

The machine gun

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue



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On the subject of summer camps allow me to sing my experience in Boy Scout camp in the deep forests of the Adirondack Mountains of New York State—long years ago but still fresh in my memory, for not only did we do the usual Scoutish things like build triangular campfires from beech logs and whittle arrows and race rickety canoes, but we also stole a camp truck filled with cakes and pies for the other troops' dessert, and slipped out of camp to an amazing nearby diner, and found the rusted shards of what one member of our patrol later ascertained to be a *Maschinenpistole* used by the Nazi *Fallschirmjäger*, or paratroopers, in the Second World War.

After all those years we found that scatter of rusted brooding shards of metal in moist shivering ground at the edge of a spruce swamp. I wonder how it got from the war over there to the forest here, and who carried it from one haunted wood to another, and why it was smashed to pieces apparently with a ball-peen hammer, and how long it had been moldering there in the swamp, and what had happened to the man or woman or child who smashed it to bits, and who would have eventually discovered it a century or a millennium later, a curious child or an archaeology team, and what they would have thought it to be—a shattered religious object, a broken toy, an instrument for some unimaginable music?

If this was a sensible and reasonable essay I would now explain the theft of the dessert truck, and how we waylaid the driver, a star Scout, and borrowed the truck

long enough to heroically deliver 40 cakes and pies to our camp, and then returned the truck to the spot where he had left it when he courageously leapt to the aid of ostensibly injured fellow Scouts; and I would briefly and entertainingly report how we plotted a journey through the moonless swamp to the extraordinary diner where the special was roast turkey with mashed potatoes and gravy; and I might mention odd and riveting moments like the time a boy in my patrol fired a whittled arrow at a hawk, and the hawk spun in the air like a dancer and dove on the boy, who I believe would have lost an ear had he not himself dove into a tent; but no, I return to the *Maschinenpistole*, for several reasons.

For one thing, several of us discovered it at once, so none could claim ownership or primacy, which was rare; for another, we all could tell, just staring at it, that it reeked of death, in a cold metallic way that only human beings would inflict on a throbbing green world. And the way we crouched over it together, fascinated and frightened, as we all are by anything evil; and how we stayed there long, unable to joke about it, but unable also to easily walk away and leave it as a grim shrine, or to bury it for good and return it to the earth from which it had been forged by men who so wanted a world of gaunt slaves.

If this was fiction or a poem, there might be a passage here where we Scouts walked away silently, each boy thinking about the crime of war, the disease of it, the weird way wars are made of courage and grace and rape and insanity all at once; perhaps it would also be dusk, the darkness sifting into the story on little metaphorical feet; but this is a true tale, and we each walked away thinking that we would come back before camp ended and take a piece of the gun as a souvenir and not tell the other guys; but none of us did that, as I discovered years later.

Last year I met all those boys again, now large men, at the wedding of one of our sons, and at the reception we talked hesitantly about the *Maschinenpistole*, and one by one we admitted that we were still rattled by it and remembered the feeling of discovering, a few inches from your face, an evil thing, a thing designed brilliantly and specifically for killing men. As the father of the groom said, all our genius, and this is what we do with it?