thousands of times. One hand pulling the barrel back and cocking a round in the chamber. Spalding held the weapon close to his face, muzzle pointed at the ceiling of the shelter. He addressed his silent stepson, "You set, Nicky?" The boy nodded; he was stepping up and down in place, trying to keep his feet from freezing. "Okay," said Spalding to Charlie, "he'll shoot from in here. We'll go over there," Spalding nodded toward a patch of ground a couple of hundred feet to their right. "We need to be closer in --" The boy was already firing. One, two, three times. Each time Charlie jumped; the little rifle was loud.

Spalding grinned happily through his beard, "Let's dispatch some beer cans." He started for the shooting place. Charlie was still watching Spalding's stepson aim his rifle across the cold. Charlie's ears were ringing from the shots.

Spalding went to the dune to reset some cans the wind had blown over. When he straightened up and turned, Charlie was standing where they would shoot from, looking thin and tense. Spalding went to him. He extended his arm and offered Charlie the gun. Charlie took it.

"This is probably the second most powerful handgun there is." said Spalding, "You'll find it shoots a little high. How does it feel?"

Charlie had been afraid of the kick. But the gun was light. "I'm amazed at how light it is," he told Spalding.

"Now I shoot with two hands," Spalding clasped his hands before him at arm's length, "but you can try with one if you want. And I was trained to aim with both eyes open."

Charlie stared at a teetering can. Spalding stopped talking. Suddenly Charlie wanted to hear the pistol. He felt the heft of the gun, raised it the way Spalding had shown him -- he looked down the barrel at a beer can that looked like it was aching for a bullet -- Charlie closed his finger on the trigger.

It might have been dreamtime. The explosion stuffed Charlie's skull, the pistol bucked. Nothing appeared to happen. Then the wind toppled one of the cans Spalding had

put up. Charlie looked over the gun at the two that still remained and felt like laughing. I can knock them down with telepathy, he thought. But that was not how he wanted it. He fired the gun again, and quickly, again.

Spalding bent and stretched, picking up spent brass. Charlie fired a fourth shot and saw a small tuft of sand flip on the dune's slope. He took a deep breath, spread his legs, flexed his knees. He found a beer can at the end of the gun barrel, stretched his arms straight out to meet it -- like a cop, he thought, a cop with a lead on a thief running from the scene of a crime. Charlie fired three quick shots and somewhere in the sequence a can spun away. Ke kept pressing the trigger until it clicked empty. Spalding was standing by his side with seven spent casings in his gloved palm, "Try and find as many of these as you can," he said, "I get money back."

Charlie nodded. His ears were really ringing now -- Spalding's words seemed to be strained through torn tissue. Spalding pulled a paper target with a bullseye on it from under his coat. He was fastening it to one of the fenceposts with a bent nail he found. He walked back about fifteen feet, turned and assumed a shooting stance. He fired seven shots in a row -- rhythmically, concentrated -- a cluster formed in the lower lefthand quadrant of the target.

"That would have been the heart," Charlie heard him say, "the .45's a lousy target gun. It's made for stopping a body

-- killing, not finesse." He spoke with no sign of satisfaction or disgust, but with a bluntness Charlie liked. Spalding walked to his target and pinned the flapping paper down with the barrel of his gun for a better look. When he returned, he put a weight in Charlie's hand, a slug. "A souvenir of your day's shooting," he said. Charlie rubbed it with his thumb and found it reassuring, like a worry bead.

Flecks of snow started blowing in over the dune. Wind tumbled them past the place where Charlie and Spalding stood with Spalding's gun. Charlie's fingers were so cold they felt like they had been caned. He had trouble fitting bullets into the clip for his turns. And he was swallowing a lot, hoping his ears would pop and his hearing be restored.

"I didn't realize how loud this thing would be," he finally told Spalding.

"Yeah," said Spalding absently, "make every shot count." His voice sounded a great distance away.

Charlie walked across the frozen stubble, .45 in his hand, and stood like a duelist, a right angle to the target. He held the gun in his right hand and placed four bullets in a space the size of a fist where somebody's guts might have been. He thought that now the only time his ears felt normal was when he was actually firing away. When it was quiet on the range, he could not hear a thing.

"You got him," Spalding smiled and Charlie was glad for his approval.

"It's easy, isn't it," Charlie said in the wind.

Spalding replied, but Charlie could not make him out.

"What?"

Spalding stepped closer and repeated himself, thrusting his .45 for emphasis, "Target shooting like this, there's nothing wrong with it."

Charlie felt like he was going up too quickly in an elevator. The pressure in his head was getting worse. He called Spalding louder than he had to, "I'm having trouble hearing you."

Spalding's eyes were bright with his own pleasure. He regarded Charlie standing there on the range and frowned for a moment. He suggested that Charlie's ears were hypersensitive. Then he called to his stepson to pack it up.