Pole Position

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Early on an overcast Saturday in November, Russell Sterner is already at his office desk, working. He works often on Saturdays, but this will be a long one. The company has two deadlines coming up in the next week: a World Bank interim project report due on Tuesday, and a proposal to the Department of Labor on Friday. At the moment, he’s re-checking tables of regression coefficients for the World Bank report. It’s all been done by the computer, of course, but the results are crucial and Russell wants to be careful. He works his way down each column of numbers, concentrating. One page, another, then the third. At the end of the last column on the third page, he rubs his eyes, leans back for a moment, and gazes out his fourth floor window.

The first thing he sees is a fight. Two men, struggling, far down in the alley directly across from his window, on the other side of Nineteenth Street. The men are too far away to see clearly, but they look young, maybe even teenagers. The one nearest Russell is smaller and wears a dark sweater. The other man lunges at him once, then again, and they lurch together into the brick wall on one side of the alley. Then the taller man lunges again with a quick flicking motion of his right arm, and the smaller one doubles over and falls to the pavement. The taller man is long-legged, almost gangly, and has a narrow, long head. He turns and runs the other way, and then Russell can see that he’s wearing a red and gold Redskins jacket.

Russell’s immediate reaction is: this hasn’t happened. This isn’t real. It’s all so sudden, he thinks it’s a game, maybe—some kids clowning around. He looks back at the printout, and then he stands up from his chair and stares down at the body, lying there. Come on and get up, he thinks. This is long enough.

At this moment, Branson passes his office and hollers in. “Hey, conference call in Joel’s office. Cambridge. Bring the World Bank printouts.” Russell starts to say something, but Branson is already gone, rushing off, and there’s no chance. He looks down at the body again, then flips through his file drawer for the right printouts. He looks once more at the body, far down in the alley, still not moving. He has to do something, right? What? Branson is hollering again, from down the hall, “Come on, move it willya? Christine’s waiting.” Russell picks up the phone, dials the local police station, two blocks up on Twentieth Street. A woman answers the phone and says, “Fifth precinct. Hold please.” Russell stands there, still on hold, and Branson hollers once, then again, from down the hall. The body’s still lying there. Russell taps his foot, drums his fingers on the desk top. “Come on, goddamnit!” hollers Branson. Still on hold. Then, from Joel,
a long plaintive "Russell," droning down the hallway. Russell jams down the receiver and runs off to Joel's office.

Already there's an argument on. The main office, in Cambridge, is writing the final draft of the World Bank report, but Russell has done a big section of the economic analysis, which is what the argument's about. Although he's only four years out of grad school, he's already a top economist in the company; two more years and he'll be up for Senior Associate, and it's only a step from there to Project Manager. The argument gets heated, Joel and Christine, in Cambridge, shouting back and forth, Russell trying to explain. It's finally resolved, but then there's a discrepancy in one of the data charts. Russell and Branson check through the final computer runs, numbers flying in a frenzy and Christine telling them to hurry up and get their act together. At last Russell finds the mistake, and everything is ironed out. The rest of the problems are minor, but they take time too, and the whole call lasts well over an hour. When it's finished, Russell and Joel and Branson talk for half an hour about the DOL proposal, and then Russell heads back to his office.

Once during the conference call, he thought he heard a siren, somewhere. But he'd been flipping through printouts at the time, arguing with Christine. Back in his office, he looks down at the alley and the body is gone. So an ambulance has come and taken it away, he thinks. Or was it an ambulance? Maybe the siren, if it was a siren, was something else. Maybe the guy, whoever he was, just got up and walked away. Just had the wind knocked out of him for a minute. Russell sits in his chair, by the window. It is dark outside, low gray clouds pushing in from the north.

At lunchtime it's pouring rain, and Russell is in the middle of another conference call. Joel calls down for take-out from the Great Wall, on the ground floor of their building: Moo Shu Pork and shrimp with lobster sauce. They all eat in the office and work. The afternoon's full of more calls and tedious arguments, checking and re-checking data tables, polishing the last sections of his chapter, and they don't finish until after six. Outside, it's still pouring.

He's supposed to pick up Susan at seven, and he knows he'll be late. He drives home past the Capitol to Pennsylvania Avenue, down to Eighth Street. Once he's home he can call her; it'll be okay. He parks his Honda in front of his building and runs up the stairs. After the call he showers, dresses, straightens the cushions on his sofa and stacks the week's newspapers under the coffee table. He's at Susan's place by seven-thirty, and they head over to Augustino's for dinner.

He and Susan met at a party six weeks ago, and have seen a lot of one another since then. At Augustino's they order dinner and a liter of the house red wine, and they talk without stopping. She's a lawyer at EPA—she talks about her work, the past week, and then Russell tells her about the DOL proposal.

He feels good, talking about his work with Susan. Sometimes he feels self-conscious, telling all the details of what he's doing, but with her he's enthusiastic,
and easily carried away. The DOL proposal is for a demonstration job training program: they’ll set it up in six different cities and monitor it for three years. Job training for the long-term unemployed, employment counseling, placement. If they can just be careful, think it all through and avoid the dumb mistakes, do it right—then they’ll have a great project, a project that really means something.

They eat, drink the wine, talk on. They’re almost finished when Russell looks up and sees a short guy, near the door, wearing a Redskins jacket.

“Hey, I just remembered,” he says. “Something weird happened today. At work.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I was working, and I just happened to look out my window down that alley, and there was this fight. Two guys fighting. And then one guy hits the other one and knocks him down, and then he just runs away. And the other guy, the short guy, he just lies there, not moving. Right there in the alley.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean, I had to go down for this conference call, right then. Right at that moment. And when I came back he was gone.”

“Oh, so he must have been okay. Probably just some kids. Hey, you know, if we hurry, we can make it to the One Step Down for the ten o’clock show.”

“I mean, I thought I heard this siren once, during the conference call. Could have been an ambulance or something.”

Susan looks back at him again. “So, what’re you saying?”

“Well it was hard to see, and all that. Way down there in the alley. I keep thinking, What if the guy was really hurt? I should’ve done something. But then I heard the siren, and later on he was gone.” He rubs his fingers across the top of his head. “It all happened so fast, you know?”

“The guy’s probably okay. Nine times out of ten, you go barging into something like that and you get hurt yourself.” Susan looks away again, sips her wine. “Right?”

“I thought I heard a siren. Or something.”

“So why don’t we pay, huh? We can get coffee over there.”

They get parked and inside just in time for the ten o’clock show. It’s non-stop solo piano for an hour and a quarter; they order espresso and decide to stay for the twelve o’clock show. It’s over at one-thirty and they drive back to Capitol Hill to Russell’s place. Russell pours them each a brandy, but it’s only half-finished when they go in to bed.

They sleep late in the morning, and at ten Russell walks down to the Ridgeway for the Sunday Times and fresh croissants. Later in the afternoon they drive out to Great Falls for a hike, and they’re back by five. Russell drops off Susan at her place and then heads home.

Alone, he pours himself a Jack Daniels over ice, and sits on the sofa. And
then he thinks again of what he saw, yesterday, at the office. Two men fighting in the alley. It was all so fast, such a dumb chance that he saw it anyway. From his office he has a clear view right up that alley. On one side of the alley, to his right, is the back end of the Crown Center, a sheer brick wall, and on the other side is the back end of a series of old rowhouses that have been converted into shops and restaurants, fronting on M Street. Only from his office can you see all the way up that alley. One office to his left or to his right, and he couldn’t have seen what he did.

Even though he only mentioned it that one time, at Augustino’s, it’s been on his mind a lot, just under the surface. Russell takes his drink and walks downstairs to see if Arruzione is home. Arruzione’s been his downstairs neighbor ever since Russell moved to Washington, four years ago, and is probably Russell’s best friend. But the lights are out, and when he knocks there’s no answer. Russell sits on the stairs and finishes his drink, and then he walks down to Eighth Street.

At the Ridgeway, he buys the final Sunday edition of the Post. The local paper. If anything happened, anything serious, it would be in here, right? He sits down in the Deli section, orders a capuccino, and starts with page one. He reads every article lead, in order, carefully. Now we’re getting somewhere, he thinks. Yeah. He works his way through the pages—left to right, top to bottom. SILVER SPRING MAN FOUND DEAD OF ASPHYXIATION; HIGH WINDS, HAIL, BATTER WINCHESTER; FORMER DRUG ADDICT DONS PASTOR’S ROBES. Every section: News, Sports, Leisure, every word of the obituaries. Nothing.

So that’s it, he thinks. Russell leaves the paper on the table in the Deli and walks home. The guy got up and walked away. Or, if it was an ambulance, then it was something minor, no sweat. At this point, he thinks that he is free of it, but later, lying in bed awake, he pictures it all again, runs through the entire scene. The two men locked together, the tall one lunging, the quick flicking motion, the body falling. What if it wasn’t nothing? What if the tall guy had a knife and stabbed the other guy? What if the other guy was bleeding to death when I hung up the phone, he thinks.

He lies there in bed, unable to sleep. After a while he rolls onto his side and flips through the Newsweeks and Times that are stacked by his bed. But he can’t read. He looks over at the two bookcases on the far wall. They’re old bookcases, solid oak—he bought them cheap at a garage sale and refinished them both. He likes the feel of a room with bookcases full of books. Here, and at the office too. There is something comfortable, something solid and dependable about all those rows of books there. Sometimes he can waste a whole evening browsing through them, organizing, rearranging them. On the bottom shelves he’s got reference books, in the middle hardcovers, at the top paperbacks. On top of both bookcases he’s got a row of photographs: he and his parents when he graduated from Michigan, his parents on the front steps of their house in Ann Arbor, his little
sister at her high school graduation. It's too dark now to see them, but he can recognize each one from the size and shape of its frame.

He turns on his other side and looks out his back window, at his balcony. He looks at the hibachi, at the antique school bench that he's refinished, the potted spruce plant, and the thin black railing. Past that the bare chestnut tree in the back yard, and then the fence. Beyond that is an alley. What would I do, he thinks, if he saw a fight in this alley, right now, and one guy was hurt? I would run down and help him, wouldn't I? Yes, of course I would, he tells himself. Of course. Yes.

At the office on Monday morning, he calls the emergency room at George Washington hospital. If he had heard a siren on Saturday, and if the siren was an ambulance picking up the guy in the alley, then they'd take him to GW—four blocks down on Twenty-First Street. After four rings a woman answers.

"Emergency room. Can I help you?"

"Yes, I was wondering . . . could you tell me if anyone was brought in to the emergency room on Saturday, say about nine o'clock in the morning? A young man with some wounds or cuts?"

"What was the patient's name, sir?"

"Oh, well, I don't know the name. I just saw, I mean, I heard about this little accident over here and I just wondered if everything was all right. I mean, I'm not even sure if it was serious or anything, or even if he was brought in—I don't really know anything about it, you know." He feels his own shortness of breath, sweat on the receiver under his palm.

"We can't give out this information sir, unless you know the patient's name. Are you an employer, or next of kin?"

"Oh, no, no—that's all right. Never mind, it doesn't matter." Russell hangs up, wipes his palms on his pants' legs. He feels flushed, hot. What's going on? Why did she ask about next of kin; wasn't that the question when someone dies? He leans back in his chair, turns toward the window, and there's the alley again. He already knows that he doesn't want anybody else to know what he has seen.

At lunchtime he goes down to the Taj Mahal, the third rowhouse in the row on M Street with their backs on the alley. It's a tiny Mom-and-Pop cafe—he eats there often and the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Mukherjee, know him. Here's a place he can ask some questions, at least. He takes the daily special and sits near the cash register. Mrs. Mukherjee comes padding over in her flip-flops, chattering, and he asks her. "Say, did you hear anything about a fight out back on Saturday morning? In the alley?" He drinks his tea, tries to look unconcerned. But she says no, no, she hasn't heard anything but it wouldn't surprise her, kids these days, and drugs. She waves her hands in a nervous flurry and goes back to the kitchen, her sandals flapping.

Russell eats his curry, and in a moment Mr. Mukherjee sidles over. Before Russell can say anything, Mr. Mukherjee starts right up, in a loud whisper. "Drugs.
He stab him." Mr. Mukherjee makes a quick flicking motion with his right arm, and the funny thing, the bizarre thing, is that this motion is exactly the same as the motion made by the tall man in the alley. "Drugs," says Mr. Mukherjee. He cups his left hand around his mouth, like he's telling a big secret. "He stab him." He wrinkles his nose and then waves his left hand downward, like he's had enough. Before Russell can ask anything, before he can even think of anything to ask, Mr. Mukherjee has gone back to the kitchen.

Russell sits there for a while, and then he notices that it's five after one. There's a staff meeting in the office at one. He pays quickly, then runs out, runs down M Street and around the corner, up Nineteenth Street to mid-block, crosses through traffic and runs into the lobby. He takes the stairs two at a time, still running, up to the fourth floor. When he barges into the conference room, Joel's already explaining new budget allocations.

The next ten hours are pure work. Cambridge has decided that the cost estimate on the DOL proposal is one hundred thousand too high. Russell has to shave twelve-five on his section, and he has until close of business Tuesday to do it. If that causes any changes in his research design, then he has to rewrite his chapter of the proposal, too. He works in his office, poring over old printouts of cost projections, pounding on his Hewlett-Packard. Dreaming up alternatives, working them through, tossing them and trying others. He is totally consumed, and happy for that.

At six-thirty Joel orders carry-out from the Great Wall: Szechwan beef with snow peas, chicken with cashews. Egg rolls with tea. Joel and Branson and Russell: when the food comes, each eats in his own office, working on through, eating around the work. Branson bails out at nine. At ten-thirty Joel comes in to Russell's office and they go over all the numbers. They check it all, carefully, and at eleven-fifteen they're finished. Russell walks down to the metro, and he's home just after twelve. It's all quiet in the house, and Arruzzone's lights are out. Russell trudges up the stairs, drops his briefcase on the couch and goes directly for the kitchen. He takes the Jack Daniels down from the shelf and pours a tall one, into a tumbler. From the freezer he forks out two ice cubes and tosses them in too, waiting for the drink to cool. There's something pleasant about the waiting, the tension of waiting. After a while, he drinks it all. He feels a certain happiness: the drink still burning in his throat, his tiredness, the absolute certainty that he'll sleep, soon. He slips off his shoes, and heads into his bedroom.

Tuesday is a carbon copy of Monday: working straight through, rewriting his chapter. It's a brilliant chapter, he knows, and he loves it—loves the insights, the careful planning, the logic. Most of all he loves the pure sense of being in control—of encountering a problem and then resolving it. In this he has a lot of confidence, and that's part of the fun: knowing that if he thinks long enough and works hard enough, he'll come up with a solution. And they're important, interest-
ing problems too—issues that affect people, everyday. Things that can make a
difference.

He's home at ten o'clock, and calls Susan first.

"Good Lord, did you just get home from work?" she asks. "What's going
on with you guys?"

"Yeah, lots of last-minute changes. Hey, wanna come over tonight?"

"No, sorry, but I really can't. I've got to go to Philadelphia tomorrow and
I won't be back until Friday. They cut our travel budget so I've got to take the
goddamned metroliner. Six A.M."

"Yeah, but can't you come over? I'd sort of like to talk."

"No, Russell, sorry, if I come over now I won't sleep and I'll be dead tomor­row. Really. We've got to argue a toxic waste class action and this judge is a
real tight-ass."

"Yeah. Okay." Russell clears his throat and runs his fingers through his hair.

"Say, you know that fight I told you I saw? The two guys in the alley? I've
been thinking—what if this guy got stabbed? I mean, what if the big guy had
a knife?"

"A knife? You didn't say anything about a knife."

"Yeah, but I keep thinking, well, maybe he did have a knife."

"Russell, what are you talking about? I mean, if he'd had a knife wouldn't
you have seen it? You said it was just a fight."

"The more I think about it the more I don't know what I saw. Maybe the
guy had a knife and stabbed him, and then I should have done something. But
I had this meeting, really a crucial meeting. Crucial. And then, I don't know an­
more, it's like . . . ."

"Russell, listen, you've been working too hard. I'm sure it was nothing. You're
just under a lot of pressure now. If it had been something serious, you'd have
done something, right? Just take it easy, okay?"

"I don't even know anymore."

"Russell, just relax and forget this. Hey, I'll be back Friday afternoon—I'll
call you then."

"Yeah, okay," he says. "Okay."

Wednesday, he's up at six, showered, and in the office by seven. He has to
finish the final rewrite of his chapter of the DOL proposal today, and it consumes
him. He works through till lunch, stops for two egg rolls and a Snickers bar,
and works through the afternoon in a frenzy. There are calls from Cambridge,
Christine on the line with endless questions, Joel in and out of his office, worrying.
At seven-fifteen, he's finished.

It's clear that he's finished—there's nothing else he can possibly do. He looks
out his window, into the city darkness, and the alley is still there. He would love
a drink, and he knows without thinking what he wants to do. He leaves his brief­
case and walks down to the corner, at M Street.
The first rowhouse is a bank branch, and it's closed. The second is The Alamo: Tex-Mex with live bluegrass on weekends. He sits at the bar and orders a plate of nachos and a Carta Blanca. After a while he asks, but no one knows, and he goes on. The third rowhouse is the Taj Mahal, which he skips. The fourth is a second-hand bookstore, where he browses for half an hour before asking the guy at the desk. Nothing. Number five is a men's clothing store, still nothing, and next is the M Street newsstand. Russell browses, flips through magazines, then asks the guy at the register. "Yeah," he says. "Kid got stabbed." He nods next door.

Next door is the Bronze Star, a video games arcade. Of all these places on M Street, this is the one he's never been in. It's dark inside, just a flurry of colored lights from each of the games. Who's in charge here? There's no desk, no counter, nothing—just four rows of games and people, teenagers and grown men, playing. He walks down the first aisle, and his eyes adjust to the darkness. The lighted name above each game gives off a glow, and he reads them as he passes: "Choplifter Rescue," "Invaders from Saturn," "Lion Safari," "Mission Impossible." There's no one just standing around—everybody's either playing, or looking over somebody else's shoulder, watching. Russell stops at an empty game, slips a quarter into the slot, and starts to play. It's called "Pole Position."

In the game he's a race car driver. He has to push down the accelerator, and at the same time steer through the course, past other cars, obstacles, curves. He starts off slowly then pushes ahead, weaving through the other cars till suddenly there's a sharp turn he can't handle in time, and he crashes. The screen shows a mock crash, but within seconds the car is repaired and whole, and he's off again. This time he's more careful—he whips the wheel right and left, avoiding signposts, other wrecks, swerving drivers. His score mounts. Suddenly the car in front of his changes lanes in a curve—Russell whips to the outside but the curve's too sharp and there's another crash: hubcaps and fenders go flying, jagged orange flames shoot over the screen. His score plummets. He takes out another quarter and shoves it in.

There is a peculiar serenity to the game—he feels himself enclosed in a sort of quiet harmony. The world reduced to accelerator, wheel, screen. After a while he glances at his watch and is startled to see that he's been playing for almost an hour. He looks up and around him again—there's a lanky kid to his right who's just finished a game of "Lion Safari." Russell chances a question. "I heard a guy got stabbed out back here, on Saturday."

The kid looks over, sniffs twice, wipes his nose with his finger. "Yeah. Maurice," he says, and shrugs. He sniffs again and wipes snot with his fingers and rubs it into his jeans. "Maurice the dickhead." The kid turns back and slips in another quarter.
With the name "Maurice," the careless shrug and the runny nose, Russell backs away, staring at the kid. He notices a door at the far corner, and realizes that it must lead out to the rear. He takes it, goes on through a hallway and another door, and finds himself in the alley.

He stands there for a while, shivering at first in the damp night chill. There is a row of garbage cans, rain water standing in potholes and the center trough, and busted bricks scattered around from the Crown Center construction. Where did it happen? He looks around for a sign, any kind of mark, but of course there's nothing. And then he looks down toward Nineteenth Street and sees that narrow column of windows on his own office building. His own window—fourth floor, room four twenty-six. Just that single column of offices: the Great Wall on the ground, then two twenty-six through eight twenty-six. Just those seven goddamned offices—hundreds of offices in the building and just those seven could see down here, down the alley. He shivers again, and he realizes that he's standing on the spot where it happened. Stupidly, he looks around for blood on the pavement. That black spot, there, could that be... no. No, of course not. Rain would have washed it all away. He scraps a shoe over the pavement. Maurice. Two twenty-six through eight twenty-six. He turns and starts down toward Eighteenth Street, heading for the metro.

When he drags in, the lights are on at Arruzione's. He goes upstairs first, heads for the kitchen and pours himself a tall one. He realizes he's left his briefcase at the office, but it doesn't matter. He takes a long sip, then walks down the stairs and knocks on Arruzione's door.

"Hey, Russell, you working late again?" Arruzione pounds him on the shoulder, pulls him in.

Russell slouches down on the sofa, takes another drink. "Yeah," he says. "Working late."

Arruzione sits in a chair across from him. "So what's up, eh?"

Russell takes another sip, then stares down into the glass. "Something really weird happened at work."

"Yeah?"

"On Saturday. I was sitting at my desk, you know how I can look down in that alley? And one time, when I just happened to look up, I saw this fight. Two guys. And then one of them hits the other one, the shorter one, and then he just falls over. Right there in the alley. The shorter one. Then the other one runs away." He stops now, feeling himself growing warm, and takes another drink.

"So what happened?"

"I was just watching this guy, lying there. Like, he didn't move or anything."

He can feel that tiny prickling sensation, on his skin, just before he starts to sweat.

"So what happened then?"

"Well, I called the police, and..."

"So this guy in the alley," says Arruzione. "He was okay?"
"Well, actually . . . well, I had to go to this meeting, right at that moment. A real important meeting. So, I mean, I never actually knew how it turned out."

Arruzione leans back in his chair. "Huh," he says. "Well, the police were there—they must have taken care of the guy."

They talk on for a while, but the conversation's over for Russell. He hasn't said what he wanted to say, what he'd planned to say all the way home on the metro. He hasn't said it. Not yet.

The next morning he's in early again. He tells his secretary to hold all his calls, closes his office doors, and phones the police.

This time a woman answers—he can't tell if it's the same woman as Saturday. "Fifth precinct," she says. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I wanted to ask about a stabbing. Last Saturday. I think there was a man stabbed, near Nineteenth Street."

"You know who was handling the case, sir?"

"I don't know. I mean, I'm just calling in for the first time, now."

"What was the name of the victim, sir?"

"I don't know that either. I just know, I mean, yeah, I know that there was some kind of stabbing."

"Yes?"

"I know there was some kind of stabbing, or something, and I just wanted to know, you know, like, how everything is going. What the status of everything is right now."

There's a long pause at the other end. Finally she says, "Sir, what exactly do you want to know?"

"Well, if there was a stabbing . . . well, I think I might have seen something."

"Sir, if you've witnessed a crime, you should come in and fill out a full report. We'd appreciate it if you'd do that as soon as possible. What was your name sir?"

"Oh, okay, I'll come in and fill out a report."

He hangs up abruptly. What is happening here? He turns in his chair and stares down at the alley. What was it he saw? Just a fight. Two guys, probably just kids. Two kids fighting, one gets knocked down, the other runs away. That was all, right? So what should he have done? What?

He gets up and walks down the hall, to Branson's office. Branson's at his desk, bent over a pile of monthly staffing schedules, and Russell says, "Hey. You got a minute?"

"Yeah. One minute, yeah."

"You know on Saturday? That conference call I was running a little late for?"

"Hell yes I know. Christine was having a shit fit."

"Well the reason I was late, like . . . I saw this fight. Down in the alley."
Russell looks out Branson’s window, but from here you can’t see up the alley, only the entrance. “Nobody else can see up the alley. Just from my office . . .”

“Russell, sorry, but you can’t have another office. We’re short of office space already as it is. No new offices, forget it.”

“I just saw these guys fighting, up the alley.”

“If you don’t want to see the alley, pull the fucking blinds, for Christsakes.”

Russell starts to speak again, but at this point Joel buzzes him on the intercom with more work, and he accepts it. Proofreading the DOL proposal, rechecking the data tables, some minor number-crunching. By five-thirty he’s finished. He closes up and heads for the Bronze Star.

Inside, it’s crowded again, and dark. He stands for a moment, letting his eyes adjust, then heads for “Pole Position.” He clutches the wheel and rams down the accelerator, pressing forward. Hip lunge, shoulder jerk—he spins the wheel wildly, then whips it back in time. He is full, consumed—he wants only to push on faster, higher, flying way out in front of it all, in the clear, untouchable. He plays twelve games before he looks up again. There’s a kid next to him, at “Lion Safari,” and Russell asks him. “Heard anything about that stabbing on Saturday?”

The kid doesn’t look up. “Bad news,” he says. He pegs two lions in a flurry, and the score clangs up. “Rubbed him out.” He nails another lion on the run, then another from behind a tree, but then a big one mauls him from behind, and the safari’s over. When the kid turns, Russell can read the inscription on the front of his t-shirt:

If you love something
Let it go free,
If it doesn’t come back
Hunt it down and kill it

Russell heads for the metro. It’s past eight when he gets home, and Arruzione’s lights are on. Russell pours himself a Jack D, then comes down and knocks. Arruzione slaps him on the back again; Russell flops onto the sofa and Arruzione sits across from him.

“Hey,” says Russell. “We’ve got to talk.” He takes a long drink.

“What’s the deal?” says Arruzione. “You look a little ragged.”

“I’ve got to tell you something,” says Russell. “I mean, I’ve got this thing I keep thinking about. It’s like it’s filling up my head.” They are looking at one another, all this time, while Russell is talking. “You know that fight I was telling you about? The two guys in the alley? The one guy lying there, not moving?”

“Yeah?”

“Well . . . I think he was hurt pretty bad. Like, it turns out, he was stabbed.”

“Stabbed? Really?”

“Yeah. And something else. You know how I told you about how I called
"Well, I . . . Arruzione, man, I've got to tell you. Like, I didn't get through to the police right away. I was real busy then, with work and all, and I just didn't take the time right then to get through."

When he says this, Arruzione's eyes flicker to the side for the first time. They don't move far, maybe only to Russell's right ear, but it's enough.

They talk on for a while and Russell tries to soften it as much as possible. Arruzione slaps Russell on the back, tells him it was really okay, what the hell, a little delay probably didn't matter much anyway. And he did call the police—that's what really mattered, right? Yes, Arruzione says that too. After a while Russell goes up to bed.

He stares at the ceiling, thinking, What have I done? I've worked, he thinks. That's important, isn't it? That DOL project means jobs for two thousand people, maybe tens of thousands if they can do it right and get it fully funded. That really matters for something, right? A man, lying in the alley. Maurice. Rubbed him out. That snot-nosed kid, and his shrug. It's hopeless to try again to reconstruct the exact details of what he saw, but by now he's convinced of the worst. He saw it all, he knew the guy was badly hurt, half-dead, even at the first moment. He saw a guy get stabbed, and what did he do? He walked off to a meeting. If he, Russell, had gotten up at that moment, run down and administered first aid, then he would have saved a man's life. But he didn't. It's all over for Maurice, but for him, Russell?

In bed, he turned to look at the bookcases, and the photos on top. The tall rectangular one is of his parents, on the front steps of their house. Rose Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan. What if his parents were sitting in their back den, or at his dad's office, and they looked out the window and saw a guy beat up, lying in an alley? What would his dad do? What would his mother do? He knows the answers to both questions. And he also knows, for the same reasons, that he'll never file an official report and never tell anyone what he has seen, and what he has done. It's all his.

Friday in the office there's not much to do. The DOL proposal is proofed, finished, and delivered by noon. In the afternoon there's a party to celebrate: Joel calls the Cafe de Paris and orders a platter of brie, foie gras, bottles of Beaujolais. Russell picks at the food, gulps the wine. Branson tells a lot of loud and dumb jokes; Joel talks about getting the offices remodeled. By five o'clock everyone's gone.

Russell's the last one out. He walks over to The Alamo, on M Street, sits at the bar and orders a double Jack D, straight up. How's the saying go? Whiskey, then wine: mighty fine. Wine, then whiskey: mighty risky. He belts it down and orders another. After that, he goes out and walks.
He wanders around for a time, although he couldn’t have said if it was a long time or a short time. A Friday night, in November. He should call Susan, but he couldn’t stand it, not now. Lots of people are out, all along M Street. He watches them pass. He stops in another bar, somewhere, for another drink, then wanders on. He thinks again about how it all happened: the pure chance of it. Hundreds of office windows in his building, but only those seven—two twenty-six through eight twenty-six—could have seen it. If he’d been in another office then. Early on a Saturday—if he hadn’t had to work then. If he’d just come to work fifteen minutes later, missed a couple of lights on the way in. When it’d happened, he’d been checking a column of coefficients. What if the column had been two coefficients longer, or two shorter? He’d have looked out the window at a different instant, and never have seen what he did. And what if there hadn’t been that conference call, right at that precise moment? What if he hadn’t been put on hold? What if there’d been a secretary in the office then, anybody, just so he could have turned it over to somebody else? But no, it all came down to him.

With such a confluence of improbabilities, it seems like it was fated to happen, like there’s some mechanism to the whole thing that’s beyond his control, perhaps even his comprehension. As he walks along M Street again, he begins to feel that he is on the verge of some important understanding. What will happen? He catches his reflection in the glass store-fronts: an ordinary man in a sportcoat, still a youngish man, walking. What is this man going to do? He steels himself to become observant, to catch every nuance around him, every sign or symbol that might come to him, feeling that somehow, he will discover the right one, and then he will know what to do. Then the whole affair will be rounded off, complete. Maurice. Two twenty-six to eight twenty-six. Rubbed him out. It all means something, doesn’t it? He walks into the Bronze Star.

He goes to “Pole Position” and slips in the first quarter. He drives a couple of games at a leisurely pace, enjoying the pure simplicity of it—the tight control, the speed, the hairpin turns, the fiery crashes. The car, always perfectly reconstituting itself, whole again every time. He goes to the change machine for more quarters, and keeps playing.

Game after game passes, he’s no idea how many. He stares into the screen, concentrating, knowing that he’s on the verge, the very edge, of some discovery. Maurice. He stabbed him. The night rolls on, it’s very late now, he knows. Friday night, Saturday morning. It’s been almost a week since it happened. Two twenty-six to eight twenty-six. You’d have done something, right? If it doesn’t come back, hunt it down and kill it.

He crashes again, a three-car pileup in a straightaway, and when he dips into his pocket, there are no more quarters. He straightens up and feels, abruptly, how light-headed he is. Fresh air, that’s what he needs. He heads for the back door, walks through, and out to the alley. He breathes in the cool air, and then he notices a kid to his left with his back to him, smoking a cigarette. It’s that same
kid again, the first one, the runny-nosed one who'd said "Maurice." Maurice the dickhead. The kid is tall and thin, and now he's wearing a Redskins jacket.

This is it, Russell knows, the one final confluence of events, the true and perfect ending. Without feeling the need to think or be nervous, utterly calm in his certainty, he picks up a loose brick by the far wall, and advances. Two steps, three—like the race car, edging up to pass. Maurice. Rubbed him out. One more step, then he strides forward and with his right arm brings the brick down viciously into the kid's left temple. The kid collapses immediately to his knees with a muttered "unhh," turns slightly toward Russell, and falls on his side, blood spurting from a split along his hairline.

Russell is ready to hit him again, but at the sight of that blood he just stands there, watching it flow. Blood in the alley. Blood has spurted onto his pants' leg, and onto his right hand, too. He feels the pavement underfoot, the rough brick in his hand, the cool night air, all with a peculiar, heightened clarity, as though he has never felt such things before. He drops the brick, turns, then starts to run. Past the rain-filled potholes, the slick asphalt by the garbage cans, he runs for Nineteenth Street, and when he looks up, he sees it: two twenty-six through eight twenty-six. The smooth dark glass of the windows, the flawless concrete gleaming white above the street lamps.

He runs.

―Michael Owen