

By Laurie Lynn Drummond
Prologue to *Losing My Gun*, a memoir in progress

Old Habits

Fall 1989. Almost midnight at ToyJoy, a funky, noisy toy store swathed in twinkly lights and geometric neon shapes just off the Drag in Austin, Texas. My new friend, Leila, her husband, Burke, and I wander the aisles, shuffling sideways past jostling hordes of other late-night wanderers—mostly students and thirty-something adults—fingering plastic armadillos that glow in the dark, dancing hula girls with cowboy boots and tattoos, cow in a soap, glittery body paint (some of it edible), oversized spiders, sophisticated versions of two cans and a string. We check out the black light show hidden behind a false wall (bend down low, put your eye up to the hole, flick the switch and presto: the solar system—or the Austin Slacker version of a styrofoam solar system—appears in psychedelic colors). This is our last stop from my “must go” list when I visit Austin: lunch at Las Manitas, swimming at Deep Eddy, shopping at Breed’s Hardware, ice cream at Amy’s, a movie at the Dobie, checking out the director’s wall at Vulcan Video. I’m thinking of leaving Baton Rouge, where I’ve lived for the past eleven years, and Austin is high on my “maybe move here” list.

I gradually become aware of an argument between two men at the front of the store. Clipped words, sharp as sticks snapping, grow in volume, then shift to longer vowels. The words are less important than the tone, and I know the underlying tone in those voices well; violence is not far away. Something buried deep within clicks on: my attitude, attention, body language alters. I drift towards the front of the store, eye the men carefully.

“Laurie,” Leila says, her warning drawing out the last syllable of my name.

I hold my hand up, palm facing her and fingers fully extended. “Stay here,” I say.

The men are in bantam cock position: full frontal display, chests out only inches from each other, chins up. One is in his early twenties, no facial hair, Hispanic, well built with a slight stomach, wearing jeans, tennis shoes, and a white t-shirt, maybe 5’9”. His hands are loose by his side, but the jiggling fingers give him away. The other man is older, slender, white, in his forties, reddish-blond hair cut short, about 6 feet tall, professional yuppie look of button-down shirt, pleated linen pants, polished leather shoes with tassels. He is the dangerous one, I know, the anger building from an ancient coil of heat in his gut. A woman stands behind him; there is an abandoned, helpless air about her.

I move closer, watching, assessing. The white male cocks a fist, yells obscenities, tucks his chin down. And before I know it I have stepped back into that role, a graceful dip back as though I’ve stepped into another body and another time, as easy as putting one foot in front of the other. Without hesitation, I brush in between the two men, using my elbow to gain room for my body, facing the Hispanic male, for he is the one most likely to listen to me; I don’t know why, I just know. Both my hands are out, pressing the air between us, just barely touching him as I step forward, trying to get him to step back with this invasion of his personal space. The heat from their bodies laps against my skin. I talk, very rapidly and softly, but forcefully.

“Alright, step back, let’s take it outside, this isn’t the place for this.” I babble on the same soothing yet command-driven words, saying anything that might defuse the situation. I am good at this. Too good sometimes. Marian McLin used to tell me I talked

too much on calls. “Sometimes,” she’d say, “you just gotta arrest their ass, Laurie.”
Tonight, that is not an option.

The white male presses up against my back as his arm reaches around my shoulders. He shakes his fist. The crowd around us grows larger; out of the corner of my eye, I’m aware a salesperson is on the phone, probably calling the police. Good.

Two Hispanic males come in the front door of the store and stand there—I taste the threat level in the room rise. I continue to talk, scrambling around inside my brain for the key to bring the situation under control. And that’s when it hits me: I know nothing about this area, about the gangs here, about Austin’s criminal patterns or elements. I don’t speak Spanish. And my gun is not here. I am with friends who don’t like guns so it is locked up in my car, under the driver’s seat. The Witness, that other part of me that always stays calm and assesses situations even in the most panic stricken times, notes with patient quietness that I am vulnerable, I am stupid, I am about to get my butt kicked.

The white male says something about being an assistant district attorney and how he’ll have the other guy’s ass in court.

Quick as a bullwhip I turn to face him, putting both hands on his chest. I shove hard and move him back a few inches. “I’m a cop, and I’m telling you you’re both going to jail if this goes any further,” I say, letting my voice rise in volume.

I pivot around and return my attention to the Hispanic male. “Listen,” I say. “You be the man in this situation. A real man does not engage in this kind of crap. You be the bigger one and walk away. WALK AWAY!” I see hesitation in his eyes, and I know I’ve found the right tune. “He’s a jerk but he’s also an assistant DA and he’s got some power

in that. This is not the time or place. Show him you're a better man, don't give him the satisfaction, take his power away and leave."

In the distance, I hear sirens. "Cops," I say. "Go. Now."

He looks at me, a deep stare without expression, then flicks his eyes at the white male, then back to me, and his fingers stop jiggling. I tense, but he takes one step back, then another. He backs slowly out the door with his buddies, profanities exchanged on both sides. The white male starts to follow him, and I grab his arm. "Enough," I say. "You should know better."

"Bitch," he mutters, but he allows the woman with him to pull him away.

"Uh-huh," I say, nodding, smiling slightly. If I were in uniform, my thumbs would be tucked inside my gun belt and I'd be rocking slightly on the balls of my feet. If I were in uniform, I'd be enjoying this. I turn away from the man, say "It's over, let's move on," to the crowd. The tremble in my knee kicks in, as it always does afterwards. I feel like my whole body is shaking, but I know I present a calm, in charge appearance.

"Oh my god, Laurie," Leila says as I walk back to her. "I can't believe you did that."

Burke is shaking his head. "That was not wise," he says.

They are both right. I had no business doing what I did. I lied. I could be charged with impersonating an officer. I'm not a cop. Not anymore. I haven't been a cop for four years. But some habits are hard to shake off; some lives just won't die.