

Men With Guns
By
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When in the company of a pot smoking, Nixon voting, veteran who is drop-dead certain to the point of egregious elocution that global warming is a good and beneficial happening for humanity, stick a sharp fork in his foot, as to keep the man from wondering off into the cold and lonely countryside. I have encountered one of these creatures I write of, and he is a tender one and should be approached with both care and a soft sense of humor.

Bat invested four grand years of his youth in Vietnam. At least, that is the way he speaks of the war. A war that was never truly a “war.” Beyond it he has lived a fine life, employed at times as playwright, a deep-sea diver, a honky-tonk guitarist, and an Italian chef. Living most of his years between Kerrville and San Marcos, many of Bat’s friends have moved on or died from sudden and sad events. Most notably a younger girl called Betty, who was struck down by a Ford pick-up at a crosswalk. I believe Betty may have been much more than Bat’s last friend, I believe she was his last lover.

Bat comes down from the Texan hillside to San Antonio every Tuesday and Thursday to teach at one of the local universities.

Bat despises teaching because the youth of today “just don’t get it”, but he claims he needs a way to make a living. I know this, because I share an office with this man. His desk is decorated with pictures of Kinky Friedman, the Jewish cowboy who took a stab at being the next govern-guy of Texas, and South Park characters holding guns. He hates John Kerry, loves dried apricots, and snores when he falls to sleep in the middle of the day. At first glance Bat is a cartoon, too weird to walk the earth, too obvious to breath.

Always looking for some one to talk to, some one to tell war stories, some one to tell what’s-what, Bat took a shinning to me quickly and without reservation. He’s invited me over to his casa for breakfast tacos and drinking binges, neither of which have sounded terribly appealing to me. But he offered one invitation I couldn’t refuse; attending a gun show. I jumped at the chance. This is Americana. This is Texas. And who better to be my guide?

“I’ll drive,” I said.

When visiting Bat’s smallish one-bedroom apartment, you will encounter several guns. An AK-47. A Browning .45. A .357. Spots and specks of other materials liter an otherwise modest apartment. A Julianne Moore film on top of the television. A framed painting of a cartoon duck over the fireplace. Diplomas on the wall from South Western Louisiana State and the University of Texas, Pan American. A molding spaghetti squash on the roof of a rusted refrigerator. Bat’s computer monitor features saltwater fish swimming from left to right to save the screen. He has two soft chairs my grandmother would adore. For a man who can make a ton of noise, Bat lives in soft tranquility.

The gun show was at the San Antonio International Airport Convention Center, which looks like an overgrown gymnasium. The Center was crawling with pale men, who spoke politely and welcomed me to my first firearm affair. These men sold rifles from England, France, Russia, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Italy. I wrapped my fingers around an old Derringer, and pointed a Nazi Lugar at a wooden target. Bat never stopped talking. "This was for desert warfare." "This one can shoot 3,000 feet." And he darted in and out of the crowd like a caffeinated greyhound. These weren't men with guns, they were children with toys. And they were restless with that.

Waiting in line for turkey-jerky, Bat told me he has made the attempt to re-enter the military. He wants to see Iraq. He wants to see a war just one last time before he hangs it all up. I don't understand why, and I believe that to be a good thing. At the gun show, we stopped at the fatigue stand across from a collection of velvet Ronald Reagan paintings. Bat caressed a desert tan uniform with his right thumb and softly said, "Hopefully I will be gettin' one of these soon." For all his queerness, Bat is a melancholy modern man. And he is relevant to this America.

As we walked to my truck it began to storm. Rain sat in Bats mustache like teardrops on the ride home. We talked about movies I've seen like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Jarhead* and how human the soldiers are in those stories. Not humane, human. Bat said, "You don't realize. In a war zone, the air changes." Then he thanked me for being his friend and coming with him to the gun show. If I had a fork, I would've jabbed his foot down, so he couldn't leave me.