



Morning Can Last Forever
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By Holden Wilde

“Milosh, slowly pull the car to the right.” Milosh couldn’t tell at first if he was dreaming or not. The previous couple hours had blurred the line between reality and fiction, pushing him into a zombie-like state. But there was something very odd about that phrase. “Meeloosh, sloowleey puuull the car to the right,” he heard again. The words were dropping among an otherwise deafening silence. And then it hit him — in the three years that he had known Slobodan, his passenger, Milosh has never heard his voice sound so calm. Despite many years in his home country’s special forces, and lately as a killer on a mafia payroll in the U.S., Slobodan was a cheerful and at times even emotional, off-the-wall character known for singing songs during restaurant gatherings, his wild gesturing and generous smile.

It took Milosh another moment to gain some alertness as he more and more vividly began sensing some inescapable danger coming their way. He took a quick look at Slobodan — his passenger’s face was deathly white as he stared at Milosh with no ascertainable emotions. At same time, Milosh had been pressing the brakes until the car halted on the right side of the road. Suddenly, he became fully alert and almost immediately went deaf again from a cacophony of sirens, screams, and a blasting car radio. A moment later, the cold barrel of an M16 crashed through a side window and pressed deep into his neck. Then his side door opened and he was pulled by the collar and thrown face down on asphalt next to a now bravely smiling Slobodan. Milosh could see multiple shadows above him, five, maybe seven soldiers. He’d had only a few moments to see his captors, but it was enough to know that they were not dealing with regular police or SWAT.

He heard approaching steps. A voice ordered, “Pull them up,” and strong but gentle hands lifted Milosh and Slobodan off the ground. Milosh was facing a fit middle-aged officer dressed in camouflage with three stars on each of his collars.

“Who the fuck are you?” he roared and without a pause but slower, “Why they fuck did you not stop?” Milosh looked at Slobodan with a question mark in his eyes. Slobodan’s eyes continued smiling and Milosh’s anxiety shifted to calm. He was exhausted and didn’t care

anymore whether these soldiers would shoot them on the spot or throw them in jail after they found the contents of their trunk. Milosh looked above Slobodan's head — across I-278 and the hills of Staten Island, about 10 miles in the distance, a gigantic cloud of grey smoke was stagnating above lower Manhattan. The morning of September 11th seemed to never end...

* * *

Milosh rarely traveled outside of South Florida. Having built a solid business reputation back in his home country, Milosh had been assigned to work for two large drug suppliers as soon as he emigrated to the U.S., and in three years he was handling all shipments from Cuba and Peru for their fast growing consortium. 26 years old, Milosh intrigued both the internal leadership and partners in DEA, customs, port, and airport with his modest appearance and succinct communication style. So when Milosh was asked to fly to New York for a seemingly simple transfer, he was taken by surprise. "Two suitcases are flying in, one has money, another, a very important merchandise. You will meet our Canadian partner and handler from customs at JFK's warehouse. Once you count the money, \$2.5MM, give \$500K to the customs guy and pass the rest to the partner. Take the second suitcase and bring it to our branch in Princeton." Milosh was wise enough not to ask questions. "Take Slobodan with you. This transfer cannot fail."

They flew in to New York on Monday evening, September 10th, staying at a hotel near the airport. They were to be picked up by a driver from the consortium's Princeton branch at 8am the next morning, then meet a customs handler and Canadian partner near the airport entrance at 8:30. The meeting itself was supposed to happen inside of a secure/bonded customs area of JFK's facilities. The morning of September 11th didn't start well — they were greeted by a stern-looking driver who took a deliberate 360 degree scan and motioned them to come closer to a car trunk. He opened it and unzipped what looked like a large wool garment bag. Milosh and Slobodan didn't expect to see a stack of Kevlar vests, a sniper rifle, and several hand guns, mostly of Eastern European origin, inside. Milosh simply had to ask.

"What is the merchandise?"

“Half a kilo of plutonium,” was driver’s laconic answer.

They suited up in vests, the driver and Slobodan placed handguns inside their jackets, and then they drove to meet the others. The customs handler asked them all to meet at a vacant parking lot not too far from the gated entrance to a secure area of JFK. Two others were already there when Milosh’s car pulled up. Milosh saw a nervously smoking guy his age and what looked to be a senior officer in a full uniform with lots of insignias.

“Hello, Comrades. Here is how we are gonna do it,” dived in the customs officer once everybody had gathered in circle and exchanged handshakes. “We will all use your car,” he said, pointing at the smoker. “As we approach the gate, I will do the talking and nobody says a word. Once we finish the transfer, we will all come back to this spot and go our separate ways.” He finished with a final piece of advice. “Look normal, don’t wear sunglasses or hats to avoid suspicions but move away from a car’s side so you are not captured on the gate’s video camera.” And with a short pause, he added, “Any questions?”

“What is going on here?” the officer asked in a solemn voice as they got within 50 yards of the entrance — the gates were wide open and there was nobody around to be seen. They drove into the field with numerous hangars spread around in a circle. “Stop the car, something is not right.” He came back from the gate house a minute later looking perplexed. “The World Trade Center is on major fire, a plane flew in, very odd... Let’s wrap this up quickly.”

They drove in for about half a mile and stopped near a smaller hangar. The customs officer opened the electric door with a key code and asked them to follow him inside. It took him a few minutes to go through different containers until he brought up two large metal briefcases. He opened the first one, and Milosh saw wrapped stacks of \$100 bills filled to the rim.

“Do what you need to do,” he directed Milosh.

As Milosh counted the money, he began separating \$500K into a separate pile. The officer’s phone rang. His face’s expression changed right away and got darker and darker as he was saying, “Yes... got it... yes...

right away....” He closed the phone and addressed everybody in the hangar in a commanding but somber voice, “We need to do this some other day. The U.S. is under a terrorist attack and they are shutting down all airport areas with extra security at checkpoints. I won’t be able to get you out with the briefcases.” The Canadian partner, who was supposed to leave with \$2MM, responded mixing English and native words in a high pitched voice.

“No, I have to return with money. I am under specific orders. My group needs this money today.”

The customs officer looked directly into his eyes and blared back, “Not today. You won’t be allowed to leave the airport with the money.”

Milosh felt a sour, vomit-like substance disgorge in his throat as he saw Slobodan, in the corner of his eye, began to reach inside his jacket...

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“Are you ok?” Milosh saw a grinning Slobodan giving him a hand to get up. “You are lucky they both had American guns. If it was Russian’s 9 millimeter, I would have to finish you off right now.”

Milosh slowly got on his knees first feeling dizzy and trying not to think about the excruciating pains in his torso where bullets had hit his vest. He looked around — their driver was in his final convulses, the Canadian partner was lying across the table with wide-open dead eyes, but Slobodan looked unhurt. “Was he hiding behind me?” the thought crossed Milosh’s mind.

“Where is the customs officer?” he asked Slobodan.

“Oh, shit, I will find him.”

“No, hide bodies, money, and the merchandise in the trunk and let’s get out of here,” Milosh ordered as he got up and started walking toward the hangar’s door.

He first noticed a blood trail as he opened the door and bright morning light poured in. About 50 yards in the distance, the customs officer

was half-jumping, half-running, holding what appeared to be an injured left leg with both hands. Milosh knew that the officer had to be killed, but he took a couple seconds to think through all the options. He had only killed two people in his life: one was a competitor who kept paying government agencies to shut down Milosh's business, and another was his employee who had stolen a large sum of money from the company and couldn't pay it back. This guy hadn't done anything wrong per say, but Milosh couldn't think of any alternative. He opened the car's trunk to get a rifle. By the time he settled in on the pavement, the target was about 100 yards away, moving toward the airport's terminals. Milosh had been part of a marksmen team in high school, had more practice during summer military camps while in college, and stayed in form by participating in the consortium's shooting gatherings in ranges across Miami. He could never become a natural shooter, but was advanced enough to know that at such distance he could shoot straight without adjusting for distance or high field wind.

Milosh shot six times, squeezing the trigger one after another, moving the barrel a bit lower after each shot to adjust for when the body began to fall. He missed the first shot, but definitely hit with the next three when the officer suddenly stopped, moved a couple steps from side to side and then fell straight on his back. As Milosh got up, Slobodan was placing a first body wrapped in some dirty carpeting into the trunk. Milosh looked toward the security gate through the sniper scope on the rifle. The gate was now closed and surrounded by uniforms on both sides.

"Lucky us — the customs officer was afraid to go toward the gate and went to the terminals to get cleaned up and come up with a story, and with strong winds nobody would hear the shots," Milosh thought as he started to walk around the hanger, looking for another way out.

He returned to Slobodan in about 10 minutes as his jolly companion was cleaning the trunk surface whistling some melody from his home country.

"All done Milosh, what is next?"

"I found a small truck. I will ram it through fence and you follow me." Milosh first slowly drove through the fence to avoid too much noise, and

then pushed through, making a small opening, wide enough for Slobodan's sedan to pass through. They only saw a few police cars blazing with sirens and saw no other cars or people as they got to a parking lot where they quickly moved the trunk contents to their own car. Both men had been silent all this time and only after they were safely on the Belt Parkway, did Slobodan tap Milosh's shoulder and say, "This is why they picked you, my friend."

* * *

"Why the fuck did you not stop?" the military chief repeated impatiently. They had now been approached by several police cars, officers coming out with guns drawn. "I want them in jail, pronto," he ordered the policemen. "They wouldn't let us pass for five minutes, even after we warned them through loudspeakers that we were about to open fire."

As the military troops got back to their Humvees, Slobodan looked at the inquisitive faces of the policemen and said, opening his arms, "Do you guys know who that was? He almost rammed our car and now it won't start. We barely got it going this morning!"

"I wouldn't worry about starting a car at this point. You are going to jail," one of the policemen responded. Milosh noticed before that the policemen were displeased with a curt order by the military chief and now kept throwing worried looks toward Manhattan.

"Detective, I paid \$7,000 for this junk and promised to drive my school friend to Florida." Slobodan looked up with a begging grimace and pleaded, "If you can figure out how to start this piece of garbage, I will give you a bottle of top Greek brandy."

"I don't think so," responded the detective, looking at his friends with a tired half-smile. "Well, ok, open it up, quickly!"

Slobodan pulled up the hood and went into five minutes of impeccable acting trying hard not to start a working car. During this performance, Milosh only asked him about where he would get a brandy.

"I found it in the glove compartment while you were driving the car," Slobodan proudly responded.

* * *

Milosh finally leaned back in his seat after they crossed Goethals bridge. Slobodan was driving and the radio was popping again.

“Why did you reach into your jacket in the hanger?” Milosh asked with half a yawn.

“South Beach is best in September. I didn’t want to get stuck in New York. And,” Slobodan looked seriously at Milosh, “we don’t need to get into too much detail when we report back, ok?”

“That is why they picked you, dear comrade,” Milosh smirked in response.

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