

The Bookseller

By Austin Guerrero

Gabriel Barret's prose fascinated the young, twenty-something, Aaron Murphy.

Aaron had read all three of Barret's 150 page books. He thought him the best writer in the world. His stories always whisked him away without fail.

Aaron had to meet him. Or at least send him a letter expressing his appreciation and adoration of his novels.

The young Murphy was one of only a couple dozen in the world that had even read a book by Gabriel Barret, much less liked it.

As Aaron lay in his dormroom bed reading the third book by Gabriel Barret he turned the final page marking it completed for the seventh time.

"I need to let him know how much his stories mean to me."

"Waddja say?" John, his roommate sitting on the other side of the room, questions.

"Oh, nothing."

Aaron set the book aside as he rose from the messy bed.

He was on the shorter side. Not so tall that he would intimidate other men or scare small children. But not so short to be limited in choice of women, either. He sported an undercut with brown, bronzed hair. An average face; emerald eyes, a Grecian nose that had a straight bridge with narrow nostrils and a slightly pointed tip, arched eyebrows of a darker hair color than the top of his head and his jawline was strong in the front but weak in the back. Good chin.

He stretched a big stretch; the kind one does after finishing a good book.

Today's the day to contact Gabriel Barret.

He stepped up to his computer, pulled the chair out and sat down turning on the electrical machine that saw daily use.

As the screen glared on he entered his short password and opened his internet browser. He typed in, "Gabriel Barret author", in the search engine. Only a hundred results came back. He needed to find Barret's mailing address or email.

After several minutes of clicking he could barely find any info on Barret. Even his Wikipedia page only listed the titles of his three books, nothing else. No birthday, no personal website, no agent.

As he returned to his original internet search results for the last time he was beginning to lose hope.

He moved his finger down across the middle ball of his mouse, the webpage scrolling down. A link rose into view: *Gabriel Barret's personal book tour for his fourth novel begins this summer.*

Aaron's eyes lit up and he couldn't open the link fast enough. It was an article in a local newspaper in Missouri. It listed his book tour dates and he saw that he'd be signing books in the Wichita Costco.

"That's weird. A Costco?"

Aaron's excitement was bubbling over despite the strange venue. Wichita was only an hour away. He desperately searched for the date and saw it was taking place that very same day in thirty minutes.

As soon as this was read, Aaron jumped up and gathered the three books of Barret and placed them in his backpack in a rush. He slammed the door shut behind him causing his roommate to jump.

The drive to Wichita was fast and furious. He also saw several more cars than usual heading westbound on KS-96. He soon forgot about the oddity when he pulled into the jam-packed parking lot of Wichita Costco.

"Come on! Come on!"

He finally found a parking space far at the edge of the lot. He grabbed his bag and locked his car faster than a June bug in May. Sprinting towards the sliding doors to the Costco was mandatory. He was actually going to see Gabriel Barret. *The Gabriel Barret.*

He rounded the side corner to the building and saw a bewildering sight. A crowd of people were hoarding to get in larger than the crowds of Disneyland.

What is going on? Are all these people here to see Mr. Barret?

He slowed down and stopped at the slow moving crowd trying to get into the building.

"Excuse me? Are you here for the book signing?" Aaron asks a stranger next to him.

"Huh? No! Haven't you heard? It's all over... Over! OVER! Ahhh!"

Aaron was stunned and disturbed by this man and decided to not speak to him or anyone else while here; at least if he could help it.

Soon more people crowded up behind him blocking him from going back. The only option was forward into the huge warehouse store. Somewhere, lurking within, an elusive writer was ready to sign books. And Aaron Murphy wasn't about to let a crowd stop him.

The people in the throng were shuffling shoulder to shoulder the air heavy with hundreds of human body heat sources.

Why are there so many people? Aaron wasn't going to ask anyone else what was going on after the crazy man's screaming.

Soon he passed out of the initial entry room and shuffled into the high-ceilinged store proper. Past the choke point people spilled into the walkway rushing in to buy what they needed as fast as possible.

Aaron saw a worker scanning bar codes so he pushed past the crazed people to get to him.

"Excuse me? Where is the book signing?"

"Huh? What?"

"The book signing."

"There's never been a book signing in a Costco. Are you nuts?" The worker sees Aaron's distraught face and quickly adds, "But if there were it'd be near the book section on the other side of the store." He turned around after giving Aaron hope ignoring him as he continued to scan.

Aaron was becoming overwhelmed at the many people. Yelling. Screaming. Crying. It all assimilated into a cacophony of sounds jarring him into a potent headache. He suppressed an urge to leave without at least checking the back of the store for his author hero. So he hiked up his backpack around his shoulders and began moving with the crowd again.

As he moved with the crowd he carelessly inspected the faces of the people around him. Some old with great white moustaches. Some with out any facial hair. Some fat. Some morbidly obese. Some with great golden beards. Women pulling their children along in a mad dash for supplies. Middle-aged men looking wild-eyed at everything around them. All types made up the colossal, sweaty herd.

As he moved along he began to feel an overbearing sensation that something was wrong, even more so than the strange amount of people rushing through the store. Like something unexplainable and supernatural was watching him.

Suddenly, a young boy tripped him and reached out with small grasping fingers for his backpack. Aaron turned on the ground, getting stepped on by dozens of heavy feet, and pushed the young child away. The boy stumbled and got knocked over hard by a passing man. Aaron struggled to get up but simply couldn't with the amount of people tripping on him. The blonde-haired boy found a way to stand back upright and he turned towards the suffering Aaron. Through the passing legs of the people Aaron could see, about twenty-five feet away, the errant boy standing and staring him down with a wild look in his eye. The young boy seemed to be burning full of an evil energy and Aaron felt a sense of fear shoot through him. The boy slowly, methodically pulled out a large pocketknife from his back pocket and grabbing the side of the blade, clicked it open brandishing it for Aaron to see with a disturbing smile.

"Help!" Aaron cried out from the ground.

No one cared.

The boy began walking towards the downed Aaron with the knife tip leading his steps. He broke into a shoving run through the moving crowd driving the knife straight towards Aaron. The blade and the boy were

only a foot away from Aaron's chest when a large hand flashed out of the crowd gripping the boy by the neck and wrenching the murderous child into the air.

A large burly man with a scruffy black beard held the boy dangling in the air as he said, "Now what did I tell you about playing with strangers? Come, your mother will not be happy." The man grabbed the knife from the squirming boy's hand and heaved him over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes. The bearded man looked towards Aaron curled into a ball on the ground and stepped up to him. He was so tall and muscular, the crowd deliberately went around him.

"Here, take my hand." Aaron peeked up through his arms protecting his head and saw the hand of the large man offering a way to stand up. He reached out, gratefully, and gripped the extended hand. He shot up from the heave of the muscular man and landed on his feet. "You be careful out there," the man said turning and walking back into the crowd. The boy over his shoulders began pounding his father's back wildly and soon they were lost from view in the crowd.

Aaron, now bruised and battered, clasped tightly to his bag and continued on trying to push the event out of his memory. The only thing that mattered was to find Gabriel Barret.

As Aaron flowed through the store with the thick crowd around him he felt that feeling from before, the feeling of unease. It began to grow to a point he thought was unreachable.

Suddenly, the pathways and people seemed to stretch and morph before his very eyes. The large garish white fluorescent lights strung throughout the ceiling of the store shone bright and hard into Aaron's eyes, nearly blinding him. After the white light subsided the world's colors were a kaleidoscope of blues, greens, yellows, and purples. He looked and saw that the crowd around him had sharp, carnivorous teeth dripping with green saliva. Aaron knew he had finally gone insane but he wished it all to end; for it to somehow go back to the normal world he was used to.

As he stumbled through this nightmare world that shifted and warped around him he saw off in the distance a line of brown boxes that were not glowing or flashing strange colors; the boxes were normal looking, they were not melting or exploding. They simply looked like standard everyday supply cases. He ran towards them seeking the normal and enduring brown cardboard boxes as an escape from the fluctuating world now around him. The crowd tried to stop his advance with their vice-like grip but he tore free and touched one of the firm, steadfast boxes.

His mind immediately felt lighter and clearer. He felt the surety of the rough thick cardboard under his trembling fingers. He began to edge around the line of boxes and noticed that they opened up into a small square area of camping supplies with a couple tents built in the center upon the linoleum floor. He entered grateful that this part of the store and perhaps the world was free from the nightmare reality.

"Da hell you want?" a voice called from the side.

Aaron looked over and saw two teenagers sitting in camping chairs around a fake paper poster of a fire. They were dressed in all black. One had a black, studded choker around his neck. Both had black eyeliner and long dark greasy hair and skulls on their jackets. "Well? What do you want?"

"I- I was just..." Aaron stuttered.

"... just wanted a break from the nightmare? Yea. Us too," the emo on the right said.

And then it hit, him. The reason he even came here. "I'm looking for Gabriel Barret's book signing. I was headed over to the book section to see if he's there."

"Hm. A book signing in a Costco? Never heard that one before. But, these are strange times."

"Why is this camping section the only place that isn't crazy?" Aaron asks them.

"Because we come prepared for just such occasions. When the world breaks down around you you need these," the emo dug around his tattered jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He slid open the top and twirled one out of the box planting it between his lips. His buddy conjured up a zippo and lit the flame burning the end of the tobacco stick. The heavy smoke permeated the air around them. He motioned for Aaron to take one. Aaron walked over and pinched one out of the pack. He put it to his lips and the second teenager tossed the zippo into his palms.

"So this will calm everything down?" Aaron asks them.

"Oh hell yea. Once your done with that everything will be just fine."

Aaron flicked the flint on the side of the zippo and an orange flame lit up his vision. He lured it to the end of the cigarette and waited until the tobacco crackled and slowly burned of its own accord. He snapped the silver zippo closed and tossed it back to the hoodlum.

He breathed in deep, smoke filling his lungs and immediately a feeling of peace enveloped his brain. Soothing. Relaxing.

He turned and expected to see the nightmare, kaleidoscope, monster filled store behind him but everything had returned to normal. Just a huge crowd passing by large stacked pallets of food and various other items.

"See? Everything is fine," the teenagers slurred.

"Alright thanks. I have to go find the book section. I hope I haven't missed it," Aaron said as he doused the cigarette on a nearby piece of stone and flicked it towards the fake paper cutout of fire next to the two teenagers.

"Good luck!" the two echo.

Aaron dove back into the maddening crowd and made sure to keep his feet as he walked towards the back corner of the store, towards the book section.

I gotta find Mr. Barret.

As Aaron progressed through the crowd rushing through the store he saw the hanging sign down a ways, high above, listing, "Books". His heart gladdened at the sight he moved even faster, outpacing the moving

crowd. Once he reached the area his view was blocked by dozens of swarming heads. He shoved and pushed his way out and tumbled into a low counter of paperback novels. He was in the book section, but where was the book signing?

He scanned the area for some sort of signifying feature of a book signing. A table? A sign? A line of people? Nothing.

Then he spotted it.

A table with a small sign taped to the front read, "Gabriel Barret".

A proud sense of accomplishment welled up in Aaron's chest.

I made it!

Then he noticed that no one was around except for the crowd behind him. He slowly walked up to the signing table and saw several books stacked on top of each other. He reached out and picked one up.

Gabriel Barret's fourth book.

The warm red book cover promised a story that would move and make one think. But where was Gabriel Barret?

Aaron set the book down and looked around once more. He waited there, slightly lost for a time. After a few minutes he noticed an employee rounding a corner from the back wheeling a cart full of random books. She stopped a few aisles over from Aaron and began stocking. Aaron went over to her in anticipation for answers.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes?" she answered pausing her stocking routine.

"Where is the author?" Aaron asked motioning behind him to the signing table.

"Oh! I'm sorry you haven't heard. He died in his hotel this morning. I should really take down that table."

A stunned silence came over Aaron then. He couldn't believe it.

Why? Why?

Of all the men in the world, Aaron thought Gabriel Barret was immortal. His world was crashing down around him. He was lost in his emotions as he grabbed the fourth and final Gabriel Barret novel to purchase. Once he was out of the Costco building he went to his car.

He knew he would never see, meet or speak with the man who had such a profound influence over his life. All he knew was that a long empty life awaited him without Gabriel Barret producing new work.

He drove home, heart-broken, knowing that the world had closed a chapter of life forever, in death.