

THE BOX

By

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The room is a ten-foot-by-thirteen-foot box of glazed brick. Electrical conduits end in four-outlet boxes on three of the walls. Secured to the floor four feet from a long wall is a standard gunmetal gray government-issue table, a D-ring bolted to one edge. Three straight-backed chairs face the table's longer edges, two on one side and one between the table and the near wall. A video camera nestles in a high corner. A small microphone hangs close to the ceiling. A four-foot-by-six-foot two-way mirror in the wall facing the single chair provides a view from the observation room.

In the single chair since a patrol officer left him 45 minutes ago sits Steven Miller. Twenty-three years old, five-feet-ten inches tall, 165 pounds. Miller is an apprentice plumber who supplements his income driving for Uber.

Miller looks up with a start when two detectives enter. Benjamin Dougherty—“Doc” to all but a handful of family and friends—is 41 years old, six-foot-one and 205 pounds. He wears a navy polo shirt with an embroidered Penns River Police badge on the left breast over tactical pants. His gold shield hangs from a lanyard around his neck. Teresa Shimp is mid-thirties, five-seven, 125. She wears brown slacks and a sky-blue blouse. A small cross on a delicate chain rests against her chest.

Dougherty's voice has no sincerity. “We didn't mean to keep you waiting this long.” He winks at Shimp, then looks at his watch. “Twelve-thirty. Have you had lunch yet? I guess not, us pulling you off the job like we did this morning. You hungry? I'm starving. Detective Shimp, you want something from Bob's?” Shimp does. Dougherty lays a menu on the table for Miller to read. “You want anything, Steve? The town's buying.” There is no budget for suspect lunches. Dougherty will pay for anything Miller eats. Orders two sandwiches with chips and cold drinks; a salad for Shimp. “Be back in fifteen minutes. Twenty, tops.” He and Shimp leave.

The cops return 57 minutes later. Lunch conversation ranges from the weather to Miller's jobs to whether this is the year the Steelers should draft their quarterback of the future. The meal complete, Dougherty rolls the debris into balls and sets them in a trash can outside the door.

With her partner otherwise occupied, Shimp takes a form from a folder on the floor next to her chair. Places it on the table where Miller can read along with her recitation. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.” Nothing anyone who watches a typical amount of television hasn't heard a thousand times and paid as much attention to as the Terms of Service for a web site. Shimp is careful to be sure

Miller understands each section before he initials it. His signature at the bottom will make it difficult for him to walk away from the agreement later, but Shimp likes to close all loopholes.

Miller initials as Shimp reads. Hesitates before signing. Dougherty notices. “Not sure, are you? Don’t know as I blame you, everything on the news these days. I’m not saying there aren’t cops who will try to twist a confession out of someone, but we don’t work that way. Not because we’re better people—well, maybe Detective Shimp is—but it’s not worth the hassle when the defense attorney starts breaking it down. That’s her job and I respect it. I’ve been doing this a long time and I’ve learned that violating peoples’ rights is more trouble than it’s worth.”

Miller relaxes. Has his fingers on the form to slide it away when Dougherty speaks again. “Thing is, once you bring in a lawyer, we have to stop asking questions, which sounds pretty good until you realize it also means we can’t get any more information from you without going through the lawyer first. Nothing. Not a word.”

Miller’s fingers still contact the form. “How is that a bad thing? For me, I mean.”

“You’ll never have the opportunity to tell your side, full and unvarnished. The lawyer will at least vet everything you say. She may not let you talk to us at all. Give your answers for you. ‘My client this’ and ‘My client that.’ Lawyering up is the way to go if you’re guilty because anything you say will just dig you a deeper hole. You want to get your perspective on the record, some nuance, that’s harder to do with a lawyer editing everything you say.”

With this last comment Dougherty gives Miller a glimpse of The Box’s most valued feature: The Way Out. A majority verging on unanimity of those who have sat in the seat Miller now occupies have sought this glorious and exalted place. They most often look for it in either of the high corners, as Miller does now, his glance moving up and to the right in search of the magical gateway that will allow him to leave this small room with his freedom unabridged. The Way Out does exist, though it shows itself only to a privileged few who are willing to take the extreme step of telling the truth when it will help them. The truth helps few who have made it this far, so The Way Out remains more mythical than material.

Miller looks at each detective in turn. Neither shows any interest in his decision. Shimp reads emails on her phone. Dougherty leans back in the chair, hands laced behind his head. The stack of files on his desk was part of the lunch conversation. Right now the detective appears grateful for the break Miller’s indecision provides.

Miller pulls back the form and signs. Pushes it to Shimp. She replaces it in her folder. Puts everything on the floor next to her chair. “How did you meet Laura Coulter?”

“It was at the St. Margaret Mary’s festival the year before last.”

“So, a year and a half ago.”

“About that.”

“How old did she say she was?”

“I don’t think it come up. Not like we discussed how old we both were or nothing.”

“How old did you think she was?”

“Eighteen for sure. Maybe even nineteen, the way she was, you know, the way she was built.”

“How old were her friends?”

“I never really met any of her friends.”

Shimp lets Miller’s answer hang in the air a few seconds. “There’s something you need to understand, Mr. Miller. We’re going to ask you a lot of questions. Some of them we’ll already know the answers to, but you won’t know which ones those are.”

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

Dougherty breaks in. “What she’s getting at is, we’ll know if you lie. Maybe not every time, but we catch you once or twice and we’ll have to doubt everything you say. That is *not* the impression you want to make.”

Miller catches on. “Okay. Yeah. I see what you mean.”

“Good. Now, is there anything you’d like to amend about your previous answer?”

“What was the question?” Shimp reminds him. “Oh, yeah. I mean, I knew some of her friends, but not real good. When me and Laura got together, we liked our time to ourselves.”

“But you did know some of her friends.”

“Well, yeah. To see them. I didn’t pay any attention to them if I didn’t have to.”

“Why not?”

“They’re kind of immature, if you know what I mean.”

“Immature in what ways?”

“You know what immature chicks are like. They talk about things no one with a clue cares about anymore. They worry about who’s dating who and who’s friends with who and who has a car and who wears off-brand clothes. I mean, they’d get worked up when someone got their driver’s license.”

“How old were these girls?”

Miller opens his mouth. Stops himself and appears to reconsider what to say. “Her age, I guess. Eighteen, nineteen. In there.”

Dougherty has been an investigator of one kind or another almost half his life. He’s never lost his curiosity about why suspects talk to the police without their lawyer. He’s a cop and would never sign a Miranda waiver, innocent or guilty. You were talking to people who did this for a living and knew things you didn’t. The only reasonable course of action is to shut up.

Everyone who talks is different. Some are ego-driven, especially if they have any college. They think because they can pronounce Socrates better than either Bill or Ted, know *The Magnificent Seven* is based on some Japanese movie, and can tell Beethoven from Beyonce, they can outwit this rube cop. They’re so busy reminding themselves how smart they are it never occurs to them this cop they’re dismissing almost certainly has a degree, maybe even a Master’s, in criminology—even worse, psychology—and interviews people who think they’re clever for a living.

Others think they’re badass, which Dougherty classifies as a subset of egotist. *You’ll never break me, copper. I’m no genius but I’ve seen every episode of Law and Order and I know what can hurt me and your weak-ass shit doesn’t cut it.* Dougherty particularly enjoys the looks

on their faces when their story falls apart. The post-conviction eye-fucking is an erection-inducing event. Almost.

The type that bothers him are those overcome with remorse, who can't tell their story fast enough, or include enough incriminating details, to assuage their consciences. Sometimes he wants to shake them and scream, "For Christ's sake, shut up until the lawyer gets here!" These people often kill in fits of anger or, even worse, are party to accidents for which they feel responsible. They are so laden with guilt they'd confess to the Lindbergh kidnapping and both Kennedy assassinations in the hope such a cleansing will make them feel better. It won't, and everything they put in their statement digs the hole deeper.

Then there are the knuckleheads. Smart enough to understand their rights and too stupid to understand why they have them. In trouble due to negligence, or a lack of respect for the property of others, or a disregard for the frailty of human anatomy. The skim milk of sociopaths, who don't bother to care in advance about hurting someone and don't understand why they're in trouble now. Dougherty suspects if he were to look up "knucklehead" in Hagen and Daigle's *Introduction to Criminology*, Steven Miller's picture would be there.

Shimp continues. "When did Laura graduate high school?"

"I don't know. It didn't come up. Last year, I guess."

"Didn't you go?"

"I don't understand the question."

"You met at the St. Margaret Mary's fall festival the year before last, right?"

"Right."

"So you were dating since around then?"

"Not like right away, but pretty close."

"Before Christmas?"

Miller considers his answer. "Yeah." Looks as if he might say more but doesn't.

"So you were definitely dating last spring when classes graduated."

"Uh, yeah, I guess so."

"And you didn't go to see your girlfriend graduate?"

Dougherty speaks up. "Didn't even make the rounds of the after parties?"

"Her parents aren't big fans of mine." Miller's comment is technically true. Laura Coulter's parents only became aware of his presence in their daughter's life when Shimp told them as part of the investigation.

The detectives and Miller fence about this point until Shimp cuts to the chase. "When did you and Laura become intimate?"

"What do you mean... intimate?"

Dougherty steps in. "When did you start fucking her, is what Detective Shimp wants to know."

Miller shrinks into himself. Not so much the average person would notice. Shimp and Dougherty are not average people. "It's not like I have an exact date."

Shimp asks if it was before or after Christmas. Dougherty is again more direct. “Or behind that row of offices across from St. Margaret Mary’s that night at the festival?”

“No no no, it was nothing like that. This wasn’t just about me trying to fu—you know, trying to have sex with her.”

Dougherty shakes his head. Shimp soldiers on. “Was it before or after Christmas?”

“Before.”

“Before or after Thanksgiving?”

“After.”

Shimp appears to study a page in her notebook that contains her shopping list. “Are you sure?”

Miller says, “Yeah...I think so. No, I’m sure. It was after Thanksgiving but before Christmas.”

Laura Coulter did not keep a diary, so this is new information. Neither detective cares much when Laura and Miller became intimate. It’s another piece of Miller’s story they’re in the process of locking him into in case he tries to change any of it later.

Half an hour passes while nailing down frequency, locations, and related activities. (“After the football game?” “Before or after you went to eat?” “Before *and* after?”)

Shimp resumes the questioning after a bathroom break. “When’s the last time you saw her?”

“A couple weeks ago.”

“That long?”

“We were kind of tapering off, you know?”

Shimp flips through pages in the notebook to settle on the grocery list again. “Two weeks. You’re sure.”

“Pretty sure.”

“Could it have been Tuesday?” The day Laura Coulter died.

“Could’ve been Tuesday, sure.”

“I mean this past Tuesday.”

“No. Like I told you, Tuesday a couple weeks ago.”

“But it was a Tuesday.”

“You said that. I said it might’ve been.”

The detectives exchange glances. Shimp says, “Okay. Two weeks ago, then.” Pauses. Reaches into a pocket of her jacket to produce a cell phone that has not rung. “I have to take this. Does anyone need a break?”

Dougherty replies before Miller has a chance. “I’m good. I have a couple things I’d like to clear up with Steve, if you don’t mind.”

Shimp has no problem with that. Miller is halfway out of his chair. “I could use a break.”

Dougherty leans in. Speaks in a conspiratorial tone. “Sit your ass down. I’m trying to do you a favor. Won’t take a minute.” Miller sits. Shimp leaves.

Dougherty waits for the air to settle. He has no notes. His manner is more relaxed with Shimp out of the room. He allows the atmosphere to calm while providing his partner time to get to the observation room. “Between us, just two guys talking here, this girl was a nice little piece. I’ve seen her social media posts. Talked to her friends. She knew she was hot and didn’t mind advertising it. Eighteen or nineteen, she was too young for me, but a girl that age’d be right in your wheelhouse. Nothing criminal in that.”

“She was a pretty girl, yeah, but it wasn’t like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like it was just about her body.”

Dougherty shows his best Dutch uncle smile, what he calls the Number 23. “Come on, Stevie. There were hundreds of people at that festival. Something about her drew your attention. You trying to tell me it wasn’t that rack?”

“Truth is, she come on to me.” Dougherty turns away in disdain. “Hand on the Bible. I was in line for a funnel cake. She come over and asked what I was waiting for, standing there all by myself.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“I said I was waiting for a funnel cake.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Miller draws a cross over his heart. “Swear to God.”

“Bullshit. You might’ve started with that, but you said more.”

Miller stares as if wondering how he missed seeing Dougherty that night, how much he knows. “I said I was waiting for a funnel cake and I wondered if she’d like some.”

“What’d she say to that?”

“She said she could ask me the same question.”

“Which question?”

“Would I like some?”

Dougherty can’t imagine anyone using that as a come-on. Then he remembers this is a fifteen-year-old girl. She might have thought it was cool. “You fuck her that night? Just between us.”

Miller is aghast. “No!”

Dougherty raises an eyebrow. Neither man speaks for thirty seconds. Miller breaks first. “She...uh...she blew me.”

Dougherty slaps the table hard enough to startle Miller. “I knew it. Across the street behind those offices, right?”

“Actually it was in those trees behind the church. You know, back of where the father lives?”

“She blew you in the rectory?”

“Not *in* it. Next to it. In the trees.”

“Played the bad girl all the way, did she? I guess those high school boys were no challenge for her anymore.”

Miller relaxes. “She used to say she felt sorry for her friends fooling around with boys while she had a man that knew what he was doing.”

“I’ll bet. Tell me the truth now, how old did you think she was?”

“Eighteen.”

Dougherty pretends to think. “I can believe that. I’ve seen the pictures on social media. A couple in that one bathing suit? Yeah, she could pass for eighteen.”

Shimp re-enters the room. Dougherty is grateful. He’s used to playing along with felons, appearing to take their side; at least to empathize. Distasteful as it can be, it is often helpful in extracting statements. Consciences are funny things. They’ll stand up when attacked, but are happy to unburden themselves when their owner feels encouraged to believe what they’ve done is understandable, maybe even excusable. Much as Dougherty loves interviews, he hates this part. Later he will shower and go out for dinner and several beers among people he knows Miller’s story would appall, if he were to tell them. Which he will not.

Shimp says, “The lab report’s back.”

The lab report has been on her desk since yesterday afternoon. It’s thorough and detailed in its description of Laura Coulter’s death. It says nothing about who might have done it. Both cops have read it and know they need a confession.

No one speaks until Dougherty says, “You gonna make us beg?”

“Laura Coulter fought whoever killed her.”

“I thought there were no defense wounds.”

“There aren’t. Whoever strangled her came at her from behind, but she must’ve scratched him. There’s skin under her nails.”

“Belong to anyone we know?” Both cops look at Miller, knowing what’s under Laura Coulter’s nails are traces of fabric. A detective trained in evidence recovery will examine every shirt Steven Miller owns after executing the search warrant for his apartment, now in progress.

Miller’s relief is obvious. He pulls up his sleeves and extends his arms. “See? No scratches. I ain’t seen her in over a week.”

Dougherty says, “I believe him.” Still looking at Miller. “Why would he kill her?”

Shimp says, “I thought you were the one who always says motive is the DA’s problem.”

“They were drifting apart. Why complicate things?”

Shimp sends a baleful look Dougherty’s direction. Turns toward Miller. “Whose idea was it to break up?”

“We weren’t like breaking up breaking up. It’s like he said. We were drifting apart. It’s not like we ever made a decision not to see each other anymore.”

Dougherty has a role to play here. “How’s that drifting apart thing work?” Shimp glares at him as if irritated by the distraction. In fact, they’ve done this a hundred times. Either can play the straight man, depending on who the suspect seems to identify with more.

Dougherty shrugs. “You know how it is. I’m a single guy. Could come in handy someday.” Back to Miller. “This drifting apart. Did one of you suggest it? Like to taper off for a while and see how much you miss each other?”

Miller looks at Dougherty like maybe he's the one who's fifteen years old. "No one brings it up. It's not like we talked about it or argued or nothing. You don't get together a couple nights in a row, then three, then four. After while you're just not seeing each other anymore."

No one speaks for at least a minute, when Shimp says, "Where were you Tuesday evening?"

"What time on Tuesday?"

Dougherty interrupts. "From the time you left work until you got back to work Wednesday morning."

"Everything I did?"

"If you took a shit, I want to know about it."

Miller does not appear to have anticipated this level of scrutiny. "I got home from work and took a shower—"

"What time did you get home?"

"I don't know. The usual time. Quarter after five, five-thirty?"

"What time did you leave work for the day?"

"Around four-thirty."

"Can anyone vouch for you?"

"Yeah. Me and my boss left together."

"You go straight home?"

"Yeah. Wait. Probably. I might've stopped for some groceries on the way. I don't remember which day. Could've been Tuesday."

"How did you pay for the groceries?"

It goes on like this for a while. Dougherty doesn't care about anything Miller did until at least two hours after he says he left work. The detectives need Miller to understand the level of minutiae they're interested in without him knowing the specific minutiae they care about. Once he's locked into a story, the detectives can use any discrepancy to shake Miller's confidence in what he's told them, which can weaken the entire foundation of his story. Even if the inconsistency doesn't relate to the crime,

Miller eventually decides he went straight home on Tuesday, took a shower, and wanted something to eat. That was when he realized he was short on groceries, made do with what he had, and went back out to shop. He stopped a couple of other places for beer, lottery tickets (he has a lucky convenience store where he buys them), and razor blades, which he forgot to get at Shop 'N' Save. The shopping run coincides with Laura Coulter's approximate time of death.

Shimp and Dougherty spend another hour walking Miller through his story. Only a few insignificant peripherals change. The detectives at last appear to be satisfied. Dougherty tells Miller to hang tight, they'll be back in ten minutes with the paperwork they need to release him.

The detectives return 97 minutes later. Miller tries to play off his upset with a jovial tone. "You guys need new watches. This has been way more than ten minutes."

Shimp sits. "We want to go over a few things in your story that don't quite add up."

“I told you everything I done that night.” Neither cop answers. Miller becomes wary of the change in atmosphere. “What is it you need to add up again?”

“You said you and Laura never really broke up. You just kind of drifted apart. You phrased it as going two days without seeing each other, then three, then four and pretty soon you just don’t see each other anymore.”

Miller appears unnerved by how precisely Shimp quoted him, no notes in hand. “That’s what happened.”

“That’s not what her friends say.”

“Huh? What?”

“Her friends say she was having trouble getting ahold of you. That you weren’t returning her calls.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing all this time? Running those snarky little bitches down? I can let you in on a few things that’ll show you not to trust them as far as you can throw that fat one. Those mean girls movies don’t tell the half of it.”

Dougherty leans over the table just enough to get Miller’s undivided attention.

“Remember when we said we were going to ask you questions we already knew the answers to? How it wouldn’t be a good idea to lie on one of those?” Dougherty gives a tight smile. Re-settles himself in the chair, nodding his head. Taps an index finger on the table twice.

Shimp speaks without waiting for Miller to re-focus. “Laura’s friends say you weren’t returning her calls.”

Miller turns back toward Shimp. “That was her playing it up, making it more than it was. She was a real drama queen when she felt like it.”

Dougherty speaks quieter than he has all day. “Who’s Maureen Feeney?”

Miller almost sprains his neck turning in Dougherty’s direction. “Who?”

Dougherty lets his disgust show. “Pay attention. This is one of those questions we talked about.” Leans in and lowers his voice another notch. “Now is not the time to lie, Stevie. Do not fucking lie to me.”

“Sure I know Maureen Feeney. I just didn’t catch the name the first time you said it. She’s this girl I know.”

“How well?”

“How well what?”

Dougherty enjoys few things more than when suspects start answering questions with questions of their own. Maintains his poker face. “How well do you know her? Maureen Feeney.”

“From around. We have friends in common an’ ‘at.”

Dougherty turns to Shimp. “They have friends in common.” Back to Miller. “Did Maureen Feeney spend the night with you last night?”

Miller now makes a fresh decision every time he opens his mouth. “Uh, yeah. She had too much to drink and I let her stay over.”

“She have too much to drink the night before that, too?”

“No. That was...I had some people over and—”

Shimp slides papers across the table so Miller can read them. “These are phone records. Your cell, Laura Coulter’s, and Maureen Feeney’s. You talked with Laura almost every day until a month or so ago. The calls to Maureen Feeney start and get more frequent at about the same time your calls to Laura drop off to a fraction of what they used to be.”

“Like I said, we were tapering off.”

“These phone records tell a different story.”

“Like what? You have recordings?”

“The records tell enough. The calls from Laura to you stay about the same consistency. Maybe even tick up a little. They keep getting shorter until they go straight to voice mail. You never call back.”

Miller pulls the paper closer so he can read it. “Show me where it says voice mail here.”

Shimp points to the *Duration* column. “Calls one or two minutes long almost always go to voice mail. This shows at least a call a day that short during the week before she died. You never call her. Then, Tuesday afternoon,” Shimp taps the line on the paper, “a call is twenty-three minutes.”

Dougherty says, “Same day she died.”

Miller is pale. “So?”

A small edge appears in Shimp’s voice. “You were dumping her, weren’t you? Not even that. You were ghosting her. A grown man and you didn’t have the decency to tell a teenager you were breaking up with her.”

Dougherty: “Decency doesn’t enter into it. He doesn’t have the balls.”

Shimp and Dougherty alternate. Shimp starts. “So she keeps calling and calling—”

“And texting and texting—”

“And you don’t even have the decency—”

“Courage—”

“To text her back.”

“To tell her to leave you alone.”

“Something teenagers do every day.”

Miller is sweating like he’s run ten miles. Dougherty says, “What did you talk about?”

“We talked about all kinds of different stuff. You know things people talk about. It’s not like I kept an inventory of all the times we talked.”

“I don’t care about the other times. I want to know what you talked about last Tuesday.”

“I don’t remember.”

“*Bullshit!*”

“I mean I don’t remember exactly. Like word for word.”

“Give me the gist of it.”

Miller scratches his head. Rubs his chin. Opens his mouth twice before words come out. “She asked me why I wasn’t calling her back.” Leaves it hanging.

“And?”

“And that’s what we talked about.”

Dougherty senses they’ve passed the tipping point. Now all he has to do is not push too hard at the wrong time. “What did you tell her?”

Miller’s morale drops another inch, as if it had not occurred to him that was the next logical question. “I told her I’ve been busy.”

“I bet that went over well.”

“She called me a liar and an asshole and...a bunch of other stuff. She had a mouth on her when she was pissed off.”

“Whose idea was it to go to the park?”

“I didn’t go to the park. I told you I went shopping.”

“Right. Shop ‘N’ Save, then for beer and razor blades.”

“That’s what I said.”

Dougherty is about to speak when there’s a knock at the door. He raises a finger to ask for a minute. Speaks to someone standing in the hallway, then steps outside, closing the door behind him. He’s back in less than two minutes. His demeanor changes no more than if whoever he spoke to told him the weather should be good this weekend. Took his seat, then a few seconds to re-gather his thoughts.

“Stevie, do you remember last year when those assholes tore up that park off the bypass there? Where the fighter plane is? Where we found Laura’s body?” Miller shakes his head and seems confused about this shift in topic. “Happened over the course of about a month. They tore down the backboards and put a bunch of obscene graffiti on the playground. Ended with taking their cars onto the ballyard and doing doughnuts in the infield.”

Shimp says, “We caught them, didn’t we?”

“Not this bunch. The reason I bring it up is because insurance paid for the repairs but threatened to raise the town’s rates. They made a deal. Penns River kept the same rate, but the town had to agree to add a couple of security cameras to the parking area. No announcement was made in the hopes we’d catch them another time.”

Shimp hands a manila folder to Dougherty, who says: “You told us you went shopping from around six-thirty until eight-thirty.”

Miller is sinking into his chair. “Around there. I never said no exact times.”

Dougherty has a hand inside the folder. “I hope you saved the receipts.”

“What do the receipts have to do with anything?”

“Because the time stamps would prove when you were there. They won’t, though.”

Dougherty places a photograph from the folder on the table. “That your car?”

“It’s like my car. They’re pretty common.”

Dougherty lays another photo on the table. “How common’s this license plate?”

Miller’s eyes won’t focus. “That must’ve been the day I stopped at the park after work to shoot a few baskets.”

Dougherty taps the first picture. “Check the time stamp. Six forty-seven.”

“Yeah. I stopped there before I went shopping.”

Dougherty believes the key to a successful interrogation is to anticipate the lies available to the suspect when his preferred story starts to fall apart. Slides another photograph across the table. “Seven o’clock.” More photos come out of the folder. “Seven-ten. Seven twenty. Here you are leaving at seven-twenty-nine.”

Miller sits dumbfounded. Shimp says, “That looks pretty bad.”

Dougherty says, “It gets better. Or worse, depending on your point of view. See, the pictures we have here are blow-ups from the security camera at the parking lot. The full photograph covers a lot more area.”

Three more photos emerge from the folder. Dougherty taps them each in turn. “There’s another car parked two spaces over from yours. Here’s a close-up. You can’t see all of the plate because of that bush there, but it’s Laura Coulter’s car.”

Miller is catatonic. Dougherty continues. “Leaving aside your shopping story, you expect us to believe you went to the park, saw her car, and didn’t leave? As long as you’d been ducking her, the conversation you admitted to us you had not two hours earlier, you expect anyone to believe you saw she was there and decided to shoot baskets, anyway?”

Miller tries to protest. Dougherty cuts him off. “That’s not all. That cop I talked to a few minutes ago? He just got back from your apartment.”

“Without me being there?”

“They had a warrant. Anyway, they found a long-sleeve shirt in your laundry that’s the same color and appears to be the same material as what was under Laura’s nails. It has a small rip on one sleeve. We haven’t matched the fibers yet, but we will. I’ll ask him about this later, you pulling shooting baskets into your alibi like you did, but you’re such a shitty liar I’ll bet you don’t even own a basketb—”

“*She was gonna tell!*”

The vehemence of Miller’s comment stops all activity in the room. Miller seems shocked to have spoken. Dougherty and Shimp sit expressionless until Shimp says in a voice made to seem even softer by what came before. “Tell who?”

“Everybody.” Miller looks three-quarters the size he was when he first sat down.

Shimp’s voice is too soft for the microphone to pick up. The transcript will read *inaudible*. “What was she going to tell everybody?”

“About—about how we went to bed together when she was fifteen. How I...how I...” Miller’s voice tapers off until it’s clear he’s spent.

Dougherty speaks, his voice now intimate. “How you knew.” Miller looks at him without comprehension. “About her being fifteen.” Miller ducks his head.

Shimp asks how it happened. Miller’s face has the animation of a corpse. Stares at the table for at least a minute before speaking. His voice sounds as if it’s coming from elsewhere. “It was fun at first. I really didn’t know she was fifteen when she first came onto me.” Faces Dougherty. “You saw the pictures. Tell me that’s a fifteen-year-old-girl.”

From the neck down maybe. Laura Coulter had a woman’s body with the face of an adolescent. Anyone looking above her neck would see the warning signs if they wanted to.

Dougherty still needs to play out the string. They're now in territory where he has to be the sympathetic face. "No argument here. She was fifteen going on twenty-five."

Miller nods as if receiving validation. "She'd do anything. That's the thing about young girls. They'll do dirty shit because they haven't figured out it's dirty." Miller's eyes close. The minutest head shake. "But after while...man, she was *boring*. And her friends. Jesus Christ, they were whiny little bitches. Thought they were cool, like they had something going on. Immature little twats is what they was."

Shimp says, "Sure they were immature. They were fifteen years old."

Dougherty senses Shimp losing patience. Moves for the close. "How did it happen? At the end, in the park?"

Miller kneads his forehead. "I suggested the park because we had some good times there and I didn't think she'd figure anything was up." Shimp and Dougherty exchange glances. *First degree*. "When we got back in the trees, I didn't know what to do. I didn't go there to kill her, you know? I just wanted to-to...impress on her the seriousness of the situation. How I had a real girlfriend now and it was time to move on. I looked at her to start and she's standing there with this *now what?* face on and I-I...what I wanted to tell her, it didn't come out right."

"She went off. Calling me names I never heard before. Said she was going to tell her parents, my boss, everyone, how I raped fifteen-year-old girls. Tell my new girlfriend. Maybe even take out an ad in the paper. She actually said that. 'Maybe I'll put it in the paper.' I must've had a look on my face because she said something like 'Go ahead and cry' and then she *laughed* at me. Turned away and started walking back to her car."

Neither detective speaks, nor moves. Nothing that might disrupt Miller now that it's coming out.

"I ran up behind her and grabbed her by the neck. She fought me, tried to pull my arms down. That's when I knew I'd have to go all the way. No way would she be scared into not telling. She'd just add this to the list." Miller dry washes his face. Tilts his head to stare at nothing. "Once you make up your mind, it's not that hard, you know?" Shifts focus to Dougherty. "It's a shame. She was funny and some of that kid shit was cute. In the end," sighs, "she was just a cunt like the rest."

An hour and a half later Miller has a typed statement to sign. He scrawls a signature and Shimp slides it into her folder. Asks if Dougherty minds taking *this* over to the jail on the county side of the building so she can start on the prosecutor's report.

Dougherty waves her out. Comes around to Miller's side of the table with the urgency of a man walking into the kitchen for a cold drink. "Get up." Miller stands and Dougherty handcuffs him before Miller can ask what happens next.

Dougherty steers him down the hall. The second shift is on, people Miller hasn't seen before looking at the curiosity as it's escorted through the corridors. Dougherty takes him through processing—*roll your fingers across the card, face center, face right*—and hands him off to Deputy Sheriff Mike McKillop for shoelace removal and jumpsuit fitting.

Dougherty puts out a hand as McKillop takes Miller by the arm. “Hold on a second, Mac. I want to ask him one more question.” McKillop opens his hands in invitation.

Dougherty speaks to Miller. “This has nothing to do with anything, but I have to ask. What made it seem like a good idea to trade statch rape for murder? First degree if the DA takes some of your comments the way I do. What was going on in your head?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want people thinking I was some kind of pervert.”

Dougherty and McKillop look at each other, hands over their mouths to hide stifled laughter. Dougherty sobers first. “I feel kind of bad for you, Stevie, led astray by that devil woman. You told me before how it was fun, young girl like that, how you could get her to do dirty stuff because she hadn’t figured out it was dirty yet.” McKillop’s expression changes 180 degrees. His daughters are twelve, fourteen and seventeen. “You know what’s really fun? An older woman who knows it’s dirty and likes it so much she’s good at it. Maybe even teaches you something.”

Miller delivers the look Dougherty hoped for. “Remember that, Stevie, if you live long enough to breathe free air again. It’s my gift to you, something to look forward to.”

THE END

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