THE BULLET

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The bullet entered the house at ten-thirty. It lodged in the living room wall, where it hid for the night. Ms. Munsey was in bed with a crossword when she heard the shot; she was so startled, she drew a line straight through the puzzle.

The blast sounded like a car backfiring, but when Ms. Munsey rushed to the window and found the street was empty, she feared that a door had been smashed downstairs and that someone had broken into her home. She returned to her bed and stared at the doorway. When enough silence had passed, she left her room and crept down the hall. A stair creaked beneath her. She ran into the kitchen, grabbed a knife and, for an hour, she sat and listened.

She slept fitfully, with the lights on. But in the morning, she forgot about the noise. She made breakfast, read the paper, and was on her way out the door, when she looked to her left and saw the plaster on the piano. She walked into the living room and noticed a tiny hole in the wall. Her finger pushed straight through it. She called the police, and when a man answered, she said, "I think I've been shot at."

The officer arrived and looked at the bullet hole. He wrote some notes in his pad.

"If it had been a hollow-point," he said, "it probably wouldn't have passed through the wall. But this was a high-velocity round. Should be here somewhere."

Ms. Munsey watched him search the room.

"There," he said, spotting the bullet — a small stud embedded in the wall, across from the piano.

The officer walked out to his car and grabbed a keyhole saw and a pointer. He cut around the bullet and placed the chunk of drywall into a baggy.

Ms. Munsey stared at the baggy and at the hole in her wall.

The officer stepped to the window and parted the curtain. "Who lives there?"

"You think it's the neighbors?"

Outside, the officer removed a ladder from the garage and propped it against

the house. Ms. Munsey watched him climb up and slip the pointer through the bullet hole. He faced the street. "Well, it's not the neighbors. It came from the corner."

Ms. Munsey and the officer walked down to the corner. The officer searched the grounds for casings. He spotted a street sign, with a large eye in its center, the words *Neighborhood Watch* written below. He turned to Ms. Munsey's house.

"You want to know what I think? I think a bunch of kids were driving down this street, drunk, on a Saturday night, and one of them saw this sign, and he saw how much it looked like a bull's-eye, so he took a shot at it. Target practice. But he missed. Aimed it too high, and it went right over the sign, straight into your living room."

"How do you know?"

"I don't. But that bullet hole says it came from this corner."

He stepped into the street.

"I don't understand," she said. "If they were driving, and he saw the sign, wouldn't they be past it before he could shoot?"

"Maybe that's why he missed. Maybe he'd seen the sign before, so he knew it was coming up. Already had his gun out." The officer bent down and lifted the casing. "Here we go."

Ms. Munsey watched him drop it into a baggy.

"A drive-by," she said. "In *this* neighborhood."

The officer shrugged. "Used to be baseball bats and mailboxes. Now they got guns."

"You better get somebody to take that sign down."

They walked up the street. The officer returned the ladder to the garage. Ms. Munsey thanked him and went inside. She swept the plaster off the piano top and walked upstairs to finish her puzzle.

* * *

That night, the bullet entered the house at eleven. It sailed through the kitchen and stuck in the freezer door. Ms. Munsey was asleep when she heard the shot. She ran downstairs to the living room and found nothing. She walked into the kitchen to grab a knife and noticed the plaster on the counter.

The officer arrived. Ms. Munsey handed him a baggy with the bullet inside.

"You really should let us do that," he said.

"It popped right out with a dinner knife."

The officer walked outside, grabbed the ladder from the garage, and carried it around back. He slipped the pointer through the hole.

"It came from there," he said, facing the yard and clicking on his flashlight. He stepped down from the ladder. "Who lives in that house?"

"No one. It's been vacant for six months."

"Wait here," he said.

Ms. Munsey watched him walk across the yard and disappear. She waited. She glanced up at the bullet hole and down at the pointer on the ground. She climbed the ladder and slipped the pointer through the hole. When she turned, she saw the officer crossing the yard.

"Found it near the front door," he said, showing her the casing. He removed his pad. "They moved out six months ago?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Ted and Joanne. Becker."

"Where'd they go?"

"Jersey."

"And you haven't seen them since?"

"No."

"Ever have any problems with them?"

"No."

The officer wrote in his pad.

"Why do you think it's them?"

"I'm not saying I do."

"I guess it wasn't a drive-by."

The officer stopped writing. "I guess it wasn't."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at three-thirty in the afternoon. It sunk into the wall, above the couch, in the den. Ms. Munsey was outside, tending her garden, when she heard the shot.

The officer walked up the ladder and surveyed the hole. He faced the driveway and pointed. "If we follow a straight line out this way, we'll probably find our casing."

"I don't care about the casing."

"I know, I know. But we can only go with what we got."

"Yesterday he was in back of my house, today he's in front."

"According to the trajectory of the bullet…"

"I don't care about the trajectory."

"I understand, Ms. Munsey. But trajectory is key. Wait here."

The officer hooked down one side of the U-shaped driveway; Ms. Munsey hooked down the other and picked up her mail. On the way back, she spotted the casing. "It's over here," she said.

"What is?" the officer said.

"The casing."

"No, it can't be."

"It's right here, by my feet."

"But it should be over here."

"I don't care."

The officer walked over and shook his head. He ran back to the ladder and looked at the bullet hole. "No, no, no. It should be there."

Ms. Munsey walked up the front steps and opened the door. "Please return my ladder to the garage."

"He must have thrown the casing. He fired the bullet, picked up the casing, and threw it to the other side." The officer removed his pad, and wrote.

"Why?"

"I don't know, Ms. Munsey."

"Aren't you going to take that casing?"

"Yes. Of course I am." The officer stopped writing. "It just shouldn't be over there."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at four in the afternoon. It struck the chandelier, bit the edge of the dining room table, and dug into the floor. Ms. Munsey was in the kitchen, eating, when she heard the shot. She drove to the supply store and bought a pointer. Then she drove to the gunshop. When she returned, the officer was at the side of her house, on the ladder.

"How did you get up there?" she said.

"This is very serious."

"How did you know about the bullet?"

"Ms. Munsey, this is very serious."

"Did you break into my house?"

"You left the garage door open." He stared at the treetops. "Ms. Munsey, we have a problem."

"What?"

"Well, this bullet came at a severe downward angle. Too severe. Higher than that rooftop. Higher than any of those trees."

"Let me see that."

The officer stepped down from the ladder. Ms. Munsey climbed up, slipped her pointer through the bullet hole, and looked at the trees behind her. "Yes, I see what you mean." She stepped down.

"Ms. Munsey, it's as if he'd been flying a hang glider, or a balloon, when he took the shot. Bird's-eye, you know?" The officer looked at his pad. He showed her the blank page. "If I can't get a trajectory, it makes it very difficult."

"I don't care. I'm going inside."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Munsey. This guy's a real crafty one. It'll make it all the more satisfying, when we nab him."

"Goodbye."

"I don't think you should stay in there. I think you should move out for a while. I have to be honest with you — we're really not close to solving this thing." He pointed to the treetops.

Ms. Munsey walked up the driveway.

"In a normal investigation, we'd analyze the bullet, check its markings, its grooves. Then we'd hope to find the weapon, and test-fire a bullet, in a safe-retrieval area, in a big watertank, actually, because the water won't damage the bullet, and then we'd compare this bullet with the suspect-bullet, and if they lined up, well, then we'd know that the markings in the bullet matched the markings in the barrel, and then - then you'd start building a case. It's important for you to understand how thorough…This is highly irregular, Ms. Munsey."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at two in the afternoon. It pierced the frame of the dormer window, shattered the bathroom faucet, chipped the sink, and fell to the floor. Ms. Munsey was in the dining room when she heard the shot. She watched the officer move the ladder. She walked into the den. She

turned on the television, so she wouldn't hear him on the roof.

When the doorbell rang, she answered it.

"Ms. Munsey," the officer said. "Ms. Munsey..."

"What?"

"Ms. Munsey. In a normal investigation, we'd analyze the bullet, check its markings, its grooves. Then we'd hope to find the weapon, and test-fire a bullet, in a safe-retrieval area..."

"You've already told me this."

"Fine. Okay."

"Just leave."

"I will. I will. At some point, though, we need to consider who might have a vendetta against you."

"Nobody."

"Now, we know a few things. The first bullet tells us that he owns a car, or knows someone who owns one; the second bullet tells us that he's poaching around your neighbor's house; the third bullet establishes a second gunman; the fourth bullet, as I've said, shows that we're dealing with an individual with some hang gliding or balloon experience; and the fifth bullet tells us nothing, so we'll just pretend it didn't happen. So you see, Ms. Munsey, we're beginning to build a profile on this guy - although I think it's important to keep an open mind, as far as gender goes."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at two-thirty in the afternoon. It ripped through the basement floor and bore into the ceiling. Ms. Munsey answered the doorbell and let the officer in.

"Where is it?" he said.

"Downstairs."

"Wait here," he said.

"No."

They walked down to the basement. The officer stared at the floor and the ceiling. "Is this house built on stanchions?"

"No."

"Well, I'll need to get into your root cellar."

"I don't have a root cellar."

"I'm just trying to solve this case, Ms. Munsey. How about a storm cellar?"

"No."

"Wine cellar?"

"No."

"A crawlspace, of any kind?"

"No."

"Bomb shelter?"

"Please."

"Well, what the hell's under here?"

"Dirt."

"Wrong, Ms. Munsey. Not dirt. The gunman. The gunman is under here. If you knew anything about the trajectory of the bullet, you'd know that. Now, I

think we should seriously consider digging up your frontyard, and your backyard. The sides, too. Because this guy has obviously tunneled in from somewhere. We dig down there right now and I bet you we nab him."

"You're not digging up my property."

"Dammit, Ms. Munsey, he's getting away! He's laughing at us!" The officer grabbed his pistol and fired three rounds through the floor.

"Get out," she said.

The officer re-holstered his gun. He tried to write in his pad, but his hands were shaking too much. "I'm sorry, Ms. Munsey." He walked upstairs. "I'll be outside."

The next day, the bullet entered the house at three in the afternoon. Ms. Munsey grabbed her gun, found the bullet hole in the living room, and fired straight through it.

She answered the door.

"Drop the gun, Ms. Munsey," the officer said, his pistol drawn.

Ms. Munsey dropped the gun.

"Ms. Munsey, I just traced the trajectory of that last bullet. It's lodged in the tree out there. It came from inside the house-and you're the only one in here. I'm afraid you're the gunman, Ms. Munsey. You're the one we've been looking for."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"I fired the second bullet. Didn't you hear two bullets?"

"I just want to solve this case, Ms. Munsey."

"But didn't you hear two bullets?"

"Yes."

"Well, the first one came through the living room. From outside. And I shot back."

"Why?"

"To catch him, right where he's standing. That's what you did."

"That's different, Ms. Munsey. I shot through the floor. But I see your point. Okay. Yeah. Just this once. But I think I should take the gun." The officer picked up the gun. "It's a shame it wasn't you, Ms. Munsey. I've got the bullet, the gun - open-and-shut case." He walked down the steps. "The living room, huh? Just like the first one. You think that means anything?"

"No."

"Okay. Okay." He looked at his pad. "I should probably write it down, though. Damn, Ms. Munsey, lucky I wasn't out here."

"Where were you?"

"I was in your backyard, poking around. With a shovel."

"I told you not to dig up my property."

"I know, I know. I just wanted to check a few spots. I figure, if he didn't tunnel in, maybe I'd find the place where he shimmied under. Don't worry, I'll stop. He's obviously not down there anymore. Anyway, I'll be outside."

The next night, the bullet entered the house at six-thirty. It flew through the front hallway and burrowed into the bureau. Ms. Munsey was watching television, when she heard the shot. She waited for the doorbell, but heard nothing. She walked into the hallway, withdrew the bullet, and went outside. She found the officer sitting on the steps. She sat down beside him and offered him the baggy.

"No, Ms. Munsey, I don't think I want that. Far from it. If there's one thing I don't want, it's evidence. If this were a normal case - yes, by all means, I'd take that bullet."

Ms. Munsey placed the baggy between them.

"You see, Ms. Munsey, I've been sitting out here the whole time. And when that bullet came through the door - a few feet above my head, by the way - well, I looked up, and I should have seen the gunman. Because the trajectory of the bullet - you see, there should have been someone, Ms. Munsey. Right there. In the street. But it was empty. I was the only one out here. You probably think it was me."

"No, I don't."

"Thank you, Ms. Munsey. I appreciate that. And you're right - it's not." The officer looked at the baggy. "You know that game - twenty questions? Animal, vegetable, mineral. You ever play that?"

"Yes."

"Well, in a way, that's what this case has been about. Except, I've been playing it all wrong. The way I've been doing it - you start off, you say, 'is it an animal?' And they say no. And then you say, 'is it a giraffe?' And they say, 'I just told you, it's not an animal.' And you say, 'Fine, fine. Is it an elephant?' You see what I'm saying? Because all the facts scream, 'Animal! Animal! Animal!' And it's never been anything else. So even if you say, 'Fine, Fine. Is it a vegetable?' and they say yes, you're next question is still gonna be, 'Is it a pig?' Because all the evidence, all your training, points you in that direction. I wasn't trained for this case, Ms. Munsey."

He lifted the baggy.

"But I've been trying to learn on the job. The whole time, I've been writing down theories. At first, I thought it was a drive-by, and then I thought, maybe you had had an affair with your neighbor, Ted Becker, and his wife Joanne wanted to get even with you. I didn't think she wanted to kill you. If she wanted to kill you, she would have done it differently. She just wanted to scare you - that's why she fired it through your kitchen at eleven at night, because she knew you'd be in bed. But she shot from her old house, from her front door, so you'd know it was her. And then she headed back to Jersey. My third theory - well, I thought maybe you were trying to kill yourself. That you were lonely, and you had hired some guy - a marksman - to shoot you, through the wall, so it would look like an accident. And you were supposed to be somewhere in the house, at a particular time, like you had staged it - on the piano bench, for the first bullet, playing scales; or by the kitchen table, for the second, eating a sandwich; or on

the couch in the den, watching tv, for the third. You had paid him and everything - but you got scared. You kept paying him - each day. And each day, you'd get scared again, and put yourself at the other end of the house. But why wouldn't you just leave - if you really didn't want to get shot? Spend your days inside a shooting gallery - crazy. Unless you didn't know what you wanted?

"And then, today, I was thinking, that maybe it's the house. Maybe it's not you that's old and in pain and wants to die - maybe it's the house. And it's drawing these bullets from all different directions. But who's the gunman? Is it you, is it me, both of us — because like I said, the third bullet had a second gunman. Is it no one - just shadowboxing? No, it can't be. Because those are real bullets, and bullets come from guns, and when a gun is fired, someone's pulling the trigger. So who is it? Is it the whole neighborhood, is it society? Is that who it is? Because if it is, I'd bring the whole damn society in for questioning - but what I'm still having trouble with is the trajectory of the bullet."

The officer pocketed the baggy.

"Why don't you come inside?" she said.

"You think I have a better chance of solving it in there?"

"No. It's getting cold, though."

"Maybe I would. Maybe that's been the problem - trying to solve this thing at arm's-length. I think you're right, Ms. Munsey. Time to get in the ring. Hold on one sec."

He walked to his car, popped the trunk, and removed a bullet-proof vest.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Munsey, I only have one."

"That's okay."

"When I get back to the station, I'll put in a request." He slipped his arms through the vest. "You're right, though - the only way I'm gonna figure this thing out is if I'm in there, with you. The answers are not out here." He grabbed his helmet. "You know, we should sit down with a sketch artist - get a picture of this guy. Half-a-dozen bullets — each one tells us something. Tomorrow, Ms. Munsey. That's what we'll do. Bring you downtown - have you flip through some binders - see if you recognize anyone." He loaded his gun.

"You don't need a gun," she said.

"You know, sometimes when I close my eyes, I can really see him — eyes, hair, complexion. Hatchet-faced? No, no. Size? On the tall side, I think. Nothing too striking, though. Figures, huh. Damn chameleon. Like I said, a real crafty one. In the frontyard, in the backyard - ambidextrous son-of-a-bitch. No matter. We'll talk to a sketch artist - tell him everything we know - he'll get us there. Put us in the ballpark, at least. Then, I'll sit down with the other detectives - get the think tank going, nail down a profile - education, employment, behavior."

"You don't need a gun."

"I know. You're right. Instinct, I guess. I won't shoot it, Ms. Munsey. I'm real sorry about before. The basement - I didn't mean to flare up like that. As far as damage goes, we'll pick up the tab, of course. But I need the gun. If you don't mind, I'd like to hold onto it." He put on his helmet.

Ms. Munsey and the officer walked inside.

The bullet entered the house at six-forty-five. Ms. Munsey and the officer were in the hallway when they heard the shot.

"It came from the street," he said, and he opened his pad and saw that the pages were filled. "I'm out of paper, Ms. Munsey."

"That's okay."

The officer stepped into the den, and was walking towards the curtains, when Ms. Munsey stopped him.

"I should check it, shouldn't I?" he said.

"There's no one out there."

"I know. I know. Maybe this time?"

"There's no one."

The officer nodded. He scanned the room. He saw the plaster on the chair.

"Sit with me," she said.

They sat down on the couch.

"Do you have any paper?" he said.

"No."

The officer looked at his pad. "I shouldn't have written so much."

He stared at the curtains. "I should check."

He gazed at the walls.

"How can you stay here, Ms. Munsey?"

Ms. Munsey saw the bullet in the wall, above the couch. "I didn't say I was staying. I just haven't left yet."