

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

*Trigger Happy: Jay Allison recalls how guns got under his skin.*

### **Tony Kahn:**

Hi, everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. Years ago, when I was a kid, there was a famous American movie actor named Danny Kaye who used to entertain kids around the world with a routine he called "The Absent-minded Cowboy." He'd point his index finger like it was a gun, and then he would shoot it: bang! Then, casually he'd raise the finger to his lips like it was a smoking barrel, and he'd blow the smoke away: phoo! Then he'd stretch the finger, and he'd shoot again: bang! And raise the finger to his lips, phoo! Then again, bang! phoo! bang! phoo! And then a funny look would cross his face; he'd stretch his finger, go phoo!, raise his finger to his face, and bang! The absent-minded cowboy.

The joke didn't need any translating. Every kid in the world knew what an American cowboy was. If you were to put together a film out of every scene in an American movie where someone was shooting somebody else, it would run ten times longer than any film where hands were doing something nice, like sharing a load, or holding a child; taking out the trash; doing the dishes; blowing a kiss? So what is it with guys and guns in America? And is it ever going to end? In today's *Morning Story*, a man named Jay Allison comes clean with his own concealed relationship with guns. We call his story *Trigger Happy*.

[Music: Frank Sinatra song *I've Got You Under My Skin* begins here and continues on and off throughout the narrative]

### **Jay Allison:**

When I was young, I liked to shoot guns. I hunted a little, and shot targets. I was a member of the NRA and got my marksmanship badges. I was a pretty good shot, and was proud of it. [Sinatra: "I've got you deep in the heart of me..."] After I graduated from college, my best childhood friend, the one I used to play war games with in the woods was murdered: shot in the back by an anonymous gunman in San Francisco. I was traveling in Europe and I saw pictures of him in the papers, lying in his own blood on the street. And I had to answer delicate questions from my European friends about whether we are an essentially violent people in America. Why we have such an active relationship with weapons. In answering, I thought about my own boyhood ease with guns, and the comfort of them.

Almost thirty years later, with my marriage failing, I thought again of owning a gun – a handgun.

**Voice of gunseller:**

Our recommendation is a four-inch double-action revolver...

**Jay Allison:**

It seemed like it might help me recall the security of childhood while reminding me I was a man, and protect me like a pioneer going into harsh new terrain alone.

**Voice of gunseller:**

...close it and fire it at whatever it was you needed to fire it at.

**Jay Allison:**

My children thought I was foolish and strange, especially when I showed them the target I had filled with bullet holes at the gun shop.

**Youth's voice:**

Oh, Dad....

**Jay Allison:**

[Chuckling] What do you mean, oh Dad?

**Youth's voice:**

That is weird, Dad.

**Jay Allison:**

Why do you think it's weird?

**Youth's voice:**

Because! It's just - it's not you!

**Jay Allison:**

[Sound of gun being fired] I bought a gun. [Another gun shot] Two, actually. [Gun shots follow, accompanying narrative] Used Smith & Wesson handguns, a 357 Magnum nickel-plated revolver, and a 9mm high-capacity semiautomatic pistol. I practiced at the range. I found some comfort in harnessing explosive energy, in practicing accuracy. Sometimes, with the new language of anthrax, sarin, and dirty bombs on the TV in the background, I fired an empty gun at the walls of my bedroom. [Sounds of unloaded revolver being fired]

I am writing these words in Europe, in a café with Frank Sinatra on the radio. Down the road from where I sit, a crew is making a gangster movie, and large crowds gather, hoping for a glimpse of one of the American stars. [Sinatra singing *Under My Skin* plays under narrative] Images in the newspaper beside

me are of American soldiers with weapons aimed casually at naked prisoners in abject postures.

My friends here cautiously want to know what sort of people we are, what we're capable of, how far we'll go. I tell them what I've always believed about the American character – how our freedom should breed tolerance and creativity. I do not mention my guns. They ask me (again, as they did thirty years ago) if we are a violent people. If they should fear us.

[Sinatra singing "*for the sake of having you near . . .*" under narrative]

When I get home to America this time, though, it will be time to think about it all again. About our country and its fear – about defense, and maniacs – and about why I have these guns. Whether they offer comfort. What they're good for.

[Sinatra sings: "*... get up; wake up to reality. And each time I do, just the thought of you makes me stop just before I begin, because I've got you under my skin, and I like you under my skin.*"]

**Tony Kahn:**

Jay Allison with today's *Morning Story, Trigger Happy*. I'm here in the listening room with Gary Mott.

**Gary Mott:**

I've never been scared by a gun; I've never been shot at; I've never been, you know, approached in a confrontational way. I have used a gun to try to kill [laughs] something – squirrels, [Tony murmurs affirmation] rabbits.... I don't think I ever connected. But it never entered my experience that a gun could, could be used to kill another person.

**Tony Kahn:**

I will never forget – it was in Mexico; I was about eight years old – there was a commotion in the kitchen early in the morning. I was in my pajamas; I went into the kitchen. There's my father standing in his pajamas with his bathrobe on, looking at the screen door. And on the other side of the screen door is our gardener, really drunk, a machete in his hand. Asking my father for more money, to get more to drink. And my father is saying calmly, "No." He had his hand in the pocket of his bathrobe.

And I kind of looked, and I realized that it was grasping something that was sort of black. And I looked a little bit more closely. The first real gun that I ever saw! All I could feel was the power of that gun, drawing a line: on one side, good guys, and in the other side, bad guys. Between life the way it was before the gun would go off, and life after that gun would go off. What's my father going to do with that gun?

**Gary Mott:**

Mm, hmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

Well, the most amazing thing. He did nothing. He kept it in his pocket. He didn't even brandish it; it was totally invisible to everybody but my father and me. I don't know if that gave him the calm and the good sense not to have an argument with this man, and not to threaten him. And after that happened, it was totally unmentioned between my father and me. So I, I grew up with the sense guns give off these powerful vibrations of potential mayhem, potential misunderstanding, and lines drawn through situations where lines shouldn't be drawn at all.

**Gary Mott:**

So Jay and you and me, we kind of have three different, you know, relationships. Jay, the comfort of childhood holding a gun.

**Tony Kahn:**

Right. Security.

**Gary Mott:**

For you, it's mayhem.

**Tony Kahn:**

Right.

**Gary Mott:**

For me, I think sport, you know – shooting skeet, shooting targets – a weekend with “the guys.”

**Tony Kahn:**

I believe a gun should never be drawn. You think, “No big deal.” [Gary laughs] And Jay thinks, “Aim very carefully.” [Sinatra song begins again, at “Wake up, wake up to reality” and continues through rest of show.] I would be fascinated to know from people out there whether they have had an experience with a gun that has really surprised them. Something that happened that they haven't quite figured out. Or they can't quite forget.

**Gary Mott:**

<morningstories@wgbh.org>. Our website: <wgbh.org/morningstories> – a lot to see, and do, and listen to!

**Tony Kahn:**

And we'll see you next time. Take care.

[Sinatra sings, "And I like you under my skin," followed by repeated clicking of an unloaded gun and then the bang! of a live round.]

[End of Recording]

Notes from transcriber:

Well, I'm just really really glad that the best security feeling remaining from my childhood is the feeling of being in a cozy elementary school classroom in a big old brick building, with rain coming down outside.

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