

The Fluorescent Lights Flickered

I stop.

It's the same; the same thing. Always the same. I still don't recognize it, maybe, but at least I know it's there.

I ignore it and keep walking, though. I'm way past the point where I started, trying to catch it, ephemeral butterfly, trying to snatch and grasp with the softly waving fingers of my peripheral vision.

By the time I get to the entrance, I've managed to push it back down, now only a vague feeling of unease. The glass guillotine of the gateway swishes open, a modern-day doorman, bowing and waving in mechanical subservience. I have to repress the temptation to turn around, walk back out, walk back in, in and out, out and in; let the murmuring sprite of the door cycle forever in silent loyalty. I've done it before; people give me looks.

Inside now, sweeping through the aisles like pre-parted Red Seas, a lazy Moses enjoying unearned fruits.

Cigarettes. Behind the symbolic shield of the cashier's plastic and tile bulwark. They always are; whether to protect the masses from their unholy grasp or to keep them safe from some unknown outside threat is, as are so many things, beyond me.

Now the keeper, tender of these minute packages of goods and services, is speaking in a voice like rusted air. Somehow it seems that voices, like people, are the reluctant carriers of one burdensome truth—mostly they are an irritation.

Presumably his whining blare is directed somewhere, a place or a thing. The high walls of voiceless wares block any sight of him or his target. Never too wise for my own, I continue forward, slowly widening my angle of vision.

Like a blundering bottleneck, the orbicular rings of my eyes nuzzle forward, following the dictated lines of artificial motion; noises continue sedulously to waft my way, dodging minnowlike around the flit-flit-flitting spires of stabbing fluorescent light.

My head, like most in our benighted race, is shaped in a swollen convexity that disguises the uselessness squashed between its sweaty sides; eyes are placed helter-skelter on its surface several centimeters apart, and for this reason the scenario I come to view enters across my visible arc with a creamy two-step stutter, first seen, then, moments later, colored with depth.

There—
flash

Two men, dressed in dark casuals, black jeans and black coats and cheap shoes. One is directly in front of the counter, as if standing in line for a purchase; the other is behind it, at the cash register. The attendant is beside him, several feet away, cowering with his hands raised as if to ward off rain.

Both men are nearly my size, one slightly shorter, the other slightly taller, the taller man with a slightly protruding gut but massive arms and squat, stout legs. He has a bag slung across his shoulders, but pulled around to his front to hang on his neck. A baseball bat, metal, black handled, is in one hand, pointed approximately at the cashier; his other hand is working the till with nervous speed. The smaller man, on the outside of the counter, has a stubby long arm held tightly in both hands and addressing both men. By the form factor, it is a shotgun, wide gauge, sawed off nearly to the forestock, six inches less than the legal minimum. It is difficult to see in profile, but two barrels are evident, and no action to speak of; it is a breech-loader, two shots only.

Both men—

Both men are looking at me, having presumably heard my pace a moment before I actually turned the corner. They exhibit veiled surprise, masked by other emotions. The cashier has not noticed.

“Hey, you, motherfucker! Don’t *fucking* move a muscle!” The nearer man, shotgun now swung jerkily my way, is assessing me with wide eyes. He takes several steps toward me, asserting authority. “Put your hands up! Put them up!”

I slowly lift both hands from their positions near my waist, elevating them to elbow height, held out wide.

“Higher! *Higher* , you motherfucker! You want to die!?” He stabs the weapon at me, like a bayonet. I incline them further, until they are even with my shoulders. He wants them higher but will not ask again, fearing to “push his luck”; in his mind, the authority he has created is tenuous, and should be challenged as little as possible.

Taking another step, he waves the shotgun a second time, now held awkwardly far in front of him, like a talisman. His face has a rubicund

glow, and I notice for the first time that he is not the young man I would have guessed; he is well on his way to middle age, a balding patch growing at his hairline, like an encroaching oil spill. He is tan, but not overly so, and looks more like an office worker than anything. There is fear behind his gaze, but the aggression hides it, to him at least.

“Don’t fucking move! Where’s your money, motherfucker?” His eyes drop to my pockets, as if in search of something through the opaque fabric. *“Give me your wallet, shithead! Give it to me!”*

Bad Guy 2, still at the cash register, hits a final key and pops the till with a *ding*. He immediately draws it out and begins flipping up the levers, pulling out stacks of bills and pushing them into the bag at his chest. The attendant is watching with the tops of his eyes, whimpering.

BG 1 is in front of me, still, and does not notice as I angle my body slightly off-line. Instead, he comes even closer, still berating me verbally. *“Where’s your fucking money?! I’ll fucking kill you, you hear me? I’ll kill you!”* Barely a meter away now, he stops and points the gun directly at me, face imploring.

One beat, two, and he shoves forward again, entering my space. *“Don’t fucking move! Don’t you move!”* He needs a hand, so his left, supporting arm releases the stock of the shotgun and comes free, right hand still clutching the grip, finger dangerously on the trigger. That left hand comes at me, its owner hunching down, and rifles into the pockets of my dress pants, clawing for their contents. I maintain my emotionless expression, not insouciant so much as unfeeling; he does not need to think of me as a person, only as a target.

Feeling nothing in my right hip pocket, he retracts his hand and begins to move for the left. I tense like a cat, a fresh spike of adrenaline dumping into my cardiovascular system, as his arm crosses his body, trapping him momentarily, the hand enters the pocket, and my lizard brain takes over—

As I spin to my left, creating an empty path for the shot, my left hand comes down through the air like a whip, circling outward in a tight arc with the same energy that my hips give my body. The outside edge of my hand hits the barrel of the shotgun two inches up the stock, very close to

his own hand, and knocks rather than pushes it a dozen degrees off-angle. At the same time, with blunt force, my right hand snaps down and plummets up, palm cocked back as I hit him just under the chin. His head snaps back as I carry through, hand rocking forward after the hit and letting my fingers claw into his eyes. I let go, though, my focus on the weapon, and am already retracting for another hit as he pulls the trigger.

The shot blows through the rack of candy ten feet behind me, safely on its altered course, and my hand flares with the heat and shock, already holding the barrel as tightly as I know how. My right hand spins around into a backhand position, then crashes stiff and straight into the side of his neck, hacking at the carotid. As it plummets through, I turn the other way again, then slap him on the left side of his head with a cupped hand. I freeze it there, rather than carrying through, and position my thumb in the corner of his eye socket; with my fingers as a guide, I plunge forward, burying the thumb past his eye up to the knuckle. Already half unconscious, he merely gasps slightly, but his grasp is still deathly strong on the shotgun, held by animal instinct.

Keeping the obscene hold I have on the side of his head, barrel of the gun still safely averted, I use the leverage and strength of his grip to spin him to his right, pulling his head toward me at the same time in a putar kepala twist. He loses his base, collapsing to the ground soundlessly, and I drop one foot into his face, which responds with nothing more than a soft, wet bump. It is easy to twist the gun out of his hands now, and I quickly turn it, torquing the butt into a rough shoulder index, forefinger finding the trigger, as I—

As I pull the trigger, suddenly able to hear again, the harsh *crack* of the shell slapped out supersonically. The splatter of blood is instant, covering my pants nearly to my waist and the tiles for five feet around. Instinctively, outrageously, I wipe red spots of wetness from my face with one sleeve, only smearing it before realizing what I am doing. I drop the empty shotgun and look up.

The second BG, still behind the counter—only moments have passed—is staring at his companion on the ground, eyes locked on the meat that had been his chest before the 00 buckshot hit it. His jaw worked, as if trying to speak.

Then, seemingly remembering my presence, his eyes shoot up to

me, shocked. Finally, his body overrides his mind, and he drops the wad of cash in his hand. Turning his head from side to side erratically, he sees the attendant, and spasmodically snaps the bat in his other hand outward. The man lowers his arms for a moment in amazement, and the metal cylinder hits him just below the temple with a sickening *crunch*. He drops behind the counter as if his legs have been cut out, and BG 2 spins back, frantic, and returns the bat to both hands as he starts to charge around the counter. As another thought hits him, he hunches his head forward and shrugs off the bag with flaring speed, then lifts the bat again and clears the counter with wide steps.

I am moving toward him already, and my right hand has dropped to my back pocket to the grip of the Emerson Commander. As I index it with the web of my palm, my fingers pinch, then in an old, practiced motion, I whip it out. The small metal tooth of the “wave” catches the seam of the pocket, snapping open the blade: 3.7 inches of black steel, almost concupiscent to my animalistically overridden brain. It comes up in a hammer grip, point forward and edge in.

Both of us blind now to anything else, my pulse spiking again to three times its normal rate (more and I will experience hypervigilance, the proverbial deer-in-the-headlights syndrome; but by then I will either be safe or dead), heart hammering in my ears the only thing I can hear. But I see him open his mouth in a primal roar, swinging the bat home-run fashion with his next step.

Back and then forward, very fast, as my mind goes again—

The tip of the bat is moving with incredible speed, but the handle less so, and my left hand shoots out to block and trap the large “intersection” of his hands and the bat rather than the hard and quick metal of its body. I merely push forward, purely gross motor and graceless; the momentum is not blocked, but baffled, and the focus of the blow is lost as I clap the bat to his chest, locking it for a moment. With adrenalized speed and quickness born of alarm, he springs back, slipping away, then comes in again with the bat high over his head, intentions telegraphed loudly enough for everyone in the city to read. I step left on the diagonal, and fast—fast!—spin the blade up outward, slashing at his arm as I pass the bat and enter. But the edge is inward—and rather than slicing, I hook the arm, like I am shaving, and yank backwards, shearing into the soft tissue

and thick muscle. I peel until I hit bone, then grate along for another inch before withdrawing with a jerk and checking the arm away. Six inches of his arm outside the ulna are now hanging loose and free, blood pouring freely and fingers starting to shake unbidden. But he is crazed and beyond thought—even as his arm begins to fail, he is already away, then coming back for another hit, wide and swinging.

I hunch, shooting my left elbow up to the side of my head in a vertical shield, head low and hips back, then withdraw the blade back to the shelter of my jackknifed body. Then I charge, straight into him, past his power arc. The bat, coming weakly but on-target, hits glancingly at the top of my head and my upper back. It is damaging, though my arm shields from it, but I keep driving into him, feeling nothing. No trapping. No throws. No elaborate vicissitudes. Just energy and damage.

My hand with the knife fires forward, arching up slightly, penetrating into his gut with almost no resistance, like cutting cake. The upward motion pushes his flesh against the sharp edge, making a cut three inches long before I withdraw again, and stab again, then again, never stopping my forward charge, and I stab him four times before I run him over and he loses his feet, collapsing weakly to his knees, then the floor. I turn and reacquire him, but he is down for good, not even moving, shock from the stomach trauma paralyzing him while he bleeds out.

I straighten my back and look around, tunnel vision clearing ever so slightly.

The store is silent except for the hum of electricity, and the fluorescent lights illuminate us with a flickering glow.