

# ACTS OF VIOLENCE

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It begins in a parking lot.

The lot sits behind a sports bar, a brick building which has been wounded and scarred many times during its long history. It's been hit by drunk drivers who went backwards instead of forwards, had initials carved into it, and been attacked by drunken vandals. Once, fifteen years ago, someone tried to set it on fire. Unfortunately for the potential arsonist, the forecast included rain. And so the sports bar still stands.

It is nearly four o'clock in the morning, three fifty-eight, a dead-dark time before even a hint of light has touched the eastern horizon. Just darkness.

The bar is closed and silent.

Only three cars sit in its usually bustling parking lot: a 1957 Studebaker, a 1953 Oldsmobile, and a 1962 Ford Galaxie with a dented fender. Two of those cars belong to patrons. One of them a door-to-door salesman who spends

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his days trying to unload vacuum cleaners; the other unemployed, spending his days staring at the cracked ceiling of the apartment for which he's three months behind on rent. Both had a few too many earlier in the night and found other means of getting home, taxi rides most likely. Particularly the unemployed guy. The salesman might have hitched a ride with a buddy, but the unemployed guy almost certainly took a cab. If you have thirty dollars and rent is eighty, there's no point in saving any of it. Drink till you're drunk and pay for a ride home. You might as well enjoy your trip to the bottom. It's when you've got eighty-seven dollars and the rent's eighty that you need to save.

Paper cups and other trash – newspapers, food wrappers – litter the sun-faded asphalt. A whistling breeze pushes the litter across the cracked surface, just for a moment, rearranging the refuse slightly before going still again.

And then a pretty girl – a woman, really, though she doesn't *feel* like a grown-up – pushes her way out the front door of the sports bar.

Her name is Katrina – Katrina Marino – but almost everyone calls her Kat. The only people who still call her Katrina are her folks, to whom she talks every Saturday on the telephone. They live four hundred miles away, but still manage to saddle up and ride her nerves just fine. When are you going to finally wise up and leave that cesspool of a city, Katrina? It's dangerous. When are you going to settle down with a nice young man, Katrina? A girl your age shouldn't be single. You're closer to thirty than you are to

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twenty, you know. Soon, you won't have the youthful beauty to catch a nice man, a doctor or a lawyer, and you'll have to settle. You don't want to have to settle, do you, Katrina?

Once outside, Kat reaches back through the door, feeling the wall just inside, trying to find a protrusion. Then she does find it, a switch, and she pushes the switch down. Click. The windows looking into the sports bar go dark, and the light which had splashed out into the parking lot, painting the gray asphalt white, vanishes.

Kat pushes the front door closed and locks it, checking the knob to be sure, then swings a metal gate home, bang, and clips a padlock into place.

The gate and the padlock are less than six months old and don't really match the decrepitude of the rest of the place. Also new are bars on the windows. Someone broke in through the back door, emptied the register, took a case of whiskey, and broke out through a window. Why they didn't just walk out the door, no one knows.

The money lost in whiskey and cash was, in the scheme of things, not so big a deal. But the cost of repairs, that was a killer. Plus the lost revenue. The place had to stay closed for two days.

Kat's only the night manager, but she still feels responsible for the place.

As she starts toward her Studebaker, tired, the long night finally catching up with her, the adrenaline of the evening spent, Kat sees that her car seems to be tilting

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rightward, but at first she can't tell why, or even whether it's real. Maybe it's an illusion, a trick of shadows.

She has to halve the distance between herself and her car before she sees that the tilt is real, that her gee-dee car has a flat tire.

'Son of a gun,' she says, angrily stomping the asphalt, feeling the impact ride up her shinbone.

She makes her way to the car, heads straight to the trunk, slips the key into the scratched keyhole, turns it left, wrong way, then right, hears the lock tumble, and pushes the lid up.

She can't see anything in there.

She fumbles for the flashlight she keeps stored on the left side of the trunk, tucked into the corner there. Her hand bounces around in the darkness for a while before her fingers finally find its cold smooth surface. She wraps her hand around it, flips it on. The light is weak and yellow, but at least it's there. And now that she can see them, she grabs the spare tire and the jack, and as she does, a brief smile touches the corner of her mouth.

Kat's always been a self-conscious person, always sort of watched herself from a distance, and the sight of her, five foot one, a hundred pounds even, wearing a blue wool dress with a white short-coat over it, carrying a tire almost as big as she is, and a heavy jack – the sight of it must have the same effect as a hippopotamus in a tutu. And thinking of that, a smile touches her lips. But it's erased quickly as she thinks of the task at hand.

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A moment later, Kat is sitting on her haunches, jacking her car up so she can change the gee-dee tire, watching the wheel well seem to expand while the tire stays firmly planted on the ground – and then finally it starts to lift, the bottom of the tire staying flat. It seems like it should fill with air, expand, as the weight is removed, but it doesn't.

And then – a sound behind her.

She stops moving, hoping that it was nothing, that the sound won't repeat, but it does, and she turns her head to look over her shoulder, afraid of what she might see, but having to look anyway. Kat is a person who's always covered her eyes when the most horrible things happen on-screen at the drive-in movie theater – but she's always sneaked a look through her fingers, too.

Newspaper pages skitter across the asphalt, carrying away yesterday's news.

'Just the wind, dummy,' she says. Just the wind.

She turns back to the car and continues her work.

Kat dumps the flat tire and the diamond-shaped jack into her trunk, not caring how they fall, and slams the trunk lid shut.

It was a nail that caused the flat. The rusted, bent thing was hooking out of the inside wall of the tire like the lone tooth in a mouthful of gums. She vaguely remembers driving through a construction area on her way to work, men with tanned arms carrying broken chunks of wood

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with shiny nails sticking out of them to the back of a truck, working on repairing a half-burned row house.

Her hands are black with grime, with brake dust, and she's afraid to touch herself, afraid she'll smear black across her light blue dress or her white short-coat. Smear more black. She already managed to get a little on her dress when she carried the tire to the trunk.

Stupid effing flat tire.

She wants nothing more than to go home, slip out of her clothes and into a warm bath, wash herself clean, and then slip again, this time into her bed, beneath her night-cool sheets, where she can sleep till noon, maybe one, and if she's lucky, from the time her head hits the pillow till the midday sunlight coming in through the window wakes her, she'll have pleasant dreams.

But first she's got to get home.

She opens her car door and falls into the driver's seat, sticks the key into the ignition and turns it clockwise. The car groans, the sound of a three-pack-a-dayer clearing his throat. The engine turns over once – slowly.

'Come on, baby,' Kat says.

She pumps the gas pedal.

The engine turns over again, this time a little faster. And again. Gaining speed. She lets off the gas, doesn't want to flood the engine. It turns again. Coughs. Farts. And finally it starts in earnest.

Thank goodness. Kat wipes her brow, glad she won't have to call a cab, and as soon as she does, she remembers

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the grime on her hands, looks at herself in the rearview mirror, and laughs.

A black smudge drawn across her forehead like on a tramp in a silent movie.

And she can't even wipe it off; trying would just make it worse. But Kat doesn't care. It's been a long night. She worked ten hours straight and she's tired, but all she has left to do is get home.

That's her one last task before the sun comes up.