

The Gun by Fred Coppersmith

Let's, you and me, get one thing straight right off the bat. Get all our ducks, so to speak, in a neat little row. I don't make a habit of killing people. I think that much has got to be said. It's just not in my nature. The sight of blood makes me dizzy and faint. Can't even stand funerals, never could. So I guess you'd have to call everything that's happened these past few days...well, just a bit of bad luck, really. A string of coincidence, that's all. Unusual. Terrible, oh yes. But coincidence just the same. Not part of any grand scheme or design I'd laid out. No, nothin' you could put your finger on anyway. Not like Dooley thought it might be when I told him what had happened and tried to hand him back his gun.

Coincidence, that's all. Sort of freak turn of events you sometimes read about in books or in supermarket magazines. Just believable enough to be true. But, then, Dooley doesn't read much. And most of what he *does* read got nothin' but little colored pictures in it. Not too many words, you know? Just funny little people with their tiny thought balloons. So I suppose he can be forgiven his doubt. Besides, I think I finally convinced him in the end anyway. Even got him to take back that shit-ass pistol of his. Though I'm pretty sure he buried it out back behind the cabin later that afternoon, when he thought I was asleep. That's what it looked like anyway, least from a distance. Didn't see a shovel, but that's what it looked like. Would explain why you boys can't find it. Yes, three dead men will eat away at anybody's conscience, I suppose, spook even a solid rock like Dooley. So I won't hold that against him neither. Dooley's a good kid. I just wish he'd never loaned me that damn gun.

Well now, I suppose a good story has got to have a beginning. Got to start somewhere. You wouldn't sit round a campfire listenin' to a man don't know how to tell a story right, would you? No sir, you don't strike me as the sort. And, well, even if the middle's a mess and the ending doesn't quite wash, if a story starts out all right, that's all that really counts, in my book. You don't have to be O. Henry to tell a story right, no sir. You just have to get whoever's listenin' interested. Pick that right first note, whole symphony kicks in just fine. Least, that's how I've always seen it. Start things off with a bang, so to speak. Though I won't pretend those wicked twist endings don't help considerably. *The Gift of the Magi?* Huh, gets me every time.

But like I say, a good story's got to have a beginning, got to have its roots somewhere, and if mine does, I suppose it's with Dooley and that damn .45 of his. Oh, I could go further back than that, I suspect. All the way back to Carolina if you'd like. Maybe tell you all 'bout my childhood...growin' up and always on the road – sort of thing you fellas like to hear 'bout, ain't it? Fill in some of those gaps for you, set your mind at ease? Maybe tell you some of the things didn't make it into the papers back then. Oh yeah, I could do that, I reckon. But you see...well, there ain't much sense in rehashin' old business, now is there? In diggin' up old graves and not lettin' the dead get their rest. No sir, I don't see much sense in that.

Besides, it's all in the past, all behind us now. Don't make a damn bit of difference where I was born, where I started out. All that matters is where I ended up. And that story doesn't really start properly 'til you get to that gun.

Dooley can't shoot it for shit, never could, but it was his father's gun and Dooley gets mighty sentimental about the old man sometimes. Strange, when you think about it, since they were never what you'd call close, and Dooley was only around eight when the bastard died. Shot a hole straight through the roof of his mouth with that very same gun, knocked molars down the back of his throat like little white ducks shot from the sky. Brains and blood splashed all over the floor like some sort of crazy inkblot – that's right, like a Rorschach test gone mad. A whole damn frenzy of splatters. Not the sort of thing you'd expect to find holed up inside a man's head, much less paintin' the walls and floorboards behind him in dark red, gray and yellow splotches. Real messy way to go, from what I've heard, from what I've been told and tried to piece together on my own. Amazin' what you can learn, you just ask the right questions. Though I suppose you already know that, don't you? And yeah...I suppose you're right. There *are* worse ways to go. Fact, I reckon there's *always* worse ways to go.

But anyway, Dooley loved that gun, kept it polished and clean, took it out back to target shoot at tin cans, maybe a quarter mile from the house – if he hit one, though...my God, it was most *definitely* a miracle.

His mother never wanted him to have it, of course. Not really the sort of thing you'd want lyin' about, I suspect. Not in easy reach anyway, and not after what had happened. A boy like Dooley'd be liable to shoot his fingers off or follow in his daddy's footsteps if he weren't too careful. Guns are dangerous things; don't let nobody tell you different. Hell, even careful don't count for much when you got a gun in your hand.

And with all those bad memories, all that caked blood and brains that had to be washed away, scrubbed off the walls and the floor...all those questions, policemen goin' in an out, maybe dustin' for prints – hell, you probably know better what goes on than I do – well, it's a damn puzzle how Dooley ever managed to hold on to that gun. Regular mystery, you might say. I see that, don't think I don't. But I can't account for it. The gun was...well, an heirloom, I suspect. Been handed down and of some considerable value – that's what Dooley always told me anyway. Said his old man had snagged it somehow in the war, pulled it off a dead Kraut most likely. Hell, it could've been Adolf Hitler's own personal sidearm for all I know. I never did get a chance to find out. I still couldn't tell you a damn thing 'bout that gun, 'cept how it felt in my hands.

And Dooley was always kind of sketchy on the details. Story changed every time just enough to make me wonder, you know? Made me a little hesitant to believe anything he had to say without a little grain of salt. Wasn't nothin' particular he said or didn't say. Nothin' you could pin down or call him on. No outright lie you could maybe catch him tellin'...but it was enough, enough to make you wonder. Sometimes, you could think maybe he made the whole thing up, even if you couldn't figure out why. Yes sir, always struck me as mighty strange.

But still, he *had* the gun, there's no denyin' that much. How he kept his grubby little hands on it probably ain't as important as everything that came next. Although I can see it's probably the sort of thing that'd stick in your head, maybe drive you crazy if you let it. Sort of detail a man like yourself can't wrap his mind around, much as he might try. Gonna go in your report, I imagine. Make yourself a little note for future reference, a nice, neat check or underline with your pretty little pen. Oh yeah, I can see you're the sort always asking questions, ain't you? Always trying to figure things out, fit those puzzle pieces together, just so. *What could possess Dooley's mother to let him keep that gun?* you're probably wonderin'. *What the hell was wrong with her?* I swear, if I knew I'd tell you. That woman was crazy, no doubt about it, but I don't know how far that goes to explainin' anything. Even madness can only go so far, I think. Hell, I know I can't explain it, and I've had plenty of time to mull it over. Some things just don't make sense.

I *do* know Dooley wasn't allowed to shoot the gun or even keep it loaded – told me so himself – even after he was old enough to get the permit in his own name, when he was 'round twelve or so. When he got older and was on his own, maybe, but until then that gun was off-limits. Absolutely forbidden. Dooley's mom made sure of that much, always kept the bullets shut tight in her dresser drawer, locked away from her young boy's overeager and pryin' hands. Hell, I 'spect she tried. But the key was always easy to find and...well, she never checked the rounds later on, never counted or noticed the rows of empty shells stuck in with the rest of the cartridges. No sir. Hell, from what I gather, she didn't notice too much of anythin' in those days. Couple cards shy of a deck, you could say. So Dooley had plenty of practice with that gun. Don't even know if his daddy was in the ground 'fore he started usin' it. Not that it ever did him any good, of course. Not with his lazy eyes and shaky hands. Most times, practice does not make perfect. It just tires you out and keeps you running 'long the same rut.

And the kick on that gun...now that must've been something for that eight-year-old boy. I know *I* felt it – not quite a wallop but damn near close – the first time I pulled the trigger and Billy Rockwell slumped to the floor. My hand ached for a good hour after that, heavy and numb like I'd wrapped it in cement. Couldn't stop myself from shakin'. So I can only imagine what the recoil must've been like for that scrawny, pencil-necked kid I know Dooley was. Oh yes, I've seen pictures.

But, anyway, Dooley had this gun...

Oh, he'd never let me use it, of course – like I said, real sentimental – but he'd never pass up the chance to let me see it, to demonstrate just how much of a crack shot he thought he was. "Eagle eyes, James," he'd often tell me. "A real marksman's gotta have eagle eyes."

As far as I can tell, what Dooley *had* were little beady eyes, two dim little, milky blue points, swimming beneath those thick, damn ugly lenses. More like fish-eyes than anythin' else. Dumb tiny specks, glazed and empty. Aquarium eyes, like watery stones. Of course, I never told him that. Never interrupted his little song and dance routine. No sir, it's never wise to insult a man with a gun, near blind or not. I'm sure even Dooley could get at least one bullet where it didn't belong, if he tried real hard. And like I said, the sight of blood makes me faint. Yes, a man has got to learn when to keep his mouth shut or he's gonna get taught the hard way.

"You don't just gotta *aim* the gun," Dooley would say, holdin' it out in front of him like an electric wire, shakin' there in his thick clammy hand, like he was afraid of throwin' sparks every-which-way. "You gotta *be* the gun. Your heart, your eyes...it's not just pulling the trigger, no sir. Lot more to it than that. Gun's gotta be like another hand, real natural, like your entire soul's out there on your fingertips, just itching to whisper something. Begging you to *pull*, just a little, so it can tell the world what it's thinking."

Some men'll try to move mountains with words like that. Climb up on their soapbox and yell out their little playground prophecies, bellow and roar, ramble on like there's no tomorrow. Others might scribble 'em down, write long books filled with pages of shit that don't quite mean anythin'. Real pretty, real nice – oh yeah, words roll right off the tongue – but there's nothin' much to it. Not much heart beatin' down there beneath the surface. I suspect you hear that sort of thing all the time. Sort of thing my father used to call cereal-box philosophy. Real simple stuff – nice enough to look at, but not too deep. No sir, not much deeper than a puddle. But for some men, men like Dooley – hell, yeah, maybe even men like me – even a puddle's deep enough to drown in.

You just gotta work at it.

Hmm? No, sir, I don't think I *would* like to talk 'bout my father just now, if it's all the same to you.

That gun...oh, that gun always fascinated me, you know? I can't deny it – wouldn't try to – but I also can't quite say why. No sir, I explain it, that attraction, the draw that it had on me. It was like...like an undeniable force, you know? Like somethin'...well, *fundamental*, really. Like gravity, just pullin' you in. Inescapable. You could pretend it wasn't there, hope it'd go away, but in the end it'd snare you just the same. Just a question of time, is all. Oh, you could wish it away all you like, yes indeed. But, like my daddy always said, wishes ain't horses, now are they? No sir, it was just a question of time.

Oh, I tell you...I always wanted to hold that gun, maybe get a sense of what Dooley was talking about, feel that itch deep in my joints, my fingers closin' in. His words maybe didn't mean much when you looked real deep, but they were certainly effective. They had resonance. And a man can learn not to look too deep if he doesn't want to. I knew there was power there in that gun. You could read it in Dooley's watery eyes, smell it afterwards in the smoke. Even if you couldn't find it in his words, you could always hear it in that soft little click just 'fore the trigger's pulled. Even a dumb moose like Dooley could look like John Wayne with that thing in his hand. Like Moses with his staff held up to the heavens. Hell, you could part the Red Sea just by cocking that thing right.

It's kinda odd, I guess, when you think much about it...as I'm sure you'd like me to do. I'd never even held a gun before, never been tempted to go out and get myself one. Far as I recall, I never did want to feel that itch, never wanted to hold that power. Just never occurred to me, I suppose. Not in my nature. Didn't know or care what I might be missin', really. My father...well, he was a stern pacifist – a lapsed preacher – and he wouldn't tolerate a gun in his house. No sir. Not after what had happened to my mother. Which was fine by me, I suppose, more or less, as I was largely indifferent to the whole idea. Guns were somethin' you saw in the movies, read about sometimes in books, but they weren't real. They were just props, like stage decorations. They popped at high noon at the OK Corral, but that was about it. Nothin' you just had to get your hands on. Nothin' you couldn't learn to live without.

Wasn't until I met Dooley, I think, that things started to change. Not in any real earth-shatterin' way, mind you – not like there was...well, not like there was any great epiphany in the smell of gunpowder, you know? No chorus of angels cryin' *Hallelujah* every time he let loose a shot. No, Dooley most definitely

did not put on any great show. But I knew – yes sir, I *knew* – I wanted that gun. The more I listened, the more I watched, I knew I had to hold it in my hands, get a feel for it. You know what I mean. You might wanna pretend you don't, but oh yeah, you know. Dooley painted such a pretty picture, you knew that gun meant something to him. It was important. It had weight. Life and death could be decided in that little *click*, in that instant before you pulled the trigger and that whisper came whippin' out into the world. Hell, Dooley may not have been any Einstein, but he knew that much.

That gun...my God...

When I first met Dooley, of course – when Beth and I went up to the cabin this past November to spend the week – well, my first thought was, “this boy's retarded.” He just seemed so dim, his mind so far away. You could talk to him for damn near an hour and not be sure if anything was sinkin' in. You know what I mean? He was just so vacant sometimes, like a huge wall of stone. Like still waters that you knew didn't really run too deep.

Beth hadn't told me much about her younger brother, said only that everybody'd called him Dooley all his life even though his real name was Duane. Didn't say why, of course but...well, that ain't really important when you think about it. There was a'least ten years separatin' those two, and he spent most of the year at the family cabin upstate. Didn't like cities much, she said, and I don't think he'd even visited Beth's place more than once or twice in all the years she'd been there. Although sometimes he'd go downstate if he had to, if he couldn't help it, maybe see their mother in the rest home – real pretty place, little garden you could sit in, watchin' goldfish zip past each other in this tiny little pond – but well...well, he'd grown up in that cabin, spent nearly twenty-two whole years there. Saw no reason to stray too far for too long.

When I first saw the place, hell, I can't say I blamed him. All I'd seen of New York before that was Beth's apartment in Manhattan, maybe a couple museums here and there, the Public Library, couple bus stations, some restaurants...but not too much that recommended itself very highly. Not really the sort of place you'd wanna live if you had the choice. Might like to read about it, of course, see it in the movies if you could. I'd done that. Probably part of why I'd agreed to move in with Beth when she suggested it. Expected somethin' different, I suppose. But it was nowhere to hang your hat or rest your feet. Not the sort of place you'd wanna end up when the day was done. No offense, of course. I know some people like it. Just not what I was used to, is all. Most definitely not what I'd expected. No sir, not much like home...which, to be perfectly honest, I still can't help but miss sometimes. Times like right now 'specially – late at night, when you can't see a star in the sky. Oh hell, sometimes I just wish I stayed put.

And all those parties. Oh God, too many. Beth and all her little socialite friends. Pasty-faced, snippy debutantes, like...oh, I don't know. Like little cartoon people, I suppose, paradin' 'round that New York high-rise, dressed to the nines and sizin' you up. Like you were a bone somebody'd tossed into the jackals' den. Sort of people you'd never imagine were real, 'less you saw 'em with your own two eyes. All those weasely, mustached men, neckties wrapped like nooses round their thick, meaty necks, pulled so tight you'd expect their heads to just go pop, pop, pop like a blister, any minute. Shoulders like cinderblocks in their blazers and sportscoats. Big, boulder-headed men who'd played high school football and were still ever so proud of it. These were moneymakers, every last one of 'em. Bankers and brokers, commodities men. Their thinnin' hair parted was just so, and their faces were a featureless ghost-like white...nails so filed and clean, cigars puckered between their thick sneerin' lips, grinnin' a pale shade of brownish-yellow.

Oh, all of them were so prim, all so goddamn proper. A thousand *esquires* trailin' after their names like rattlesnakes in the grass – sort of thing they'd announce with a little titter or chuckle, maybe say with a little cough behind their hand – just to make sure you were listenin'. Tell you how they'd spent the past weekend in Kennebunkport or out on the Cape. And *have you ever been out on the Cape, Jimmy?* they'd ask. *Oh, you simply must go!* Oh but no sir...best you could do for them was be a novelty, do your little song and dance, like Rhett Butler for the day. With each of them sneerin' at you, just a little. Real subtle, lips hardly movin' at all. You might not even notice it 'less you looked, 'less you paid attention. But you could tell if you looked. You could hear what they said behind your back or read between the lines. Wasn't hard, and you didn't have to dig too deep beneath the surface.

No, you weren't really there at all to them. You were just a bit of gossip, somethin' to gawk at. You were just a little detail they could ignore when they got bored. When the novelty had worn off.

Oh yeah, you could bounce back and forth in that little circle forever. Like a man lost at sea. Drown in all that paté and bad wine and even worse conversation. It's enough to make a grown man weep sometimes, let me tell you. You could feel so stranded, if you let it get to you, if you let yourself buckle under. All those *don't he talk so nice?* and *where down south are you from again, Jimmy?* All those damn questions pointed at you, pokin' and proddin' like you were some sort of trained monkey...or like part of a travelin' minstrel show. Like they got you lined up in their sights, just biding their time 'til you stroll on by and they shoot you down.

Ain't he the cutest thing you ever did see? Darling, he's just so precious! Bethany, dear, wherever did you find him?

Well I ain't no Br'er Rabbit, no sir. And I don't sing no "Jimmy Crack Corn." No look away, look away Dixie land for this boy. I had my fill, thank you kindly. Ain't gonna be no more of that.

But well anyway...that cabin, yes, that was something else. Real quiet. Peaceful. A man could hear himself think there if he really wanted to. Beth never liked it, of course. Too many memories, she said. Couldn't walk from one room to another without picturin' her daddy with that gun in his hand, without hearin' that shot echo up from the past like a ripple in a pond. Couldn't understand my attraction to it neither, why I'd go out there almost every day with Dooley and watch him try to shoot, watch him lose a whole box of shells out there in the woods, never hittin' nothin' 'cept maybe a tree every now and then. Like a little puppy dog, she said – that's what I was – right there at Dooley's heels, eyes only for that gun. I s'ppose by now you've probably already talked to her, heard this all before, but I think some of it bears repeatin'.

Besides, she wasn't really there when it all happened, was she? Not when it all started to fit together, you know? All started to go...well, go a little sour, you could say. Least in hindsight. When I actually got my hands on that gun, convinced Dooley I knew somebody could appraise it down in the city, could tell him just how much his daddy had been worth. Oh, you should've seen his eyes light up at that. Like a little kid at Christmas. Actually believed all those damn stories he'd told me, the dumb moose. Didn't wanna see past all the lies, I guess.

But no, Beth'd already run back cryin' to that little circle of hers by then – took the damn car with her, too, as I remember – and, well...way I figure it, Beth ain't really too important to the whole story. Not the real meat of it anyway. Not the heart. Not when you get down to...what'd you call it? the final analysis? No sir. I know she was there at the end, can't pretend she wasn't, and like I said, by now I suspect she's out of the hospital and you've talked to her already. Probably already heard a lot of this, too, one way or another. Got it all down there in your little notebook, neat as can be. Hell, maybe it's even been in the papers by now. Papers eat this sort of thing up.

But she wasn't there when it really mattered, no sir. Not when I left the cabin with that gun tucked into my duffel bag, hidden down deep, waving to Dooley at the train station. Only dumb bad luck she was there at all at the end. Hell, how was I s'pposed to know she'd be home that late? Wasn't like I went lookin' for her or anythin'. Just another damn coincidence, that's all. Sort of pure stupid chance I can't seem to get myself away from, much as I might try.

So, if I were you...well, I'm not so sure I'd believe everything Beth might have to say, least not without that little grain of salt. Best to err on the side of caution, ain't it? That's what they say. And, well, she's got her reasons to lie.

Oh, maybe not lie, so much as...embellish. Maybe tell you more than she could really know, try and fill in some of those gaps for you, those bits of lost time – sort of thing you keep askin' me about, keep scribblin' about in your notes. Damn, I don't know. Talk to her if you want. This point, I'm not really sure I give a damn anymore. Just want you to remember who was there and who wasn't, what *really* happened, that's

all I'm sayin'. I'm just tryin' to make sense of everythin' for you, map it out as much as I can. I'm bein' as honest as I know how.

Beth might have the best intentions for all I know, but she's not gonna do *that*. She's just gonna tell you what you wanna hear, what you're expectin' to hear. Give you some story that'll look nice on paper, wrap it up for you in a neat little bow. Tidy things up, trim those edges, and hell, you might even start to believe her. Easy that way, I s'ppose, everythin' sorted out, everythin' makes sense. All fits together just so. No more mystery, no more unanswered questions. I can tell you don't wanna believe me.

But real life doesn't always make sense, now does it? Real life's full of mystery, full of unanswered questions, puzzles you just sometimes gotta learn to let be. Sometimes things just don't figure themselves out. I mean, you of all people should know that.

Sometimes a story'll just happen, you know? Unfold without a rhyme or reason. Can't make head nor tail of it, much as you might try. People pop in and out, maybe a name gets dropped here or there, somebody gets him or herself killed – little tiny hints, so very tantalizin'. And you're so very sure you could fit 'em all together if you just tried, if you just put your mind to it...or if whoever's tellin' it would stick to the facts. But, no, no sir. You'll never see them again. They're just details, thrown in there for good measure, round the story out. They're just background noise. Little things you might mistake for the real story if you weren't payin' attention, if you were just lookin' at the surface, listenin' for names and takin' notes. You can skim a stone 'cross a pond, but it's what's down there beneath the ripples that matters most. That's where things begin. And it's only in the beginnings of things that stories really happen. That's all that really matters. What's *not* said on the surface, what's beatin' down there in the heart.

All the rest, all that *who, what, where* and *when*...well that's just plot. That's just aftermath. And anybody who's just keepin' an eye out for plot can go fuck themselves, far as I'm concerned, 'cause there's not much worth listenin' to in that, now is there? Not much worth tellin'. Because every story ends the same way, when you really look at it. Every story ends in death, when you add it up. Only thing you can really count on nowadays. One thing you can be sure of. It's how the story starts that makes it worth hearin' then. That's what makes all the goddamn difference.

So you wanna know 'bout that gun, what I did with it when I first got back to the city. You're just itchin' all over to hear 'bout it, ain't you? Hear all 'bout Billy Rockwell. All 'bout those two cocksuckers over at Beth's place. Nearly tumblin' out of your seat. Huh, I can see the look in your eyes. That little flutter. Oh yes sir, I've seen it before. You wanna know those details. You want those gaps filled in. That's why you keep askin' me questions, keep pokin' at me to go back over things, get me to repeat myself. If you're not careful, your pen's gonna start runnin' outta ink pretty soon. Oh but I know what you want. You want those little puzzle pieces – the ones I'm sure Beth would be more than happy to try an' give you. You want everythin' to fit together, neat as damn well can be. That's why I'm here, why you ain't gonna let me leave 'til I tell you what you wanna know.

But I can't tell you what you wanna know, 'cause you're just interested in the way things end – that grand finale when the curtain comes crashin' down or the credits start to roll. You wanna see the trail that led me to this point. You wanna know why. You wanna know *what*. But you don't wanna know my story, no sir. Not really. You don't *really* wanna know 'bout that gun. You just wanna know how I'm like everybody else. You just wanna hear 'bout death and decay and let everythin' fade to black. Just like those policemen, kept houndin' my father rest of his life. You keep pokin' at a caged animal, pretty soon it don't much care who it's gonna bite, now does it? So you pin me to the table, cut me open, and dissect everythin' I say. Maybe then, you think, you'll understand, right? Then everything'll make sense.

No...you're all the same. You're not interested in that *click click click* of the gun; you're just interested in three dead men lyin' on the ground, zippered up, tags on their toes, nothin' left in their eyes, smug grins wiped from their lips and every story they might've told erased from memory. Gone for good.

But there's no *story* in that. That's just what happened, where the pieces fell when all was said and done. That's just how the cards were dealt, plain old coincidence at work.

No, the real story's in that gun. You might not wanna think it, but you know it. Deep down, past all that ripplin' water, all those questions bubblin' at the surface, you *know* it, same way I knew it first time I saw that thing in Dooley's hand. Same way Dooley knew it even if he didn't know much of anythin' else. Same way I'm sure my mother knew it, lookin' straight up into that barrel. Oh...well, maybe you never held a gun before – I don't imagine you would've – but you know the sort of power that's there. You know it just by bein' born. It's *innate*. Every instinct tells you that it's true. The hairs on the back of your neck start to stand up straight. Your stomach tightens. You know that charge, that soft little *click* and that earth-shatterin' boom – like a thousand volts in your fingertips, like...like you got God coursin' through your body and boltin' down that barrel. Might send shivers down your spine, might make you run and hide and wish you'd never picked the damn thing up. But you can't pretend not to know what sort of power's there in your hand. Love it or condemn it, you can't deny it.

That gun could make a story worth tellin' out of anybody.

Billy Rockwell worked in a pawnshop – though you already know that, don't you? They've told you already, filled you in on all those details. Shown you the lay of the land. Mapped it all out for you. Because the devil's in the details, right? That's what they say, ain't it? I mean, all you gotta do is look in your little report and you know everythin' that happened. Flip through those pages and you've got yourself an explanation, or at least some pieces you can stitch together. But you still wanna hear me say it. You wanna be my confessor, usher me along that long, windin' road to recovery. Well, I don't need your pity, thank you very much. Your smug little smile...

Because, you know...I don't remember if I knew the gun was loaded or not, all right? I'm sure I didn't. Wasn't like I'd planned anythin'. It just...happened. Just like that. Less than the blink of an eye, you might say. I mean, I figured I owed it to Dooley to actually get the gun appraised for him like I'd said I would, you know? See how much money he might get if he ever decided to part with it. And well...no, I can't remember my finger pullin' on the trigger or hearin' that whisper whip itself into Billy's body. But seein' that kid lyin' there on the dirty floor behind that marble-top counter was proof enough, I suppose. I felt sick to my stomach, couldn't believe what had happened. My hand hurt so much and he was just lyin' there, so very still, in that puddle of blood like...like a little dead, broken-necked sparrow, knocked right from the sky, plucked mid-flight and flung to the ground...but no sir, I could not believe it. That little hole ripped right through his chest and leakin' blood, *drip drip drip* down his shirt...his eyes starin' up at me, nothin' at all in 'em, like his life had been just washed away...oh no, that was just incomprehensible. Didn't make a damn bit of sense. It was like lookin' through somebody else's eyes, you know? Not quite sure what you're supposed to be seein' but knowin' you see it all the same? It was like standin' outside yourself, tryin' to get back in...maybe not quite sure you want to but knowin' you ain't got no choice.

No...no sir, I'm sure I only fired once. There must be some mistake in that report of yours. He was dead. Weren't no reason to shoot again.

I *was* amazed, you know, that nobody had heard the shot and come runnin' 'fore I could get the gun tucked back into my bag, down there beneath my socks and the extra shells. I half expected that door to come crashin' in, sirens rollin' up the street and the flash of lights outside, just like in the movies. Like I was...James Cagney or somethin'... But it was a fairly deserted street that time of day, sun goin' down and startin' to snow, and well...Billy worked alone – I'd noticed that on my way in, yes sir – so there weren't too many people around to sound the alarm or call in the cavalry.

Don't suppose I'd have heard 'em anyway, though, not with that little echo still ricochetin' back and forth in my ear. Amazin' how much noise a gun can make. Just a little *pop pop pop* and a man could go very nearly deaf. Yes sir, out in the woods, nothin' but tin cans and squirrels, you could maybe fool yourself, not really hear what's happenin', start thinkin' 'bout some place else, let your mind go wanderin'. But up close, all boxed in, you couldn't help but hear. You couldn't help but sit up and take notice. And it was like listenin' to God tryin' to shatter your brain from the inside. Like your heart had just stopped, you couldn't catch a breath, and the whole world was comin' to an end. It was like a little piece of Armageddon when you pulled that trigger and nothin' else seemed to matter. The whole world had been swept away.

Hmm? No, listen, I told you already, I don't wanna talk about that. Why you gotta keep bringin' that up? My father ain't got nothin' to do with this story. Why can't you see that by now? It's as plain as day, ain't it? You keep askin' me questions 'bout things that oughta stay dead and buried, old ghosts that got nothin' to do with what happened, got nothin' to do with anything. You just sit there, writin' your notes, scribblin' everything down – hell, I can't say a word without that little red pen jumpin' across the page, like you got some new little insight into just what makes me tick, like there's some sort of revelation goin' on and you're pleased as punch just to sit on the sidelines and watch it happen.

But why won't you just let it be? Why can't you just accept that I can't tell you what you wanna know? There ain't no fuckin' answers sometimes. People just die. Scenes just fade to black sometimes, and there ain't no warnin'. There ain't no explanation. There ain't nothin' you can do 'bout it but move on and try to forget what you can't figure out. But yeah, you *want* those answers, you want a reason – you wanna know *why* – wanna know so bad it hurts, can't stop yourself from cryin' late at night, achin' all over...just wonderin' why that little *click* came so damn fast, why you never heard it comin'. If you'd only heard it comin', maybe you'd understand. Maybe then you could prepare yourself. That's what you think. But you can't understand. You can't piece it together. You can't fuckin' know why a man would do somethin' like that. His own goddamn wife... Oh no sir, there ain't no sense in that. There ain't no answers. So why even bother tryin' to ask questions 'bout it? You goddamn people are all the same, you know that? All you care about are details and consequences and end results. Just a diagnosis and a damn headline – that's all I am to you.

You ain't got a clue what really matters.

Billy Rockwell is dead. That's all there is to that. Didn't even know his name 'til you fellas told me. For the longest time I couldn't stop wonderin' who you were talkin' about. It's funny...in a strange kinda way. Maybe he had a wife. Hell, maybe he had kids. I don't remember seein' a ring on his finger, but...well, you never know, now do you? Maybe he had a story, somethin' worth tellin' behind that glassy-eyed face, but I couldn't tell it to you. I know nothin' about him 'cept that he's gone. And, he ain't comin' back. You know...sometimes, be perfectly honest, I don't even remember what he looked like. You know, it's funny, but sometimes...well, sometimes I can almost pretend like I made the whole thing up.

Sometimes I think maybe that's the only thing would explain it – if all of it was just a lie, every last bit. Just a story, you know? Because if it's just a story...well, then you can change things around. That's what Beth told you, am I right? That I made the whole thing up, every last word? Wouldn't surprise me one bit, you know. No sir. I mean...well, she don't want her name in the papers, now does she? Of course she's gonna change the story round a little bit, stretch some things when you ask her, lie some to protect herself. That's all she really cares about, ain't it? I...well, I wouldn't be surprised if she'd convinced herself by now, you know...that I was just...just another nut. Just another name in the paper...that she didn't know me at all. I mean...

Well no, look, I told you that already... Keep me goin' back over the same shit, time and time again. No goddamn point to this...you call yourself a professional? Beth *took* the car. She took everythin' with her when she left the cabin that day. Just left me stranded there. All my stuff was back at her place. I mean, how am I s'posed to prove somethin' like that? What other reason would I have to go back there anyway? I told you, I didn't know she was gonna be there. I hadda go back, now didn't I? All I had with me was a change of clothes and a duffel bag I'd borrowed from her brother.

Well of course she's got a brother – I mean, what kind of stupid question is that? I told you! She and Dooley...

No look, look...I don't care if you boys can't find that gun. You're just...you're just not listenin' right, are you? You ain't heard anythin' I said all this time... You keep writin' but...but you're confusin' details with what's important, talkin' 'bout my mother for God knows why, like that's got anythin' to do with this...like askin' me 'bout my father's gonna make everythin' alright. I don't need your goddamn condescension. You're just...you're just fuckin' with me, you know? Treatin' me like I'm a fool, like I...like I don't see what you're doin', like I can't read between the lines or hear what's said beneath the words. Like I'm just lookin' for the ripples on the surface... A goddamn child, that's what you think I am.

Like I don't know anythin'...but I know. I know where my story begins. I know what's important and what's not. That gun, that tingle in my bones....that's...that's...

Look, I don't think I wanna talk about this anymore. I think...I think I just wanna go back to my room now. Can't think straight, all these damn questions. I just...I just wanna go back. I'm so tired...