

honorable mention, non-fiction

The Healing Gun

by Jasmine Kent

Once again, I burst into their kitchen, aim the gun and kill my mom. Blood splatters all over her pink flowered dress. Once again, my dad rushes in, torn between his wife, me, and the phone call to 911. I shoot him, too. Shivers of satisfaction run down me. I open my eyes to the real world, only to replay the reverie again moments later. All day long, I “shoot” her. All day long, I “wound” my father with the gun that I romance from the crippled dirty old man on their street. And all day long, they “handcuff me and take me to jail, where I stay until I die.”

No wait, I often correct myself. I wouldn't get the death penalty. I am mentally ill and clearly not in my right mind. Besides, this is a crime of passion... I hate my mom.

It started, I believe, when I was a baby. Under hypnosis, I remembered her beating me and beating me all over my little diapered body. I remembered her foaming face screaming, “Bad baby! Bad baby!” Right there I split. I made myself a good baby. Doctors confirm that I am now dissociated into parts.

I first remember hating her when I was nine, and she left me with a different baby sitter every night while she went to church. I was lonely and disturbed, and when she took me to a horror movie, I was going to throw up with a migraine, so she had to take the whole family home. She railed at me and pronounced that I would kill myself in my early teens, because I was so emotionally weak.

When I was fourteen, I didn't kill myself. I became fiercely loyal to her instead. We grew flowers together and rescued baby birds. We floated down streams on inner-tubes and made cakes and candy and threw parties for my friends. She would scream and yell over the smallest things but speak in matter-of-fact whispers when someone passed away.

As I grew older her soft voice began to confuse me. She got her masters in family counseling, tossed most of it as bunk, and mixed the rest of it with Pentecostal religion. Religion infiltrated everything. Defense mechanisms such as pride, feelings, and assertiveness became sin, and physical illness was psychosomatic, which meant to her that it was only curable by confession. I had never known comforting words, but now in my vulnerable teens, they came warped and twisted. She began to control me with them.

“Darling, the fever will stop when you confess that last sin you must be holding onto.”

“You know, honey, you must tell me everything when you've been with your friends.” I gladly complied. I was becoming afraid of myself; afraid that I might do something wrong or say something wrong. She could correct that. She would correct everything I said. Her goal was to make me devoid of all personal defenses. Anything that would protect me psychologically from anything else was a lurking defense mechanism.

One day, Mom's bird flew in front of my cat, which I had had since age nine. She grabbed the cat and threw it against the wall, killing it. She wasn't sorry. I demanded that we go to a friend's house in town for the weekend. There, I had my first nervous breakdown. I wandered all night, saying "I don't know, I don't know." Finally, I came home and began screaming as I lost control of my mind. She forced me to take a valium, saying "Now you know that as you take this pill, it is a terrible sin to do so, but you must take it." Our kind friend separated us and put me to bed, stroking my hair. It was the first soft touch I could ever remember.

At the age of eighteen, I went away to college and didn't see Mom for a few years. I was totally confused about life in my new environment, and I could no longer reach her for direction. I fell into deep depression.

Mom came for my son's birth. It was a rough birth, which I undertook at home, so there was no C-section when I pushed for hours. The midwife said I was in and out of consciousness.

The next day, when I asked for help to the bathroom, my Mom started in with one of her religious/psychological tirades. "You're just trying to get attention! You've always been a selfish invalid. Just look at what it's doing to your marriage!" she ranted. My marriage was fine, but began to feel as though I was at fault for the whole world. Her tirade lasted two hours.

Once, I disagreed with Mom on a tiny issue in something I wrote, and she threw the Bible at me so hard that I needed a doctor's care.

When my daughter was born, I got involved with a slightly off religious group that matched Mom's theories but took them one step further. It was the only way I could remove the burden I had carried everywhere since I had learned through her that everything that happened was ultimately my fault. These people taught that we were indeed worth absolutely nothing and could do absolutely nothing about it. It was only the impersonation of Jesus in us that could do anything correctly, and he had it all planned right down to my next bite of cereal. I totally "died to self" and took off flying! I started a non-profit group, wrote a book manuscript, and sold an article to a very prestigious magazine. I got involved in ministry through a church and thought I was happy for the first time in my life. Nothing could stop me now!

But something did. A cop came to my door, and I was informed that my husband was living a secret life of desultory crime. I was devastated. God hadn't protected me or prepared me for this. I lay on the floor and cried for a month. Jesus obviously wasn't living through me now. There I was, just plain old worthless me.

I had been taught that psychologists were agents of the devil. Yet, against my best judgment, I began seeing one. I had one more defense mechanism left: my dissociative splitting. It was the only one Mom never knew about. It began to be worn away in therapy. I spent the next eight years trying to kill myself, lost my kids to relatives, and landed in the state mental institution. There, I finally gave up on God and started believing in me just a little bit. It was a major turning point.

God gradually came back into my life, but it required one of the best trauma therapists in the country to help me see how Mom had it all wrong. I saw how seriously flawed she was as I worked through one false ideology after another, all of which had completely destroyed me. I have three siblings, and two of them are also severely mentally ill. I am certain Mom's craziness is the cause of their illnesses, and they blame her too.

It got to the point where if she said anything at all at a family gathering, I ended up in a hospital. Christmas... Easter... Thanksgiving... "Darling, you would never experience sadness or loneliness if only you had Jesus like I do." Her nose would clip the air. I don't remember that she ever said a comforting word in my life. My siblings still refuse to even come to family gatherings.

I was taking care of my 40-year-old brother, who is so mentally ill, he is often on the streets, raving at who knows what, when the letter came. It was from mom to my uncle and was supposed to be kept a secret from me, but it accidentally came to the wrong address. It was a ten-page letter addressed to all the relatives, explaining through the use of countless scriptures why her kids were mentally ill. Mom's resounding point was that we had all chosen a life of sin, and specifically, the sin of disobeying her teachings. The letter was so convincing and so slick that even one psychologist from my secular hospital could not see through it. Not only had she made our lives nightmarish, but she also blamed us for our own mental illnesses. Furthermore, by this document, she was proclaiming to the world, convincingly, that our problems were caused by our own selfish choosing. That is when I decided to kill her.

That dirty old man is always begging for a kiss, I think to myself. He keeps a loaded gun in his truck. He'll give me the keys to get him sodas out of the cab. Now all I have to do is find it. I am serious. The plan goes through my mind over and over, no matter what I am doing. I perfect it.

"Don't you know that you'll be in a mental institution for life," my therapist implores. "If you're lucky!"

"But I would rather spend my life or death anywhere than have her around," I reply.

It's got to be soon, or I'll chicken out, I think.

In the afternoon, I really decide to do it.

Suddenly, it dawns on me, "I don't have to kill her! The fact that I can means I have more power over her than she has over me." I put the mental gun down.

I don't speak to Mom for a few months after that realization. One day I went by her house to see Dad, and there she was, as nonchalant as ever. It wasn't long before a sly, cutting remark came out, using Jesus as support for her meanness. I don't remember what she said. All I remember is telling her firmly "STOP! STOP! Shut up! You are talking in circles. I don't want to hear it!" She backed off. I really did have the power.

Now we are friends of sorts. I'm strong enough to say "no" when she preaches, and we restrict our conversations to food, birds, crafts, and parties. I won't say we're close. Our contact is somewhat limited. I'm just not afraid of her anymore. I am able to resist her ridiculous ideas and replace them. For

example, I'm finding my own version of faith in Jesus. We can even spend a couple of hours together alone from time to time.

A couple of months later, Mom and Dad packed up the guns for that old crippled man on the street when he moved. And I watched.