

BANG!

By Gus Prouty | 3487 words

What strikes me most about the man I killed were his eyes. It makes sense, that's all I really got to see of his face after all, the rest of it obscured by a black ski mask. Every time a customer with those same deep blue eyes comes up to me for checkout I suddenly become enamored with the checkout counter before me. Dreading the company-mandated farewell, which forces me to make contact with those eyes; I risk being pulled back to that night once again.

I awake to a loud crash in the night coming from the general direction of my living room. Listening intently, a stream of cursing follows the initial noise, so I roll out of bed and reach for the loaded .44 kept in a shoebox under my bed. It's a big gun, but I'm not Dirty Harry and I feel a bit ridiculous with the hand cannon leveled in front of me as I inch my way down the hall. I haven't so much as looked at the thing since Dad gave it to me as a moving out present, but at that moment his last words on the subject echo through my mind,

“It could save your life someday”.

I finally reach my living room and come face to face with the culprit. The broad shouldered man is dressed all in black with the aforementioned mask covering most of his face. It looks like he lost his grip on my TV and accidentally dropped it through my glass coffee table. The realization that I am actually being robbed sinks in and my knuckles turn white as they grip the gun.

“H-hey you!” I shout with a lot less authority than I intended.

The man's head jerks up and his eyes meet mine. They're deep blue, with an air of intelligence about them that is currently smothering under a blanket of panic. Seconds pass like this, neither of us daring to breathe for fear of provoking the other. Finally he twitches, jerks his body for a split second, and my finger reflexively squeezes the trigger. The deafening bang that follows seems to resonate through the house echoing as the man slumps backward, the light fading from his eyes, and again as the gun slips from my hand clattering to the floor and all throughout the next few days of questions, statements and sirens. Everything seems muted compared to that thunderous bang that continues to ring in my ears.

That was a month ago and I haven't gotten a full night's sleep since. Every time I close my eyes that man's blue ones are there staring back at me, pleading silently for his life. I can still hear the bang too, echoing in the quiet of the night, reverberating through my head, resonating-

“SLAM!”

-every time someone closes a God damned door. I exhale softly, thankful to still be in my skin and try to slow my racing heart as well as the ticking clock which inches ever closer to the end of my shift. I used to barely be able to stand waiting for my shift to be over, relishing my free time. But lately I welcome it more as a mixed blessing. Sure work is about as entertaining as a root canal, but at least it keeps me busy. Aside from the occasional eye based flashback I can usually avoid thinking back to that night while I'm here. At home I'm rarely so lucky. I've asked about longer hours but my boss won't have it. My own fault for wanting to work only part time during the summer, he says. Got more than enough people to fill all the shifts, he says.

“Yeah, and they probably aren't traumatized by the color blue,” I mutter as the clock strikes two marking the end of my requisite eight hours. So I grab my things and head out back

towards my car. The sun blares down on the pavement, but a cool breeze promises a shift in the weather as do the dark clouds on the horizon. I just hope it doesn't thunder, because if I'm jumping from a door closing, my heart will probably explode if I hear a thunder crack. Shaking my head at the thought I finally reach my car and start to head for home.

One brief car ride later, with the banging of my radio failing to drown out the banging in my head, I am finally standing before my apartment building. For off-campus housing it's not bad. Living alone means I have my privacy and being on the ground floor keeps me from having to climb stairs. Those were the features that had attracted me at least, but they may also have appealed to a certain ski mask wearing man who was searching for a new TV last month. That last thought strikes me just as I cross the threshold into my apartment.

I groan and slam the door shut behind me, probably a little too hard. Turning, I make sure to lock the door, in several more places than I did before that night. It's strange, I'm not really afraid of being robbed again. It's just that whenever I think about that possibility I'm suddenly standing there again holding that gun transfixed by those pleading eyes. I'm willing to go through a lot to make sure that never happens again.

As I make my way to the couch I check my phone to find a string of messages. Frigging Ken, I never thought I'd ever bemoan having a friend so concerned for my well-being. He wants to know why I haven't been going to the summer school sessions we decided to take together and if I'm doing alright. The first question's easy, we signed up for that class before this whole fiasco with the robber. At present, I haven't been in the proper frame of mind to focus on school or much of anything really, outside my own screwed up head. The second question however has

me at a loss. That's probably why I end up slipping the phone back into my pocket without replying to his messages.

I seriously need to unwind, so I plop down and start up my favorite gaming system. A few minutes pass before it occurs to me that this may have been a bad idea. The weapon I'm using makes that same bang noise, despite it not even being a pistol, never mind a revolver, and every enemy I kill has those same terrified blue eyes. I switch guns and eventually games but nothing changes; I can't escape that sound or that stare. Exasperated I throw down the controller in disgust and bury my face in the couch cushions. I'm sick and tired of this. Tired in every sense of the word; I can't work, I can't play, I can't even sleep all the time like a normal depressed person because these stupid memories won't ever leave me alone. As if on cue those blue eyes flash before my mind again and I chuck the pillow I've been gripping across the room in a fit of disgust.

“VERRRRRRR” a dulled hum fills the apartment as my pocket begins to vibrate. Great, just what I need, didn't whoever's calling get the memo not to bother me while I'm sulking? Sitting up I pull out my phone, not bothering to see who's calling before I answer.

“What do you want?” I all but bark into the receiver.

“Well hello to you too, it's always nice to get such a warm welcome.”

Oh crud. “Sorry Mom, what's up?”

“I was just calling to check on you. It's been a while since we talked. Did you have a rough day at work? You sound stressed.”

“No, I'm fine; work's fine, just tired is all.”

“You haven’t been sleeping well since that night, have you?”

I swear my mother could make big money as a mind reader.

“Um-hm” is all I can muster.

“Have you thought about seeing a therapist honey, getting some of this off your chest? Maybe you could finally call your father? He really wants to tell you how glad he is that you’re OK and how proud he is of you.”

I know that Mom is just trying to reassure me that she and Dad still love me, but there’s something about the idea of being proud of my actions, of killing someone. It makes me sick to my stomach and then suddenly the man is back in front of me silently pleading for his life.

“Look, I don’t need therapy, Ok? I just did what I had to, alright? I killed him and that’s that. The sooner I get over it the sooner I can start feeling as proud of myself as you guys do.”

I regret the words almost as soon as they leave my mouth, even more so as the silence hangs over the line.

“M-mom?”

“Oh Wade, I just hope you can find it in yourself to talk to somebody; if not me or a professional, then at least a friend. Please honey, for your own sake. What you’re doing now isn’t healthy.” She hangs up before I have the chance to think of any meaningful response.

I get Mom’s point, really I do, but at the moment talking is the last thing I feel like doing. Of course lately, life hasn’t really cared too much about what I’ve felt like doing so it doesn’t come as a shock that no sooner have I returned the phone to my pocket than I hear my

apartment's door bell ringing. Lurching up off the cushions I make my way to the door and check the peep hole to see who is bothering me now.

“What do you want Ken?” I grumble as I swing open the door.

“Hey man, long time no see, I was just in the neighborhood and I thought I'd swing by. You didn't respond to my texts so I wanted to make sure nothing was wrong.”

“Sorry about that, I saw them but just forgot to reply.”

“That's fine man, its cool. So how have you been? I haven't seen you in class for the past week. Given any thought to what you want to major in?”

“Not really, my mind hasn't been on school lately. Besides, it feels like everyone is either staring at or avoiding me now; it makes me feel uncomfortable.”

“That's just because everyone knows your face now, I mean your photo was on the news and everything.” Ken pauses lost in thought for a moment. “What was it like, seeing yourself on TV like that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I never saw any of that; my TV was kind of broken at the time.”

“Oh, right.” Ken seems flustered at this oversight. There's silence between us for a few moments until he finally looks me in the eyes once again, his face more resolute than before.

“Seriously man, are you doing OK? I haven't seen you smile in a month and I'm starting to worry.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’ve had a lot on my mind lately and I haven’t been sleeping too well since that night.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I shake my head, “I think this is something I have to work through on my own.” I can see his face drop a bit at this. “Hey, why don’t you e-mail me the work I missed this week? If I’m feeling like it, I can see if I can get caught up later.”

“Ok man, if you’re sure. Just remember you’re not alone, you’ve got friends you can talk to if you ever need to.”

“Thanks Ken, that means a lot to me, really it does.”

We say our good-byes and I’m back to brooding on the couch. As I sulk I keep coming back to what Mom and Ken said about talking to someone. But who the hell do you even talk to about this kind of thing? A shrink? The obvious answer blinks in front of me but I just can’t go for it. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to get across to a stranger how I feel right now, no matter how much coaxing he does. Paying for the wasted time may also be factoring into my decision. I guess that rules out my parents too, not the paying for it part, the other thing. Friends are out for mostly the same reason. Despite Ken’s attempts at reaching out, I just can’t think how I could convey my feelings about that night to someone who wasn’t there. But now I’m back at square one, the couch.

As I lay back and close my eyes, images of that night play themselves out on the theater screen of my mind. Those eyes beg me for the millionth time, and then the answer hits me like a freight train. I sit up so fast I almost fall off the couch. It might be stupid, and maybe even a little

bit insensitive, but at this point I'm willing to try anything. I let that momentum carry me up off the couch and to the kitchen junk drawer where I tossed the phone number the police officer gave me that night. Thinking it over again before I dial the number, I agree with my original thoughts. There really is only one other person I can think of who understands the circumstances of that night.

A few hours later I finally reach my destination and begin the long walk through the cemetery grounds. The sun would be setting if it were not obscured by the storm front, fast approaching in the twilight. It had taken a bit of convincing to get the officer who handled my case to tell me what became of my assailant, but I guess my tone got through to him in the end. I promised him that I just wanted to know, for closure's sake, and that I wasn't planning on doing anything rash or illegal with the information; idiotic sure, but definitely not illegal. Then it was just a quick internet search and a call to confirm with the cemetery before I was on my way to visit the one man I knew would be able to understand my current predicament. So here I finally stand, once again facing down Jackson Sanders, my blue-eyed burglar.

It was a simple headstone, just his name and the dates of birth and death adorning the cold gray rock. No 'He will be missed' or 'In loving memory', just a name. I don't know if this makes me feel better or worse about what I did to him. I don't know much about his life. All the cops would tell me is that he'd just recently gotten out of jail after serving six months for burglary and he was survived by his mother and younger sister. I'm suddenly very curious about them. I wonder, if they saw me here, knew what I did to their family, how would they react? Would they hate me, yell, cower, or just turn away in sadness? I don't know what reaction I'd actually want out of them. What do you say to someone like that? 'I'm sorry I shot your son but, to be fair, he was in my home, trying to rob me?' I shake my head, all of a sudden feeling very

self-conscious about being here, out of place, a murderer come to mourn. But I'm worrying for nothing. The oncoming storm has driven away anyone with sense; it's just Jackson and me, once again. I realize now that after having come all this way, I really have no more idea what to say here than I did sitting on my couch. But here I am, so I might as well make something of it.

“You know, if I had known that ending up like this was the outcome, I would have stayed in bed that night. Hell, I would have helped you carry the TV out myself if it meant avoiding this.” I feel just a little ridiculous talking to a stone, but as I shut my eyes I can feel that stare once again, those blue eyes boring into me, pleading again. Thunder sounds far off in the distance and I flinch, the bang ringing in my ears as loud now as it was that night.

“Hey, are you watching me from heaven or hell or wherever? Is that it? Is this your revenge? Because, if so, you have a hell of a lot of nerve. You broke into my house, remember? You screwed up by stealing my TV, and then you looked at me with those stupid eyes and, to top it all off, you had to flinch.”

“And because he flinched you had to move too, couldn't have waited five seconds to see what the guy was doing? Hells no, just jump the gun for once in your life. Squeeze that trigger and BANG! Bad guy's dead, you're a big man, right? Then you had to look into his stupid eyes, watch the terror, the fear, the questioning of why he had to die like that. Had to burn that image onto your fucking soul so you couldn't sleep at night, and you're supposed to feel proud of that? Well, do you asshole? Now you're a murderer, all because you fucking twitched. So where's your God damned punishment, huh? Where is it?” At this point I have my eyes shut as tight as they go and my hands balled up into fists beside me. I can barely comprehend what I'm saying as a month's worth of stress flows from my mind. To punctuate the tirade, I rear back my foot to

kick the tombstone. But in the moment, my other foot slips on the freshly watered grass and I fall flat on my back in the dirt.

“Well, I suppose that’s a start,” I mutter as my eyes stare up into the now totally overcast sky. No sooner have I closed them than I feel the soft touch of rain falling on my face. Contemplating the words I just spoke, the pressure they released from my mind, and listening to the gentle patter of the rain soon has me drifting off to sleep.

My eyes snap open and I sit bolt upright. I can’t sleep, if I could it would mean... Oh my God, they’re gone. That bang and those eyes are gone. I lie down again and actually try to recall them. Soon, I realize I was wrong. I can still recall that night with all its sounds and images, but it’s muted a bit, the noise of the rain drowning out that of the gun. I’m sure that night will never be a pleasant memory for me and I don’t think I will ever really forget it. But maybe I shouldn’t. That night both Jackson and I lost something, and you don’t just forget a thing like that. Still, recognizing that you have a wound is the first step in healing it. I think I remember reading that in a fortune cookie once, but I like how it sounds anyway.

Lying here listening to the rain I think for a moment that maybe nature is mourning him because I can’t, but probably not. The rain doesn’t actually sound much like tears, and honestly nature is no fit to cry over him than I am. Nope, he has other people for that. Still, as I stand and begin making my way back to my car, I wonder about maybe trying to track down his mother’s number. I could give her a call, as an acquaintance of Jackson’s, which I suppose in a certain light, could almost be called truthful. Let her know how sorry I am about the circumstances of his death, see how she is holding up. I mean, just because I can’t cry for him doesn’t mean I can’t make it easier on those who can.

I smile as I realize that this is the first real planning for the future I have done since that night. I guess dwelling on the past will do that to a person. Still, it feels pretty good, and as I walk through the steadily increasing rain I resolve to continue setting goals for the future. I could go and look at the homework from the summer class, see if I can manage to salvage my grade, maybe even figure out what I want to do with my life after college. But I'm a bit out of practice, so I decide to set the bar a little low to start with. My first goal for the future, I think, will be to go pass out in the back of my car.