



Michel Sauret

Midnight



How

ow did this happen? One moment you think you're in control, with your old man's Beretta in hand, telling everyone inside the Circle K to get down to the ground—and they do, of course they do—and the next moment... Shit. The next moment's gone. It's all blanked out, and now I'm outside pointing the same Beretta to Black-Man's head over here, with beams of white light bleaching into my face, and the cops shouting that everything's going to be okay.

Right.

Everything's going to be hunky-dory.

Who in the hell ever invented happy endings?

The Black Man I have the gun pointed to, he's not really black. In fact, his skin is as pale as worn wooden shingles, stripped of colour by the sun. And now, with these lights beaming unto us, his skin—it glows. It's like little shiny particles are dancing all around him. Or like droplets of fine mist bouncing off his body and reflecting the light in all directions. I call him the Black Man because of his clothes. Because of his hair.

Christ, you'd never think that hair could be so dark. So thick. He keeps his neck tilted because the barrel presses against his big mulch of black hair, and it's like the gun could be lost in it. I'm afraid of pressing the gun any further, not because the metal might dig into his skull, but because this hair could swallow the gun and my whole hand with it.

The man wears a black tux, matched with a silk tie and deep oxford shoes. His shirt is the only thing whiter than his skin. When I first entered the gas station, I asked myself what a man like this could be doing here, on the side of the highway in the middle of the night. Was he running from his own wedding? From his own funeral?

He had opened the cooler doors, reaching for a jug of whole milk, and a fresh breeze of air licked against my face. I pulled my gun out then, and the shouting began. At first I didn't think Black Man would get down. He opened his jug of milk, took a long swallow, and just stared into the barrel of my Berretta. But then, slowly, he sat on the floor while everyone else seemed to be hugging it.

The clerk was an old Mexican man without any facial hair. On the ground in front of the counter, some teenage kid clutched a Red Bull in his right hand. He wore a t-shirt too tight for his chest. Some older woman cried, and as she sobbed on the ground, I could see only the back of her head, filled with silver hair. I screamed at the clerk to get back up, to open the register, while fixing my gun at his big, brown nose. The whole time, I kept looking back at Black Man, who would twist his milk open, take a long drink, and twist the cap closed tightly again. Then every time I looked at him, he would do the same again,

somehow always thirsty for more.

His eyes grabbed me each time.

I couldn't see his irises from where I was standing, but his black pupils seemed big enough to swallow the night's sky. Remembering that detail makes as much sense to me as watching kids dress up for Halloween. Or as much sense as religion. How can you judge the size of a man's pupils, but can't tell the colour of his irises?

The old woman was crying, forming half-sentences about fuses for a car and not wanting to die. The kid's Red Bull rolled away, hitting the base of the sunglasses stand, and he formed himself into a ball, hands over his head and taking quick peaks at me like a series of bad twitches. This is the point where my memory stops, and somehow reforms with me outside of the store, holding Black Man with one arm around his chest and my gun sunken into his hair.

I don't even remember if I shot anyone. Or if any of the register's money made it to my pockets. I just know that I entered the store minutes before ten, and now the big, digital clock above the Shell station across the highway reads eleven-fifty-three. Two hours passed through my frame of mind like a shot in the dark. Untraceable.

And somehow, beyond and above the shouts of the cops, all I hear is one voice. Black Man says, 'Chill'.

He pronounces the word fully, slowly, with a sort of authority somehow pocketed inside his voice. And just then a chill does penetrate through my neck, because his voice is so cool. So indifferent. Then the cops' shouts continue, and my muscles regain their wooden stiffness. A prickly heat flares over my skin, and I can feel droplets of sweat covering my face.

'What's your name, pal?' Black Man asks. Except it sounds nothing like a question normally asked, but more like an inquiry. More like that of a stranger wanting to be friends.

'I'm Benjamin Franklin. What the hell do you care?'

'Come on. Give me a break, here. You could at least tell me your name.'

'I don't have to tell you shit,' I tell him, twisting the barrel harder into his temple. He tenses hard into my grasp as pain digs into him, and

that makes me realise how real this is. It makes me realise that the man I'm holding hostage is of flesh and bone, and not just any stranger in a black suit. This is a life I'm in control of. A life that will end if I pull the trigger. The reality of this fact tumbles inside my stomach, and I grow warm all over. The heat that was just on the surface of my skin sinks deep into me.

'My name's Adren,' the man says next to my face.

'Shut up. Don't tell me your name.'

But now the name is already in my head. Adren. He's flesh and bone, and has a name. Now he's not even a stranger. Once you know a man's name, he's no longer just a person out there that doesn't matter. He becomes part of your life. You could piss next to some guy in a public restroom and be okay with it, but if he tells you his name then it becomes awkward. Pissing next to each other becomes meaningful, somehow, and that's just wrong. Now me and this guy, Adren—we're pissing buddies.

'I imagine you didn't expect this to happen,' Adren says. He chuckles, and his laughter is a bouncing ball rolling down a hill. Gleeful and worrisless. He laughs as if I'm the one who's supposed to be surprised, here.

'Yeah, like you fucking knew you'd have a gun to your head tonight.'

'Not like you're going to shoot me,' he says, coolly as always.

'Oh you're so sure, huh?'

A man in an unbuttoned suit and a loosened tie steps forward from the blue-and-red flashes of police cars. He speaks into a megaphone. His voice is crackly through the thing, but I can make out most of what he says.

'Son, please remove the gun from your hostage's head. It's making everyone here real nervous.' The guy talks to me as if we're old college buddies. Great. Next he'll tell me his name, too.

'Please lower your gun, Son,' he says again. His hair is white, and that to him makes me his son. 'I'm agent McAfee. You can call me Bruce.'

'Fuck you!' I scream, flashing my gun up in the air. My voice is shrilly exploding from my throat and scrambling into shards of glass. As I scream, the cops tense up. Some back away. 'The next fucking person to

tell me his fucking name, I'm going to fucking kill him. Fuck!

'Smooth,' Adren tells me. 'Real smooth. Way to gain their trust there, bud.'

'I'm not his son, I'm not your bud, and don't tell me what to do, okay?' I say crisply through my teeth, clenching them against his ear. I press the barrel back into his temple, and somehow more of the gun disappears into the hair than before.

'You don't want to be shot, do you?' Adren asks me, as if he were the one holding the gun but could care less either way if a bullet landed inside my head or not.

'That's why I have you as my shield, *Adren*.'

'Much good that'll do you pretty soon. They're already setting up firing positions.'

I look around. To my far left, the exit ramp coming off the highway has been blocked off. Men with flashlights stand there next to rows of orange cones and road blockades. To my right, a Taco Bell joint stands lit but deserted. Farther down, cars and people watch from a distance at the Economy Inn motel. Suddenly, a helicopter blares overhead, and I look up quickly to see that it's a news chopper.

'Where?' I ask Adren.

'Tell me your name, and I'll tell you.'

'No, you tell me where the snipers are, or I'll shoot you.'

'You won't shoot me.' And he laughs. How the fuck can you laugh at a moment like this?

'What makes you think that? Huh? Huh?' I jab him twice with the end of the gun, and his laughter stops, but I can see his profile, and his lips hold a smirk. I back away two steps towards the Circle K entrance, keeping Adren close to me. I twitch around, searching with my eyes, looking for snipers. I see none.

'You won't shoot me because you have no choice to do so. If you kill me, you're left exposed.'

'Tell me where the snipers are.'

'Tell me your name,' he says indifferently.

'Goddamnit! Where are the snipers?'

I look back at the digital clock across the highway. Eleven-fifty-sev-

en. Only four minutes passed since I last looked. Adren breathes in and out deeply. He sighs on the exhale, as if waiting patiently for something. His back relaxes against my chest.

‘You don’t know,’ I say, testing.

He says nothing.

‘You don’t know where they are.’

Nothing still.

‘There’s no *snipers*,’ I say, but I look around still, focusing on the roof of the Economy Inn where I catch a blurry silhouette. It’s too small and too far away to tell what it is. Swat rifleman? Chimney? Satellite dish? In any case, if I can’t tell what the hell it is, then how could Adren?

Yet the sound of his voice ... It’s like that of a man requesting nothing but trust. But for whose benefit?

‘I’m in control here, okay?’ I tell Adren.

‘Of course you are.’

‘Tell me where!’ I snarl into his ear, pressing my cheek against the barrel of my own gun. My finger is a fragment of a pound of pressure away from firing off a round.

Blast, and the game is over. Either that, or just begun. Shit. I don’t even know what my options are.

‘Okay, fine,’ I say. ‘Daren. My name’s Daren.’

‘Spelled with one or two R’s?’ he asks.

‘What the hell is this? Am I applying for a bank loan? Just tell me where the snipers are.’

‘It makes a difference, you know.’

‘What kind of a fucking difference does it make?’ I yell this, while whipping him around from left to right and back, looking for any man with a gun and a good shot to kill me. Now Bruce, the cop, talks into his megaphone again, but I don’t hear a thing he says. All of his words are mechanical blurs.

‘It makes all the difference,’ Adren says, not even jolted, ‘because Daren with a single ‘R’ means “born into the night”. While Darren with a double means “he who upholds the good” or even “dearly loved”. My guess is that yours is the first. Am I right?’

And I can’t help but laugh. It just bursts out from my lips, taking me

by surprise. 'And I don't seem 'dearly loved' to you?'

'Your name fits you. It fits your situation.'

'My situation?'

'Look around, you, Daren. Take it in and feel it out.'

My eyes jump once again. Flashing lights. Nervous cops. Meshes of shouts. None of these are anything new. I close my eyes, and breathe in deeply. Adren's body feels calm against my chest. His coat is warm and dry, like lint out of the drier. The nerve endings to my skin flare like foot-stomps. I'm shaking.

My ears twitch.

Below every other level of noise, the wind whines in a soft blow of air. Everything feels meaningless. With my eyes closed I still can't remember the part of my memory that's been blotched over by a black spot of ink.

'Tell me something, Adren,' I say with a quiver in my voice.

'Anything.'

'What did I do in there?'

The man shrugs in my grasp, exhaling deeply. I wait for him to inhale the breath back into his lungs, but he doesn't. I wait longer, holding my own breath, but I give in before he does. I inhale through my throat, and the noise it makes is that of a croaking old man giving in. Somehow, I feel oily inside. My veins and arteries chug crud in both directions. Finally Adren breathes in through his nostrils. He opens his mouth to answer.

'You—'

I stop him before the first word fully leaves his lips. I don't want to know. I don't even want to go back inside the gas station, safer or not, for in fear of knowing.

'Nevermind,' I say, feeling that blackness moving slower inside me. 'Tell me this instead. What are my options?'

'Not many.' He pauses. 'And you won't like the one best for you.'

'I'm not surrendering.'

'You have by midnight to make a decision,' Adren says, and my heart twists tightly inside my chest, like ropes knotting around a small, suffocating creature. It's not the word 'midnight' itself that punctures so

hard, but rather the idea that I'm limited by time. As if just until now I believed that I had an infinite amount of time to think, to wonder, and to analyse everything around me. But that makes no sense. Soon the cops will have run out of patience, if not already. Soon Bruce, my old pal, will give command to blast my head into cranium splinters. The clock across the street reads eleven-fifty-nine.

'Why midnight?' I ask in a panic.

'Because midnight marks a new beginning. Midnight is your limbo, Daren. You're stuck forever in it if you don't make the right choice.'

Then Bruce's voice seems to come in close from far away. All I catch from what he says is, '...are you listening to me, Son?'

He stares, and I stare back. Before, the cops and lights were coming from just one general direction. Now, as I look back to reality, they've formed an arch around me, guns pointing and somehow creeping closer.

'After midnight,' Adren says, 'It'll be a new day. You can start by becoming a new man.'

'Born into the night,' I say, mesmerised by earlier words, only half-aware of it.

Bruce talks into a radio and a high-pitch squeal shoots from the megaphone because he's holding both up to his mouth. He drops the megaphone and continues talking into the radio, looking toward the motel.

Bruce nods.

For the first time this night, Adren tenses in my arms. I feel like the child who clutches back for the father who isn't there.

Midnight strikes on the clock across the highway. Midnight strikes everywhere, and a standstill surrounds my frozen world.

Adren breaks through the frozen time and presses back against my chest. We fall backwards, and a whizzing sound darts through the air, inches before my face. A *bullet*. It cuts right through Adren's nose, and his face bursts open with blood. The sound of his nose cartilage cracking resembles that of wet leaves ripping. A sound of childhood memories.

The bullet hits the ground and a chunk of concrete explodes upward. Adren just saved my life. We fall to the ground, me on my right shoul-

der and him on top of me. My grip loosens from around his torso and my gun tumbles out of my hand, flipping cartwheels towards one of the cops. The officer panics, tensing his arms and shaking from his knees up. My gun stops short and lands with the barrel pointing back into my eyes.

Every weapon within a mile radius is aimed at my head.

Adren crawls over to me, pushes up with one hand and crouches before me. He wears an odd smile, and half of his face is covered in blood. He turns to the police, arms spread, shading me from light. Covering me from death.

He tilts his head to the side and says to me, 'Do you want to be born again today, or die tonight?' His voice is a fog, distorted by gashes of nasal sounds. He looks deeply into me and this time his eyes are visible. His pupils have shrunk, each of them swallowed by a blue halo of energy. Blue. His irises are blue. And even though every light is shining from behind him and his face should be a silhouette, his irises are as visible as a breath of air is vital. And it makes no sense.

'Live,' I quiver. My voice is a harsh whisper. 'Live—live!'

Back at the cops, Adren tells them not to shoot. Bruce screams something into his radio. My skin trembles and my every nerve twitches. Then the officers are on me, shouting at me not to move and fisting their big hands against my body. One of them strikes me in the face. He shouts, 'Why are you moving? I told you not to move!'

'I'm not!' I say.

Someone else's elbow cracks me in the back of my neck. They drag me away reading my rights, my hands handcuffed behind me. Paramedics surround Adren and lead him to an ambulance. I want to shout his name but he disappears into the crowd and I'm pushed inside a police car.

On the clock across the highway, the time is still midnight. Still midnight ... Still midnight ... Movement catches my eye, and I look away to the gas station's entrance. A spray of blood streaks the glass of the Circle K window.

Oh my God, I killed them. Oh my dear God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry—
But then three cops walk out from the store, each of them escorting

someone beside them. The woman with silver hair coats her face with her hands, shaking and sobbing. The tight-shirted kid walks out with a blank stare. At every few steps, he twitches. The clerk holds his shoulder with one hand. Blood seeps through his grasping fingers. He walks with heavy steps, supporting his weight onto the cop beside him.

The knots dissolve from around my heart.

...my world moves on another minute.

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