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Man's Best Friend

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York, the German Shepherd, and I, his owner, had no interests in common to speak of. He couldn't care less about my landscaping business, and I didn't give a hoot about those scents that would suddenly sent him scurrying nose-first to tree trunks and under bushes. Yet, in the three years we'd been together, we had developed so close a bond that he could read my moods better than any person I'd known. That Saturday morning, when I put my Winchester M-7 rifle in its gun bag, he could tell that it wasn't for target practice as usual, that I had something different, more serious, in mind. Whining softly, ears back, he put his tail between his legs and went to lie down behind the living room couch.

As a Marine Sniper in Vietnam, eight years earlier, I had killed my share of men. The killing I did, though, was not like the killing in regular combat, nothing personal or messy about it. At 300, 400 yards, my kills were merely targets. Through my rifle telescope I could see them fall and flop on the ground, but their agony was too remote to register, hardly the kind of experience that would cause me any psychological trauma after I returned to civilian life, as it happened to many of my fellow soldiers.

Of course, if I had been captured, I would have suffered a slow, painful death, as snipers were not among the enemy's favorite people. My first week in 'Nam one of the snipers in our team was captured. The glint of a religious medal he was wearing had given him away. His captors that night purposely tortured him within earshot of our camp, so we could hear him scream. Next morning we found his mutilated body staked to a tree. Me, though, they would never capture. I was too clever for them.

Sniping to me was like a game. I would lie hidden in tall grass, perfectly still, often for hours at a time, so as not to stir the grass and give away my position, soiling my pants if I had to relieve myself, oblivious to heat, rain and insect bites, waiting for the right moment. My assigned targets, enemy officers, would shed their insignia to blend in with their men and avoid detection, yet I could always tell by their body language and demeanor who was who. Then I would shoot, but not to kill immediately. Seeing their leader wounded, some of his men would invariably come to his aid and, while they made over him, they, too, became easy targets, usually good for one or two more kills. And before the rest of their unit could react and start searching for me, I'd be slinking away and back to my base for a hot meal and a good night's sleep.

Since those two tours in Vietnam I had felt no need to harm, much less kill anything, not even the mice that now and then came to forage in my kitchen. Them I would discourage by not leaving food where they could reach it. The sight of a fellow mammal killed in a trap for merely trying to survive saddened me. When deer season came around, my hunter friends, having heard of my shooting skills, would ask me to join them, but I would politely decline. My Winchester I used only for weekend target practice in the local firing range. Today, though, my target would be a man, not of the faceless kind I took out in 'Nam but a man who had wronged me personally, someone I knew and detested. This killing would earn me no medals. The law would call it murder.

How this barely literate boor managed to con clever me out my hard-earned life savings is a long story, which, frankly, I'm too embarrassed to tell. I therefore skip to what followed next: The con job he had perpetrated was no mere civil matter. It was rife with felonies and misdemeanors. So I pressed criminal charges and he was arraigned and brought to trial. But come the day of the trial, the local police detective who had investigated the case somehow lost the reams of evidence that I had provided him, and the witness for the state, reputable citizens my family and I had done business with over the years, were never called to testify. Consequently, he walked.

Later, I learned that he was a career criminal, with a record of 43 arrests for a variety of offenses in 12 different states — fraud, embezzlement, forgery, writing bad checks, auto theft, assault and sexual abuse — yet he had never been convicted. Either he was someone very well connected, a protected FBI informant or a filthy rich crook with the means to buy cops and judges. Whatever the case, I realized that the law would never bring him to justice. That I would have to do it myself, unless somebody else beat me to it, which would have sorely disappointed me, for I was very much looking forward to it.

I did not, however, act hastily. For two years I mulled over the moral angle. Maybe the man had a loving wife, or ailing parents who depended on him, or children to support. Maybe he gave generously to charity, attended church, felt pangs of remorse or pity. Had I been the only person he ripped off, I might have forgiven him, turned the other cheek. But I found no hint of decency in him. None whatever. His long arrest record suggested that he had been screwing people without a qualm all his life, probably since childhood. Due to some genetic or psychological quirk, he had never developed a normal

conscience, but from living among those who did, he understood what a conscience was and had learned to fake one, the better to dupe and manipulate his victims, the ace card of his confidence game. A cunning sociopath, that's what he was.

The sight of his dumpy person strutting about town, showing off his Rolex watch and diamond jewelry to strangers, ostentatiously pulling from his pocket thick rolls of 20's and 50's to pay for the smallest purchases, ogling at pubescent girls, everything about him had galled me once too often. The man needed to be killed and his time had come.

Like most people and animals, he was a creature of habit. I had watched him from afar, knew his routine, knew that on this Saturday morning he'd be out his driveway washing his three luxury cars. Clad in my camouflage outfit, I took my position in a clump of oak saplings by the golf course across the road from his house. At a mere distance of around 80 yards the shot would be easy. I could have killed him instantly with a single shot to the head, but chose to hit him in the chest instead, not to make him suffer — he couldn't have survived the big caliber slug for long, anyway — but because I wanted him to realize before he died, at least for a moment, that justice had finally caught up with him.

The cops, of course, knew of my grudge against him. If they recovered the slug, found that it came from a Winchester, learned from the attendants at the firing range that this was the kind of rifle I owned, matched the markings on the slug with the spirals in the barrel, of my M-7, they would have all the evidence needed to charge me with the murder. I had, however, taken the precaution of purchasing an identical Winchester M-7. The one I used for the killing, I would toss in the deepest part of Lake Norman, 200 miles away. Should the cops come to investigate, I would produce the other M-7, the spiraling of which would not be exactly the same. Moreover, this second rifle I had purchased and registered legally, whereas the first one, the murder weapon, I had purposely bought illegally, from a shady character in West Virginia. So there would be no evidence that I ever owned two rifles and made the switch. Besides, the Winchester M-7 was a popular hunting gun, and I wasn't the only person the con man had screwed. The cops would have more suspects to investigate than they could handle. There was a reason why I survived Vietnam unscathed.

I waited patiently for the man to turn in my direction, so I could see the expression on his face when the bullet hit him. My finger was on the trigger, the cross hairs of the M-7 on his sternum, when, suddenly, from the between the cars, a tiny dog of mixed pedigree dashed up to the man and, wagging his rear end for all it was worth, started running playful circles around him. Turning off the hose, the man picked up the dog and began cuddling and kissing it, letting it lick his face, kissing it some more, whispering in its ear. The scumbag in my cross hairs had suddenly morphed into a fellow human being.

I crawled out of my hiding place, put the M-7 back in its bag, and went home.