

‘How Much Blood Is Your Fun Worth?’

By Tyler Austin Harper, *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2023

5 During my first semester of teaching while in grad school, I made a habit of showing up to my classroom half an hour early. I had the sense that arriving before anyone else was one way to earn the respect of students who were barely younger than I was. The second week of classes, I arrived to find an undergrad crouched in front of a half-open window. He was taking a photo with his phone, and when he saw me, he jumped. My presence was unexpected. The student turned to face me. His cheeks were flushed red. When I asked if everything was all right, he said he was making sure the windows opened. “My mom told me to always check to make sure they work, just in case, you know...”. I must have looked confused because he continued: “In case some gun nut with an AR-15 tries to shoot up the place.”

10 Last night, as I sat on my couch watching CNN anchors discuss a mass shooting that left 18 dead and 13 injured in Lewiston, Maine, the little city where I teach. I thought about my terrified students who were sheltering in place. About my colleagues, about all the people waiting for news, or getting news. And for the first time in years, I thought about that student and that window, opened to prove to his worried mother that he had an escape route. His phrase – “gun nut” – came to my mind again and again.

15 As the night wore on, my grief also slowly gave way to guilt. I felt guilty and complicit for that violence. I felt, for the first time, like I was part of the reason that mothers have to ask their children for photos of open windows. I felt guilty because gun nuts are, whether I like it or not, my people: I grew up in gun country. I’ve been a gun owner nearly my entire life.

20 In Walker Percy’s classic novel *The Moviegoer*, the protagonist observes that mass media can make it feel like the only places that truly exist are big cities. When you unexpectedly see your small town on the silver screen, however, you get a fleeting sense that you belong to an important place. Last night, a place I have called home was certified in the grimmest possible way. This is what it took for me to fully understand our country’s mass-shooting problem.

25 The honest truth is that I have always viewed the gun-violence epidemic as an abstraction, remote from my own life or choices. Like many gun owners, I had always supported stronger gun control. But my views on gun control have also been academic in nature: It is something I care about and have written about but have never felt deeply. That changed yesterday. Wondering if I was going to get The Call or The Text or The Email.

30 Today, I am filled with nothing so much as rage. Rage at my gun-nut friends from home who will see this tragedy as a reason for less gun control, rather than more of it. Rage at every conservative pundit who has ever uttered the phrase “good guy with a gun.” Rage at the state of Maine, which has some of the laxest gun laws in the country. Rage at the politicians here and beyond who have refused to solve a problem for which solutions readily exist.

35 If you had asked me before yesterday why I own guns, I would have fed you the same line I had fed my liberal friends – and myself – for years. I would have told you that I own guns for hunting, for protection, for blasting clay pigeons. I own guns because I come from a gun family and guns are some of the only things I have left from people I loved (the rifle that my Great Depression–surviving grandmother kept under the bed, the 20-gauge my grandfather used to bring home Thanksgiving turkeys, the 30-06 that took my father’s first deer).

40 But it is only now that gun violence has visited my little corner of the world that I have been forced to confront a truth that I have refused to admit: I own guns because I like them and because I am an American and I’m allowed to and no one stops me. The inescapable fact is that the only people capable of shifting the gun conversation in this country are the people who buy them. As a gun owner from gun country, I’ll let you in on the dirty secret that everyone knows in their heart: The AR-15 is America’s best-selling rifle not because people need them for protection or because our country is full of aspiring militiamen. People own AR-15s because they think they’re sexy and cool and manly. They own them because they are fun. How much blood is your fun worth?

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