

Violator

'You fucked my wife.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'You fucked my wife. I *know*. I'm coming for you. You're dead.'

The voice on the cellphone was calm but there was an unmistakable undercurrent of boiling fury, barely contained.

'I think you may have the wrong_' replied Andy, startled and a little indignant.

'*Dead.*'

The caller hung up. Even as the line disconnected, Andy became abruptly aware that, in fact, he knew *exactly* who the caller was. The blood drained out of his face. He swallowed. He looked at the screen: *withheld number*.

The infant on his lap dropped the wedge of green apple it was inexpertly trying to cram into its mouth and started bawling. He bounced his little girl up and down on his knee, put the cellphone on the table and gave her another slice from the plastic plate. Immediately, the child was mollified.

His six-year old, Jack, stared at him across the cluttered dining table, eating a bowl of cereal, his expression somehow both entranced by his father and completely vacant.

'Who was that?' asked Sally. 'Is that Cawstead calling you at breakfast-time again?'

She flew around the kitchen as she spoke, gathering up the kids' lunches and her bits and pieces for work.

'Wrong number' he lied.

'Well, good. You can't even eat your damned breakfast without_' She turned, forgetting the call, and bellowed up the stairs. 'Lloyd, get down here now. We've got to go.'

'I'm coming.' The faint, plaintive, utterly jaded reply of a sullen teenager.

'Now!' She reiterated, then snatched up her car keys and turned back to Andy. 'Ok, we're out of here. Tell Maud thanks for sitting.'

She leant in and kissed the infant on the head. She kissed Andy too, glanced at him, frowned.

'You okay? You look pale.'

'Stomach,' he pleaded. 'Bit of a stomach ache.'

'Well don't go in to work if you're ill. You'll make yourself worse.'

'I'm sure I'll be fine.'

'Your choice.'

Little Jack was whisked out of the dining chair by his arm, his spoon clattering in the not quite empty bowl.

'Bye, daddy' he managed, as as they swept out of the house.

'See you later, Jacky,' he called. 'Have a good day at school.'

Lloyd thundered down the stairs and exited the house without a word. His mother was already starting the car.

Andy was left alone in the kitchen, now silent but for the baby gnawing her apple wedge.

He had made up the stomach ache but he realised that he did feel nauseous. The guy on the phone sounded nasty. Sounded dangerous. It had to be Klara's husband. Andy had suspected she was married, despite the absence of a wedding band, but it had been convenient to disregard that possibility, if only to partially salve his own bad conscience. This wasn't good. What should he do? He looked at the kitchen clock. 8.13am. He needed to get to work.

As Andy rose from the table, lifting the baby from his lap, and caught a warm whiff of faeces. He gave her a tentative sniff. His nose wrinkled.

'Oh, not now, Kirsty.'

He would have to change her.

'Couldn't you have waited until you got to Maud's?'

Four lanes of traffic crawled along under a glowering, breeze block sky. It was going to rain. And he was going to be late.

'Dammit!' He hit the steering wheel with his palms and startled the baby in her child seat.

'Sorry, honey.' He gave her tummy a little rub and was rewarded with a big, wet, toothless grin. What a beautiful thing, that smile, and what a terrible, terrible father.

He turned the words over in his mind again. *You fucked my wife*. That withering accusation. And so it was back, the oppressive burden of self-disgust he

thought he had banished.

I'm coming for you. That voice, so full of resolve, all the more disturbing for its forced restraint.

You're dead.

Andy's stomach rolled. It wasn't so much the threat of violence; it was his family. Sally would find out what he had done if this guy came to the house blurting out his accusations. The kids. Christ! He and Sally had only just gotten over that other business from last year. He'd used up his last chance already.

How the hell had Klara's husband found out anyway? He would need to talk to her when he got to work. Straighten things.

Then it dawned on him. Work. The guy would come to the office to claim his pound of flesh. Where else? That's the one place he would know where to find Andy. The scene of his and Klara's sex-crime. At once, he had a humiliating premonition of the guy standing sentinel in the car park outside the office at 5pm, like some school bully waiting for his mark. A circle of excited kids chanting. Teachers in the building, oblivious or disinterested. He recalled it all from his school days, and distant though they were, he felt the vertiginous rush of adrenaline through his limbs.

How long since he had a fistfight with anyone? Twenty years? Nearly that. He had been eighteen and hoping to impress the lovely Ann-Marie Shaw with his gallantry by challenging some rude, drunken rugby player at a party. But in the jostle that followed it was *his* nose that got broken. Embarrassing.

He and Ann-Marie had still slept together after the fight - at least there was that. But he was the wounded soldier instead of the triumphant hero. All his life, the girls had loved Andy. In that respect, he was blessed. But like Michael Jackson, he was a lover not a fighter and when it came to brute force he was far from gifted.

The clock showed 8.38am. There was the big meeting this morning too. Shit. Cawstead would flay him if he missed the start. That was on top of any trouble that Klara's vengeful husband might add to matters. How could he possibly conceal this from the company? He might lose his job. They would not take kindly to reports of sexual impropriety in the workplace.

The traffic was not getting any better. Sitting high in his SUV he could see up ahead, over the tops of the cars, road works. New ones. And an extra set of temporary traffic lights.

'Come on! Come on!' He went to smack the steering wheel again but then remembered the baby. He looked at her - he'd put his family at risk. Stupid, stupid, stupid_

The only solution was to meet the trouble head on. He needed to contain this. He would speak to Klara, get her home address and then go and confront the offended cuckold. Reason with the guy. God's sake, strictly speaking he didn't know that Klara was married. She never told him that she had a husband. He could, in *reasonably* good conscience, plead ignorance. But then wouldn't that just deflect all the blame onto Klara?

Yes, but it was *her* betrayal, not his. He owed her husband no loyalty. This was cowardly and shameless reasoning and he knew it.

What about if he paid the guy? Compensation? Klara wasn't in a well-paid job, just a temporary office assistant. Everything about her: the way she spoke, her clothes, the slightly excessive amount of make-up she wore - it didn't speak of an affluent household. Again, he felt a surge of self-loathing, but he couldn't deny that money might help smooth things over. Yes, give the husband a few hundred by way of reparations. But might this offer of money offend him further? This was his wife we were talking about after all. Maybe just take the cash and see what the lie of the land is. Make an assessment when he was there. He would get the address and go over during his lunch-break. Might have to take a beating. He winced. Well, if that's what it took. If he was too messed up, he would just say he had been mugged and take the rest of the afternoon off.

He stumbled into work, sweaty and stressed, at 9.42am. He was expected to present his business case to the board at ten and he hadn't even been through the notes. This looming ordeal had occupied his mind on his fraught drive to the office from Maud's and almost pushed the issue of Klara's husband out of pole position in the anxiety grand prix. He dashed through the lobby carrying his jacket and laptop bag, a glaze of perspiration prickling his back. The clouds hadn't broken yet and the atmosphere outside was oppressively

stuffy. He was glad of the building's air conditioning.

He plunged into the familiar bustle of the morning. Folks ferrying aromatic cafetieres around, sitting frowning at VDUs or tending to droning photocopiers. He said a few coy good mornings and thought he detected one or two unusual glances thrown his way but just put this down to self-consciousness. It was always embarrassing being late into the office when you are management.

He made his way to his PA's desk. She was a dour, schoolmarmish divorcee who clearly felt that servicing this new junior manager was well beneath her dignity. He forced a smile.

'Hey, Angela. Whew! Don't ask.'

Her demeanour seemed even more disapproving than usual.

'There's been some bother, Andrew.'

His guts twitched but he managed to keep his polite smile pasted on. 'Oh?'

'There was a man here looking for you earlier.'

The fact that Angela, usually so formal, said *man* instead of *gentleman* told him straight away that, as far she was concerned, the visitor was unsavoury and unwelcome.

'A man? Who?'

'He didn't give a name. I don't think it was a business matter actually. Something personal I would say. When I told him you hadn't arrived for work yet he wanted me to give him your home address.'

He felt the earlier nausea return.

'You didn't_?'

'Of course not. It is our policy never to give out employees' personal details without consent.'

'Thank you, Angela.'

'I have to say, I did not like the look of him at all. He became very insistent. Aggressive even. I had to threaten to call the police in the end to get him off the premises.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Only ten minutes or so.'

A drop of cool sweat raced down his spine.

'What did he look like?'

'He was a big man, dark hair. Very unpleasant in my view. Is this person someone you know?'

'No, no. I don't think so. I'd better_ uhm_'

He couldn't think of how to end the sentence and so he just turned and headed down to find Klara in business support.

'Andrew_' Angela called impatiently after him. He barely heard her.

As he walked through the open plan office, A thin man sprang from an adjacent doorway, like a spider ambushing its prey.

'Andy, where in Christ's name have you been?'

The sour odour of black coffee was pungent on his breath. James Cawstead: twitchy, intense, always getting too close.

'Oh, I'm sorry, James. I had a bit of a bad morning. Got lumbered with the baby and then there were roadworks.'

'We were supposed to have a damned pre-meet at nine-thirty. Hendrick and I were waiting for you like a pair of twats. I had to make fucking conversation with him for quarter of an hour. It was Hell.'

'Sorry, James.'

Cawstead grabbed his shoulder, lowered his voice.

'Look, I put a word in for you, Andy. Got you on the next rung. You've yet to prove my confidence well-founded. You know how anxious Hendrick is about this bloody presentation and neither he nor I have even seen the final draft yet. Please, please tell me you are all set for ten?'

Andy looked at the wall clock. 9.48am.

'Yeah. Yes, all set' he lied.

'Good. Don't fuck it up, Andy. Hendrick is already pissed-off.'

'I just gotta go use the bathroom.'

'Alright. See you up there. Don't be late.'

Cawstead scuttled off to get ready for the meeting. Andy knew it was crazy but he had to talk to Klara before the presentation. He wouldn't be able to focus otherwise. He had ten minutes.

He marched briskly to the business support section at the other side of the building. As he walked he again felt eyes on him. Something was up, for sure. Could it be people knew? *Please no.*

He arrived at Klara's desk. Even though she was just a temp, she has made the space her own with colourful

stationery, a hand-thrown coffee mug and a miniature aloe in a plastic pot. No photo of husband he noted for the first time. Klara wasn't there either. Her computer was switched off.

'Klara's not here today.'

It was the woman occupying the desk next to Klara's. She was heavy-set, big pink arms, a mass of orange-brown curls and huge, round, unflattering glasses. Andy thought her name might be Jan.

'Oh, what time is she due in?'

Jan looked around the office as if considering what to do. Andy now definitely sensed that other staff in the vicinity were discreetly listening-in to the exchange. A feeling of conspicuousness washed over him, making him shrink involuntarily.

Her mind apparently made up, Jan rose from her desk and gestured for him to follow her. She led him to a small meeting room. Once inside that private space, she sighed. He felt extraordinarily tense.

'Klara's not well' she began.

'Not well?'

'I'm don't really know how else I can say this, Andy, but Klara is in hospital. She's in a serious condition.'

The ground lurched beneath him.

'What?'

'She's in a coma.'

'Oh my god.'

'And I don't want to embarrass you, Andy, but I know what happened between you two and you probably need to

understand that lots of people here know. Soon everybody will. You know how people are.'

He was too stunned to even try to feign ignorance.

'What happened?'

Tears welled and sparkled at the corners of Jan's eyes and he saw now that the lids were already raw from weeping.

'Her husband has beaten her very badly.' She choked on the sentence.

'Jesus.'

'She's in a critical condition, Andy. She might_ ' The sentence was left unfinished.

He stared out of the window at the stolid greyness. This couldn't be happening. His world was about to implode, and Klara; lovely, bright, sexy Klara - she was on life support. His heart was galloping. He was going to be sick. But he knew he had to act.

'This is just awful. Please. Do you have her home address?'

'What for?'

'I need to talk to him. The husband, I mean.'

'Go to the police. They are looking for him. He might be charged with attempted murder.'

'I think if I can talk to him, it might help.'

'No. I don't think that's a good idea. He won't be there anyway, the police will have searched.'

'Then there's no reason not to give me the address. I promise you if I can't sort things out, get him to give himself up, I will go to the police.' He lied.

She looked doubtful, sniffed, pulled a tissue from

her sleeve and dabbed her eyes.

'Okay, Andy. But at five o'clock I am calling them and telling them about you and Klara.'

As he pulled out of the car park a police car pulled in. The officers inside, faces pale and blank, didn't pay him any mind.

Of course the idea that he would try and convince Klara's husband to turn himself in was laughable. This was pure damage limitation now. Screw the meeting. Screw the presentation. Screw Cawstead and Hendrick. Clearly he was going to lose his job, no question, but was there any way he could avoid this mess getting back to his home, his family, to Sally?

And what about poor Klara? He was trembling. A powerful, irrational urge to just up and drive as far away as possible grasped him. Run away, hide, as he had as a child. That would never do though. Not now.

Perhaps it was the recollection of these childhood feelings - he found himself driving not to the address Jan had given him but in a different direction, a familiar route.

The care home was clean but threadbare. It smelled of fried onions and bleach. No residents around, just the sound of a vacuum cleaner deep in the building somewhere. He signed in at the front desk and a bored-looking receptionist told him where he could find Patrick.

As he entered the TV room, his father looked up from

the daytime chat show he was barely watching. His was a face ravaged by hard living, but beneath the wear, the broken veins, one could still discern the vestiges of a strikingly handsome man. That's where Andy had gotten his good looks. Rounded and softened by his mother's girl-next-door prettiness.

'What, is it Sunday already?' His father said drily.

'Dad, can we talk?'

The old boy caught the grave note and gestured for Andy to sit.

'Don't worry about him.' He pointed at a shrunken old man sleeping in an armchair, the only other occupant of the TV room. 'Even if he was awake, he's as deaf as a tree.'

'I've really fucked up, dad.'

'Ah-ha, don't tell me. A woman?'

Andy stared, at a loss, then dropped his face into his hands, massaging his eye-sockets.

'Go on then. What happened?'

'A girl at work. Just once. She's married.'

'And Sally's found out?'

'No. At least not yet, but the husband has.'

'I see, and the slighted gentleman demands his satisfaction.' A nod of recognition.

'More than that. He says he's going to kill me.'

'Pff_ they always say that.'

'He's beaten her half to death, dad. She's in a coma.'

His father's flippancy was instantly dispelled. He was caught for a moment, not knowing what to say.

Quickly, he recovered.

'Right. Well that's a bit more serious then.' He left the room and came back with a half-full bottle of J&B plus two mismatched glasses. He poured.

'Have a drink.'

'I'm driving.'

'Have it anyway.'

Andy drank. The burn was harsh, comforting. 'The husband called me' he gasped through the fumes.

'He's got your number?'

'It was in her phone.'

'Does he know where you live?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'Have the police come to you?'

'No.'

'Well, they may yet. You might want to think about going to see them first. Stop them rolling up at your office or, worse, at home. God forbid! I don't imagine Sally will give you another chance after the last time.'

'The police are at the office now.'

'Fuck. How could you be so careless, Andy? You've only just patched things up with Sall.'

'I don't know. I don't know.'

'Fucking disaster.' Patrick shook his head, then gave a thin smile. 'You sure are a chip off the old block, Andrew.' A dry little chuckle.

'How can you laugh, Patrick? A woman could die. Everything I have could be lost. Sally, the kids, my job. Everything. For what?'

'Well, the way I see it, you've got two choices only. Either you go home, come clean with Sally, throw yourself on her mercy - good luck with *that* - and then call the police. Or_'

Andy looked at him expectantly, hoping for something, desperate for something.

'Or?'

'Or you find this guy before he finds you and give him such a beating that he never dares come near you or your family again. Now, as a man your age, I'm damn sure what *I* would do.'

'That's not a solution.'

'Not for you, I guess.' He shrugged. He drank. He poured. 'Andy, its tougher being a guy than we get credit for. You'll have to make Sally understand. It's natural for a man to want other women. Programmed-in. Millions of years of evolution. Women and men have their own survival strategies. Women tend to put all their eggs in one basket, men tend to drop a egg in as many baskets as possible. Irrefutable facts. A man shouldn't be damned for being what he is.'

Andy flushed. 'And how is *that* helping?'

'Just saying.' He emptied his glass.

'I don't buy your bullshit evolutionary theories, Patrick. This is just your post-hoc rationalisation for being such a fucking shit to all the women in your life. If you'd been able to keep your fucking dick in your trousers, maybe_' He hesitated.

'Go on, boy. Say it! *Your mother would still be alive, right?* That's what you want to say.'

'I'm not like you, Patrick. I don't want to play around. I love Sally. I want my family. Nothing is as important to me as that. Nothing!'

There was a moment of silence before his father spoke.

'But you still fucked that coma-girl, didn't you?'

He drove to the house where Klara and her husband had lived. It had been a terrible idea, going to the retirement home. What possible advice could his father offer him? Maybe he'd gone just to remind himself. To stare in that bleak mirror. To face down the destiny he had to escape.

There were so many missed calls and voicemail messages on his phone; from Cawstead, from the office, and from a withheld number - Klara's husband? The police? He didn't care to listen to the messages.

Klara's neighbourhood was poor but well kept. He approached her house and found that the door had been broken open. There was a piece of paper lying on the threshold with fragments of the lock. It was a carbon copy of a warrant to search. The police had left the house unsecured. They would never do that in a more affluent neighbourhood. Perhaps a locksmith would be coming? He'd better be quick.

There was no sign of life inside. The gloomy day made the interior of the house like a cave. In the hall was a set of golf clubs. Golf, the uninspired go-to for social climbers. He grabbed one. In case. He thought of Klara's husband here, nursing his grudge in this

darkness, plotting his vengeance. But no, he was unlikely to come back. The police were looking for him, while *he* was busy trying to track down Andy.

He wandered around the property. It was an ordinary home in every way: flatpack furniture, mass-manufactured appliances, cheap ornaments, mementoes. There was a framed photograph of Klara and a tall man on their wedding day, bride and groom. Her, hunched slightly, giggling, her long fair hair taking flight in the breeze. Him, suited, lean, not unattractive, but as unremarkable a man as one could possibly imagine. What had happened to them?

He tried to imagine Klara getting ready for work here each day. Rushing around. The smell of toast and coffee. The noise of a radio. Arguments. Boredom.

His phone rang. On the screen: *number withheld*. He answered but said nothing. Silence on the line.

Then, 'You fucked my wife.'

'You.' Unexpected rage engulfed him. 'Yeah, yeah, I fucked Klara' he yelled into the tiny device, his free arm flailing the golf club around. 'And you know what, I made her come. She came like Niagara Falls. And she loved it. Said it was way better than anything she got from you. She told me your dick is tiny, like a peanut, but you couldn't get it up anyway. And that you were fucking boring!'

The stunned silence on the end of the line broke. 'I've got a gun, cocksucker. I'm going to shoot you dead. Do you hear me?'

'No, no, don't shoot me, you fucking pussy. Use your

fists like you do with women. You can do it. I'm weak. I'm weak and I'm a liar and I'm a coward too, but you know what? I'm still ten times the man you are, you fucking pig.'

'I'm going to make you suffer, you hear. First I'm going to take your knees off then I'm_'

Andy hung up. The phone rang again. He threw it hard and it burst against the kitchen wall.

He pulled up in front of his own house. It was 2.31pm. No police, but really he was now only concerned about Klara's husband finding his way here. No sign of him either. The neighbourhood was quiet. The house looked silent. Its worn, benign facade, so familiar, already feeling like a fond remembrance from another lifetime.

The sky was achingly pregnant with rain and it cast a sullen, greenish tinge over the world. Through this taut murkiness he caught a movement at the side of the house. Amid the stacked recycling bins and behind the polythene bags of refuse put out by Sally that very morning, a dark shape. A man, hunched over, busy with something on the ground. Andy leaned forward, feeling a chill leach into his extremities. He saw the shape again briefly, squinted, frowned. He could swear the intruder was wearing a coarse fur coat.

He got out of the car, picking up the golf club he had taken from Klara's house. The air was close, damp, almost greasy. He approached the house silently and crept down towards the bins. As he skirted them he saw

that the intruder was gone. The ground level basement window was open and off its latch. A sign of someone breaking into the house? No. It was an awning window, opening outward, and a corner of the mustard-yellow curtain had been dragged outside and was now lying in the grime on the ground. This suggested someone climbing *out* of the basement, not into it.

A scratching noise made him start. He raised the club defensively. There was shuffling around the back of house. He moved forward as quietly as he could, not wanting to lose the advantage of surprise. Gingerly, he rounded the corner to the backyard. It was in the usual disarray - a repository for junk, stuff that they had neglected to put away in the garage and products from unfinished family projects. The kids' bikes abandoned on the patio; some partially assembled garden furniture he had been meaning to finish off; against the back wall a big, dirty gas-barbecue that needed cleaning and covering up.

A pulse of electric fear spiked through his core. At the base of the barbecue there was a great hulking shape quivering feverishly. A wet, bristling, black hump with a thick, fleshy, rope-like tail snaking across the concrete. It was the hindquarters of the largest rat he had ever seen. Bigger than the average dog - a hundred pounds at least. Frantically, it gnawed and scratched, disturbing the barbecue, making the metal feet scrape on the concrete. He gasped and the rat snapped its head around, fixing him with its glistening, black-glass eyes. Its jaws were working at

some fragments, the rotten remnants of meat that had fallen down the back of the grill and unknowingly been left to putrefy. Its whiskers, were beaded with moisture, spreading a foot and more out from either side of its shivering snout. It sniffed at him, let out a screech - a noise like rending metal that made him cower. Disregarding him, the rat turned and continued its forage beneath the barbecue.

Andy was stupefied with revulsion. Now that the rancid meat had been disturbed, he could smell it, as well as the cloying sewer-stench emanating from the rat's hot body. Its scaly tail was draped, twitching, over little Jack's bicycle, with its training wheels and its peeling rocket-ship transfers.

Again an irrepressible fury ignited within Andy at the sight of this filthy interloper in amongst his family's possessions. He felt his teeth grind. Raising the club, he advanced on the monster. The club sliced the air and smacked the back of the rat with a noise like a machete cleaving a pumpkin. There was a horrendous, jarring shriek from the furious beast as it span and leapt at him. Brown incisors tore into the flesh just beneath his knee and he felt the snap of a tendon as it was sliced through. He bellowed in agony as those huge rodent teeth scored across his bones. The damaged leg buckled and he just avoided falling by throwing his weight onto the other. He pounded the back of the rat again with the club, sending shocks of pain through his knee, which the rat held fast. With the third blow, squealing like hellfire, it let go and

snatched his free hand in its jaws. He felt the fleshy base of his thumb tear open and teeth cleave through his ring finger and little finger, like scateurs though green twigs. He was rocked by dizzying pain again - nearly fell again. Horror, as he saw those little pale digits tumble to the ground. But the rage that possessed him gave him abnormal strength and he brought the club down again and again with such savage impact that the rat was forced to let go and was left squirming and shrieking on the ground, its tail flailing repulsively, its back broken. He struck it again twice more, if only to stop the appalling noise of its death throes. Now silenced, it lay jerking and steaming among the children's bikes.

Overcome by the burden of his injuries, clutching his ruined hand, he limped slowly to the rear wall of the house. Thick, dark blood, was oozing and congealing. He collapsed against the brickwork and slid down until he was seated on the cold concrete. He tried to catch his breath. His mind whirled. He felt tremendous exhaustion and closed his eyes. The darkness welcomed him.

A cold spot of moisture landed on his face and made him wince as he drifted out of consciousness. Then a few more. Then at last, finally, the rain came down.

END.