My Intractable, Gun-Loving, Anti-Government, Right-Wing Cousin (Who I Like a Lot)

A treatise (with gunplay) on "the two Maines," peace on Earth, and good will towards Ben.

By **RON CURRIE JR.**

Photographed by **TRISTAN SPINSKI**

Back in our formative years, my cousin Ben and I shared a lot in common.

We were both geeky, bookish kids growing up in central Maine, an environment in which young nerds were usually treated to either a heaping helping of indifference or a boot in the face on the playground gravel. The obvious, clichéd consequence of this: we both passed much of our time alone, reading, learning to program computers, and generally doing what we could to render ourselves invisible to other bipeds, both adult and juvenile, in our habitat.

Given what we know about the influence of childhood experience on the adults those experiences produce, you might think that Ben and I would have come of age with a similar mindset, with a shared view of the world. But that's not how it ended up.

These days, Ben and I don't have much in common at all. He lives in Sidney, a hamlet not far from where we grew up in Waterville. He is a veteran, a firearms enthusiast, and, insofar as he is willing to identify with any political creed, a government-wary libertarian. I, on the other hand, have scrupulously avoided military service, voted Democratic in every election for which I've been eligible, and write books for my supper. I live the hip, urbane life in Portland, a town so liberal they charge a fee on plastic shopping bags. What's more, I would probably need smelling salts, followed by a change of underwear, if anyone ever launched a rocket at me, whereas Ben got so accustomed to having rockets aimed his way in Afghanistan, he would just sit there and finish his lunch as they came screaming in overhead.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I am not a gun guy. But a couple of years ago, after the two of us got into a Facebook debate over firearms, Ben floated me an open invitation to go shooting. Given that I had only fired a gun once in my life, succeeding in scaring the daylights out of myself and not much else, it didn't seem like the smartest idea. At the same time, I was intrigued – and I wanted to take the proposition one step further. Sure, I said, I'd come to the shooting range, and we'd fire off some rounds. But in exchange, Ben would sit down and talk with me, tell me what he believed. And why.

The reason I chose Ben for this cross-ideological experiment – an attempt to see whether the divide between Maine's brunch and Bud Light crowds is really as impermeable as it seems – was because he and I had already demonstrated an ability to have interesting and (mostly) courteous conversations about our disagreements, something we're routinely told is impossible these days. In our civility, I'd learned some things from him, and I would like to think I'd made a point or two that scuffed the gleaming surface of his own dogmatic certainty.

So Ben and I arranged to meet, first in Sidney, then at a friend's place in nearby Albion, where the guns would come out.

DRIVING TO BEN'S, A MALAISE AKIN TO DESPAIR descended on me as the Priuses gave way to pickups, the Bean sports coats to Mossy Oak hoodies. I moved south only a few years ago, but these days, if I'm honest, central Maine bums me out. It has something to do with pride of place, how so often it's inversely proportional to the circumstances of a given area: the more dreary the situation, the more people puff themselves up and pretend that there's no place else they'd rather be. This is especially true of Waterville, where the slow-motion combo punch of mill closures and the Great Recession have left things pretty grim, even compared with just seven or eight years ago. Sure, I'm hard on Waterville in the way we're all sometimes hard on our

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The author, left, takes aim at a makeshift shooting range in Albion while cousin Ben offers pointers.

MY COUSIN BEN

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hometowns, and I understand the things that can keep one tethered to such an area – financial realities, family ties, plain old stasis. But you'd be hard-pressed to convince me that most people in town actually, actively want to be there.

Out in Sidney, though, where there's a bit of room to swing your elbows and the country highways open up on pretty views of the Kennebec Valley's undulating hills, things seem a little less bleak. I arrived at Ben's place, a squat tan house on several grassy acres, in early afternoon, and he greeted me at the front door. We hadn't seen each other in years, despite the fact that when we were younger, our families shared a duplex in Waterville's south end. For a while, I'd wondered how our two clans had grown so far apart, assuming it had something to do with Ben's parents' turn to evangelical Christianity. These days, though, I tend simply to chalk it up to the tectonic drift that happens with families over the years, especially families as large as ours (at one point, while recalling bygone holidays when the whole mess of us got together, Ben and I couldn't figure out how many cousins we actually had and ended up settling on "dozens").

He'd been expecting me, of course; his dogs, looking curious and docile, were crated in the front entryway, and there was coffee on. We caught up for a few minutes, hitting the usual topics of conversation when kin haven't spoken for a while – work, status updates on various members of the bloodline. I had the sense that Ben might be nervous, that maybe this had sounded like an okay idea in theory, but the reality of me picking his brain for the record might have put him ever so slightly on edge. Before long, though, we settled on the porch, and I eased us toward the purpose of our visit.

I floated a theory that part or maybe most of the reason why Ben and I, so similar as kids, had ended up so different as adults, was because of the different religious aspects of our upbringing. We were both raised Christian, but for me it was in the Catholic Church of our shared Franco heritage, while for Ben, it was in a flurry of increasingly fundamentalist Protestant denominations – Episcopal, Southern Baptist, full-on Pentecostal. To me, it seemed reasonable that a direct line could be drawn between the evangelical child and the libertarian adult.

Ben swatted this notion away, though. He described himself as more or less "apolitical" before joining the army and insisted he'd decided at an early age the whole church thing was pretty much bunk, put off by the gulf between how he was instructed to behave and how he witnessed his fellow congregants actually comporting themselves on days other than the Sabbath.

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"They dressed up real nice Sunday morning," Ben said, "then spent the rest of their week smoking, drinking, and fighting. Why would I want to associate with these people?"

Having little patience myself for hypocrisy from the family-values set, I was with him. But the more we talked, the more I became convinced that Ben's early experiences in the church had a stronger influence than he realized – they primed in him a sensitivity to hypocrisy and corruption. That sensitivity flared up when he became a soldier and bore witness to waste and mismanagement in the army, to systemic corruption among the Afghan National Police. Ben told me about a palette of

network switches – a million and a half dollars in electronics, by his estimate – left out in the mud for a year at a forward operating base because the previous unit couldn't be bothered to move it. He related anecdotes about ANP officers looking the other way on drug smuggling and petty theft. As I listened to his stories, it occurred to me that the real difference between us might be more experiential than ideological: if I'd seen what he'd seen, I'd have returned with an ever dimmer view of the government than Ben has. In fact, I can say with confidence that I would have come home embittered, a state of mind Ben seems largely to have avoided.

Which is not to say that Ben and I don't have genuine points of disagreement. We tussled a bit when I asked his view on Islam and he described it as "not, as a whole,

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compatible with Western culture." Ditto when I asked him his take on welfare – among the most conductive of lightning-rod topics at this moment in Maine, thanks to our ideologue governor. Ben offered that people who "need it" should receive assistance. Well, of course, I said – it would be hard to find anyone of any party who'd say that people genuinely in need of help are simply on their own. The definition of "need," I'd suggest, is our real point of contention, the issue over which the knives come out between conservatives and liberals.

After a few hours on the porch – and perhaps growing tired of my incessant questions about his stance on this or that issue – Ben suggested that maybe my sense of self was a little too wrapped up in my own

political identity. Immediately, I chafed: First of all, that's what this whole thing was supposed to be about. And secondly, I spent a lot of time thinking about these things because I believe that effective democracy requires an informed citizenry, and that being informed requires a great deal of dispassionate thought about issues, and so hey man, if that makes me "too wrapped up in my own political identity," then so be it because . . .

. . . and as this train of thought petered out, I realized that if I was having such an indignant reaction to such a simple assertion, maybe it was just this side of possible that Ben had a point.

I was relieved, if not surprised, to learn that Ben believes people on the far-right fringe – your birthers, doomsday preppers, and others convinced that President Obama is

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a Kenyan-born socialist emissary from hell – are just as crazy as I think they are. He doesn't have a bunker full of emergency rations in the backyard. He's not stockpiling iodine supplements or worrying about chemtrails or FEMA concentration camps. It's probably instructive that I, as a liberal, have a hard time distinguishing between that crowd and Ben, just a guy who holds beliefs unpopular with the American left and who also happens to own a not-small number of guns.

Speaking of which, things got slightly heated again when the subject of guns came up. I mentioned that I'd had a fleeting notion about getting a sidearm to carry while camping, but that my partner had said no, absolutely not,

under no circumstances, thanks very much.

"But why is that, though?" Ben asked, suddenly more animated than he'd been all day. "Is it her upbringing or what?"

"I think," I told him, "that beyond any political considerations, beyond any policy discussions, people are afraid of the power that guns represent. It's not an entirely rational reaction. But at the same time, guns are dangerous."

Here, Ben tried to float the old gun-rights chestnut about cars being just as dangerous as guns, and I pounced.

"But a car isn't designed, engineered, and manufactured to *kill things*," I said. "It's designed to bring me from Point A to Point B. That it's capable of killing is incidental to its actual purpose."

Ben banked the fire. "None of *my* weapons have killed anything," he said, calmly.

This was, to my mind, utterly beside the point, but I took my lead from him and let it drop – which seemed wise, considering that in a few days, I'd be meeting with him to shoot a bunch of those guns that hadn't killed anything.

On the appointed day, I drove to the appointed place, a 200-acre spread in Albion where Ben and I could fire off just about anything short of a howitzer without having to worry about either bothering or injuring the neighbors.

We drove out into a field behind the house, took a left at a stand of apple trees, and followed a recently mowed path a couple hundred yards to a makeshift shooting range. Ben swung open the hatchback of his SUV to reveal an arsenal inside. Understand that when I say "arsenal," this is not the hysterical overstatement of a gun-phobic liberal – arrayed on the floor of his cargo area were at least a dozen weapons, all of which looked very serious indeed. Of course, I knew nothing about any of the guns I was looking at, and in this way, I suppose I *was* a hysterical liberal, in that my utter ignorance left me

with only a visual impression to judge these devices by: that combat rifle appears particularly scary; this pistol with the thick black grip looks like it's very loud and fires a very large bullet.

Staring at Ben's stockpile, I realized that this gut-level reaction, borne of an unreasoning fear, is what informs many liberals' stance on firearms. They look scary, therefore they should not be around. I thought of an article I'd recently read by Jeff Cooper, a World War II vet and canonical firearms writer, about a phenomenon that he terms *hoplophobia*: "The most common manifestation," writes Cooper, "is the idea that instruments possess a will of their own, apart from that of their user." I had to admit, he had me pegged – though I understood it was irrational, and though I pride

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myself on seeking rational stances (especially in matters political), the guns in Ben's trunk seemed to seethe evil, just sitting there by themselves, secured and unloaded.

It had taken two weeks for Ben to find us a place to shoot, because he didn't want to go to a public range where some yahoo might try to show off for the journalist. This was interesting to me, because it demonstrated that there were at least some gun owners – people who would, in many liberals' minds, be lumped right in with Ben as a vile, homogenous mass – whom Ben himself didn't trust or even necessarily like.

When it came time to shoot, Ben started small: First up was a .22 semiautomatic pistol. He gave a brief lecture on safety and then handed it over. I hoisted the pistol, feeling

awkward and dangerous, then pointed it at a target about 40 feet away. I couldn't keep my hands steady, and the sights were veering all over the target, which seemed like a bad circumstance under which to send a projectile hurtling through the air.

Still, eventually, I pulled the trigger. Then I pulled it again, and then again. It got easier, which was what both I'd hoped for and worried about. My focus narrowed; time slowed. When the pistol's clip was empty, Ben secured the weapon and we walked over to check the results, but whether and where I hit the target was beside the point. Only two things about this afternoon would really matter: One, that the gun was, for me, no longer an abstraction to be argued over at a safe remove, but instead a real and deadly tool that I'd held in

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my own hands. And two, that I was still afraid of guns, but for a different reason. Having fired one, now I couldn't stop thinking about how it would feel to be the target instead of the one taking aim.

Call it the reflexive empathy of the novelist.

"I noticed you were shaking quite a bit," Ben said. "Were you nervous?"

"Nah," I said, knowing that Ben was too polite to call me out on an obvious lie.

As the hours went by, we cycled through Ben's other guns. There was his custom AR-15, that much-maligned variant of the M-16, used in more than a handful of mass shootings in recent years. Then came the CZ Scorpion, a Czech submachine gun sold as a pistol in the United

States in order to skirt ATF guidelines – with a butt stock, it requires special registration and taxes; without a butt stock, anyone can own it, no questions asked. Go figure.

Late in the day, Ben retrieved from the car a Mosin-Nagant bolt-action rifle, a Russian-designed gun of 19th-century origin that's still in use today. This particular rifle, Ben told me, bore a serial number indicating it had likely been used in the Battle of Stalingrad. It was, in other words, the only weapon here ever fired in anger. Ben had been wrong; he did own a gun that might have killed a man, or two, or ten.

Again, the hyperactive empathy of the novelist: Without trying to, without wanting to, I imagined scenarios in which other men, men older than my grandfather, men long dead, had hoisted this very rifle to their shoulders, pulled back the bolt to chamber a round, glared down the sights, fired and fired again, then moved downrange to check the results of their work, as I did now. Except where they searched for blood, all I hoped for was torn paper and splintered plywood, and this, with my hands still vibrating and the smell of sulfur in my nostrils, was terrible enough, thank you very much, world without end, amen, and that was a way in which Ben and I would forever be as different as two men could be, which was perfectly okay.

Back in 2010, I'd learned that Ben was shipping off to Afghanistan while attending the funeral of another soldier, a 21-year-old kid from Waterville, name of Wade Slack, who'd been killed in an ambush in Wardak province. The news of Ben's deployment had come from my aunt, Ben's mother, who sat next to me in the pew and, at several times during the service, put her head on my shoulder and sobbed as though it were her own son in the casket. I remember thinking, as she cried and I fought back my own tears, that I had an obligation to say something, to assuage her fear. But I couldn't bring myself to tell her that Ben

would return alive and intact, for the simple reason that neither I nor anyone else knew whether he would.

Maybe I should have said it anyway. Five years later, I still don't know.

There's a decade's age difference between me and Ben, and several eons ago, I used to babysit him, when I was a teenager and he was a sweet, shy kid who reminded me a lot of myself. One of the more subtly painful human experiences, I think, is being forced to let go of how we remember someone as a child. The difficulty is complicated by the fact that we want those who we first know as children to have full and happy lives as adults – but this means, almost inevitably, that they must grow into people we don't recognize. And so Ben the smiling kid with the Coke-bottle

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glasses, cute as a Baby Gap model, had to become someone else, someone bigger, and also harder, someone I don't quite recognize – yet indubitably himself. And here he is now: a gruff though not unfriendly man, wide as he is tall, long-since grown and autonomous and full of ideas and stances I can't abide, although they don't make me like him any less.

Which is maybe the real point: that political views aside, I like Ben. It's possible that he was right and that I am, in fact, too wrapped up in my politics. Maybe the idea of us as a left/right odd couple misses the point. Maybe the first step to a diverse culture that can effectively govern itself is to chuck political identities altogether and just figure out how to, you know, *like* each

other as human beings, rather than as members of opposing tribes.

Reductive? Perhaps. Naïve? Okay. But I could easily envision the two of us sitting in a room and hashing out some sort of legislative compromise, not because we agree, but because we like and respect the guy across the table.

As I was about to drive away from the makeshift gun range in Albion, I noticed a pair of bumper stickers on the truck of the man whose property we'd been using all day, a man who told us, in parting, that we could come back and shoot anytime we liked because "that's what living in a free country's all about." On the left side of his bumper, this bit of nose-thumbing: ANNOY A LIBERAL – WORK HARD AND BE HAPPY. And on the right side, in a jarring juxtaposition, the same message I've seen on the back

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window of a hundred hybrid hippymobiles in Portland, often nestled up against Obama/Biden stickers: NO FARMS, NO FOOD.

I sat there for a minute, trying to absorb the ideological dissonance. I thought – not for the first time – about how much overlap there really is between the right and left, and how too damn few of us will ever acknowledge it because so damn many of us find screaming at each other so satisfying. And then I smiled, jotted a clever note about the stickers, and left for home, where everyone I know agrees with me on just about everything.

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