

GUNS AND BLACK ROSES

By Jerold London

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jlondon@deepweaversfaith.com**



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GUNS AND BLACK ROSES

TIME AND PLACE

Present. School auditorium. Five large (very large) monitors rest on a table at the front.

CHARACTERS

CHARM, teenager, female. On a monitor.

DEWEY, teenager, male. On a monitor.

JOSÉ, teenager, male. On a monitor.

MICKIE, teenager, female. On a monitor.

DR. RIVER, moderator. On a monitor.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

... // signals the starting point of overlapping (but **not** interrupting) text.

Killing a man should be harder than waving a length of pipe in his direction. It should take long enough for one's conscience to get in the way. – Hugh Howey, *The Unraveling*

When a country with less than five percent of the world's population has nearly half of the world's privately owned guns and makes up nearly a third of the world's mass shootings, it's time to stop saying guns make us safer. – DaShane Stokes

We're not seeing reasons for gun control. We're seeing reasons to carry.

Man in the mirror
I despise you.
Your dull, sunken eyes
Your imperfect, yellow teeth
Your cruel, hateful smirk.
I wish to start

And end
With you....

– Joseph Davis

GUNS AND BLACK ROSES

DR. RIVER (on monitor) begins the session.

DR. RIVER

We are meeting like this,
as I said yesterday,
so that we can express our grief,
and shock,
and disbelief,
and questions. And, yes, maybe anger.
And I know the biggest question, besides “Why?” is
What do guns have to do with learning and high school?
As if none of us really knows guns.
So, today I’ve asked four of your classmates to prepare something to share.
And, like yesterday, no censorship. If things go too wrong, there’s the plug.
So ... there is Charm.

CHARM

Hello.

DR. RIVER

And Dewey.

DEWEY

At cha.

DR. RIVER

José.

JOSÉ

Hola.

DR. RIVER

And Mickie.

MICKY

Silence.

DR. RIVER

[*beat*] Charm, would you get us started, please?

CHARM

Hello. Again.

People have asked me:

“Charm, if you’re not a gun owner, what possible cred do you have, talking about gun control?”

As if I can’t talk about what I see heroin doing, not being a user myself. Or poverty.

It makes about as much sense.

I’m a student. Right?

In a public school. Right?

I have a right here. And a life. That’s enough.

And guns take lives away.

If not by themselves, then by their trickery.

Guns kill.

If not by themselves,

then in the hands of kids who ought never be permitted to touch them.

Guns kill.

DEWEY

Guns protect, you Fool.

What do you think they’re for?

Why do you think our Constitution protects them?

And calls them necessary for freedom?

CHARM

My Mom didn’t get protected.

With her depression, the last thing she needed was a gun in the house.

With her sometimes suicidal thoughts,

the last thing she needed was a gun in the house.

And then came my uncle to visit, the month my Dad was away.

My uncle with his Constitutional protection packed in his car,

which he brought into the house. He didn’t know.

When she found it, it was just at the wrong time. Lights out. She killed herself....

No one who’s made a serious attempt to end their life should be allowed near a gun. Period. Ever.

DEWEY

All I’m saying is that it’s relaxing, knowing there’s a gun in the house.

For most people.

To protect most people.

Hell, what if she took sleeping pills?

You saying people shouldn’t be allowed sleeping pills?

CHARM

Sleeping pills are not sudden....
A hundred people *a day* die in our country from guns.
And two-thirds are suicides.
And no effective legal system of checks to stop them.
No waiting period long enough for an episode to run its course.

JOSÉ

Man in the mirror
I despise you.
Your dull, sunken eyes
Your imperfect, yellow teeth
Your cruel, hateful smirk.
I wish to start
And end
With you.
I want to consume you.
To pull you down.
To tie you down.
To burn you down.
Until your insults of me
Your prophecies of my future
Your doubts of my love
Are screams of agony.
Because when I melt your touch
Raze your sight
Tear your sound
Then I will smile.
With black boned
And empty socket and ashen teeth
I will be free of you.

DEWEY

I wish we could be free of that aching poem of yours, José.
That's all I can say.

CHARM

I've walked. I've marched. All the way to Washington. The March for Our Lives.
And Dad and I have talked to Congressmen. And on TV. *And* to gun owners.
And gun owners have told us they support what we talk about.
Honest gun owners can see the need for action.
Honest gun owners are open to different views on sensible gun control.

DEWEY

There is no sense, like you say, in gun control.
Control freaks want to take guns away.
Because it's something *they can't control*.
Like all the other stuff they want to control in our lives.
Like marriage.
And bathrooms.
And Bibles in school.
And vaccinations.
And dead people voting.
And stealing elections.
And no walls where we need walls.

CHARM

Dad and I call it being SMART.
SMART means:
S, for secure all guns, wherever they are. Everywhere they are.
M, for modeling responsible behavior around guns.
A, for asking if there are any unsecured guns around.
R, for recognizing the risks of suicide and worse. And
T, for telling your classmates and their families about being SMART.

DEWEY

You're full of it.
Like there's some kind of national emergency.

CHARM

There is.
Kids are bringing loaded guns to school.
Even four and five-year-olds.
Guns and shootings are an epidemic in our country.
Parkland. And Sandy Hook. And Santa Fe, Texas. And Virginia Tech.
And all the others. Read the news, any day. Read about us, any day.
And rampant gun violence is not just a school thing.
It's an everywhere thing.
And it takes all of us ... all of us to change this country's gun culture.

DEWEY

That's what I just said.
All you want is to change other people's culture. And beliefs.

CHARM

What *are* your beliefs, Dewey?

DEWEY

That “toxic masculinity” and MeToo and “critical race theory” are piles of bull
crap in the field.
Nobody in World War Two called it “toxic masculinity” when men were saving
the world from the Nazis.
My father’s no candy ass.
He says, “You stand up like a man, or sink like a rat.”
Better not be any stranger coming sneaking around our place after dark.
And no phones or tablets at the dinner table, neither. Not at our place.
We talk...
And we like cop shows. The real life police, what they have to go through.
And how they are protecting our country....
And I’ll tell you, Charm, what else I believe.
I believe climate change is a hoax.
Tens of thousands of scientists are now admitting it.
And California is developing two of the country’s filthiest slums.
So where is all their liberal thinking getting them?

CHARM

And a country bursting with illegal guns at the seams helps you keep those
beliefs?

DEWEY

A country bursting at the seams with illegal aliens certainly won’t.

CHARM

Black men are thirteen times more likely to be killed by gun violence.
Brown men about the same, I’d guess.

JOSÉ

Man in the mirror
I despise you.
But not the bike I had, that I rode to school every day when I was a kid.
It was just a beat-up old bike; but ... well ... it was like a part of me.
And I would never hate it, no matter how ugly it got beaten up.

CHARM

Why? What happened to it?

JOSÉ

Some punks in my class stole it, and smashed up the wheels and spokes, and
slashed the tires. I never could prove it; but I knew who they were.
I wanted to get revenge, but never got a gun.

CHARM

I should hope not.

JOSÉ

What I really wanted to do, instead of shooting them,
was to write a poem about them, and get it published.
Poke them in the eyes with it.
But my poem's not about them.

CHARM

What *did* you do? About your bike?

JOSÉ

A friend of mine's father owned a bike shop, and he let us repair it there.
It never would have gotten fixed without him;
and he charged me next to nothing....
I've never forgotten that.

CHARM

What about the punks?

JOSÉ

You can go through life hating people, I guess,
when something that means so much to you gets ruined.
And shooting them.
And what does that get you?
Dead. Or in jail.
Or, maybe, deported.
Let me tell you something

CHARM

What?

JOSÉ

The more we worked on my bike, the closer I got to my friend, and his dad.
And that meant something more important to me than the rest.
And something strange happened, inside me.
I imagined feeling how it must feel, being beaten up and broken, like that.

CHARM

Is *that* what your poem's about?

JOSÉ

What?

CHARM

Bullying?

JOSÉ

Is that what you think it's about?

CHARM

I think it's sad.

JOSÉ

What?

CHARM

It's sad that it takes a shooting and a suicide to bring us together....
Jews, African Americans, Latinos and Latinas, everybody. We've all lost.
Even buses are being shot at. Or caught in a crossfire.
In Durham. In Memphis. Where else?
In the words of our pastor:
"It takes more than prayers to deal with the things that we have to deal with as a
country right now. Yes, God gives us prayer; but he gives us the motivation and
the willingness to take action, too."

DEWEY

My sister was a crybaby, like José.
And do you know what happened to her?

CHARM

No. What?

DEWEY

She was dating this no-good loser.
You could tell he was a liar.
Just by looking in his eyes.
But she moved in with him, anyway.
And what did he do?
Before he kicked her out?
Stole everything she had.
Dad told her it would happen.
And I told her what she needed was new glasses.
To see men better.
She said she'd just bought new ones....
He stole them, too.

CHARM

Let me tell you.
We were watching Australian TV the other day, Dad and me.
And in a scene with a gang of criminals, one pulls out a gun.
The rest are shocked; and one asks,
“Why do you have a gun, mate? Where did you get it?”
I had to laugh. And then I had to cry.
Only in America.

DEWEY

You're a crybaby, too. Like José.

CHARM

I've lost a mother *and* a classmate.

DEWEY

Mom told me, long ago, I wouldn't be happy till someone loses an eye.
And I've lived my life that way.
And I've lost her, too, Flitwick.
And when someone you love dies, you don't get them back by crying.
And you don't get over it by forgetting.
You get *through it* by remembering what she taught you.

JOSÉ

You know what I hate?
I hate ignorance.
I hate when people refuse to even listen to thoughtful thoughts about guns.
It could have ruined *my life* for sure, if I'd gotten hold of one.

DEWEY

You calling me ignorant? Taco?

DR. RIVER

Stop it right there, or the plug gets pulled.

CHARM

I hate lies.
Lies are the elephant in the TV room.
My father says.

JOSÉ

Socialists. Liberals. Immigrants.
Pick a scapegoat.
That's what they do. On TV.

CHARM

That's the man in the mirror? A liar?

JOSÉ

No. It's not....

It was on the highway past our house that a woman's car got shot up.

In a drive-by shooting that hit her baby in the back seat.

All she heard, she said, was, "Pow. Pow. Pow. Pow."

She just held onto the steering wheel, asking herself,

"Where's this coming from?"

Not knowing her own daughter had gotten hit.

CHARM

It's an absolute no-brainer for Dad and me.

To start with: Federal background checks that have teeth.

DEWEY

You're already got those.

CHARM

We do not, despite what the NRA may claim.

Look at Pittsburgh.

After eleven worshipers at the Tree of Life Synagogue get murdered, three common sense gun safety bills were set to be introduced to City Council.

All nine members of Council had announced their support.

One of the bills was a ban on assault weapons and ammunition.

One would forbid anyone not a policeman from carrying a gun within city limits.

And the third would allow a person to be stripped of their weapons if they pose an extreme risk to themselves or others.

After that Pittsburgh was barraged with gun-control opposition, including a march on city hall by gun-rights advocates brandishing the same kind of semi-automatic, military-style weapons that gun control would have banned. Petitions were circulated to have the Mayor impeached. And a warning letter was sent from the district attorney to the Mayor, telling him and council to drop the bills. They want *guns* to protect against guns. And no other checks, background or otherwise. But arming rabbis, pastors, priests, and teachers is no answer; and it flat-out ignores research that shows that the mere presence of guns *increases* risks.

Get that? It *increases* the risks of death.

DEWEY

Let them pray. That's what they do.

CHARM

Parents don't want prayers. Or thoughts.
They want us protected. They want children protected. They want *gun control*.

JOSÉ

I know we're better than this. It doesn't take a schoolmate's death to tell us that.
We're greater than hate.
Parkland.
Sandy Hook.
Las Vegas.
Pittsburgh.
They're all greater than hate.
That's why we all live in this country.
And we're greater than the NRA, too.

CHARM

I agree with you, José. But look what we're up against.
I'll give you an example:
In a video I just saw there's an actress playing a leader in the gun-control fight.
And she gets shot and killed by a burglar.
Behind her a Moms Demand Action sign is splattered with blood.
It makes me sick.
What it stands for makes me sick.
What it makes me wish for is to fight tooth and nail against people who make
videos like that, and who use guns and black roses to intimidate people like us.

DEWEY

You're a wimp. Let *me* make you a video.
I've collected some mannequins. In the basement.
Think I'll spice them up with cans of red paint inside,
and take them to a firing range I know. The female ones.
Dad and I and our friends will have a ball shooting them up. On my cell.
Thinking of you.

CHARM

You're sick, Dewey.

DEWEY

And you're a hypocrite, Charm Bracelet.

CHARM

A *hypocrite* signs "Choose Life" while packing death.

DEWEY

You can just shut up about abortion.
Sixty million lives have been lost since Roe versus Wade.
And another ninety million, or more, in the children they would have had.
That's nearly half our population.

JOSÉ

Water, water, everywhere,
and not a drop for those fleeing for their lives from Central America.

DEWEY

Of course not, Meathead, they're not Americans.
Get a grip.

JOSÉ

Like you?

DEWEY

Like, what do you think makes clothes shrink?
A dryer?
I used to think that.
But, actually, it's the refrigerator.
"Ice box" to you.

CHARM

You're making no sense.

DEWEY

That's my point.
Neither are you.

JOSÉ

You make jokes? At a time like this?

DEWEY

Better than your lame poetry.

JOSÉ

Like you would know.

DEWEY

You insult me one more time, Chico ... //

DR. RIVER

I said no more of that, if you want to stay on the air.

DEWEY

Just answer me this, country poet.
Have you heard of MS-13?

JOSÉ

It so happens I have.

DEWEY

Figures.

JOSÉ

It started in California in the '80s.
As a way to protect Salvadoran immigrants from gangs in Los Angeles.
And, true, *if* you're Latino or Latina, and *if* you're in *some* neighborhoods,
it has become a menace.
But in no way is it a threat to white communities, like some of the media has said.
In fact, if it weren't for their propaganda, you'd probably never hear of it.
It has less than one per cent of all gang members in the country.
A fraction of the Crips. Or the Bloods. Or the KKK, for that matter.

DEWEY

What propaganda?

CHARM

Guess.

DEWEY

Socialist liberal Bernie Sanders....

CHARM

[*pause*] Why do you want guns so bad anyway, Dewey?

DEWEY

For us to protect our neighborhood, and our country's freedom. That's why.

JOSÉ

Figures.

CHARM

Like when they stormed the Capitol January 6th?

DEWEY

When the going gets tough, the tough get going.
It's what Jefferson said.
Right?

CHARM

What it is, is ...
guns make more noise.
And people who make more noise get their way in government.

JOSÉ

And people who lie.
That's what I believe, anyway.
No matter what the country.
Life is fragile. Like time. And truth is fragile.
And it's a terrible crime for leaders to spin out lies to get people to hate one another. And fear one another. And waste the moments when people could be happy with one another.

DEWEY

Happiness. Sappiness.

CHARM

José's right.
What should be more important to a country than protecting peoples' lives?
Especially children's lives.
And what's more scary than to propose using more guns to do it?
Especially, *inside* the schools.

DR. RIVER

Do you happen to know, Charm, if March for Our Lives has a mission statement?

CHARM

They do, but it's general.
They want universal background checks, a searchable database,
a ban on assault rifles, and a ban on high-capacity magazines.

DR. RIVER

And you want more?

CHARM

You've got to get a foothold somewhere, against the headwinds.

DR. RIVER

But, in the end, you want more. Right?

CHARM

Yes.

DR. RIVER

What?

CHARM

Treat gun ownership more like car ownership.

Age limits.

Insurance.

Annual registration.

Periodic testing for competency.

Increased observation by authorities, like of reckless driving.

If you've got a gun, and if you're broadcasting hostility, people should look into it.

DR. RIVER

Do you think mental health is a factor, in gun violence?

CHARM

It's a very good reason to deny gun ownership, I think.

But actually, Dr. River, there's little evidence to link the two.

Maybe 5% of the 40,000 gun deaths a year are attributable to people diagnosed with mental illness. And that's a fourth of the national average for mental illness.

DR. RIVER

So ...? What is a good prognosticator?

CHARM

Drinking and packing.

Too much alcohol, and gun violence increases seven-fold.

DR. RIVER

Which means? Practically?

CHARM

If you're out drinking, with a gun on you, make it like drunk driving.

DR. RIVER

From my observation anger, not drinking, is a better indicator.

Like, losing your temper with your spouse.

Or with someone messing around with your spouse.

CHARM

That, too, of course, Dr. River. I couldn't agree more.

If a gun's handy, it's five times more likely a person will be murdered in a domestic dispute.

DR. RIVER

Like some pain meds.
If they're there, there's a good a chance something bad's going to happen.

CHARM

You mean meds for depression? Like my Mom had?

DR. RIVER

[*beat*] People in difficult relationships shouldn't have guns around.
That's all I'm saying.
And, yes, maybe.
Maybe the wrong kind of pain meds make things worse.

CHARM

And children, too.

DR. RIVER

Children?

CHARM

Do you have any idea how many young children every year get killed by guns?

DR. RIVER

No.

CHARM

Thirteen hundred. Every year, in the US.
Young kids should never be able to touch a loaded gun. Period.
People have got to come together on that.
Like Moms Demand Action and Every Town for Gun Safety have.
Locking guns up. Away. Safe.

DR. RIVER

Okay.

CHARM

But the biggest problem, Dr. River, is getting help to people who think their lives aren't worth anything. *Before* they do something awful.

DR. RIVER

[*beat*] You ever feel that way, Charm?

CHARM

[*beat*] I don't like feeling like I do when I feel being left out.

DR. RIVER

Everybody feels alone, some of the time.
And a death of someone you know only makes it worse.

CHARM

When I want to be alone, I'm perfectly fine being left alone. It's what I want.
But when I'm alone when I don't want to be, it makes me feel rejected.
Like people don't want to be around me.
And that gets me depressed.

DR. RIVER

But you know, don't you, that's *not* how people feel about you?

CHARM

My feelings tell a different story.

DR. RIVER

What?
What are your feelings saying?

CHARM

That my life's not worth shit sometimes....
Oh, sorry.

DR. RIVER

We'll let that pass.

CHARM

I want to feel I can do something with my life.
Make a difference, around me, with my own hands.
I just feel ... unwanted sometimes.
And just damned angry.
It's not a mental health thing.
It's a human being thing.
And I'm damned certain there are jillions of other kids out there feeling the same way.

DR. RIVER

Do you feel like that often?

CHARM

No.... It's only once in a while.
Like when a good friend dies. Not that often.

JOSÉ

Like *I* don't go around all the time saying ...

Man in the mirror
I despise you.
Your dull, sunken eyes
Your imperfect, yellow teeth
Your cruel, hateful smirk.
I wish to start
And end
With you.
I want to consume you.
To pull you down.
To tie you down.
To burn you down.
Until your insults of me
Your prophecies of my future
Your doubts of my love
Are screams of agony.
Because when I melt your touch
Raze your sight
Tear your sound
Then I will smile.
With black boned
And empty socket and ashen teeth
I will be free of you.

DEWEY

Will you just get off that?

**Mickie's head begins bleeding from the
gunshot holes in it, although she
continues to sit upright in the screen.**

CHARM

I need to be part of something I can be proud of.

DR. RIVER

I think you are. Look at it this way: Winds are tearing at our country,
and you're standing against the wind.

CHARM

How can we heal it? And get the American Dream back?

DEWEY

The American Dream sleeps with the Second Amendment.

CHARM

And another thing.
Life's especially hard on kids right now.
Emotionally.
We feel threatened, every day.
So many shootings.
Like we've just seen.
Not just in schools, but in the neighborhoods.
Some kids vomit before coming to school.
Some cut themselves.
Grades and expectations.
Instagram, and YouTube, and Twitter, and Facebook, and TikTok, and Snapchat.
And then, a classmate goes and dies on you.

José, is your poem about suicide?

JOSÉ

My poem's definitely *not* about suicide.

CHARM

It could be.
But, if you want to know the truth,
I think the problem is that us kids are spending too much time on our devices.

JOSÉ

If you want to know the truth,
the man in the mirror is what I see in my eyes in the mirror:
the truth:
the invisible ignorance in you and me.

DEWEY

If *you* want to know the truth, I'm my father's son.
And nobody's taking away his guns.
And nobody's taking away my guns.

CHARM

Your guns? Where did *you* get guns?

DEWEY

None of your fucking business.

That's it.
That's enough.
Pull the plug.

DR. RIVER

The plug is pulled, and the monitors go dark, except for Mickie's, whose head continues bleeding as she sits, motionless, upright in the screen.

END