

## For Sarah

by Mike MacLean

A duffle bag sits in the trunk of my car. In the bag is a 12 gauge shotgun, a small axe, a hammer, a box of ten-penny nails, and a rain parka. Over the next fifteen minutes, I plan to use each and every one of these items. Especially the shotgun.

Hot today, even by Arizona standards. One hundred ten degrees and not a cloud in sight. Mopping my forehead, I slip out from behind the wheel. Pop the trunk and grab the bag. It's heavy. Veins in my forearm come alive as I hoist it out.

I cross the street, heading towards a house. No hesitation in my movements. *"Hesitation equals death."* A hard-ass drill instructor told me that way back in basic. It was a lesson I already knew. I grew up in the barrios of South Phoenix—a white face among an ocean of brown ones. You don't survive a place like that without learning two things: how to cuss in Spanish and how to fight.

The house is mission-style. White stucco and red tiles, like every other residence in the neighborhood. Clean and neat and totally anonymous. If only the homeowner association knew what goes on behind closed doors.

*This is for Sarah.* I walk up the driveway, repeating the words in my head like a prayer of contrition. *For Sarah. For Sarah.*

Pausing on the stoop, I glance at my watch. 5:13 pm. Rush hour.

I set the alarm to go off in ten minutes. I figure that's how much time it'll take the cops to reach this place.

I take a deep breath, unzip the bag, and pull out the shotgun. It's a Mossberg "cruiser" model—short barreled with a pistol grip instead of a stock.

I pump a round into the chamber and blow the front door to shreds. The boom ricochets inside my skull, drowning out my frantic heartbeat.

No turning back now.

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*I'm in the desert, but it's not my desert. Not Arizona.*

*The Humvee eats up an unpaved road, spitting Iraqi sand from its tires. A nineteen-year-old private sits next to me. Daylight filters into the cab, and I can see peach fuzz on his chin and an M-16 between his knees. He takes off his helmet to wipe away the grime and sweat—gifts from the desert.*

*"Put it back on, marine," I tell him. "Could be IEDs out there. Don't want a brain full of shrapnel, do you?"*

*"Nah Gunny," says the kid. He doesn't call me "Sarge." Only army fucks call sergeants that.*

*I go back to the letter my mom sent a week ago. Reading in the bouncing Hummer is like trying to read in a mosh pit. My vision blurs with every rock we rumble over. I can only focus on every few words. But it's enough.*

*Your sister... trouble... drugs...*

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I pump the 12 gauge again and march into the living room. The place is empty. No furniture. No TV. No family photos. Nothing but a boom box on the floor, spinning Marilyn Manson. The Goth rocker chants, "THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE! THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE!"

Dropping the bag, I head for the kitchen. I only make it a few steps before a flash of motion catches my vision. A dude comes screaming into the room, running straight at me. I don't ask him any questions.

The Mossberg roars. A storm of buckshot lifts the dude off his feet. He crashes to the floor and lies there twitching like he's hooked up to a car battery. His bare chest was once covered in tattoos. Now all the artwork is drowned in blood. Guts are sprayed against the far wall. Red chunks on white paint.

Next stop, the kitchen. Nobody here to shoot. Just cereal bowls in the sink and a rotting pineapple on the counter, drawing flies. I keep marching.

My boots plow through the hallway, crunching over fast food wrappers and beer bottles. Marilyn Manson still screams at me, telling me to hate every motherfucker that's in my way. Good advice.

Over the music, I hear people behind a door, trying to whisper. But they're too scared to keep their voices down.

"Oh fuck. It's him. It's fucking him."

"Shut up. He'll hear us."

I kick the door down, finding a man and a woman huddled in the room's corner. They look like survivors of a nuclear apocalypse. Gay skin covered with sores. Ragged clothes. Wild eyes. The man gnashes his teeth at me and raises a Smith and Wesson revolver. He never gets a shot off. The shotgun barks, turning skull and brain matter into a pulpy red mist.

The spray of buckshot catches the woman too, and she wrenches backward then falls. I walk over to her tattered body and finish her off. This has nothing to do with mercy.

*For Sarah, I remind myself.*

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*No one greets me at the airport. No hugs and kisses. No parades.*

*I hail a cab and watch America stream by outside its window. Some sort of Mexican, gagsta polka blares from the cabby's tape deck as he swerves from one lane to another in frantic time with the music's beat. I close my eyes. Think about my mom's last letter.*

*"Come home," she said. Like it was up to me.*

*The cab rolls into my old neighborhood, pulling up to the fire hydrant in front of Mom's place. I slap a couple tens in the cabby's hand and he salutes me. Stepping out, I shoulder my bag and breath in some fresh, South Phoenix smog.*

*There's a car in mom's driveway—a Crown Vic. A few years old, but in good shape. I don't need lights and sirens to recognize a cop's unmarked roller. I've seen a few in my day.*

*Mom's in the living room with this young guy in a suit and tie. She sits in her favorite chair, her shoulders slumped, her head in her hands. The screen door slams and they both turn to look at me. Mom's eyes tell me everything.*

*"Oh Max," she says. She's a hard woman—a cigarette for breakfast kind of woman. But now she can barely compose herself enough to utter my name.*

*I hold her tight while the guy in the suit talks over my shoulder. He says he's a detective, working missing persons. Says my sister's car has been found at a rest stop west of Tucson. Blood on the seats, but my sister's nowhere to be found. Says he's sorry.*

*I barely hear him.*

*The pulse begins to pound between my ears. An echoing drumbeat just for me.*

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Backtracking into the hall, I check the time. Still eight minutes and thirteen seconds to go.

Behind me, a pistol “pops” and a wall lamp shatters. I spin around, facing a closet door at the end of the hall. Someone is hiding behind that door with an automatic. They fire blindly through the wood. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Filling the air with bullets, praying they’ll hit something.

I squeeze the shotgun’s trigger—pump—squeeze the trigger again. The closet door erupts in an explosion of splinters. The gunfire dies.

I keep going.

It takes twenty seconds to search the rest of the house. I find another door, this one next to the garage entrance. My pulse picks up speed.

I shove through the door and flatten myself against its frame, making a small target. I’m not ready for a bullet in the head. Not yet.

Stairs descend into a dark basement. Heavy mad scientist vibe here. Measuring cups, beakers, scales. On a workbench, two big pots boil over a propane stove. Wafting from the pots is a stench like cat piss. It hangs in the air, a putrid fog that clenches the room in a stranglehold.

I do a slow climb down the stairs, sweeping the room with the Mossberg. I’m halfway to the floor when a psycho jumps out from nowhere. He wears safety goggles and a leather apron and has hair spiked in every direction. Makes me think of a demented shop teacher. A funny looking guy, if it weren’t for the Colt .45 in his hand.

I’m dead. My shotgun’s pointed in the wrong direction. No way to swing it around in time.

The shop teacher lets out a guttural snarl and jerks the trigger. Then I hear the most beautiful sound in the world.

“Click.”

The guy looks dumbly at his pistol and tries to pull the trigger again. No dice. It’s jammed. He shakes the gun like a broken toy and attempts to rack the slide. By then, I’m down the steps, rushing towards him. I throw an elbow into his face and his nose gives way with a sick crack.

The guy stumbles, knocking over a trashcan full of empty Sudafed boxes and matchbooks. I kick his .45 and it skids across the concrete floor.

“You’re him, aren’t you?” says the guy, voice shaking. He’s on his ass, blood gushing from both nostrils.

I don’t say a word. Instead, I blow his legs apart with the shotgun. The guy screams, making a sound you wouldn’t think a human being could make. But I know better. I’ve heard screams like this before.

“Don’t wander off,” I tell him. Then I check my watch. Six minutes and forty-five seconds left.

Time to go to work.

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*Carl leans over to rack a new game. I can see his gut sagging down to the table from across the pool hall. He's gone soft since the corps. It happens sometimes—a guy gets his freedom, starts shoving double-cheeseburgers into his face.*

*Carl's buddy knocks out a sledgehammer break and starts running the table on him, lining up shots and sinking pockets. Carl mutters something, but I can't hear a thing. Too much AC/DC screaming from the sound system. He tips back his bottle of Coors and heads for the men's room.*

*I slide off my barstool.*

*When I walk in, Carl is at the urinal, pissing up a storm. He looks over his shoulder at me. Does a double take.*

*"Goddamn," he says. "Is that you, Gunny?"*

*"It's me," I tell him. Then I throw a right hook, deep into his kidney. Nice and clean. I follow up with a palm strike to the back of the head, driving him face-first into the wall.*

*Carl's knees turn to jelly and he begins his descent to the floor. I give him another shot on the way down then step on his neck to pin him to the tile.*

*"I need a favor, Carl," I say, leaning close to him. "I need to find a meth house."*

*"Crazy fucker. Don't know nothing about meth."*

*"Yes you do." I twist my boot, grind his cheek into the dirty tile. "You got a dishonorable discharge for dealing shit in the barracks."*

*"Not meth, man." His words are all bloody gurgles.*

*"No. But I bet you know who deals it. I want to talk to them, Carl." I pull out a bar napkin and a pen and drop them on the floor. "So start writing down addresses."*

*An hour later, I'm in my mom's garage, gazing at an old photograph of my sister. She's twelve-years-old and smiling the way only a kid can smile. Like the whole wide world is all hers. My hands begin to shake.*

*I pocket Sarah's photo and load the shotgun into the trunk of Mom's ancient Buick. Getting ready for war.*

*I'm about to close the lid when I spot a hacksaw on the wall. I lift it from its hook and thumb its metal teeth. The blade is old and rusty, but still sharp.*

*I drop the hacksaw in the trunk and slam the lid shut. I've no idea why I'm bringing it along.*

*At least that's what I tell myself.*

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Marilyn Manson is still roaring from the boom box as I slip on my rain parka and grab the axe. It's time to make a statement.

My first victim is right where I left him, on the kitchen floor in a pool of his own blood. One by one, I chop the guy's fingers off. I pick up the pinkies and cram one into each nostril. I stick the middle fingers into his ears then shove the rest in his mouth. For a second, I think about hacking his head off. I dismiss the idea right away. Not enough time. Cutting a man's head from his shoulders takes some doing. I know this from experience.

Moving on, I drag the duffle bag to the bedroom where I killed the couple. I use the hammer on them. First, I drive nails into their eyeballs, popping them like cherry tomatoes. Then I smash their collarbones... their ribs... their toes. Finished, I wipe the hammer off on my parka and head back to the basement.

The demented shop teacher hasn't died yet. In fact, he still has enough life in him to ask a question. "Why?"

I glance at my watch. Four minutes left.

"For my sister," I tell him. "Sarah Pike was her name. I want you to take that with you to the grave."

"Sarah?" asks the guy.

I nod. "She was just eighteen. Had her whole life ahead of her. Then she met a scumbag like you—a meth head. Now she's gone forever."

The guy tries to speak, but hacks up a fountain of bile instead. I watch his eyes go gray. He's slipping away from the world.

"The Arabs taught me a thing or two about terror," I say, talking more to myself than to the guy on the floor. "I brought it all back with me. All the fear. All the anger. All the hate. Now, every time I hear about a meth house, I tear it apart. And I'll keep at it until it kills me. Then I'll be able to see her again."

The guy coughs some more. "I know her."

"What'd you say?"

"Sarah Pike. I know her."

"Lying won't save you."

"I'm not lying. Sarah sliced her own wrists, wanted to kiss the world goodbye. Did it in her car at some rest stop. But she's not dead. We found her. Took her in. Shit, she's been living with us for months."

"Shut your mouth," I tell him.

"It's true. She's probably hiding somewhere upstairs. Go look for yourself."

"Shut up," I shout. Then I press the Mossberg's barrel to his forehead and pull the trigger.

Before the gun blast stops echoing, I'm up the stairs, running for that closet I shot up. I tear what's left of the door open and gaze at the person I killed.

She was a woman. Rail thin with greasy blonde hair. I wipe the blood from her face trying to make out her features. Her skin is ruddy and sickly pale. But she has blue eyes like Sarah. High cheekbones like Sarah.

*No, I tell myself. Sarah was beautiful. This isn't her.*

*And I keep telling myself that as I lift the hammer. This isn't her.*

Marilyn Manson seeps in from the living room, all screeches and grinding metal and machinegun drums. With one swing, I pound a nail between the woman's eyes. Then I hammer another nail into the crown of her skull. Then another. And another.

*Not Sarah. Not Sarah. Not Sarah.*

I keep pounding away, working so hard I don't even hear the alarm on my watch go off. I don't even hear the sound of police sirens closing in on me.

*Mike MacLean's first Thug Lit story, "McHenry's Gift" will appear in The Best American Mystery Stories 2006 edited by Otto Penzler and Scott Turow. Mike's work has also bloodied the pages of HardLuck Stories, Thrilling Detective, Demolition Magazine, and Plots with Guns. His first novel, The Silent, is currently making the rounds among publishers.*

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