

Third Friday in February

M.K. Patrick

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Editor's Note

Based on a real event in a small Midwestern town during the 1960s, the following ShortWork, "Third Friday in February," suggests that simple daily struggles to answer questions about love, work and friendship can lead to unpredictable violence.

In the early twenty-first century, terrorism is associated with foreign cultures and fundamentalist religious ideology, but America has often been home to a different type of daily terrorism, festering beneath the surface and eventually revealing itself in flashes of brutality. These moments are rarely acts of passion but seem to arise from a continuous and steady strain placed on people's sense of self-worth, often subverted by the media for profit or by the government for influence.

Paradoxically, the acts of violence that result from this strain seem to originate in a darker side of the "American Spirit," that is,

distorted expressions of individual freedom and self-reliance. And like terrorism, they are desperate attempts at expression by individuals who have lost their faith in community and society.

M.K. Patrick suggests that perhaps America's small-town psychoses nurtured some of the first acts of modern terrorism.

Third Friday in February

It was four in the afternoon on the third Friday in February and I was standing in the shade of Rensler's Pawnshop debating whether to cross the street to Mick's where Stella would be sitting at the bar, her round soft ass a little wider than the bar stool, the bar stool fixed and chromed and Stella swiveling back and forth on account of her insecurities as she waited for me to slip onto the stool next to hers, to spread my legs and hug her to me, to feel her roundness beneath that purple sweater she would be wearing for warmth and for the guarantees she so desperately needed and that I was so reluctant to give.

But then I saw Stan and he was looking like the Old Stan with his jeans and white T-shirt, cigs rolled up in one sleeve. Others imitated Stan including yours truly, but Stan was the real deal. He was legendary among those of us who frequented Mick's, legendary for his open assault on society and whatever society held sacred. And so, we had congregated on the third Friday of every month for the last two years, hoping the Old Stan would be back. This Friday it seemed he was, because the Old Stan didn't

walk, he swaggered like he did today, as if he and that open five-gallon bucket he was swinging in his right hand owned the fucking town. Seeing Stan like that made crossing the street to Mick's seem like something I wouldn't be long deliberating. Besides, needy women like Stella had always been magnets: they attracted before they repelled.



Irene too had been needy. But she was only sixteen and a half when we stumbled on to each other in the stock room of the IGA where we both worked the night shift. It was after ten and I had locked the front door and turned off the store lights as a favor to the night supervisor, Steve, who asked me to be a pal—he had a hot date with Tina the beauty operator and needed to be home to his wife by 10:30. It was 10:30 exactly when I turned the lights off in the stockroom and went into the employee lounge for my jacket. The lounge was a grimy cramped room strewn with candy wrappers and ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts, and I was thinking about how Steve would be just walking

in his front door, his wife glancing up from doing her nails, her hair in curlers and two children asleep in the back bedroom of the house Steve never quite got around to painting after he scraped it the previous summer. That was before Tina. Now, Steve remarked to whoever would listen, Who has the time? Though I knew it was just a matter of time before Thompson, the store manager, discovered Steve was leaving me, an eighteen-year old, to run the cash drawers, put the cash and receipts in the office safe and lock up. Steve compensated me with an extra twenty from petty cash each week and, to sweeten the pot, told me to help myself to a six-pack or a carton of Marlboro Reds.



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