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Murder

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MURDER

...YOU NOTICE THE FORMS FAR UP the road, a pickup truck on the shoulder, hazards blinking, the exhaust coughing dirty clouds, and the fields on either side of you ripple with snowy, wind-sculpted dunes, and the morning sun, swelled and heavy, shines brilliantly on the white expanse, and you squint against the glare and stab your cigarette into an ashtray already brimming with crumpled butts, then you cough and cough and cough, deep, dredging spasms that end when you spit blood into your waiting handkerchief...

A two-foot length of lead pipe. When you were done, there were stringy blonde hairs stuck to the metal. Pink strips of flesh embedded in the grooved threads.

... wipe the blood from your lips and stuff the handkerchief back into your pocket, and your vision isn't what it used to be (the letters at the bottom half of your ophthalmologist's chart squirm like minnows in muddy water), and there are no other cars on the road, the cows penned up in the distant barns, a barren vista populated by just you, the blurry figures behind the idling pickup, and a knot of circling crows, and you crack your window and the numbing air whistles in your ear — closer now — and the twitching minnows arrange themselves into a strange focus, a man and a boy struggling to hoist a weighted tarp onto the pickup's open gate — closer — the two of them wearing hats and gloves, stained winter jackets, and over their mouths and noses, they've tied bandanas whose triangled ends twitter in the breeze, and as you pass, you spot the stiff-limbed doe peeking from the tarp's covering, and in a speed-blurred glimpse, you see the other carcasses lining the truck's bed, a snout-speckled heap of rigid paws and hooves...

Stutterers shouldn't tell jokes, but Gill did, and his hiccupping rhythms swelled as he neared his soon-to-be butchered punch lines. "Be-be-because she's my sis-sis-sis-sister!" At the bar, you'd seen more than one man bail out in mid-joke, poor Gill abandoned in a socially mortifying freefall, his stutter left to

fizzle itself out in the vacated, smoky space. But you always stuck out his jokes, even the long ones with endings you already knew. Maybe you were a sucker; maybe you were something else, but there you'd be, half-listening, then not listening at all, your eyes drawn to the way his uneasy hands bothered with his cigarette, a toothpick, the collar-smothering mane of his sandy mullet. You met Gill at the Wednesday night dart league ("Con-con-concentrate, Gill!" the opposing team would chide when he stepped to the line in a tight game), and in the dark alley behind the bar, he'd pop his trunk and glance fretfully about as you and the other players surveyed the still-boxed electronics (or shoes, power tools, sewing machines...) he offered for half of what the department stores charged. Once, you bought a winter coat for your daughter; another time, a bracelet for your wife — but most nights you said no, thanks anyway, and then felt like a sucker every time you opened your wallet at the mall.

... study the dwindling scene in your rearview, and you've heard the local department of transportation pays by the pound for roadkill, but since you've never known anyone who's actually bothered with the stench and mess, you'd assumed the story was bullshit (after all, you know men who've done seriously fucked-up things for money — the monthly plasma sellers, the ones who pen bad checks on their invalid mothers' accounts, the mail frauders and welfare scammers), and far behind you, the pickup, its hazards still blinking, lurches onto the road...

The first time Gill brought up the loading docks where you worked, you laughed off his daydreamer's math of how much the two of you could make on a skid of Levis or a crate of Lucky Strikes. To you, these things were simply boxes in a day filled with boxes, transient burdens waiting to be piled onto the next eighteen-wheeler, but when you received a mistyped invoice for spools of copper wiring, you called Gill. In the dark of an early December night, your only company the warehouse rats and the lone security guard drunk again in the heated office, you and Gill wrestled the uncounted spools into a panel truck. Gill stammered excitedly about your coming windfall as you drove through town, his bubble-snapping wad of gum exacerbating his stutter, his gloved hands attacking the truck's vibrating gearshift with a

spastic rhythm that had you stalling at every stop sign. Your thoughts drifted back to your wife and daughter asleep in your tiny apartment, and you wished you were with them, dreaming this predawn scene of empty streets and blinking traffic lights. The heavy spools rolled with each turn, and you feared the truck was one steering wheel jerk away from tipping over, your dream crumbling into a nightmare of bloody police strobes, questions asked, nonexistent papers requested. With morning's first purplish hint breaking over the hills, you dropped the spools at a deserted construction site across the river, your getaway delayed when you lost a boot in the ankle-deep mud.

... near the river, the pastures give way to steep wooded hills, and the sun flinches behind the ridge's skeletal branches, the valleys shadowed and the road spotted with black ice, and you check your watch and figure you should reach the hospital in twenty minutes, a trip made because your daughter has just given birth to a seven-pound boy, your first grandchild, and she called last night from the delivery room, her voice fatigued and ecstatic, and asked if you'd like to visit this morning, a timetable you suspect has been arranged to keep you from crossing paths with your ex-wife, and you say, "Sure, honey, I'll be there," hanging up before asking the baby's name, and alone in your trailer, the windows' plastic coverings twitching with the night's frigid gusts, the air polluted by cigarette smoke and the kerosene heater's gassy stink, you swallowed some pills and drank until you passed out....

With your two thousand split, you covered three months of rent and car payments, and then used the rest to splurge on Christmas gifts. For days, you discovered curls of ribbon between the sofa cushions, crinkled tissue paper wads beneath the tables and chairs. New Year's Eve, the tree lights glimmering in a nearly emptied bottle of French wine, your wife asleep with her head on your lap and the floor strewn with haphazard piles of unwrapped gifts, you silently congratulated yourself. This, you thought with a smile, must be how lottery winners felt, the flipside of life's bad breaks and unanswered prayers. The outgoing invoice numbers were never questioned, and as winter wore on, you'd chat with Gill at Wednesday night's dart league. Gill had gotten into coke, his scraggly mustache often powdered white,

his stutter chemically agitated into a spit-producing, percolating labor. Some nights you'd snort a line or two with him off the condom machine in the bar's mildewed bathroom, but when he got around to asking about the latest shipments at the docks, you quickly changed the subject back to hunting and darts.

... you light another cigarette, four drags before your cough returns, and when you finally stop and wipe the tears from your eyes, you spot a dead dog on the shoulder, a big dog, a retriever or a setter, its matted fur bristling in the breeze, a sunshine glint on the collar's metal tag, and perhaps the man and boy will claim the dog later, another parcel of rotting meat for their truck bed, and before the next odometer tick, you pass a belly-up squirrel, a mangled possum — has the deep snow forced these animals to forage along the road or maybe they've always been there, your eyes oblivious to the carnage....

The Wednesday night bartender was the one who let slip that Gill had given you the shaft, an offhand joke as he worked the taps how Gill should be the one paying for the night's rounds after the eight large he'd made on some construction site deal. You'd been blindsided before, gotten beamed by a fastball in your high school baseball days, had three ribs cracked by a dropped two-by-four, but you'd never had the wind knocked out of you like you did that night, your white knuckles gripping the bar railing, your bones as brittle as November cornstalks. You said nothing, declined Gill's offer to check out the wristwatches and Cabbage Patch dolls waiting in his trunk, but over the next few days, the knowledge of his betrayal festered beneath your winter-pale skin. You'd been the one who'd told him about the spools, the one who'd risked his job, who'd balanced his family's well-being atop Gill's tee-tee-teetering schemes. That Saturday, you confronted Gill in the windowless garage he rented outside town, the unheated space crammed with car stereos and new, rubber-fragrant tires. The lead pipe lay on a workbench littered with pot seeds and coke-smudged cassette cases, and you were only aware of the first blow, the pipe striking Gill's temple before he could raise his fluttering hands in defense. After that, the metal-on-flesh thuds reached you in fading echoes, the sound of a bass-thumping radio being played in a distant room (did you hit him

three times? a dozen?). When you were done, the pipe slipped from your fingers, struck the concrete with a loud ping, and rolled lazily — the garage filled with its hollow, metallic song — until it came to rest against Gill's motionless body.

Remembering a scene from a movie (but had the character gotten away with his crime?), you mopped bleach over the far-flung bloodstains. You wrapped the pipe and body in the white shower curtain Gill had rigged up to hide his metal shelves stocked with triple-beam scales and the bottles of baby laxative he used to stretch a quarter ounce of coke into a half. Then you slumped against a cold wall, gagging on the bleach's chlorine stink, your jackrabbity heart bounding in your chest.

You turned off the lights to deter the coke-seekers and bargain hunters, but the knocks still came, and each jiggle of the locked handle squeezed the breath from your lungs. In gray degrees, the shrouded form lying beside your bloodstained boots separated itself from its murky surroundings until it seemed the white vinyl radiated its own faint glow.

The shovel rattled in the backseat and your headlights jittered ahead over the logging road's rutted grooves. The trunk's weight shifted with every wheel-bucking bump. The pines and firs stretched over you, the moon and stars choked from the sky, the air thick and cool and utterly still. You parked and killed the lights. The body balanced over your right shoulder, the shovel clutched in your left hand, you set off into the woods.

Your father had shown you the trappers' footpath that followed a seasonal creek down to the river. You walked the trail for fifty yards and turned abruptly into the brush. Your father had died the year before, and you wondered, despite your lack of beliefs, if he was somehow near you now.

Gill had always seemed so insubstantial, bird-like with his slight build and nervous tics, a guy you outweighed by a good fifty pounds, but now your shoulders burned as you weaved your way through the thick growth. Saplings clawed at your legs, and the pine branches swatted your face. You waved the shovel before you and cursed the darkness. You thought of the trail and panicked, fearing your staggering path might prevent you from finding your way back to the car. The body fell with a muffled

thud, and you stood over the faintly radiating cocoon, the panting bellows of your lungs the only sound to reach your ears. The digging proved harder than you'd expected, the earth bothered by roots and stones, and you had to fold the stiffening body, knees to chest, to fit the tiny hole.

... mountains of dirty, plowed snow hem the vast hospital parking lot, and after two laps you find a space, your ill-timed engine shuddering into silence, and you unscrew the lid of the pint bottle stashed beneath your seat and throw back a shot, then another, and outside, quick steps propel you across the macadam, and you spit a dark, red glob on a cinder-crust snow-bank and the biting wind snakes up your pant legs, the cold tingling on the dewy alcohol residue around your lips, and the sun disappears behind the hospital, your body shivering in the shadow's temperature drop, and you shovel gum into your mouth, hoping the minty flavor will mask the taste of whiskey and blood, and as you near the entrance, navigate your way between the wheelchair-bound, the crutch-users, the bandaged and bruised, and the entrance's double-set of automatic doors whisper hello, the lobby's warmth tickling your stuffed nose, and you ask for directions at the main desk, make a stop in the perfume-scented gift shop for an overpriced teddy bear and a balloon that proclaims *It's a boy!* in blue, curlicue letters, and in the main corridor your ridiculous balloon bobs above your head, your steps slowed by a pair of bed-pushing orderlies, their oblivious, IV-tethered cargo as white as the bed's sheets, and you study the other passing eyes, the dazed and mournful and relieved, the work-a-day weariness of doctors and nurses and maintenance workers, and how unreal the place seems, this man-made cusp between life and death, and the elevator lights flash, a climbing of floors and a tally of heavenly pings, and the nurse standing beside you brushes your arm as she exits, the cinnamon smell of her coffee lingering after the chrome doors shut, and finally, it's your turn, and you step off and all you have to do is follow the muffled cries, and you count seven behind the nursery's thick window glass, all swaddled tight, their scrunched heads topped with knitted caps the color of ice cream, and some cry, some sleep, while the one nearest you blinks his clouded eyes against

the assault of harsh light....

The next day you burned your clothes in a rusted drum behind the loading dock. The wind whipped the flames, and the swirling smoke stung your eyes, the thinning, gray ribbon climbing into a slate sky. Weeks passed, months, and the knock on the door that had kept you up at night never materialized. At the bar, you overheard rumors about Gill's disappearance, the most prevalent speculation that he'd run off to Florida after burning a couple of Jamaicans in a coke deal. With each passing year, you think of him less ... and more.

The fear that once consumed you has distilled into something more subtle, something finer and grittier, an ashy scrim through which your days are filtered. Food doesn't taste as good as it once did, and the bar's jukebox has lost its power to make you sing along.

Unwelcome images of Gill's decomposing body sometimes drift into your thoughts. Alone in your bed, you have pictured the rotting flesh and the feasting of worms, the slightly richer shade of green for the grave's grass. And some nights, you pull back further, rising over his grave, above the fragrant pines and firs, and you imagine the mice that ate the worms and the coyotes that snapped up the mice, and you feel as if Gill's carbon-laced residue has been spread as far as you can see.

Would you have forgiven him by now? On some level at least? Perhaps you'd still play darts with him. Perhaps you'd still be married. Perhaps you wouldn't need booze to fall asleep each night. Perhaps your daughter would call you more than once a month. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything.

... your daughter, propped in her hospital bed, smiles at you, sweat-teased curls springing from her hair, the tips brushing her flushed cheeks, and there's a nurse there, the room so small you have to wedge yourself into a corner so she can finish changing the boy's diaper and all you can really see at first is a pair of improbably tiny, needle-pricked heels cradled in the nurse's tender grip, and when she's done swaddling the boy in a sky blue blanket, she steps aside and there's your grandson in a glass crib hardly bigger than a shoebox and he isn't crying, not a peep, and you study the peaceful face, the puffy, slitted eyes and cone-shaped

head, a single finger reaching out of the swaddling blanket, and your daughter says, "Hold him, Dad," as she reaches onto the nightstand for an instamatic camera, and you slide your hands under the barely stirring bundle, your callused palm cradling the boy's neck and head, and as you lean over, you listen to the glass-trapped echo of his breathing — a sound high-pitched, congested, shallow, and persistent, his tiny lungs fighting to adjust to a strange world, and carefully, carefully, you bring the bundle closer to your chest, and when your bodies meet, you think about the purity of a soul without secrets or sin, and you think about the new generation of dart-throwers at the bar who've never heard Gill's stutter, never sifted through his trunk's improbable treasures, and a teary welling mingles with the blood in your throat, and your hands tremble when you bring the boy closer and kiss his smooth, round cheek, and as the camera flashes, you cry softly for him and for yourself, cry for the living and the dead and the fateful roads a man travels between the two....