Stephen King - The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet
The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet
by Stephen King

The barbecue was over. It had been a good one; drinks, charcoaled T-bones, rare, a
green salad and Meg's special dressing. They had started at five. Now it was
eight-thirty and almost dusk -- the time when a big party is just starting to get
rowdy. But they weren't a big party. There were just the five of them: the agent and
his wife, the celebrated young writer and his wife, and the magazine editor, who was
in his early sixties and looked older. The editor stuck to Fresca. The agent had
told the young writer before the editor arrived that there had once been a drinking
problem there. It was gone now, and so was the editor's wife... which was why they
were five instead of six.

Instead of getting rowdy, an introspective mood fell over them as it started to get
dark in the young writer's backyard, which fronted the lake. The young writer's
first novel had been well reviewed and had sold a lot of copies. He was a lucky
young man, and to his credit he knew it.

The conversation had turned with playful gruesomeness from the young writer's early
success to other writers who had made their marks early and had then committed
suicide. Ross Lockridge was touched upon, and Tom Hagen. The agent's wife mentioned
Sylvia Plain and Anne Sexton, and the young writer said that he didn't think Plath
qualified as a successful writer. She had not committed suicide because of success,
she said; she had gained success because she had committed suicide. The agent smiled.
"Please, couldn't we talk about something else?" the young writer's wife asked, a
little nervously.

Ignoring her, the agent said, "And madness. There have been those who have gone mad
because of success." The agent had the mild but nonetheless rolling tones of an
actor offstage.

The writer's wife was about to protest again -- she knew that her husband not only
liked to talk about these things so he could joke about them, and he wanted to joke
about them because he thought about them too much -- when the magazine editor spoke
up. What he said was so odd she forgot to protest.
"Madness is a flexible bullet."

The agent's wife looked startled. The young writer leaned forward quizzically. He
said, "That sounds familiar..."
"Sure," the editor said. "That phrase, the image, 'flexible bullet,' is Marianne
Moore's. She used it to describe some car or other. I've always thought it described
the condition of madness very well. Madness is a kind of mental suicide. Don't the
doctors say now that the only way to truly measure death is by the death of the
mind? Madness is a kind of flexible bullet to the brain."

The young writer's wife hopped up. "Anybody want another drink?" She had no takers.
"Well, I do, if we're going to talk about this," she said, and went off to make
herself one.

The editor said: "I had a story submitted to me once, when I was working over at
Lagan's. Of course it's gone the way of Collier's and The Saturday Evening Post now,
but we outlasted both of them." He said this with a trace of pride. "We published
thirty-six short stories a year, or more, and every year four or five of them would
be in somebody's collection of the year's best. And people read them. Anyway, the
name of this story was 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,' and it was written by a
man named Reg Thorpe. A young man about this young man's age, and about as
successful."

"He wrote Underworld Figures, didn't he?" the agent's wife asked.
"Yes. Amazing track record for a first novel. Great reviews, lovely sales in
hardcover and paperback. Literary Guild, everything. Even the movie was pretty good,
although not as good as the book. Nowhere near."
"I loved that book," the author's wife said, lured back into the conversation
against her better judgment. She had the surprised, pleased look of someone who has
just recalled something which has been out of mind for too long. "Has he written
anything since then? I read Underworld Figures back in college and that was... well,
too long ago to think about."

"You haven't aged a day since then," the agent's wife said warmly, although
privately she thought the young writer's wife was wearing a too-small halter and a
too-tight pair of shorts.
"No, he hasn't written anything since then," the editor said. "Except for this one
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