In the sport of shooting, proficiency means not only winning, but getting good at killing.

Welcome to Gun Camp

where the question is, Do I want to do this? and the answer is, a little sadly, You bet. **By Karen Karbo**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON GIPE

THE PISTOL RANGE AT GUNSITE Ranch has spaces for 12 paper targets, arranged against a sandy berm. The targets are roughly human-shaped—a large square is the torso; a smaller one above it, the head. Beside the range is a flagpole with a tattered red flag hanging limp in the heat. The flag is a warning: This range is hot.

John Bowman, the range master for General Pistol 250, a week-long course in "the technique of modern pistolcraft," divides the 19 of us into two relays and assigns targets. These will be our positions for the entire week. I have target number three. Lucky. I hope. I am easily the least experienced shooter in the class.

To my left, at target number two, is Juanita, Bowman's wife, one of only four women enrolled in General Pistol. She's a tiny woman with arms of steel and a down-home accent. When she and John were first married, she was afraid of guns; when she dusted the furniture she steered his pistols out of the way with a pencil. Juanita has been through General Pistol once already and packs a big ol' Colt .45 that spits out burning aluminum casings. They zap me on the neck, find their way down my T-shirt. The first time this happens—on the first shot of the first afternoon—I jump and shriek. By the end of the week I won't even notice.

Gunsite Training Center at Gunsite Ranch, not far from Paulden, Arizona, is the Harvard

Keep your muzzle down range, and please close the bathroom door: on the firing line at the Harvard of shooting schools

of shooting schools. There are a dozen or so such schools around the country, but Gunsite is the most famous, respected worldwide for the quality of its instruction and its facilities, a thousand acres that include 28 pistol, rifle, and shotgun ranges as well as nine outdoor and three indoor simulators.

It's perhaps the ultimate place to get a good look at marksmanship, which enjoys a peculiar status among sports. Rock climbing and whitewater kayaking are potentially lethal, of course. But that's not what they're *for*. In shooting, achieving proficiency means not only winning medals, but getting good at killing.

The approach to Gunsite is inauspicious. Drive 25 miles north from Prescott on Highway 69—passing Mike and Marty's Junk, Prescott Livestock Auction, and The Pour House Cocktails, a mean building painted bright green—and turn left onto the corrugated road between mile markers 335 and 336. Get ready to have your molars jarred, your bladder jounced around. The road is so dusty that you have to use your windshield wipers.

Be sure of your target: the anatomy of an adversary (top). Gunsite, respected worldwide for the quality of its instruction and its facilities, draws a far-flung clientele (above).

The main compound is marked with another flagpole and a wooden sign: WELCOME TO GUNSITE TRAINING CENTER. There is a handful of low wooden buildings, in the same architectural style as The Pour House Cocktails. You could well be in sub-Saharan Africa. The Harvard of shooting schools looks nothing like a school, and its campus is definitely not laid out around Harvard Yard.

At Gunsite, you shoot: the welcome at the end of the inauspicious approach (above). Hiding in the simulators are effigies of pistol-packing thugs (right), but not always—sometimes the thug is licking an ice cream cone.

I WALK INTO THE CLASSroom on the first morning with my gun in a box. Everyone else has their leather strapped on, pistols cocked and locked, magazines stuffed with ammo, eager to get at it. My box, shipped via UPS to the Gunsite gunsmith by my meticulous father, glistens with packing tape. I spend a good 15 minutes hacking at it with the fish scaler of my Swiss Army knife—the easiest blade to open under pressure—before I extract, from beneath tightly wadded newspaper and an annoying quantity of styrofoam peanuts, the Colt .45 I'll be using for the week. It's the same .45 that my father loaned me 14 years ago for an intensive oneday shooting course offered through the local police department.

My father is an expert marksman. He's taken courses at the International Shootist's

Institute, at the Lethal Force Institute (where he was Top Gun), at Gunsite. He's taught defensive shooting at a college in Irvine, California, and recently, at age 69, scored 100 out of 100 on his concealed-weapons permit exam. The shooting course was his idea. He paid for it and went along, standing behind me with folded arms while I put 250 rounds through his gun. After a hundred rounds the instructor pulled him aside and said that I might be a "natural." At the end of the day, as a souvenir of my aptitude, I was given the target to take home.

I liked the experience—the heft of the weapon, its dark machine smell, the big boom, the whip of recoil. I liked what everyone who likes to shoot likes: the feeling of power. But, being barely out of my teens, I had a duty not to enjoy my father's sport as much as I did. For a decade and a half, I never touched a gun again.

During that period, my attitude toward the sport that seemed to be in my genes was pollinated by a hardy strain of dread and heartsickness. In 1989 the young actress Rebecca Schaeffer, a family friend, was murdered in Los Angeles. Expecting a package from Federal Express, she opened her front door one hot July morning and was shot once in the chest by a stranger who claimed to be in love with her. I helped pick out the flowers for Rebecca's casket. Her murderer, now serving a life sentence without parole, purchased his .357 Magnum in Arizona, home of Gunsite.

My father, my friend—at best, I'm ambivalent about being here. Then John Bowman strides in. Long of leg, square of shoulder, with knife-edge creases in his Levi's, he's loud and, like all our instructors, could probably find work as a stand-up comic. During the academic year, he's an associate professor of police science at the University of Illinois Police Training Institute, where he trains SWAT teams and conducts tricky maneuvers in the politics of academia.

Here at Gunsite he can (and does) make grand pronouncements like "the only cure for stupidity is death!" without fear of censure. "Don't look for too much political correctness here," he warns. "If you don't have a sense of humor, it's going to be a long week." By the end of the week, he adds, we're all going to be "manly men."

Before we head to the range, John orders us to burn into our minds the four iron-clad rules of gun safety: (1) Every gun is always loaded. (2) Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy. (3) Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target. (4) Be sure of your target.

He also reminds us to be sure to close the bathroom door before leaving. Scorpions and rattlesnakes have a habit of sneaking in to escape the heat of the afternoon. "You haven't lived," he says, "until you've shared the toilet with a three-foot rattlesnake."

CHINO VALLEY, WHERE GUNSITE IS LOCATED, is nearly a mile high. The air is dry and clean, the sky a bleached-out blue. Early summer temperatures hover between 95 and 100, not particularly hot, unless you're standing in the sun with three ex-military men barking orders at you for hours on end.

In addition to John, there are two other coaches. Hershel Davis is former Command Master Chief Davis, the oldest Navy SEAL ever to have served. He's tall, with eyebrows that fly up like a schnauzer's, a kaiser mustache, and a penchant for the outrageous aphorism, which he likes to deliver at the top of his lungs. About the female populace of the closest small town to Gunsite Ranch, he says, "You put all the women in Paulden together and what d'ya get? A full set of teeth!"

"Don't look for political correctness here," John warns. "If you don't have a sense of humor, it's going to be a long week."

He's missing parts of fingers on one hand, and his hearing is bad from decades as an underwater demolitions expert. Of his 33 years, four months, and 23 days as a SEAL—the happiest time of his life—he says, "All I did was root-toot-loot-shoot. My life has been nothing but hurting people and breaking stuff. That's what I did. Don't be impressed."

But I am impressed, or perhaps terrified. When Hershel stands behind me, it's like my father times ten breathing down my neck.

Luckily, for most of the week, Hershel will work the other end of my relay. The instructor I come to think of as "my coach" is the more normal-seeming Greg Hamilton, who was active in the Army's Special Forces for five years and now owns and operates his own self-defense school, Insights Training Center, near Seattle. By dint of his age, 29, and the fact he's spent 28 years, four months, and 23 days less than Hershel hurting people and breaking stuff, he's more approachable. A freckle-faced redhead, he tells me he's the touchy-feely coach. When I ask him the difference between his school and Gunsite, he says, with a straight face, "At Insights, we teach killing in an emotionally supportive environment."

It's a joke. I think.

It's also the fork in the road, the conceptual point where sport shooters and tactical shooters part company.

In the last ten years, shooting has become a big-money sport, with thousands of dollars to be made by the winners of regional and national International Pistol Shooting Confederation matches. At the same time, competitive shooting has evolved into an activity so different from defensive shooting that the two are almost unrecognizable as siblings. It's the difference between an Indy car racer and a secretary in a Datsun trying to evade a creep following her through rush-hour traffic. The guns used in competitive shooting resemble nothing you'd ever have stashed in the nightstand; they're heavy, three to four pounds, some with electronic sights bigger than the pistol itself. Coach Greg describes it this way: "Competitive shooters are playing a game. It's their recreation. Defensive shooters shoot for one reason and one reason only—not for fun, but for practice. They view their gun as a tool. There's a seriousness of intent that precludes their ever seeing their weapon as a piece of sporting equipment."

Still, like anyone else, defensive shooters like to compete, and so there is the National Tactical Invitational. In its fourth year, the NTI is not strictly a test of shooting ability. (The competitors carry special guns that fire Simunition, pellets filled with paint.) What counts is whether you're "alive" at the end of a scenario reconstructed from actual documented events.

In one scenario from last year's NTI, for example, the competitors had to walk down an alley to get to a car. Two assailants appeared, one jumping out from behind a trash can, the other standing in wait at the end of the alley. More than a hundred competitors went through the alley scenario, and the winner was an athlete who never fired a shot. He read the situation in a split second and sprinted away down the alley. The "hostiles," as they are called, just stood there, mouths agape. The Zenlike lesson is

A thousand acres: one of Gunsite's nine outdoor scenario simulators

that the truly successful tactical shooter may never need to shoot at all.

AT GUNSITE, HOWEVER, WE SHOOT. THE drills go on from 8:30 in the morning until five in the evening. John and Greg and Hershel pace up and down behind us. In their khaki and olive drab, they look like models in a combat-wear catalog. They have earplugs custom-molded for their own ears. Off range, the earplugs dangle around their necks like sea creatures coaxed from their shells.

The relays take turns at the line. We find our stance. We "make ready," checking that our pistols are loaded. We assume the "guard position," holding our weapons below the sight line but ready to raise and fire. John hollers. We fire. We fire one into the body. We fire one into the head. We fire two into the head, two into the body. We do this from three yards, from ten yards. "Remember!" John barks. "Ninety-five percent of personal confrontations happen at distances of less than ten yards." I think of Rebecca, still in her blue bathrobe, answering her front door.

During a brief break, while the other relay is on the line, I peek at one of the instructors' clipboards, left beside the water jug in the range house. The roster lists our names, addresses, makes and models of weapons, occupations, and ages. Demographically, our class resembles the cast of *Our Town:* a doctor, a contractor, a salesman, a nurse, an engineer, an exterminator. There are two bona fide eccentrics: a hollywood producer who resembles Marlon Brando in his *Apocalypse Now* phase, with shaved head, safari suit, and gold monocle, and an East German pastry chef, now living in Los Angeles, who still mourns the fall of Richard Nixon. The ages of the youngest student (a 15-year-old boy here with his father) and all students over 40 (half the class) are circled. I think I know what this means: Those of us in our twenties and thirties are fair game.

We have strips of white tape with our names on them stuck to the backs of our caps. This way, our instructors can personalize their harangues from the get-go.

"Karen! You're not following through!"

My arms shake with exertion. My hair itches beneath my cap. My thumb keeps slipping off the safety, my hands greasy from sunscreen.

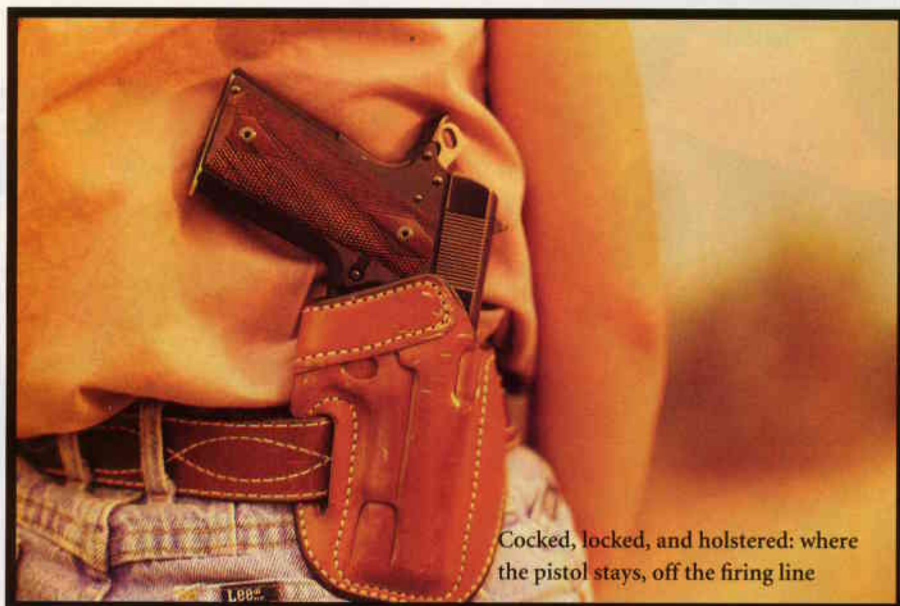
"Karen! You're mashing the trigger!"

Soon I understand: Focus is everything.

If I don't think of Rebecca, I can shoot well.

Shooting, like tennis and golf, is a psychomotor skill that relies on focus, on giving full attention to each in a series of small, uncomplicated movements at the moment in which they are happening. As you bring your pistol up, you allow your focus to shift from the target to your front sight, forgetting the target completely. Once the front sight is lined up with the back, you don't wait for a perfect shot. You allow the front sight to drift around while you apply steady, gentle pressure to the trigger. You don't shoot the gun; you allow it to go off. The moment the trigger cracks should always be a surprise. Otherwise, anticipating the blast, you'll involuntarily flinch, and the shot will be low.

The way it's supposed to work will become clear during Thursday's night exercise. With Venus rising over the berm behind our tar-



Cocked, locked, and holstered: where the pistol stays, off the firing line

gets, and not another light for a thousand acres, I'll stand on the line with the rest of my relay, peering at where I know my target is. John will give the usual orders: two to the body from three yards; two to the body from seven; two to the body from ten. Afterward, we'll shine our flashlights on our targets to find that almost everyone has gotten "good paper," the shots clustered in tight groups. My own cluster will be a nosegay of holes, edges burnt and shredded, just to the left of the heart. In the dark, our conscious minds have nothing to do. Our muscles do all the work, the result of our training.

But that will come later in the week. Now, after one particularly frustrating set of drills—if I watch my front sight, I can't seem to press the trigger; if I press the trigger, I'm so eager to see how I've done that I forget to follow through—Juanita sneaks her arm around me and says, "Don't worry. Last year I couldn't make my head shots and I locked myself in the bathroom to have a good cry."

"Any three-foot rattlers in there?" I ask.

Each of us has a steel box of ammunition sitting on a table in the range house. In my box there are 800 rounds. After each exercise we return to the range house to get a sip of water and to reload. The magazine for a Colt .45 takes seven bullets. I load and reload all afternoon long and never made a dent in my ammo. It's like eating an enormous chef salad: You're full long before you ever get a glimpse of the plate.

AT NIGHT, WE HAVE HOMEWORK. WE ARE issued small practice targets and instructed in the elaborate ritual of "dry firing." We are supposed to set aside a special part of our hotel room just for this. We are supposed to put all of our ammunition in our suitcase and then put the suitcase in a closet. Then we are supposed to go through the precise motions of shooting, only without bullets. Afterward. we're supposed to say to ourselves, aloud, "I am now finished dry firing," and close the target so as not to be tempted. I think this must be a directive geared exclusively for men. I can't imagine ever feeling an overwhelming urge to shoot just because there was a target staring me in the face.

Anyway, I skip the homework; instead, I go downstairs to the hotel bar and order a scotch on the rocks. The tumbler is as heavy as an anvil. My arm shakes as I bring the glass to my lips. The crook of my elbow is sore, and a large blister has erupted in the web of my right hand. My entire body throbs from standing rigid on the line, unable to relax.

Some people supposedly fear public speaking more than death. Shooting in public is worse. If you goof up, you not only embarrass yourself, but you may hurt somebody. You may kill somebody. This is the essential difference between shooting and, say, tennis or kayaking. Unlike a racket or a paddle, a gun is always unsafe, and you can never afford to forget it. Fatigue or frustration must not lead to sloppiness.

After my drink I go to a grocery store, where I buy some Band-Aids. This being the Catholic Southwest, the store has a special on prayer candles. For 99 cents I buy a St. Jude, patron of lost causes, and put it on the nightstand in my hotel room. As I melt into sleep, I see a fleeting image of myself lying prostrate in the dust, hugging Hershel's boots, begging him to let me go home.

THE NEXT DAY, TUESDAY, WE MEET AT THE range at 8:30 A.M. It's already 85 degrees. When I arrive, another student is discreetly barfing in the shade of a juniper tree.

We have been issued three red plastic dummy rounds, which we are instructed to load into our magazines at random to force unexpected malfunctions. John might order us, for example, to shoot two to the body from ten yards; we might squeeze off one round and then hear the Second Loudest Sound in the World: a click instead of the anticipated boom. (The Loudest Sound in the World is a boom when you're expecting a click.)

The first time this happens, most of us stare at our guns in wordless reproach or whisper, "Oh, shit." Then John or Greg or Hershel swoops down, barking TAP RACK BANG! TAP RACK BANG! "Tap" means whack the magazine to make sure it's locked securely in the magazine well; "rack" means rack the slide to clear the dummy round out of the chamber; "bang" is self-explanatory. The process should take four seconds, tops.

"Your punishment for being dead is public humiliation!" John crows. "Step *back!*"

While the other relay is on the line, I bandage my fingers. The choices at the store were either Neon Brights or Beauty and the Beast. Knowing I'd never hear the end of Beauty and the Beast, I got the Neon Brights. I need three Outrageous Pinks for the web of my shooting hand. When my relay is called, I'm the last one back up on the line, and no sooner has John given the order to make ready than Hershel descends, a vulture on carrion. "We allow no pink on the firing range, young lady," he booms.

The distraction causes me to miss John's instructions, which are becoming increasingly byzantine. Shoot two to the body, reload, shoot two more to the body. Or, begin with your back to the target, pivot 180 degrees, shoot two to the body, reload. "Excuse me, John," I say. "I missed what you said."

"When I say listen up, people, I mean listen up, people!"

"I was being sexually harassed over

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here," I say.

John laughs; a good retort is worth a few extra points. But Hershel is too quick. "We don't make accusations of sexual harassment here," he says. "We grade it on a scale of one to ten."

The drill is this: two to the body, one to the head. It has a Soldier of Fortunish name, the Mozambique. All the trickier maneuvers have been christened with exotic nicknames that bring to mind far-flung Third World outposts and skinny boys in tattered uniforms with automatic weapons slung over their shoulders.

The idea behind the Mozambique is that two to the body should do it, but if it doesn't, you must take stricter measures and put one between the eyes. If you miss the head entirely, as some students do, or fail to make your shot inside the small rectangle that represents the eye area, you are forced to step back from the line.

"You're dead!" John crows. "Your punishment for being dead is public humiliation. Step *back!*"

I expect to spend a lot of time stepping back from the line. Then something happens. Coach Greg has suggested that I talk myself through my shot. So, like an idiot, I chant, "Front sight...p-r-e-s-s...follow through. Front sight...p-r-e-s-s...follow through." Then, after shifting to make the head shot, I hear the awful click. I tap, I rack, and again, "Front sight...p-r-e-s-s...follow through." Even with the malfunction I've made both body shots, within an inch of each other, and put a hole clean through the center of the head, as has Juanita beside me.

"Both the ladies had malfunctions and still managed to make their head shots," John announces. "You manly men, you're dead. Step *back!*"

I understand, suddenly, that what the instructors have been harping on all along is true: Focus is everything in shooting. If I don't think of Rebecca I can shoot well, or well enough. The question is, do I want to do this? The answer, at this moment anyway, and a little sadly, is you bet. I want to be good.

BY WEDNESDAY OUR REPERTOIRE HAS COME to include shooting from a braced knee position at 15 yards and from a prone position at 25. Some of the students look like gunslinging roller skaters in their black plastic elbow and knee pads. I go without, thinking my Levi's will be enough protection.

The drill for prone consists of dropping to your knees while drawing your pistol and then flopping onto the ground, rolling yourself up onto your right side. Your elbows become the sides of an equilateral triangle, your pistol at the apex. It should be easy. Instead you become insecure, you look at the target instead of your front sight. At this distance it's a cinch you'll send a round into the berm. After the third drill I notice drops of blood on the top of my tennis shoes: scraped knees to match my scraped elbows and blistered fingers.

In the morning we are given a reprieve from the range in the form of a lecture on the combat mindset, the crucial element of our training. "Good marksmanship," John says darkly, "is not even half of it."

People who force themselves to think the unthinkable, to prepare themselves to kill a midnight intruder, are considered by those of us who like to pretend that this situation might never arise to be paranoid or bloodthirsty or nuts. In fact, anyone at Gunsight will tell you that's the difference between a handgun owner and the opposite—in their minds there can only be an opposite, there's no room for someone like me, the ambivalent—a "gun grabber." The gun owners like to think they're realists.

"You will never win a fight if you behave instinctively," says John. "Our instinct is to flinch, to cower and cover our heads. The way to overcome your instincts is to do what you are trained to do. When the flag flies, don't mistake that adrenaline dump for fear. It's your body preparing itself to fight. A woman can defeat a man with the right mindset. There are women who can do the job, and let me tell you, they ain't all got mustaches."

There is, of course, no real way to practice "doing the job," but there are simulators. The Playhouse and the Funhouse are squat cinder-block buildings painted, like everything else here, desert beige. Inside there are lots of places for people to hide: corners, closets, staircases, small rooms. Behind the corners and inside the closets are life-size effigies of pistol-packing thugs. But not always. Sometimes the thug is licking an ice cream cone. The idea is to shoot the bad guys, avoid shooting the rest, and make it to the end without running out of ammunition.

Before we are taken through, John instructs us on how to sweep a building. He backs against one wall and creeps sideways toward the corner, his pistol up beside his ear, muzzle pointed skyward. "This is not the way to work a corner," he says. "Only stupid people work a corner this way, and you know what the only cure for stupidity is. I call it a Half Sabrina, named for my favorite Charlie's Angel. A Full Sabrina is both hands." He brings his other hand across his chest to grip

his gun. "Either way, you're looking at a situation like this." Around the corner, Hershel waits. Just as John is about to roll himself around the edge, Hershel nonchalantly reaches out with one hand and grabs John's gun by the barrel, lifting it from his hands.

What we are supposed to do, according to John, is to use the angles. Rather than hug the corners, we are supposed to stay as far away from them as possible. We are supposed to search systematically, moving forward in arcs as large as the space will allow, checking each potential hiding space before moving on to the next one. It sounds less like tactics and more like plane geometry, a subject I was never very good at.

It's almost six in the evening when Hershel finally takes me through the Funhouse. The late-afternoon sun is low and glary. I've been sitting in a wooden shelter nearby, waiting. Occasionally, from inside the Funhouse, I've heard BAM-BAM, BAM-BAM. A small brown snake uncurls from beneath some scrub and disappears behind a rock.

My turn. Hershel shuffles behind me with a clipboard, grading me on everything from gun handling and marksmanship to my fledgling command of tactics. I know immediately that this won't be my strong suit. I manage the corners OK, but I'm too slow and hesitant. And I don't have the heart for the amateur theatrics that seem to be expected of us. If we are unsure of our target, we're supposed to yell something along the lines of "come on out, shithead!"

I check one room and see a woman's eye peeking out from behind a trench coat hung on a rack. I stop. I stand there.

"What are you doing?" asks Hershel.

"Waiting for her to come to me," I say. This was something we learned in the lecture: Always let the intruder come to you.

"You're gonna have to wait a long time with this one," he says.

We stare at her painted blue eye.

"I'm a pretty patient person," I say.

Suddenly, Hershel starts blowing short toots on a silver whistle that he wears on a leather thong around his neck.

"What are you doing?" I ask. If I was one of his SEALs I'd probably be punished for impertinence.

"You're dead," he says. "She's a slut with a gun."

"Oh," I say, exhausted. "Does that mean I don't have to continue?"

"Not that dead. Keep moving."

But I am that dead. It's already a long week, and I've begun to experience the kind of mental fatigue that results in stupid mistakes. All the basic skills that we learned on the first two days seem to have suffocated under the more and more complex drills being thrust upon us hourly. Somehow, I'm back to not knowing how to check to see if my gun is loaded.

ON FRIDAY MORNING JOHN SAYS, "TODAY WE turn up the wick." He begins timing us on our school exercises in preparation for our marksmanship test tomorrow, when we will be graded Expert (the "E-ticket," which is almost never awarded), Marksman 1, Marksman, Certificate of Completion, or No-Pass. We are told not to take it seriously, that being graded is just another opportunity to practice shooting under stress.

It is no longer good enough to make a head shot; you have to make it in two seconds, drawing your pistol from its holster. You have 1.5 seconds to shoot two to the body from seven yards, two seconds to make two to the body from ten yards, 3.5 seconds to make two to the body from 15 yards in a kneeling position, and an eternity of seven seconds to shoot two to the body from 25 yards, prone.

All week long John and Hershel and Greg have warned against succumbing to frustration. Don't admire a good shot, they've said; don't get discouraged by a bad one. But I am discouraged. I'm back to mashing the trigger. I'm doing weird things with my feet, a little shuffle in the dust after I've drawn. I keep forgetting to snick off the safety. Dumb things, all day long.

On Saturday, I'm awakened at three in the morning by the jetliner roar of the hotel air-conditioner. Something has been bothering me the entire week, and I now know what it is: I still don't know how Rebecca could have been saved. Even if she'd had all this training, had been able to make her head shots under two seconds and get good paper in the pitch dark of an Arizona night, she still would never have taken a pistol to her front door at 10:30 in the morning. I wouldn't. Nobody would. Then, speeding to the range, late as usual, I'm convinced I've lost my mind when, spinning through stations on the radio, I stumble upon Frank Sinatra belting out his trademark—"If I can make it there, I'll make it en-ee-where! It's up to you, New York, New-ooh York!"—and burst into tears.

In the range house, I thread my belt through my belt loops and cinch it bruisingly tight to keep my holster from sliding around. Load magazines. Bandage fingers. Tape Band-Aids down so they don't come unstuck at a crucial moment. Bandage elbow. Sunglasses, hat, ear protectors. A swig of Gatorade. An image: two to the head, two dime-size holes in the rectangle. It seems crucial to get off a good first shot. I suppress the other image that keeps elbowing its way to the front of my mind, the image of me lying in the dust, hugging Hershel's boots.

My relay is called to the line. Thin white scarves of cloud trail across the sky. A green lizard scampers across the ground past the plate bearing my target's number. Three. Lucky. Even though this is practice, I want to make it good. I am desperate for a good omen.

We shoot two head shots from three yards, but it seems I've made only one shot. My stomach feels as flat as road kill. Bad, bad sign—but no, the hit is amoeba-shaped. I've sent two rounds through the same hole. I nail the rest of the drills and think, wildly, "I'm gonna get an E-ticket outa here!" Then I lose a round into the berm from the prone position. It was my last bullet. Anxious to be finished, I lost focus.

All right, I think, I can do this. Then I'm confused. John, Hershel, and Greg move in with their clipboards and pencils, scoring the targets. This wasn't practice. This was *it*.

John barks, "Karen, I think you'll be pleased with your paper."

It's no E-ticket, but I do make Marksman. My father will be only a little disappointed that I'm not one of the few in the class to make Marksman 1. I'm a little disappointed myself, and before I leave I ask Coach Greg, "What can I do to improve my shooting?"

"You've got it all," he says, "The next step is to bond with your gun."

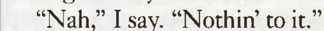
"I don't know if I'm ready for that kind of commitment," I say. He laughs, but I mean it.

The next day, leaving Arizona, I set off the metal detector at the Phoenix airport. After pulling off my watch and bracelets, I look down and see the brassy glint of a bullet stuck in the cuff of my jeans. Anticipating a strip search and a criminal record, I sheepishly fish it out and drop it onto the plastic tray.

"Been doin' some shootin'?" asks the security man, who doesn't even bother to recheck my pack.

"Some," I say.

On the other side of the metal detector he inspects the bullet, then hands it back to me. "Forty-five. That's a kind of a big gun for a girl like you."

"Nah," I say. "Nothin' to it." 

Karen Karbo is the author of Trespassers Welcome Here *and* The Diamond Lane, *both published by G. P. Putman's Sons.*

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