

A Cure for Empathy

The photos transferred in a handful of seconds, morsels of naked flesh flickering across the progress bar as the three boys shielded the screen with their bodies. Every tab open in the browser was a weapon, armed, the images their ammunition. Target locked.

It seemed funny, that exposure could wipe somebody out of existence.

Wesley Graham couldn't stop jiggling his legs – nerves, excitement, he didn't know – as he glanced around at the half-empty study room, squinting against the early autumn sunshine that glowed in the scratches and finger-smears on the windows. Most of the school PCs were occupied, screens of half-finished essays or YouTube videos. Others in their class, apparently taking the final year of school seriously, had ranged their burden of early coursework across the tables in the centre of the room. Mr Buttercliff, charged with supervising, was much more invested in *Clash of Clans* on his phone.

'Can you *please* stop that?' said Luke, punching Wesley's leg.

The dull pain did little to help him hold it still. Although Wesley had been around during the last trolling campaign, one undoubtedly larger than this, he had been little more than a spectator. This time he was on the front line. They had somebody to impress, so this had to go off without a hitch. He willed his restless leg to stop betraying his gut full of nerves.

In the far corner of the room, hunched over her MacBook, was Kat Waldgrave. It was the first time they'd seen her in school for a few days, and her usual ponytail had gained a strand of plasticky pink that curled into the light brown skin of her neck. The sunlight conspired to hide her screen from Wesley's gaze, but he was sure her website would be open in a tab somewhere, just as it was on their screen.

'Imagine if she actually looked like this,' said Justin, sandwiched between them in front of the computer.

Luke plucked a USB stick from the PC and grinned. 'We'll always have Photoshop.'

Scrolling through the images, Justin sighed under his breath. 'I wish any actual girl looked like this.'

'Sounds like somebody's struggling with NoFap,' said Wesley.

The joke was a risk. They hadn't been friends for long, and sometimes it took a while to earn the right to take the piss.

'No way!' said Justin, apparently not offended despite his protest. 'It's been three weeks and I swear my mind is clearer than it's—'

'*Please* don't start with that again.' Luke brought up the login window for Kat's site and typed in the password that had been stolen for them.

‘How long’s it going to take?’ said Wesley, pressing his fists into his knees to keep them from bouncing. The Photoshopped pornography had been his idea, and he had felt elated when it was accepted. That had been tempered a little since by the reality of doing it, the fear of getting caught, but he still couldn’t wait to deal this final blow. People like Kat deserved everything they got – that’s what TrumourPixel said.

‘Not long,’ said Luke, clicking to edit the home page. ‘Let’s give our snowflake something worth crying about.’

Kat Waldgrave was only at school because of the email she’d received complaining that she rarely went to school. It was an injustice, as far as she was concerned, that a mandatory attendance meeting should be allowed to upset her regular schedule of pretending to revise while actually watching Tinker videos and *Doctor Backwash* bloopers on YouTube. As if she hadn’t seen them all a million times before.

She tabbed to one of her favourites, putting in her earphones and angling the screen away from the window glare. Tinker showing off her new hairstyle, a neat bob dyed electric pink, dusky eye shadow applied to match. God damn, she was beautiful. Kat fiddled with the pink extension she had added to her own hair yesterday. It was supposed to be a tribute to Tinker, borrowing a little of her boldness, but now it just felt pathetic.

The meeting had not gone well. Despite her being head of sixth form, Miss Jalloh’s office was the size of a bus shelter, and smelled even worse. Kat would gladly have

not attended her attendance meeting, except the email had threatened to get in touch with her dad. A phone call from school would certainly contravene their unspoken accord to keep their lives as separate as possible.

‘Your attendance is nowhere near acceptable,’ had been Miss Jalloh’s opening line, peering over her half-moon glasses.

The word *attendance* had begun to lose all meaning. ‘I still did fine in my exams,’ Kat pointed out. It was true too – nothing below a B grade in her mocks.

‘That’s hardly the point!’ The bangles on Miss Jalloh’s wrists rattled as she slapped her hands on the desk, living up to her reputation for being *expressive*. ‘Everybody knows you’re a bright girl.’

That was funny; as far as Kat could tell everybody hardly knew she existed.

Tinker had started out recording make-up tutorials – perfectly shaped eyebrows were her trademark – before moving on to discuss topics such as sexuality and feminism. She identified as pansexual, and was so open about everything it meant for her, posting regular videos on the impact it had on her dating and sex life. These were all mysteries to Kat, abstract ideas, and it was easy enough to pretend Tinker’s life was her own. Pretend these regular updates fleshed her out with experience. In between those personal videos she still posted about make-up, *Doctor Backwash*, books . . . a video almost every day made it feel like having a one-way conversation with a best friend. The friend Kat had always wanted, had always missed despite never having nor losing them.

'If anything is going on to keep you away from school, I want to know about it,' Miss Jalloh had said.

Kat had kept her gaze on the dusty desk surface, wondering if there was any way the teacher would understand: the threatening emails, attacks on social media, blurry photos of her sitting alone in the canteen or going into the toilets at break, even walking up the path to her house, always taken around corners or zoomed in from a distance. It was all part of a world the teachers couldn't comprehend. Reporting it would be futile, and only risked making it worse.

Instead, she'd set about deleting her online presence. If she wasn't there, they couldn't attack her.

She reached out to type a comment on the video, before remembering that she had deleted her profile a week ago. It shouldn't have made her feel so disconnected – it's not like Tinker had ever replied.

'It's nothing,' Kat had said, finally lifting her head. She had left the teacher's office having barely heard the threats of phone calls home or possible suspension. It would never come to that.

It was pretty obvious who was responsible for this campaign against her. Luke and Justin sat across the room from her now. Everybody knew they had played a big part in what happened to Selena Jensen last year, and they had never been caught. The problem was proving it; if it was them, they were good at hiding it.

On her desktop was an unsent letter she had written to them, titled *Please Stop*. Into it she had poured everything she really felt about these attacks against her, everything she had nobody in her life to tell. She was so

angry. Every blow they struck made her want to scream. But who would listen? Even if there was someone, she would have to convince them of the truth, prove she wasn't overreacting. The thought of it made anxiety wring her chest like a wet washcloth. It was better not to bother anybody else and handle it herself.

She let the cursor hover the letter and wondered if she had ever really intended to send it, or if simply typing it had convinced her she wielded some kind of power.

The video finished. Kat set the next one playing and turned the volume up.

Wesley had to admire the fact that it had taken over a month for them to force Kat into closing down her Twitter profile, suspending her Facebook, deleting her YouTube channel and abandoning Instagram. At first she had fought back, retweeting and mocking them to try and get some support. All it really did was attract more trolls, enough to shut down anybody who came to her defence.

The hardest part had been getting her banned from the official *Doctor Backwash* fan forums. Wesley had never seen the web series, but all of his favourite YouTubers considered it worse than cancer. In the end, they had targeted a few major players on the forum until they identified Kat as the common denominator and cut her loose.

The only part of her online presence left standing was her personal website, and they'd made the photographs so that they could nuke this last outpost from orbit.

‘Almost ready,’ said Luke, dragging an image into place.

She brought it on herself. Wesley couldn’t let himself forget it. Before the summer, Kat had given a presentation in media studies about misogyny on YouTube and toxic masculinity, calling out a local YouTuber named TrumourPixel who ran a gaming and pranks channel. *Everybody* at school watched and loved him – she was just too sensitive about his non-PC style of humour.

Wesley had sent TrumourPixel an email about it as soon as the class was over, and couldn’t believe it when he got a response. It turned out Luke and Justin had done the same thing. Did they want to team up to take her down? Wesley had jumped at the chance. While Tru talked about it on his livestreams and made an attack video against her, they had begun to plot together.

This was an opportunity to prove himself. He had to take it.

‘Is that the best picture to use?’ said Justin.

‘It doesn’t matter, blue balls.’

Her website was mainly used for updates on the video game Kat was making. The home page hosted a sort of biography and a video of her, chatting self-consciously into the lens. Luke deleted it all, dropped his chosen image into place, and attached the rest to an email.

He leaned back in his chair. ‘We’re ready to go.’

As soon as the video shuffled to the next in the playlist Kat tabbed to Twitter. Muscle memory. *Oops . . . That person doesn’t exist!* She could still lurk on her favourite

feeds if she wanted, but the well was poisoned now. When the harassment aimed at her had splashed onto innocent people, she knew she had lost.

Innocent people. As if she deserved it.

After the summer, she thought it had all blown over. The video attacking her had stopped being shared. Everybody had gone back to ignoring her.

Now anonymous threats and faceless trolls meant she never felt safe, not even at home. She felt responsible, as if she was at fault for daring to exist in those online spaces in the first place.

Tinker constantly experienced the same kind of abuse, but on a much larger scale. This video was all about why she was supporting the forthcoming women's march in London, an event Kat wholeheartedly agreed with but was too scared to attend. Story of her life. The topics Tinker spoke about painted a target on her back, but she never let the trolls win. Tinker was kind of a hero.

They would totally probably be BFFs if they ever met.

A chronic loner. That's what Kat's sister Suzy always used to call her, flippantly, apparently unaware it was her fault Kat had slowly but surely faded into the background of their lives.

The fan forums and online communities had been there for her then. At first she'd believed what Suzy said, that it was all a substitute for real life, that online personas were inherently fake, an idealised facsimile of the truth – who you are online is who you *want* to be. Online Kat was confident, comfortable expressing her opinions and talking openly about the things she loved. She reached out into the void desperate to make

friends and actually succeeded. Friends that loved Tinker and *Doctor Backwash* as much as she did, who always understood her references and appreciated her gif game. Online, Kat had been everything she wasn't in 'real life'.

After a while, she began to think that her online self *was* the real Kat. The Internet provided a proxy in which she was able to thrive.

Shutting those channels down felt like cutting pieces of herself away. She missed tweeting work-in-progress screenshots of her game and seeking development advice, debating what the *heck* was up with Esme's hair in the *Backwash* Christmas special, playing games online with friends. When she had a bad day it was her only way to purge the negativity from her body, the bracing catharsis of casting a gloomy selfie or grumpy tweet into the social media abyss. Nobody ever replied, but at least it had left her brain.

Last night, with every outlet gone, she'd caught herself leaning into the balmy glow of her blank screen, hoping it might nourish her in some small way like a hothouse plant.

Maybe none of it had ever been real.

Maybe it was pathetic to miss it so much.

Kat had never felt so lonely.

When the email was finished – third-party account, nothing to do with the school system – and they had double-checked their handiwork on her website, Luke and Justin turned to Wesley. 'Want to do the honours?'

This was an audition, and Wesley was determined to pass. He scooted his chair across, almost dizzy with pride and fear and excitement.

The first click saved all changes to the website.

He hesitated, just for a moment, before his second click sent the email.

They all spun their chairs around to watch the fallout.

An email notification popped, and Kat expected it to be from Miss Jalloh, sending through her 'improvement expectations'. Instead it was from a sender she didn't recognise, so it had to be the trolls. Usually she deleted without reading, but it was impossible to ignore the subject line: *THE WALDGRAVE WANK BANK IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS*. The panic in her chest, the corrosive demon of anxiety she always had to fight to suppress, began to stir awake.

It was different to any email they had sent her before. All it contained was a link to the home page of her website. And instead of being addressed only to her, it had been sent to the entire school directory.

With shaking hands, she clicked the link.

For a moment, Kat could not quite comprehend what she was seeing. The trolls had somehow hacked her website and replaced the welcome video with pornography. A photograph of a dark-skinned woman, naked but for long white socks, her hand between her legs.

And Kat's face, deftly superimposed over the woman's own so you could hardly see the join.

Around the room, people began to gasp and laugh.

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Wesley couldn't keep his legs from dancing as they waited for her to react. She stared at her screen, body rigid, before she lowered it from view and spun to look around the room.

All three of them turned away just in time, Luke stifling a laugh in his thick palm. Wesley stared hard at the assortment of paper spread over his desk.

'She's going to lose it,' whispered Luke.

It seemed that everybody had opened the email now, those at the centre tables gravitating to the nearest screen to see what the fuss was about. Most looked shocked, glancing uncertainly at Kat, while others laughed and whistled.

'Wahey, Waldgrave!' cheered one of the boys.

Mr Buttercliff looked up from his phone. 'What's all this noise about?'

Wesley risked glancing back. Kat was staring at her screen, paralysed, as the noise around her continued to grow. He felt a stab of panic that she might have figured it out, that she would point the finger at him and this would all come crashing down on his head.

It was only when she finally moved to log in to her website that he wilted with relief.

They had won.

Kat's whole body seemed to vibrate and her skin felt white hot. The images were doctored, fakes designed to mess with her head. Still, seeing herself like that, *everybody* seeing her like that, made her body feel as

if it might disintegrate, and she would let it so that everybody would stop *looking*.

Behind her, Buttercliff heaved himself up from the desk and began walking towards the nearest PC. There was only one thing she could do to stop it. If the trolls were willing to do this, there was no way she could beat them.

Kat took a final look at the website she had built herself: her name in custom pixel art for the banner, animated sprites of *Backwash* characters dancing underneath, the developer diaries and blog posts, random videos and memes she had shared. It was supposed to be a sanctuary for her personality, her true self squeezed into a glass bottle and entrusted to the departing tide.

She wanted to scream, stand tall in front of them all and demand to know who had done this. Instead, she opened her website options and navigated to the delete menu.

Here, at the end, was nothing but defeat.

Are you sure? it asked.

There was no other choice. She pressed the button.

Luke refreshed the tab. Her website was gone.

'Fucking *yes, mate!*' he hissed.

Across the room, Kat had closed her MacBook and pressed her forehead into the edge of the desk. The adrenaline that had surged through Wesley moments before was quickly ebbing, his triumph eaten away by a growing nausea.

Buttercliff was leaning into a screen, demanding to be

shown what had caused the commotion, but the girls there refused to relent.

‘I’ll show you, sir!’ shouted one of the boys.

Looking back, Wesley saw Kat grip the edge of her desk as if trying to tear chunks of it loose. Her whole body shook, too violently to be caused only by tears.

Melodrama, Wesley told himself. TrumourPixel had warned them about this; girls like her always played the victim, even when they got exactly what they deserved.

Luke and Justin were already collecting their things. Ten minutes remained of the period but there was no obligation to stay. Buttercliff wouldn’t stop them. They had their victory, and now they were fleeing the scene of the crime.

‘Where you guys heading now?’ asked Wesley.

‘We’ll report this to Tru and catch you later,’ said Luke, shouldering his bag. ‘Drop us a message when you’re finished at your new job or whatever.’

‘We could—’

They turned their backs on him and left, as if Wesley had ceased to exist.

At the back of the room, Kat’s convulsions had turned violent, her breathing sharpened into high-pitched rasps. Other people in the room could no longer pretend they didn’t notice, tearing their eyes away from the photograph preserved on their screens to watch the real thing.

‘Live demonstration!’ crowed one of the boys.

Buttercliff saw what was on their screen and gasped, fumbling for the mouse to close it.

Finally, Kat’s head jerked up, and she stared at her

hands gripping the desk, as if she didn't recognise them. Her knuckles had bleached so white it was almost as if Wesley could see right through them.

A lump caught in his throat, and he made to stand up. It was different, seeing a victim in real life and not inside a computer screen. Before he could move, Kat swept everything off the desk into her bag and stood up sharply enough for her chair to clatter over.

'Who is responsible for this?' shouted Buttercliff.

Kat ignored him, everyone, and rushed for the door. As she passed Wesley, something about her changed that sent goosebumps skittering across his skin. The light from the windows seemed to consume her entirely, shining through her body as if it was made of glass. By the time he had blinked, trying to blot the illusion, she was out of the door and out of sight.

The room fell quiet around him. Buttercliff glanced around in bewilderment, and then returned to his seat at the front of the class to resume his game. Everybody at a computer closed the website, the email, and returned to whatever they had been doing before as if nothing had happened at all.