

Don't Shoot

I turn the corner as the first shot is fired. Masonry bursts from the wall, sharp slivers of stone stinging against my face like blunt needles. Instinctively I turn away from the impact, my hand reaching too late to shield my face from the impact. The world slows down as the shock of the impact hits home. Screams echo through the building, pain, fear and anger all mixing into one voice to cry out.

GUN! GUN!

I hit the deck, the warm blood from the shrapnel impact running down my cheek like tears. The adrenaline is in full flow, my heart pounding so hard my head throbs. Another shot rings out and I feel the heat of blood spattering onto me from above. A girl falls in front of me, clutching her stomach in silent shock. I stare into her shocked, confused eyes, brilliant green slowly fading as her life spills from her.

Hold on, I want to say. Hold on. But my voice fails me as I watch the life ebb slowly from her. Everything sounds distant and tinny, screams come to me through a heavy blanket of silence, suddenly pierced by yet another shot ringing out. Blood is pooling around the girl now, the polished surface of the floor slowly being carpeted in a deep glistening velvet. Creeping through her scattered shopping, the delicate cloths sucking up the fluid, darkening and congealing into bloodied rags.

Besides my head, a pair of polished, heavy set boots appear. Buffed to perfection, I see myself reflected in the black shine, strangely warped by the curve of the toe. My eyes are wide and unblinking, the fresh scratches on my face look like I have been swiped by a tiger. I breathe softly, trying to calm my frantic heart as it thrashes in my chest, thudding against my ribcage. Over my head a sharp volley of rapid firing is unleashed. The noise is deafening, a roaring, battering assault on the senses. Down the corridor, I see the gunman fall in this hail of lead, his guts torn from him in a series of tearing impacts. I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Danny? Danny, are you okay?" I look up at Karl and smile grimly before carefully getting to my feet.

"Yeah, I'm okay." I shake my head, trying to clear it of the ringing sound. I'm not okay.

"You've got to be more careful man, you can't just turn a corner without looking!"

It's a little late for that, I think, as I stare down at the girl who took the second bullet. It's my fault she's laying there. From this angle I can no longer see her eyes, hidden behind her blonde locks. But when I blink they are in front of me again. Full of pain and confusion. Her pale blue, knee length skirt has ridden up slightly, revealing the inside of her young thigh. I can't take my eyes off the pale skin, I almost reach out to – No she can't be much more than fourteen. Just another victim.

Suddenly Karl shoots again, the hollow braa-aaping sound drilling through my head and body. Startled, I turn to admonish him, to tell him to show a little respect. But the words die on my lips. He won't get it. A smile plays on his lips as he sights down the barrel and fires twice more. I turn in the direction of fire in time to see a skinny guy plunge backward over the balcony, his eyes and mouth wide open in shock.

Karl looks at me quizzically, his pale brow furrowed, between the long black curtains of his hair.

"You sure you're okay?" His hand reaches out to my shoulder and he squeezes it gently. A simple gesture, loaded with the memories of the last couple of years of confusion. I meet his gaze.

"I'm good," I reach down and pick up my fallen rifle, checking the safety as I do so. I flick it off and look to the distance, determined to prove myself, take the final step. I spot a brunette about 20 yards further away than Karl's last target. She's cowering behind some kind of ceramic art installation, not the kind of thing that is going to withstand the firepower we're packing. But I play it cool, there's nothing impressive about shooting 30 rounds through someone's shield. A headshot, on the other hand ...

I sight carefully, controlling my breathing. As my breath goes out, I squeeze gently, readying the trigger. Three ... two ... on –

A hail of bullets turn the art to dust, pieces flying this way and that. The woman drops backwards, a mess of blood, dust and torn flesh.

"Whoooo!" Karl cheers like a maniac. "Did you see that? Did you see it? The whole thing man, just blown to pieces. You stupid bitch! What kind of a hiding place was that?" I look at Karl, and it's like looking at a stranger. His face is mean, with an upturned lip that is thin and ugly. His lank hair sticks to his forehead, and his Adam's apple is pronounced against a scrawny, vein filled neck.

He starts to move forward, and looks down at the blonde girl as he swaps magazines. He nudges her with his boot, then smiles strangely. With the barrel of his gun, he lifts the hem of her skirt higher. My mouth fills with saliva, my throat tightening as my stomach clenches. He laughs: a short, sharp bark.

“What a waste! We could have had some fun, huh, Danny?” I don’t respond, but Karl doesn’t notice, he’s too busy scanning ahead for more targets. “Come on man, let’s move out, we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

I look down at my rifle, checking the safety again. A drop of water hits the barrel, and another. More shots ring out – Karl has reached the balcony and he is shooting down into the plaza below. More screams of horror, more whoops of joy from Karl.

“This is awesome Danny. Come on, it’s like fish in a barrel!”

I sniff deeply, a wet, snotty inhalation accompanied by the cloying scent of blood and carbine.

“Danny? Danny, what are you doing?”

This was always a terrible idea. You can’t make things better by destroying them. You have to build to make things.

“Danny, point that thing somewhere else. Danny you fuck, I’m warning you!”

The sun is shining, streaming through the glass roof. I notice that they are still piping musak through the tannoy system. I try to work out what they are playing, but a woman screams out in pain, blocking the tune.

“Danny, if you don’t point that thing somewhere else, I’m going to fucking do you! What the hell is wrong with you?”

A good question.

I squeeze. The recoil thumps into my shoulder, thud, thud, thud. The world spins rightward, and up. For a brief moment, the image of Karl stays in my mind’s eye, his eyes wide open, the spray of blood from the back of his head.

Then I am on the floor once more. My eyes meet the girl’s. Dull and lifeless, any hint of emerald sparkle snuffed out. I reach out to close them as my blood pools and meets with hers. I try to take a breath, but there’s nothing but a gelatinous sucking noise, an empty feeling in my chest. I try harder, and am rewarded with the scantest of breaths, a rattling noise escaping from my mouth.

My heart strains, my head throbs.

Through treacle I hear the sirens arriving. Too late for her.

Hopefully too late for me.

The End

