

Men Love War

By Michael Fine

In memory of NE (2008-2022)

© 2022 Michael Fine

I wish this were only a work of fiction. Or just a bad dream. But it is what is happening in every US city. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

What the liberals don't know, Jakub Smyth thought, is that their turn is coming. They make money on our backs every which way: taxes on beer, a couple of percent whenever you use a credit card, what you have to pay for the internet and the cellphone, Netflix, ESPN, Disney – and what they take out of your check every week for federal tax, state tax, worker's comp and FICA. What's FICA? Just money that disappears, never to be seen again. Then a hundred and a quarter every two weeks for health insurance you can't use. You know what gas costs now? You know what it costs to fill up my truck? And that sucker has a hundred and seventy thousand miles on it. Gonna run me five or six thou to get a new engine. Maybe more. But who can afford a new truck now? That's fifty G's at least.

Jakub built a little shooting range behind his house: a nice clear fifty yards to the target and a ten-foot-high berm – fill-dirt dumped on old tires and pushed into a nice brown hill by his old MF backhoe. He'd bang away when he got home from work in the summer and on Sunday afternoons. There isn't anything quite like a little recreational shooting. You lay your head on a nice smooth stock, sight out a target and squeeeeze that trigger. And Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! You learn to control yourself, to calm

yourself down, so you don't jerk the trigger. You squeeze that trigger, nice and easy. You learn self-control.

But you never lose the thrill of the pop. That little blast, it satisfies something deep inside. Even the kick of the gun is a part of that thrill. It means you just did something, that you made something happen that is bigger than yourself. You let the force of the kick come into your body. You just absorb it. Got to stay loose enough so the force spreads out though your shoulder and chest without pushing you back, but firm enough so you keep your balance and your concentration. Zen master. In the moment. Focused and ready.

You don't go looking for trouble. But Jakub was ready in case trouble came looking for him. If and when bad actors showed up on his doorstep. If and when the world falls apart, like it almost did at the beginning of their so-called pandemic. Like it could if good old Vladimir starts up a cyber war. If and when a tyrannical government showed up to take away his property and trample on his rights. Only a matter of time.

So when a woman from the other side of the universe knocked on Jakub's door, he was armed and ready. Like we all should be.

It was late summer. The days were shorter, the heat a little less intense at midday, and the grass on the median strips had become brown. There hadn't been any rain in weeks. The Ukrainians were still holding their own against Putin, his thugs and his missiles, God-bless them. There were 900,000 armed Ukrainians at the start of the Russian invasion. Jakub never let anyone he knew forget that small fact. Governments depend on the consent of the governed, and armed citizen patriots still matter more than talking heads and a zillion bureaucrats, lawyers in tasseled loafers, or women in business suits, or worse, women in tee-shirts and sneakers telling people what to do. Don't you tread on me.

She was short and brown skinned, like they all are these days, with a clean pressed white blouse and a brown skirt that went to her knees and a white kerchief over her hair, and she had a kid standing with her, a skinny little boy wearing a white shirt and a bowtie, maybe nine or ten years old. There was a blue-gray minivan parked in the circular

driveway, older model, black windows, a little tired but not dented or rusty, and movement inside it.

Jakub didn't have a shirt on. He had started to strip down to go into the pool after a long hot day in the bucket truck. He was a decently hairy guy, the hair on his chest and arms chestnut brown. He had a good ruddy tan, more on his neck and face but all over, and his green and blue tattoos shimmered under the hair on his chest and arms because his skin glistened with his sweat.

"Yo!" he said as he came to the door. "Whoops, I wasn't expecting company."

"Not a problem," the woman said.

"We are raising money for the Pop Warner Football league in Mount Pleasant," the kid said. He had a squeaky little voice.

"So?" Jakub said. "This ain't Mount Pleasant."

"Pop Warner is the leading youth football, cheerleading, and dance program in the world."

"Nice," Jakub said. "Not interested."

"You got to do good in school to play Pop Warner," the kid said. "You got to have good grades. They have good equipment. So everyone can play safe and stay safe."

"Good for you," Jakub said. "Not my thing."

"Everyone makes the team," the kid said. "Everyone gets to play."

"So we get a nation of cream puffs," Jakub said. "More snowflakes. Like I said, not my thing. Now skedaddle." He backed away from the door.

"No problema," the woman said. "Sorry to bother you."

"Don't come back," Jakub said. "We take care of our own. You might want to try that."

The woman backed away shaking her head. She put an arm around the little boy and guided him back to the blue-gray minivan.

Jakub went to a window. He took out his cellphone and shot a picture of the minivan as it was pulling out and another picture as it turned into the street. Got a picture of the plate as the minivan pulled away. You don't know who is who any more. You don't know if people are who they say they are. There are break-and-enter artists who scout this way. Or people from the deep state, under cover.

There are certain things you don't tell your mother. Some mothers know anyway. But not Julio's mother. Julio's mother was straight and narrow. She went to work and to the mosque. She coached soccer in the spring and Pop Warner in the fall. She knew that if you follow the rules, good things happen. So she never thought about breaking those rules. She worked two jobs – as a medical assistant at a community health center in the day, and cleaning offices at night and weekends during the off season. She never said a bad thing about Julio's father, who had another family now. Julio's mother told him when his father sent a present or made a child support payment. She never said a word about the payments Julio's father missed. She sent money home to her parents in their country.

But life is complicated now, and more complicated on the street. Julio's mother had no idea what his life at school was like, and Julio was not about to tell her. She got dressed up to raise the Pop Warner money.

James, Julio's brother, was just a kid. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Julio did what he needed to do. You don't keep a piece. You just know where it lives. There were crap guns, scattered around the city, under dumpsters and in fire alarm boxes, wrapped in rags and hidden in the back. They got moved. But everyone Julio hung with heard there they got moved to and knew where to look. No one was planning a war. The gangs were always feeling each other out. People got shot from time to time. And nobody talked, which was as it should be. Nobody ever talks, not if you know what's good for you. But you never know. People got to be ready. Shit happens fast when shit happens. Chance favors the prepared mind.

It ate at Jakub. Who were those people? That come-on about Pop Warner. Who did they think they were fooling? Nobody knocks on the door anymore. There aren't door-to-door bible or encyclopedia salesmen anymore. Alright. Salespersons. Or ice-cream trucks on the street in summer. Politicians just go to farmer's markets. Even they don't knock on doors anymore. They just show up on Facebook, Instagram and Tic Tok, and you are supposed to buy one, the way you'd buy a car or a dishwasher detergent, by what you see on TV. Everyone is afraid. Or just looking at their cellphones, and not one another.

Jakub went out and banged off a few while he was thinking about it. To calm down.

Blue-gray Toyota Sienna. 2007 or 2008. What did that tell him? Nothing. Nothing about the van. Nothing about the people in it, or what they were really up to. Two million illegal immigrants. It was a problem, them coming out to Jakub's house, knocking on Jakub's door, if that's all they were up to. But maybe it was more than that. People stage break-ins to look like robberies. People are looking to take the guns away.

You got to be able to find the owners of vans by looking up the license plate on the internet. That's what the internet is for.

Jakub went into the house.

Julio just lived his life. Get it? He took care of business. He did what he needed to do. Go to class. Be with his people. Look like you are learning. Learn some anyway. Mouth off at teachers. Learn anyway. Mount Pleasant was a good enough school. Plenty of people there. Plenty of this and that. Some of his people went to the Met. Some went to PCTA. Some went to Classical. The teachers, some were good. Lots were checked out. He liked history. But he didn't tell nobody that.

His mom made him take James to Pop Warner after school some days when she had to work over. He did that to keep the peace. Pop Warner practice was near his school. It was all good. James was a sweet little kid. He didn't know nothing about what is what. But he would learn. Get out of middle school, get done with the football and the soccer and shit, and then he'd see the world that is, not all this make-believe bullshit. James, he followed Julio around. Asked him shit. Julio didn't like to answer. James would learn it eventually.

He dropped James at his practice. When James was at football, Julio hung with his people. Near the school. His moms thought Julio was home after doing his school work. Fat chance of that.

There had been a problem at lunch. Over somebody that used to be a girl. About the right to love who you want. About who was who and what was what. About outing.

Shit happens. People lined up behind their people. Pushing and shoving at first. Then the cellphones came out. Text and Instagram and shit. Even a little TikTok, get people engaged and paying attention, so everybody could know what was what.

Julio didn't think much of it at first. Then, after he dropped James, he heard different. He got the word. And he went to do what he needed to do. Ask me no questions. I'll tell you no lies.

What's on the internet is bullshit. Them people are all the same. Globalists. Only out to take your money. They run things now. They've got us all tied in knots.

A hundred different websites to look up license plates, all different, all come to one place with the same deal. They all tease you the same way. They got them little rolling green circles, spinning, spinning, round and round, like they are working on something big. They made it take a couple of minutes, to get you salivating. Then they tease you: we show you the make and model of the car. The size of the engine. The number of cylinders. Whether there have been any recalls.

But want to know the actual name of the actual car owner? They put you through ten more screens, each with some little disclosure, some little tease, each with their little green rolling balls and check-offs, like you are getting closer and closer. Then they lower the boom. You gotta sign up for a deal that charges your credit card \$19.95 a month. For the rest of your life. They say you can quit at any time. But lots of people say lots of things. A hundred different websites, with different names and different pictures. That all take you to the same place. Like there are a hundred different politicians, that all say the same things, all of them lies. A hundred different fast-food restaurants, all the same. A hundred different banks, all exactly alike. Meet the new boss. Same as the old boss. We do get fooled again.

Jakub went out to squeeze off a few more and cool down.

The silver SUV came and got Julio at the corner of Home and Whitford. Then they made the rounds. It was a thing. There had been disrespect. Something had to happen.

Jakub loaded up the pickup and hit the street. He had a name and an address. He was looking for information, not trouble. Had to check off something on the internet form about needing the information for the safety of the driver, like after a hit and run. Okay. No hit and run. But Jakub needed to know anyway so he could keep himself safe. His safety should count.

The GPS said Providence was thirty-eight minutes away. It was a house near Rhode Island College and Mount Pleasant High School. Tucked back in west and north Providence. Near PC and Lasalle. Lot of students live over there. He had been to PC parties. He knew what that was about. Didn't matter. Jakub wasn't looking for trouble. He just wanted to see for himself what he was up against. Not Pop Warner. He was pretty sure it was more than that. Forewarned is forearmed. He was both.

It was a row house on a street of rowhouses near an old mill. Old triple decker. Pretty tired. Pink vinyl siding that was coming off in some places. Too run down for students. Immigrants, then. This was where the immigrant caravans brought people to and dumped them off, right here, so Jakub would get to pay taxes to feed, house, and educate them. Put them all on Medicaid. Give them for free what Jakub had to pay for. That's how America is now

The house was empty, though. Or at least the minivan was gone. Jakub sat and thought for a moment. At least there was a real house, and the house matched the story of the kid at the door. That was something. I'll drive around a little, Jakub thought. Let me get the lay of the land.

The asshole was on the football team, Junior Varsity. There was a scrimmage with Lasalle that day. They'd be walking back to school after the scrimmage. Perfect.

There were five of them. They each knew what they had to do. Julio was ready. They'd be in and out in five minutes. His moms was picking up James when the practice was over. Julio could get his boys to drop him near home, and he could be sitting inside like it was nobody's business by the time his moms and James got to the house.

Pop Warner was on one of the fields behind Mount Pleasant High that day. The high school team itself had a scrimmage someplace else. Eleanora got off work right at five and she came over and sat for a few minutes on Whitford Avenue, where she could usually park about half-way up the block. There were no open spaces so Eleanora just double parked. James knew the place. He'd come right after practice. She had Gatorade and three energy bars for him.

Eleanora sat in the blue-gray Sienna. She was about ten minutes early. Ten minutes to sit in peace. It was a gift. She closed her eyes.

They came up Mount Pleasant Avenue and hung a left on Whitford, made a uuey and parked right near the corner in front of the No Parking sign. Those people, the a-holes on the football team who thought they owned the world, would come down the street, right toward them. They'd walk right into a trap. Julio's people talked. They'd wait. They'd jump out of the car when the first one was ten feet away. You know the drill. Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes.

Julio's boys sank into their seats so you wouldn't see people in their SUV when you walked by or drove by. You couldn't see the five of them, just sitting there, waiting in ambush. People drive around. You don't know who is who. You don't know who is watching.

Jakub didn't think much about Pop Warner or where he was when he drove down Academy Avenue. A little nicer over there. Still a neighborhood. Houses with lawns. Neighborhood stores – a dry-cleaners, a bakery, a CVS. Maybe there was nothing to the people who had come knocking at his door. Maybe they were who they said they were. He'd drive around for ten minutes and then head home. It was all in his head. Still, it's better to check this shit out than to be caught off-guard.

He tuned the corner onto Whitford Avenue and passed a bunch of football players walking on the sidewalk, some in the street when they were trying to walk four or five abreast, some still wearing helmets and shoulder pads, some with the helmets under their arms, their red practice jerseys tucked into white practice pants, some muddy, others wet with sweat. Kids. Stupid kids. They'll learn, he thought.

And then he saw it. The blue-gray Sienna. Black windows. Double-parked on the other side of the street. He pulled over in front of a fire hydrant. What do you say about that? There it was, sitting right out in front of him. Sitting pretty.

Let me watch, Jakub thought. Reconnoiter. Listen and learn. Things might not be what they appear. Situational awareness. Always ready.

He sat for a few minutes, and thought, nothing happening. This is dumb. Time to pack it up and go home.

But then he saw the little kid from the other day walking up the street toward him. On the same side of the street as the blue-gray Sienna. Harmless little kid. Helmet that looked way too big for him under one arm. Back-pack under the other. Maybe it was all okay. Maybe the world wasn't gone completely to shit yet.

And then he heard the shots.

They poured out of the silver SUV when the first kid in a red jersey got to within ten feet of the silver SUV. They came out firing. The two on the sidewalk took out the kids near the SUV and trotted up the street, popping one kid after the next. The three on the street side ran outside of the line of cars to get behind the knot of red jerseys, so they could catch all of them football players in a pincher, two shooters coming up the street, three shooters coming down the street, to get the job done right. They hadn't counted on the two vehicles double-parked, which made them run out further into the street.

Oh shit, Julio thought, when he recognized his mother's car. Then he turned a little and saw James walking alone on the side walk on the other side of the street, his helmet under one arm, carrying his backpack. Oh shit, Julio thought. Then from nowhere some dude comes out of the pickup truck double parked near his mother's Sienna and starts firing. First single shots in rapid succession. Then he crouches down, and there's a burst of automatic weapon fire. That dude knows what he's doing, Julio thought. And then he went down.

It's automatic if you practice. You just do what you have learned to do. Jakub took his first shots standing, left foot forward, knees bent, nose over toes, to get an advantage over those other shooters, who looked like kids playing cops and robbers, their shooting arms outstretched, not defending themselves at all.

Then Jakub dropped to one knee. Your accuracy isn't any better on one knee, but you are a smaller target. Good way to defend your position.

He popped off a short burst. Shattered all the car windows on the other side of the street. Three down. No opposition still standing in the street.

The first sirens began to wail in the distance.

He heard a woman scream.

I ran to him. I heard the shooting start. I didn't know where he was but inside, I knew. I ran toward the shots. I couldn't get to him in time to stand between him and those bullets. I saw him fall. But I held him. I felt him leave. I was holding him. He wasn't alone. I said, I love you and I'm here. I called 911. I touched his face and I held him. And then I said what we say as Muslims because he couldn't say it for himself. La illaha illa 'lah Muhammadun rasul 'llah. Believe in Allah and the Prophet Mohammed his messenger. So that he could go out a martyr. Because that is what he is. He is a martyr. God chose him.

He's not a number. He's James. My son.

Kids shooting other kids. Nothing is ever going to change.

The EMTs loaded him into rescue, pumping on his chest. Then the police came and told me about Julio.

Men love war.