

STRAYS

They do the maiden races first, get them out of the way. You sit in your truck, going over the racing program one last time, circling your picks with a pencil, and you can see the track from where you are. You look out past the fence and watch the dogs. They're greyhounds, long and slender and athletic, and they shoot out of their boxes fast, chasing the mechanical rabbit around the track. The dogs wear muzzles to keep from biting each other, though some of them still try.

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You go to the teller inside and place your bets. You only play the higher grades. Not smart to play lower grades. The dogs are unproven. Too many variables.

You take your ticket and make your way outside, fighting through the crowd. Rows of stadium seats align the track, and the regulars sit in their regular seats, programs and tickets on their laps. A lot of them are coal miners, playing every evening after their shifts, hands still gray from the mines as they mark the programs, noting who's up and who's down. You know the faces of the regulars, and they know yours, but none of you really talk to each other. The wind's chilly that October night, and you pull your denim jacket tight as you take your seat, settling in for the next race.

The workers parade the dogs out, nine of them. Some of the dogs squat and shit on their way to the starting line.

This is the fourth race of the night, a grade C. You didn't put much money on it. A couple of the dogs were moving up from D, so you avoided picking those. Instead, you

bet on Lightning Bullet—a C dog that has competed a few times in B races—to place. For you to collect, the dog has to finish in either first or second.

When the race starts, the announcer's voice goes a hundred miles an hour, rattling off names of dogs, race positions, who's gaining on who and who's winning at each turn. On the second call, Lightning Bullet is in third, but you feel okay. The program indicated that the dog was a stretch runner, and heading into the stretch, into the final straightaway, Lightning Bullet gains some ground, battling his way into second. He crosses the finish line in that position, a few tenths of a second shy of first place. That doesn't matter, though. You still win the wager.

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Rest of your night isn't quite as lucky. You drop the next few races, and, soon enough, you've lost more than you've won. Your evening's bankroll rides on the next race, a trifecta bet for three dogs to finish in the exact order you chose. It's a tough bet, but the payoff is big.

You handicapped the race before you made your selections, calculated the average speed and grades for all the dogs and made notes in the program. According to the stats, I Smell Victory should come in first, followed closely by Sally's Saddle in second. Those two bets feel like locks, and you're confident with those choices, but then after that it's a toss-up. You settled on Magic Missile, an A dog moving back down to B grade races. The dog didn't seem out of form, his most recent B races still tightly competitive, so that's why you chose him.

As these dogs and others move onto the track for the next race, making their way to the boxes, you hold your ticket in your hand, gripping it tight.

I Smell Victory, Sally's Saddle, and Magic Missile. Has to be those three in that order that finish first.

When they shoot out of the boxes, I Smell Victory is on the outside, a prime position. He takes the lead and keeps it. Sally's Saddle, running in an inside lane, is bumped early by another dog, but he quickly recovers, and he fights his way into third as the dogs round the first turn, moves into second by the next turn.

The lure moves at sixty miles per hour, and the dogs pound away, chasing it.

Magic Missile is your only pick that's not performing. The dog is in fifth as the pack heads into the stretch. There's a burst of speed in the last few feet of the race, and Magic Missile finishes in fourth, but that does you no good. Your bet is ruined.

The whole race took barely thirty seconds to complete.

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As soon as you cross the threshold into that piece-of-shit house, she's on your case about the groceries. She's asking for the bags, the fucking bags, and she really wants her smokes. You tell her you didn't have money, that you lost it all and she'll have to make do until next payday. You tell her that she shouldn't be smoking with her being pregnant, and she tells you to go fuck yourself, that she knows what's good for herself and the baby.

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Next payday, you're back at it. You follow the same precautions, jotting notes in your program, weighing your options. Magic Missile is racing again, but you aren't betting on him this time. That dog looked pathetic last time out, and no matter what the odds say, you aren't hinging all your luck on him.

You feel good about your picks, though, and you do pretty well early in the night at breaking even. You have a couple

bumps here and there, but that's to be expected anytime you're gambling.

You look at your ticket, reviewing your bets.

The eleventh race is up next. You bet on a trifecta. Magic Missile's running in the race, but you bet on three others instead. Strong C grade runners that seemed like the obvious choice based upon your calculations.

The dogs come out, making their way toward the boxes.

People around you talk about the night's action. What dogs are in form, what dogs are out of form. Supposed to be a dog from an out-of-state kennel racing that night, a real fast one that set a track record at a place down in Florida.

The mechanical rabbit moves toward the starting line, and when it passes the boxes, the doors fling open, the dogs loose.

Come on, you say. Come on, come on, come on.

The race is 5/16ths of a mile, the standard distance for a greyhound race. It doesn't take long for the dogs to run it.

The pack looks pretty even, no single dog far ahead until Magic Missile pulls ahead at the third turn.

You're crinkling your ticket in your fist.

Magic Missile crosses the finish first. There goes your trifecta.

When the other dogs soon finish, the mechanical rabbit disappears to the side of the track, and the dogs instantly stop running, looking like they're lost and don't know what to do with themselves.

Workers come out onto the track, clipping leashes onto the dogs, leading them off, leading Magic Missile back to the kennel.

It's at that moment you decide you're going to kill that damn dog.

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This time, you bring her groceries and smokes. Keeps her off your back, at least. She gets her carton and sits herself down on the couch, goes through two packs in just a couple hours. You don't care. Gives you time to think. Gives you time to plan. You just let her be, her sitting there on the couch with her Camels, and you go back to the bedroom, get your rifle out of your closet. You check the scope, then you make sure you have ammo.

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You figure you should probably practice. Been awhile since you've been hunting, so you go up into the woods behind the house, find an open clearing. You put a couple targets out, a couple stuffed animals you bought at a dollar store.

The stuffed animals aren't any typical teddy bears, either. They're stuffed dogs. And each one, in your mind, is Magic Missile.

You make yourself prone on the ground, the butt of the rifle nestled against your shoulder. The gun's a bolt-action, a thirty-ought-six. It'll hit a target at eight hundred yards, though you won't need it to go that far. You load a cartridge into the chamber, and you peer down the scope, one eye squinted, one of the stuffed dogs directly in your line of sight.

Slowly, you squeeze the trigger.

You miss.

So you reload. Try again.

This time, you don't miss. The dog's head explodes, white cotton floating in the air.

That makes you smile.

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On the night you plan to kill Magic Missile, you buy yourself a beer and watch the first few races. You don't bet. You're in such a good mood you don't even need to play to have fun. It gives you great enjoyment knowing the dog's back there in his kennel, psyched up for a race, not even realizing it'll be the last race he'll ever run.

Magic Missile's scheduled to run in the tenth race of the night. At the sixth race, you finish your beer and return to your truck. Time to get ready.

You parked with a clear view of the races, the back end of your truck facing the track. In the bed of your truck, you have a heavy, gray canvas blanket, paint and dirt stains covering it. You put the tailgate down and climb in the bed, bury yourself under the blanket with your gun by your side.

You'll have to fire through an opening in the chain link fence, but that's not a problem. What has you concerned is the wind. You hadn't thought of it being so windy, and with Magic Missile a few hundred yards away, a gust of strong wind—or even a gust of light wind—just might throw things off enough that you'll miss.

You don't want to miss. That bastard deserves to die.

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You've waited, lying there underneath the blanket, the barrel of your rifle barely poking out, and you've watched the greyhounds through your scope. Magic Missile's race is up next, and at first you have trouble finding the dog on the track, readjusting your aim a couple times so you can locate him, and then you see him, kicking dirt up with his hind legs as he covers the pile of shit he just made.

This is it.

You could fire now, but you'll get him after the race. Let the cocky son-of-a-bitch get one more run in before he dies.

The whole race, you keep your attention trained on the dog. He's running in the number eight spot, and he comes out of the box strong. When the dog beside him tries to nip him, Magic Missile simply strains harder, going faster, not letting himself fight back. A lot of dogs get distracted by stuff like that, but not him.

At the second call, Magic Missile is in fifth. Heading into the stretch, he's in fourth. Last time, this is when he pulled ahead, and he does it again now, beating his paws on the ground, drumming his legs, and he powers into second as he crosses the finish.

Good boy, you say.

When that rabbit disappears and Magic Missile's standing there, waiting for his leash, that's when you start to squeeze.

You exhale a slow breath.

Your finger gets tighter on the trigger.

The dog's in your sights.

At the sound of the fired gun, the dogs scatter. The wind catches the bullet, and the shot misses.

You work the bolt-action and fire again. You don't take your time with this one, trying to get a shot off in the chaos of the whole thing, the dogs scurrying about, workers ducking for cover.

The wild shot hits one of the workers. You don't know where it hits him. You just see his body drop to the ground.

It's too late. You've missed your chance.

You hop out of the truck's bed and climb into the cab, speeding out of the parking lot as fast as you can.

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Too late for the story to make the eleven o'clock news. Word won't get out until morning. When you come in the door, she asks if you won anything, having no idea what really happened, and you tell her you didn't win anything. You go down the hall and lock yourself in the bathroom. You left the gun in the back of the truck. You'll have to remember to get it later. But you have to calm down first. Your hands are shaking from all the excitement and you can't get them to stop, so you run the faucet in the sink and splash water on your face, splash it again on your face, and then you lap at the pouring faucet with your tongue, trying to get a drink like a dog might lap a drink from a mud puddle.

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She knows something's up. The next day, she hears them talking about it on the radio while she sings in the shower.

Shooting at the dog track late last night, they said. One employee dead. A five-thousand dollar reward offered by the dog track for information leading to an arrest.

She's telling you about it, asking if you knew anything.

You say you don't know anything.

But you were there all night last night, weren't you?

You have to tell her yes. If you don't tell her yes, she'll start yelling, start throwing things, accuse you of having an affair and kick you out of the house. You can't have that happening.

And you didn't see anything?

No, you say. I didn't see anything.

She knows you're lying. Maybe she's already checked the closet. Maybe she knows the gun isn't there. Maybe

she's going to call the police, cash in on that reward, give everything up.

She's asking you all this as a couple of eggs sit on the stove, boiling.