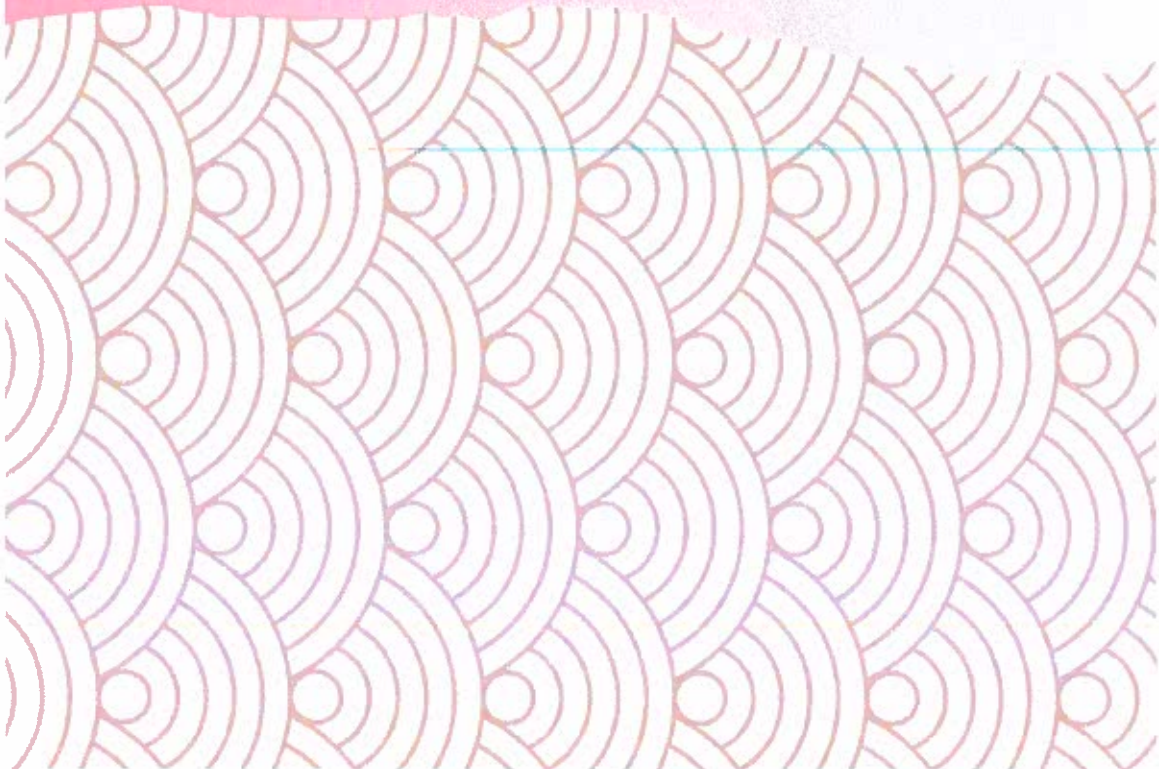




Work Ethic



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The casual turns, scenic stretches, and gradual hills of the country road from work to home were transformed by the day's rush into three chicanes, two S curves, one hair pin, a chassis-pounding jump, and two accelerating flat-out straightaways. The cat never really had a chance.

S_____ never felt the front left tire jump as it overtook the still-running, skulking, swerving feline. It bounced up to thud the bottom of the car, right underneath his foot on the floorboard. The rear left all-weather radial undauntedly spared the writhing target nothing, paying no heed to the panicked, searching pleading green eyes.

S_____ withdrew his foot from the accelerator but did not brake, nor stop. He shot momentary glances at the straight, flat road ahead, as he slowed along its length; cold dry eyes affixed most steadily on his rear view mirror.

One car passed going the other way, toward the cat. S_____ hoped not to be recognized. The cat was in the middle of the two-lane blacktop, right in the center of the spotlight cast at dusk by the lone streetlamp.

The horror of watching was tainted. S_____ had been so pushed, so rushed; he only now saw its toll on him. He felt nothing for the cat. He felt only the threat of being discovered and he was angered at the inconvenience of the memory of guilt he knew he should, but didn't, feel about the hit and run.

S_____ was detachedly amazed at the death throes acrobatically transforming the cat into a mockery of sobering reflection. The grotesque pain shot the animal into the air an easy three feet straight up from the road. It flipped, somersaulted, and twisted in each escalation. It was nearly comical, had dying not been the cause. Repeatedly, as if in a mock countdown of the nine lives, at least a half-dozen times, the cat collapsed to the ground. Unable to land on its feet, it bounced off its side or spine or the side of its face, before leaping skyward, as if the macadam were superheated by a summer's sun.

Yet it wasn't summer. It was November. And someone's holidays would be missing a favorite family feline. But none of this moved S_____ to surrender his anger and sense of being put upon. Glaring into his mirror, at the end of the straightaway one last time, he convinced himself the owner was irresponsible and, in the ultimate justification, that untethered pets get exactly what they deserve.

He negotiated the bend in the road, and nothing else. He got home late and spoke of the murder to no one.

S_____ awoke before sunrise. He disturbed no one. After showering, shaving, and dressing he drove off into the pre-dawn beginning of yet another workday. Heading down the driveway he adjusted the seat harness, around his hip, so it wouldn't press against his belt-mounted paging beeper. He looked down to see the radio dial in the dark and below that the dimly lit keypad of the dash mounted car phone.

Considering avoiding the road used the night before, S_____ paused to decide which way to turn. Refusing to be intimidated or made to feel guilty, he reset the wheel and went down the same fateful road. S_____ cruised around the bend and saw the streetlamp pool its halo at the end of the straightaway. In a moment he was there, and, noticed nothing in the road. S_____ relaxed. He marveled that he could be physically relieved from emotions he was consciously denying all the while. Then it struck his peripheral vision. The stiffened corpse, hunched under a juniper branch, stared out at S_____ with eyes whose meaning and expression could now only come as a reflection of the beholder.

S_____ sped on. Despite the emptiness of the road, he looked around furtively to make certain no one was watching to see his ever so accusingly slight hesitation.

Further on, S_____ was still seeing his own glance in the floating specter of the dead cat's eyes when their shape and color changed. They became gradually more rounded than elliptical. Their marble look of green gave way to a pupilless ebon sheen. And the cat metamorphosized into a muscular tawny doe, just before the shower of blood sprayed his windshield.

S_____ broke from his reverie and the spry mother bounded into the roadside woods in advance of her startled fawn, crossing the road behind her. He knew he'd hit neither of them, so S_____ was at a loss to explain to himself the blood he'd first thought was from his cat haunting.

The mystery was too much for S_____ to take. Quickly stashing his car off the road, he dashed into the stand of leafless maples. To his right, a fir-lined run, dotted with steaming deer droppings and streaked with jet sprays of arterial blood.

The frog peepers grew louder as S_____ pursued the doe. Without thinking about it, he automatically reached down to turn off his beeper. Subconsciously he noted the deer were escaping over a ground cover of soft and silent fir needles, avoiding the adjacent brown leaves and short twigs his shoes were crunching and snapping astride the maples. Doe and daughter were instinctively heading for the marshland behind the reservoir, in hopes of losing their pursuers. He winced at the inescapable assumption they must be

making about him, chasing them upwind as the brown tinge of first light silhouetted the hills to the east of the wetlands. S_____ passed over onto the softer deer run.

Nagged by the low background sounds of the leaves and the sticks, S_____ pulled up, slowed, and stopped. He strained to hear if the mother and her young one were circling back to lose him. He wondered what they were doing. He wondered what he was doing; and set out again down the run.

The peepers stopped. There were far off splashes. That wasn't good. The deer hadn't turned in a circle. And if not them, then who?

There were two flashes reflected off the evergreens in front of him. The first was fleeting. A background sheet of fluorescent orange. The second sprayed out foreground specks of red. Both bursts were lost in time and memory, pushed there by the immediacy of his pain.

S_____ spun and smashed into a prickly fir, shaking half its branches. Far off he heard two more reports. At first, he was startled into jumping bolt upright at the sound; then was bent over double when something struck him in the base of the neck. S_____ catapulted into a somersault when another pain drove into his lower back and flipped him over onto the ground.

Despite having no feeling in his legs, S_____ snapped to his feet and crashed his way back through to the maple debris paralleling the soft, silent run he'd been driven from.

Twice more he heard the same sharp cracks. He tensed. To no avail. His legs were propelled forward and out in front of him, ferris-wheeling him so he looked up to see his reddened shoes stretching before him in the air. He slammed into the ground, hitting vertebrae first.

He laid there. Detached. The amorphous shapes before him were vague reminders of the way things used to be. All he could recognize were arguing human voices.

"What the hell is he doing here?"

"I don't know."

"We were chasing deer. Where did he come from?"

Damned if I know."

"What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

"Well, serves him right."

"What? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we've got one week off from work. We got two days to hunt doe. There's ten people with doe licenses. We're two of them. Forget this guy. We've got a wounded doe to find."

"But we can't leave him for dead."

"Look at his eyes. He's already dead. Forget him. It's not our fault. He's not supposed to be out here anyway. He got what he deserved. Come on. We're wasting time."

"And what do we do later? After the hunt. What do we say then?"

"We go home. We gut and cut that doe if we get our asses in gear. About him. We speak to no one. Case closed. Understood?"

"Understood."