

Of a Gun and a Cigarette

Category: Traumatized

written by Tonya Saliba | August 22, 2025

Today, while sitting with my kids in a cafe at a busy intersection, I saw a man stick his arm out of a car window. I spotted a metallic glint in the afternoon sun. I couldn't see his face due to the glare through the cafe window. But I could see him point his arm and hold it horizontally in my direction.

I flinched. I went into survival mode. I told my kids calmly but firmly to move their chairs away from the window immediately. When they asked why, as they noisily scraped their wooden chair legs against the polished linoleum, I lowered my voice and said, "There's a man with a gun at the stop light. It's pointed at the restaurant."

They turned to look as I scanned the room for a quick, safe exit or a spot where we could shelter in place. I quickly sized up the other patrons and calculated who might not be able to throw themselves to the ground to avoid being hit by bullets, who might panic, who might die.

My 16-year-old said, "Mom, there's no gun. He's just holding a cigarette." They laughed and did that "mom is crazy" eye roll all teens do when they think adults are being stupid or over-protective.

I felt confused. I was sure I'd seen a flash of metal. I knew I'd felt the adrenaline rush I used to get when I had patients who were gang members or on watch by law enforcement. I knew I'd felt the wariness that comes from a threat of immediate danger. My ears were ringing, which is my internal sign of impending chaos. In that glint, that aggressive movement by someone in an idling car, I saw my gunshot patients. I smelled blood and death.

Drug deals gone bad, robberies, love triangles—I'd seen them all end in the sorrowful hallways of the inner city hospital where I worked.

I'd seen boys my own children's ages crying for their mothers as I pulled blood-soaked gauze from their abdomens. I'd heard machines warning of the cessation of life. I'd heard wails of family members as I unhooked lifeless bodies from those machines. I'd felt helpless in my inability to change anything.

This time, I was wrong.

It really was a cigarette. It's been four hours since I thought we were going to die, since I thought I saw a man point a gun in my direction. My kids are at home watching a crime show on TV. I can still smell the wounds.

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