

The Scene of the Crime

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The door to the bar opened with a bang, and a couple stepped inside. Buzz and Kate moved unevenly across the floor to a table in a dark corner. It was late, almost closing time. The bartender watched them, scowling, not looking up from his paper. They were pissed—drunk and angry, saying something about whose fault it was and why it happened again. They were bickering with each other and loud when they sat down, but in another minute they were laughing at a joke. It wasn't that funny. The waitress got her order pad from the bar, and the bartender looked up to meet her eyes. He said flatly, "One round. No more. They don't need it, and we're closing." Buzz and Kate were giggling and looking around when the waitress came for their order. They were sitting close together in the dark booth, their hands touching on the table cloth.

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Susan was sitting at her dressing table and getting ready for bed. Paul, her husband, was already asleep. From time to time he would snore gently, and then return to deep sleep. He always said he could sleep through anything, and it seemed to be true. The house was quiet. She liked this time of night, and sometimes she would stay up later than Paul to read or sew. But she was really staying up for the quiet. They lived on an open stretch of highway, just inside the city limits, but well past the suburban strip malls and intersections. Their house was close to the road, but there was seldom any traffic on the highway, so it didn't matter. She could forget the road outside. The kids were small when the interstate was built about five miles away, and it carried all the through traffic. They had a couple of neighbors a few miles down, but she hardly saw them. Sometimes at night she could hear a neighbor's dog barking, but that was about the only sound besides the birds outside and maybe the rain.

When the kids were small, she would sit with them on the sofa downstairs to tell them stories before going to bed. Then she'd chase them from the room, usually laughing, and have them pick up their toys and get into their pajamas. Later, when the kids were teens, she'd wait upstairs in the bedroom for them to get home. They were always good about the midnight curfew, and she knew they'd be responsible, but she just waited for them. Of course, she didn't want them to know what she was doing, so she would turn out the bedroom light and move her chair over by the window. She would just sit there, listening to the sounds outside in the night, waiting for her children to come home. They were good kids, grown kids now, she thought, both married with

kids of their own, living at different ends of the country these days. Susan glanced out into the darkness beyond her window. She looked forward to the kids' visits and their weekly phone conversations.

But this Saturday night she wasn't expecting any calls as she got ready for bed with the night so quiet outside her room. She picked up a book from her bedside table, and opened its cover to read a little. She started to feel drowsy after a few pages, so she turned out the light and snuggled herself comfortably with Paul in bed. The moonlight made a light square on the bedroom wall across from the window. She could hear the wind outside, and before long she was asleep.

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It was dark in Buzz's bedroom, and Kate was shaking him. "Get up!" she said urgently. A light in the bathroom made it possible to see their clothes scattered on the floor by the bed. It was 5:15, according to the digital clock on the table. Buzz opened his eyes, groaned, and started to go back to sleep. "We didn't set an alarm," Kate said, talking loud and fast. She shook him again with both hands. "I was going to be home hours ago. We fell asleep. The sitter was supposed to leave by 2. I promised the girls I'd be there when they wake up, and I can't lose another sitter. *Get up!*" Buzz moved himself to sit on the side of the bed, and then balanced gently on his feet. He turned his head slowly, and started looking around for his clothes. He was still high. Kate was frantic. "*Let's go!*"

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Susan drowsed awake after dreaming about her son coming home from the first day of school. He was on a yellow school bus, and proudly negotiating the large steps down to the ground where she was standing. Susan was smiling when she woke up. That's the way it was, she thought, that's just the way it was. She made a mental note to tell her son about the dream when he called on Sunday afternoon. The room was dark and quiet. She snuggled next to Paul. The window facing the highway was open, and a slight breeze stirred the curtain.

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Kate jumped in the passenger seat of Buzz's car, and pulled the seat belt so hard it jammed. She didn't bother to fix it. "Just go!" she said, and they did, one tire rolling over the sidewalk curb as they pulled out of the driveway. Buzz felt like he was floating, but he was sitting in his car and driving. He tried to focus. He just wanted to drop Kate off and go back to sleep. Bright car lights bothered his eyes, and he squinted. He wanted to close his eyes. Kate was leaning toward him in the car and yelling. It felt like her mouth was about six inches from his right ear, and she was yelling. It was his fault, whatever it was she was talking about. He was trying not to listen, trying to keep his eyes on the road and focus on what he was doing.

Buzz thought he remembered a short cut back to Kate's apartment, and he pulled off onto a country road with little traffic. The road was dark ahead except in the beam of his headlights. There was no sign of morning in the sky. He glanced sideways at Kate to answer something she said, but when he looked back at the road it curved in front of him. He startled when the tires hit gravel on the shoulder of the road, and he jerked the wheel to get back on the pavement. Everything was happening fast, but he

felt like a dreamer. The car crossed the road like a bullet. His foot jammed the brake to the floor, and the tires squealed. Kate was screaming.

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The explosion downstairs was like a bomb. Susan jumped out of bed in an instant. She glanced briefly at Paul, who resettled himself to go back to sleep. Her bare feet touched lightly on the wooden steps, and she turned on the porch light when she reached the bottom. She tugged at her bathrobe to close it in front, and snugly tied the cotton belt in front of her pajamas. Quickly she put on the slippers she kept near the front door. The air was cold on her face when she stepped outside, and she could still hear unexpected sounds from the yard. She thought she heard a cry.

As she stood on the porch, Susan was startled to see a man in his twenties walking with some difficulty around the corner of her house. As he got closer, she could see there was blood on the side of his head and the front of his jacket. He never really looked at Susan, but he was making his way toward her with awkward steps. She didn't know what to say or do. She could smell alcohol on his breath when he stood near her. She asked him, "Did you hit a deer?" Buzz raised his eyes toward her, but didn't quite focus. He seemed unsure about why he was there and why she was talking to him. His lips moved first, but without sound. He looked down and said, "I think I just killed the mother of two little girls."

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The car was lurching toward something big, and Buzz saw the small, neat house in the headlights just before hitting the tree. Everything spun and crashed, and he saw nothing. Nothing made sense when he was seeing again. The car was stopped, but leaning against something at a crazy angle. His face was wet and sticky, and it was in his eye. He was hurting in more places than he could count. The windshield was broken out to his right with only a jagged fringe of glass remaining. And Kate was gone! Her passenger seat was empty, and the door was still closed. Buzz was dizzy, so he put his head down on the steering wheel. He felt like being sick, but it wouldn't come. When he was ready to move, he pushed his door out and up a little to remove himself from the car. There was a dark form on the ground, but he didn't look that way. He thought he saw something there that looked like shoes.

Buzz wanted to go back to bed, and not see anything. He didn't want to think, or know anything. He wanted to be away from there, to be home or anywhere else. He wanted things to be the way they were yesterday, or any day before now. He closed his eyes, opened them, but it was all the same. He started walking, going nowhere, stumbling and getting away from the car. He was near the little house he saw. It was tidy, with a hedgerow, and he walked slowly around the house toward the front. The porch light was on, and he saw an older woman in a bathrobe near the steps.

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After calling 911, Susan ran around the house to retrace Buzz's steps. She gave him a kitchen towel for his head, and left him sitting on the porch. He was looking down and shaking his head from side to side. He wouldn't say any more. She was amazed by what she saw in her yard. It was gashed with parallel ruts that came from the road. One of the trees was shredded and broken, leaving only a torn stump and a mess of branches on the ground. The demolished car was tipped slightly against her

house. Steam was rising from the engine, and Susan could smell gasoline. She found Kate, face down and broken, like a rag doll dropped on the floor. Her arms and legs were at crazy angles on the ground. Susan couldn't tell if Kate was still breathing. She started to go back inside to get a blanket for Kate, but then she heard the sirens and saw the bright flashing lights.

In another moment there was a swarm of people in her yard. The rescue squad gathered up Kate, and drove off fast for the emergency room. Firemen stood by as a precaution, and police began working the area as a crime scene. An officer approached Susan to ask if she knew anything about the accident, or the location of the driver. She led him to Buzz. She watched from a distance as he struggled with a field sobriety test, and seemed to be unwilling to answer questions. He shook his head. The police cuffed Buzz and led him away. Susan noticed her kitchen towel was stuffed in his pocket. She let it go. Paul was waiting for Susan at the doorway, looking astounded, asking what happened.

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Susan and Paul slept in the next morning, and then shared breakfast at the kitchen table. Susan folded her napkin after finishing the bowl of cereal, thought once more about the accident in the night, and said to Paul, "I'm glad that's all over now." But it wasn't. A little later she heard a noise outside, and she thought the police might have returned to investigate. But when she looked out the window she saw an old car parked just off the road near her yard, and several strangers walking toward her house. They seemed to be looking in the grass near the places where the car crashed. Susan and Paul went outside to see what was happening. The people kept looking in the grass as they approached, ignoring them. Susan said hello, but they made no response. She asked if they were family members of the people in the accident. One of the strangers looked at her with a flat expression, unsmiling, saying nothing. Susan realized they were souvenir hunters. "Get out!" she yelled at them, waving her arms furiously. "This is our home! This is our yard! *Get out!*" The strangers retreated toward their car and left. Paul put his arm around Susan, comforting her and restraining her. She turned to him, speaking quietly now, her face pressed to his shoulder, "This is our home."

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When the souvenir hunters left, Susan and Paul took another look at the place where the wreck happened. Susan could see the skid marks from the tires on the road. The two parallel lines cut diagonally across the pavement toward the house. The skid marks were dark on the road, as if painted black, and led to the ruts in the yard from Buzz's car. Susan could also see the marks left by the tow truck that removed the wreck from their yard. There was a neat row of boxwoods against the house, but the car crushed three of the shrubs. She walked closer to the boxwoods that were standing, and noticed a dark object in one of the branches. It was a small purse, shiny and black, with a golden clasp. Susan opened it. Inside she found Kate's driver's license, house keys, cell phone, and a clip with some cash. She wasn't sure what to do with it. She considered taking it inside and calling the police investigator who left his card. But instead she turned on the phone. It had a wallpaper picture of two little girls in print dresses. Susan found the phone's address book and list of favorites, including "Home," "Work," "Buzz," and "Mom and Dad." She pressed the button for "Mom and Dad," and in a moment she was talking with Kate's mother.

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Mrs. Ann Malone, Kate’s mother, visited Susan and Paul the next day. They sat at the kitchen table, and Susan brought her coffee. She explained that Kate had a broken back, a broken arm, and a serious concussion. Her prognosis was poor. She was now in the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital. The doctors were very guarded, and seemed to be preparing Kate’s family for the worst. But she was still alive. The girls were with Ann and her husband now, with help from other relatives and friends in the area.

Ann was plainly dressed and quiet. She seemed to be holding herself together by an effort of will. She emphasized that Kate was a good person and a good mother. She had a good job. She’d been a good daughter, and taken care of her younger brother when they were growing up. Ann showed them photographs of Kate at different times of her life—Kate with pigtails and a bike, Kate going off to college, Kate when her own girls were babies. Ann explained that Kate was the first person in their family to go to college, and they were all proud of her. But she’d been going through a hard time since the divorce a couple of years ago, and she couldn’t seem to find the right guy. Then Ann’s voice trailed off to nothing. She seemed to be holding her breath until finally she started to cry. Susan brought her some tissues, and Ann settled down quickly.

“I do have one favor to ask,” Ann said, wiping her eyes. Susan and Paul looked up and listened carefully. “Will you let me place a cross with some flowers and pictures near the spot where the accident happened?” Susan hoped that her wince wasn’t visible to Kate’s mother. Susan and Paul were ready to reclaim their home, and didn’t want their yard to be a crime scene, a landmark, or a shrine. But Susan and Paul nodded to each other, and Susan said, “Of course, Ann, this is a beautiful way for us to help.” Later that morning they led Ann to the side of the house. Ann carefully placed the cross and other items at the spot where the car hit the house. They all stood quietly for a few moments, and Ann was gone.

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Buzz stood on the sidewalk in front of the Public Safety Building next to the courthouse. It was a beautiful sunny day. “The sun shines bright,” Buzz hummed to himself, “the sun shines bright.” But he didn’t go home. He’d been thinking about this day for weeks in jail. His public defender explained the judge set his bail high because new charges would be added if Kate died. It also didn’t help that the case was high profile with all the coverage in the newspapers and television. Buzz couldn’t make bail, so he went for a time not exactly sure when he would get out, or what would happen. But Kate lived. There was another bail hearing after Kate moved from intensive to intermediate care, and Buzz was a free man. His attorney explained he would likely be allowed to plead guilty to speeding and driving while intoxicated. He would most likely be given a sentence with probation, credit for time served, mandatory participation in driver’s safety school and alcohol rehab, and a suspended driver’s license. He was free.

First he took the bus to the hospital where Kate was recovering. She was in a single room with lots of flowers, and crayon drawings taped to the wall around her bed. A sheet covered the cast on her body. One arm was also in a cast, and there was an IV in her other arm. She seemed drowsy. Kate looked up at Buzz, smiled, and said with a muffled voice, “Hey, stranger.” He pulled up a chair next to her, and they held hands until she dozed off. Then he found a friend to take him on a drive in the country.

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There was a noise in the yard, so Susan looked out the window. She saw a car parked on the other side of the road from her house. The driver was still in it. Then she noticed another man walking across her yard toward the crash site. This surprised her a little because things had finally settled down. The family quit visiting after Kate started to recover, and no one else had been in their yard for weeks. This man seemed familiar to Susan, but she wasn't sure. She decided to check for herself.

Buzz was taking pictures with his cell phone camera when Susan approached him. He was down on one knee to get a close picture of the cross surrounded by flowers, photographs, and stuffed animals. He smiled up at Susan like an old friend, and said, "Kate will love this. She's better."



photograph by Journey McAndrews