

## Burn Me Blue

Matthew Clarkson

It always starts and ends the same. Footsteps along the cold floor. Shuffling, tripping, face down. Sometimes it is hands reaching for my soul. Sometimes it is hateful faces gawking at my shameful visage. But I walk down the hall, oddly pulled by some presence toward the familiar figure ahead of me. Strangely fueled by some fear behind me. My staggered walk quickens. The fingers yearn for my flesh. The eyes sparkle in my pain. Then I'm alone. Suspended like a naive cartoon beyond the cliff. And then I fall.

They say if you see the moment you die, the point of impact, in your dream, you actually died; you aren't going to wake up again. In the past three months, I've died seventy-three times. I wake feeling I've never slept. I sleep feeling I'll never wake. Every slumber I am confronted with my mundane walk down the hideous hallway that has now become so familiar to me.

I've always been told believing in something passionately is worth dying for. But what if my passion is death?

The Beretta pointed at a sincere angle, parallel to the tilt of my head. Eyes staring down the sights on the barrel, I realized the victim of my hands. I remembered each steel tear I emptied into his flesh, almost thoughtlessly. I remembered the beads of sweat trickling down his forehead. I remembered the threads of his shirt I split and the blood they danced in as my steel pain created his. Three holes mocking the mortality of humanity. Looking into his glazing eyes, I felt his soul cry my name.

The human heart beats up to seventy times a minute. Day in and day out it pumps, nothing else. Humans search their whole lives to find the inspiration that they can feel beat in their heart. Why not the beat of the heart? We look in every shadow of this dark world when it is the light within. The blood flowing through our billions of arteries is the key to all we search for. I took this man's key.

He had taken mine.

He had taken her.

We are gathered here today.

Her first memory of me is tickling her on the playground. Flirting with love. My greatest memory of her is tickling me, running through our apartment on our first night together. Chasing love.

To celebrate the union of two souls.

Her short blonde hair shone behind her veil like sunlight through a curtained window. A dulled light strong enough to hold the beauty and power of the sun but just a dim enough glimmer to question the magnificence behind its work.

To have and to hold.

My heart pounds violently. My small truck is driving again down the gravel road to her house, being ripped apart by the bumps and rocks. Through the door walks me, her date,

her boyfriend, her father's target of all doubt and fear. The smile behind her mother's camera helps raise the anchor of uncertainty sunk at the bottom of my stomach. Flash. First date. Flash. Marriage. Flash. First date. Flash. Marriage.

To honor and cherish.

I waddle down the aisle, stiff in my black and white. I feel like a penguin, the only bird that has feathers but can't fly. Outside I have my feathers, starched tuxedo and permanent smile; but inside, I know I'm just a young bird running off the cliff, questioning whether or not his wings will hold him in this breeze.

For richer or poorer.

She is on my left. Her warmth holds my cold hand. I want to look at my hand, my notes: I do, her left = my right. I'm in college again, copying the formulas onto my test paper, her judging eyes two rows back and one to the right. I long to be the concentrated focus of those eyes. Even in the most hateful glare, I want nothing else but to kiss her. Place her fallen hair back behind her ear. Wipe the tear building up that I brought to this angelic face. I love her.

For better or worse.

The wedding ring is in my hand, ready to go on hers. The engagement ring I was so proud of glistens on her finger, reminding me of that nervous night. What the lasagna looked like sitting in front of me is what my heart feels like halfway up my throat. I can't help but think of the dozens of weeks' salaries put into this night. I fiddle with the ring in my pocket. I hope the kitchen crew enjoyed cooking my meal more than I enjoyed eating it. She's rolling her spaghetti with her delicate fingers, and I pray that I have the right ring size. I'm close enough I could touch her, but I feel far away. I'm a tourist in Italy admiring Michelangelo's sculptures, her perfect breasts accented by the low-cut dress, her silk-smooth legs crossed. She is beautiful. A masterpiece sculpted of the finest flawless marble. Her magnificence still didn't stop the adding in my head: the meal, the gas, the rock in my pocket burning a round scar on my leg. Four words. The candles between us flicker with my hard breathing. One question.

Till death do you part?

I do.

My footsteps echo on the floor. I walk down the hall, emptiness through every doorway. The landlady pushes me towards the master bedroom at the end of the hall. The place where my wife and I will fall.

Home is a three-bedroom apartment on the second story of building D. Down the hallway are a study, an unused bedroom, and our room. Our room is the theme park children spend their whole childhood dreaming about. I've been going to the same theme park for five months, and I'm still fantasizing about the ride. The closet doors, when open, protrude from the wall in line with the hallway. The inside of the closet doors is

mirrored. If opened at the right angle, coming home from work, I see my wife stretched out on the bed in the finest lingerie the world can offer and the best body to wear it. Every night I experience the fastest, steepest drop on her sleek, sweet roller coaster, pulled by some strange gravity, with the dream that the moment could last forever.

The first few weeks my boss gave me what he liked to call the Newtynwed Noon. I wasn't due in until after lunch; the night was ours and ours alone. Some nights we went to the airport, parked the car as close to the runway as we could, lay on the hood to feel the airplanes pass over only a hundred feet above us. Other nights we would get some tofu and dance under the bridge to the love song blazing on the car radio. Most nights we stayed at the apartment, all quiet except for the murmur of Holly Golightly and Paul Varjack and the faint sound of her breathing in my lap. I usually stayed up and watched the end of Breakfast at Tiffany's because she always asked how it ended, although she'd seen it a thousand times. She was testing me, the cute smirk dimpling her cheeks.

Every morning I was a soldier dragged off to fight a war in the trenches with nothing but a picture of my girl back home and the love letters stirring in my heart. Dirt would have been better than these wood, plastic, and carpet walls. This cubicle is my trench. The war of falling shells is the explosions of loneliness, keeping me away. I hated to be away from her, not knowing she was safe in my arms. E-mail haiku to my love. Simple words of longing. Syllables of want. Megabytes of desire. I could picture her in my monitor, replying in our study, wearing nothing but my favorite T-shirt, faded from use, from love.

Down the elevator, to the car, through the traffic, up the stairs, home. Her scent flowed from under the door. Opening the door, the aroma overcoming me like water bursting from a cracked dam. My Aphrodite was posed through the doorway, the felicitous elegant dress she wore when I proposed draped over her body hung by the small straps loosely fallen over her shoulders. The candlelight dinner behind her glowed in the dimmed lighting, outlining her figure. I stepped toward the silhouette of the goddess, my shadow stretching as I moved closer to perfection. Right hand under arm, around to shoulder. Left hand on the waist, down the back. Chin to cheek, gap closed.

I've been waiting for you. I found a job.

Slide hands to waist. Her hands on my chest.

That's great.

Nose brushes nose. Lips to my ear. Whisper.

There's something else.

Tilt head right. Squeeze her closer. Kiss.

There's more?

Forehead to forehead. Glimmer in eyes. Smile. Kiss.

I'm pregnant.

My footsteps stumble on the gray industrial carpet floor. I walk down the hall, worried faces through cubicle doorways glancing at my staggered walk. My eyes red. Tie undone. Coffee stains on my shirt. I haven't changed in days. I crawl to my office, my desk at the end of the hall. The place where into my distractions I fall.

My boss is there. Eyes questioning, halfway with fear, halfway with doubt. Fake tear ready to roll. He stretches out his arm, grasping my shoulder with his loose grip. He offers me a full-week bereavement. My boss thinking he can give ice water to the man in hell. My boss with his two false words: I'm sorry. How can he know? How can he sympathize with my pain? He can go home to his perfect TV family, his smiling wife, son and daughter. He doesn't sit alone in a three-bedroom apartment playing Russian Roulette with the thought of life. He doesn't know what it feels like to have your heart thrown in a blender. His wife was never raped and killed.

My wife was smothered, a man on top of her, shaking her, sinking her, pushing her down, immersing her into his darkness. He watched her drown in the sheets that held our passion, now a deadly storm. Her fallen body infected, he choked my newly created son.

Micah, my son could have been Micah.

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. The toy basketball shrills as I bounce it against the pastel-blue dinosaur wallpaper. Bashing the smiling beasts. Reminding me of the pain. I want all to feel my suffering. Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

My fingers run gently over the engraved lettering on the Beretta's slide. I grasp it and pull it back, then release, snapping a single round into place. I push my thumbnail into the grooves on the hammer as I ease it into its readied stance, cocking it in position to tap the firing pin, hit the primer, and cause the compressed powder to explode. I imagine the 250-feet-per-second velocity of the bullet as it travels down the five-inch barrel that is now pointed at my head.

Brian, my son could have been Brian.

I wade out into the water, paddling, trying to keep my head up. I hug my pillow, hoping it will keep me from drowning in this cursed sea. The cotton is no replacement for her skin. My hands feel the coarse threading instead of the smooth, light-golden hair outlining her body, making her skin glow in the faint light. The stuffing of polyester and cotton did not gratify me like her soft flesh. Let me sink into these tears. Anchor me in this pool of lonely nights.

Chris, my son could have been Chris.

Eyes closed. Eyes opened. Eyes closed. My finger trembles on the trigger guard, sliding gracefully to the bent position over the lever, applying a minute amount of pressure on the tiny parts, slowly working my way to the threshold. I am dangling my toes over the cliff, hoping for a gust of wind to make the decision for me. I lower my hand, pull the hammer farther back. Holding the hammer firmly at its limit, I squeeze the trigger, and gently place the hammer back in place. My fingers release their grip and slide the Beretta down on the table. Eyes opened.

Mark, my son could have been Mark.

The radiation from the microwave excites the water molecules in my Salisbury steak. Microwaveable dinner trays stacked on the counter. Dinner for one. Table meant for two. My Beretta handgun in her place, my new wife. The one I sleep with. The one I flirt with. The one I caress, running my fingertips over its delicate parts. The one I want to feel the inside of. The one I want to feel the inside of. The one I want to be one with, even in death.

Jacob, my son could have been Jacob.

But she's gone.

I'm due back at work, but the Beretta has become such a friend. Somehow I'm walking to my car, going back.

Pull handle, open door, right foot in, duck, sit, left leg in, grab handle, close door, key in slot, foot on brake, turn key, arm to belt, buckle to lock, park to reverse, release pressure from the pedal, roll.

I sit up to have a better look out the rear view mirror as my car inches slowly from its space. The man is there. The man that caused my pain. The man that took my wife. He's there. Slam brake, release buckle, rip out key, swing open door, jump out. Gone. He's gone.

I glance around the apartment complex parking lot, eyes blinking. Slowly I step back into my car, closing the door gently.

At work, the glass of water on my desk is actually a bucket placed under a leaking roof. The screen saver floating, my face in my hands, eyes dripping rivers into the lettered valleys of the arid keyboard. My elbow bumps the mouse. The screen flashes to what idly waited in my mind. E-mail haiku to my love. Simple words of loss. Syllables of wishes. Megabytes of memories. Evidence of what once was.

Right click file, Delete, Send to Recycle Bin?, Yes, right click icon, Empty Recycle Bin, Delete these items?, Yes.

I watch as the blue bars fill the indented gray row. Cancel box pleading at me. Getting rid of something is better than dealing with it. Too much pain. The happy box pops up smiling. The message: Done. I wanted to punch holes in that string of blue teeth, the blue row that smirked at me, that lined smile. I smash the monitor button. The CRT projects its last beam of electrons onto the fluorescent glass, producing a luminous white flash before diving into a forlorn sleep, black, death to the million pixels that cover my screen. Cold in darkness, the glass reflects the light behind me, mirroring my unkempt appearance. I see the man walk by my cubicle behind me, head turning into my office space, eye contact through a monitor window. I stand up, calves forcing my chair back, head scanning every walkway. I exit to my frequent path to the bathroom. I need to splash my face. I need to cleanse these drained eyes.

I cup the water in my unyielding hands, immersing my face into a drowning bowl. I blink to rinse the residue of saline teardrops, dried down my cheek. I toss my head up, the front of my hair drooped on my forehead. I lean into the mirror, fixing the fallen portion to match the rest of my somewhat presentable look. I glance up only to see him leave, the door swing to a whisked close.

I take an early lunch break. Down the elevator to the world outside. The rows of café after café mixed in with a deli here and there. I walk down the series of establishments, glancing in windows, at the couples and groups, and at the reflection of me walking alone. I find the least crowded café and sit down outside to sip my coffee, the noise of traffic blocking out the possibility for any unwanted thoughts. I pan the tables through the window beside me, all pairs. Two people at every table, if not in deep conversation or cheerful gossip, reading the paper in one another's company. Every table, save one. His table, centered in the first row of the square grid. Directly in front of me. Him, walkway, window, walkway, me. Footsteps and bodies pass by on my side of the glass. He enjoys this. Coffee smears itself down the nicely Windexed pane, disorienting his grin. My thrown Styrofoam cup lays broken, like a bird that has dived into an atrium wall. A gap forms in the path of determined walkers. I rise to join the procession, following an empty heart rather than an empty stomach. I glance back to where his face would be, my guided eye aimed above my brown liquid flung on the tinted glass. Only his pulled out chair remains.

Back. Back to my office building. Back to my boxed prison. Back to my safe shelter in these winds. Back to my tornado of papers lifting me from the ground, away from the pull of gravity, away from the weight of sorrow. Then thrown back down. Carried miles from where I was to where I now am. Home. Back to my empty apartment. Back to my loneliness. Back to my little island in the great sea. Back to the eye of the hurricane, storms all around me, and nowhere to run, the spiraling water moving closer. Then to my friend, my lover, my savior, my gun.

I topple towards my son's bedroom, its only use from me, me and the Beretta strung out on the floor those nights where I pass out, gun to temple, painful thoughts flashing before my eyes, rolling out my ears. My hesitant limbs drag to the hallway, the pathway to all my pain and bloodshot eyes. The connector of the memory of my wife, the dream of my son, and the reality of the man I now see staring at me, frozen at the end of the hall, standing within the same room he killed her in. This man is in my apartment, in my room. As I raise my gun, he raises his. I slowly walk forward.

My footsteps quicken as the worn out wheel of the gurney squeaks at the hurried pace. I follow as they push my wife faster down the hospital hall. In every doorway are new mothers reaching for their babies, cameras flashing in the new fathers' hands. She wasn't due this early; we hadn't planned anything yet. I had forgotten my camera. I glanced into every room, head turning back and forth. Flash. Happiness. Flash. Love. Flash. Life. Flash. Moments kept against the unavoidable grasp of Time. Frozen pieces of joys and memories. No one ever takes a picture of something they want to forget...

The first gunshot rings through the hallway, shattering the mirror on the closet door.

Her contractions lasted around 53 seconds and were coming every seven minutes. The baby's heart monitor was just below hers, beeping in synch. I knelt on her left and held her hand; she squeezed every time the contractions came. Her pounding heart tried to out-drum the electronic beats. The baby's rhythmic strokes dropped in intensity and speed, the percussion-like melody slowing to a distasteful dissonance. The baby was in stress, and natural labor is risky for a premature birth. No-name doctors filter in and out, with their second and third opinions. She needs a Caesarian section quick. They ask if she has any health problems or heart conditions. I didn't know...

The second gunshot sends the broken glass splinters from his heart like fleeing blood.

Blood. Blood everywhere. Her rounded abdomen was being opened. I never knew something claimed to be so beautiful could look so horrible in its performance. My wife poured sweat onto the saturated pillow. The power in her grasp grew, and then she released her grip, raising her hand to run her fingers through the hair around my ear and brush my cheek with her warm touch. She smiled, even in her pain, and I smiled back, seeing the glint in her eyes as they started to glaze. She took my hand and placed it over her left breast, hers on top of mine, as if she was telling me to feel her heart. Her smile faded to a grin, her eyes closed, and the two beats became one remaining frequency. My son was lifted cold from her still-warm body. The umbilical cord wrapped around his tiny body having suffocated him inside the womb. New doctors rushed in and pulled me away from my wife.

Clear.

My wife and son were now nothing but the resounding pitch vibrating my eardrum.

Clear.

I always wanted a son. My want and my selfishness caused her death and extinguished his life.

Clear.

She wasn't planning on having kids this early. The day I impregnated her I raped her from our future and sealed her fate.

Clear.

In our bedroom I infected her beauty and purity and suffocated her in the devil's design.

Clear.

The third gunshot pierces my haunter in the head.

The fragile broken mirror falls from the swinging closet door. I stare down the barrel of my Beretta towards my fallen reflection. The shattered glass crunched as I close the closet door, sliding it into darkness. Devoid but for three holes of penetrating light, one for each life taken by my hands. One for my wife, one for my son, and one...for me.

What is humanity?

I will lie face down in this dirt that my forefathers claimed was clean. I will spray my life over these four walls that trap my endless thought.

What is reality?

Salty perspiration rolls over my pores, burning like acid. My Titanic is being filled to the brim in sweat, and the captain must go down with the ship.

What is mortality?

Eyes closed.

Suddenly there is a startling noise, but I don't wake.