

One Punch

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THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF



1

Yasmin

Yasmin Weston ignored the first call. She'd just slipped into the pool and the jets of warm water were already doing wonders for her hip. She checked the bruising. That last fall was a doozy. It was crazy to be skiing on Storm Peak in this weather – she was too old to be testing her luck in a white-out, but Kat wanted to prove they were *fifty, fearless and fantastic*. Safe to say, Yasmin proved otherwise. She settled deeper into the water as the snow fell in thick flakes all around. She wasn't getting out until she was properly pruned.

'How magical is this,' Kat said, sweeping across the pool, almost vanishing in the steam. A pile of blonde hair and pink cheeks floating in the distance. 'I can finally feel my toes.'

'There's something very decadent about being snug in a blizzard.' Yasmin closed her eyes. The pool was fed from the nearby thermal springs and she could feel the mineral salts soaking right into her muscles. The only thing interrupting the peace was the constant buzzing from the bench.

'Is that your phone?' Kat asked.

'Just try to ignore it. It'll be one of the boys. They're probably looking for the oven.'

Kat laughed. 'I had a text from Toby about the washing machine.'

Mum, I really think it's shat itself.

'Care factor: zero,' Yasmin said, sinking a little deeper. 'We're on holidays, not staffing the domestic support desk.'

She had a son at university and two at high school, plus a perfectly competent husband. Surely they could fend for themselves for a week. It wasn't like she travelled for work or flitted around the world on endless self-discovery journeys, like some people she knew. She rarely went anywhere without them. Her last solo trip had been over a year ago. A spa weekend with friends that ended abruptly at a highway service station, in the toilets, thanks to a dubious turkey sandwich. She'd been off duty for less than a day. As for the ski trip, it was a last-minute thing. A favour to Kat because her sister had been forced to cancel. Admittedly, skiing in Colorado wasn't an arduous favour, but still, she'd had jet lag to contend with and a very surly flight attendant on the way over.

Her phone buzzed again. This time, her shoulders started to tense as it dawned on her: it was late morning in Steamboat, but it was the middle of the night in Australia. She clambered out of the pool, dried her hands on her towelling robe, unwrapped the phone.

James. Five missed calls.

She stared at the screen, the mineral salts suddenly abandoning her muscles and the pain in her hip flaring. Her husband wasn't calling about an appliance. It was almost certainly about her father-in-law. He'd come down with pneumonia days before she left; his condition must have worsened.

She silently cursed the timing. She'd probably have to cut her trip short. Such a hassle to change flights, and she'd just booked tickets to a music night at the cutest little country bar, with exposed beams and antlers on the walls, right in the snow. She'd bought new cowboy boots and everything. Still, if James needed her at home, she'd go home. She took a deep breath and answered the call.

‘Why didn’t you pick up your phone?’ James asked. She hadn’t even had a chance to say hello.

‘I’m skiing. It wasn’t that easy—’

‘I’ve been trying to get hold of you.’

‘What’s up? Is it Douglas? Is your dad okay?’

There was a choking noise, and then, ‘I’ve got bad news.’

Oh dear. It was worse than she thought. Douglas must have passed away. She’d definitely have to cancel the country and western night, and she probably wouldn’t get anything back on the heated ski boots she’d rented for the week. She chided herself for worrying about the boots at a time like this. But as a gondola trundled up the mountain into a cloud of white, she couldn’t help hoping it would be bright enough for a quick ski in the morning before she had to leave. Douglas would surely have approved. He’d been a gun skier in his day.

‘James, I’m so sorry,’ she said. ‘Your father was such a—’

‘Yaz, it’s not my father. You need to get on the next plane home.’

2

Evie

Evie MacIntyre peeled herself off her yoga mat. Sweat was gushing from every pore, soaking her top and leaving a large damp patch between her legs. She discreetly studied her tights as she rolled up the mat, wondering if she'd actually wet herself. Given the intense pain from her crotch area during the final warrior what's-a-name, anything was possible. Her ex-husband had promised yoga would make her feel a foot taller. An inflexible, fat slob, more like. The girl in front had been doing handstands, for God's sake. Evie was flat out balancing with two hands and two feet on the floor. Never again.

She grabbed her keys and Birkies from the open locker, pausing to read the poster on the wall – partly for entertainment value, but also to give herself a few minutes before tackling the stairs to the car park. The studio's annual retreat to Byron was coming up, according to the poster. Four days and three nights of *spiritual, mental and physical enrichment*. Four days of torture, for sure.

'Looks tempting,' came a voice from behind.

Evie turned to find a tanned glamazon, a mat under her toned arm, flamingos dancing down her long legs.

'Hey, how are you?' She knew the woman from school but couldn't immediately recall her name. 'How's ...' She grasped for the name of

the woman's son, but that eluded her as well. She wondered if early-onset dementia or yoga-brain was to blame. 'How's everything?'

'Great. Great. Love the classes here.'

Evie noted the woman's pristine tights and perspiration-free forehead. 'You here for the next class, are you?'

The woman smiled. 'I was right behind you. Your first time?'

'That obvious, hey.'

'Not at all. You did so well,' the woman said with an earnest expression, as if she'd been employed to offer encouragement. Then her face became suddenly serious. 'Oh my goodness. Have you heard about Dan Weston?'

Dan Weston. That was a name Evie couldn't forget. 'What's that shit done now?'

The woman stiffened. 'Dan Weston's an absolutely gorgeous boy. Captain of cricket.'

'Oh, *Dan Weston.*' Evie tried to recover. 'I was thinking of that other Dan, a nasty piece of work.'

The woman seemed confused for a moment and then composed herself, clutching her throat for dramatic effect. 'Dan Weston got attacked. A coward punch. In the Valley. *Really bad.* Some thug came out of nowhere, smashed him in the head. It was on the news.'

'*God.* Sounds terrible.'

'Poor Yasmin. Can you imagine what she's going through? She gives so much. And then this.' She shook her head. 'Life is not fair. *Poor Yasmin.* Anyway. Sorry. Not really the best topic for a yoga studio. I just found out. Still in shock. So tragic.' The woman touched Evie's arm, her smile returning. 'Nice to see you. Take care.'

Evie left the studio, suddenly remembering the woman's name – Amber – and feeling guilty for calling Dan a shit. Then her thoughts turned to *poor Yasmin.* She reluctantly recalled last year's Spring Lunch. She'd had a skinful of champagne and barely a morsel of the

chicken piccata and was two sheets to the wind before the acapella group finished their first number. She couldn't remember the speeches but had a vivid recollection of her comments about Yasmin, *the lollipop lady in her high-vis dress*. Evie had bagged that hideous designer outfit to anyone who'd listen.

She got to her car, scanned the news on her phone, found a few lines about the attack. One punch, leaving a seventeen-year-old fighting for his life, and the police calling for witnesses, looking for a man in an orange baseball cap who might be connected. There was no mention of Dan Weston but she was sure it was him. The article talked of a brain injury, a fractured skull. She'd been a nurse long enough to know how serious this could be. He might walk out of hospital in a week or so, but he might be bedridden for months. Or worse.

She started the car, anxious to get home. She'd been so flat out with groceries, washing, preparing for work and trying to get all Zen this weekend, she'd barely had a moment for Brody. Suddenly she needed to hug him, whether he wanted hugging or not. Then maybe a takeaway and a TV movie – Brody's choice. Just the image of them settled on the sofa made her feel calmer.

'Brody?' Her voice echoed down the hall of the timber Queenslander. There was no reply, which was weird – Brody never went anywhere on a Sunday afternoon. She called again. This time there was a shuffling sound from the bedroom, a barely audible groan. She peered into the gloom of Brody's room. The blinds were down and, even with the fan on full bore, the room reeked of rum and stale socks. Brody was still in bed, face down – distinctly unhuggable.

Great. His first hangover. A milestone she would have preferred he reach after finishing high school. This was his final year. He couldn't afford to be cutting loose now.

'If you're going to drink, you need to learn moderation,' she said,

hovering in the doorway, where there was less chance of asphyxiation from the alcohol fumes. ‘Drinking isn’t about getting plastered. Look at you. It’s five in the afternoon. You’ve wasted the entire day.’

Brody groaned. Possibly her sermon was a day too late. She might have delivered it yesterday, if she’d known he was going out. He must have slipped off after she’d gone to sleep. It had been a gruelling week at work and she’d passed out in front of the TV during the news, was tucked up in bed shortly after. God knows what time Brody came home. ‘Are you listening? You need to know your limits.’ No response at all, so she braced herself, strode across the room and hauled up the blinds, prompting a loud moan from Brody and startling his pet scorpion. It twitched, just slightly, in its lonely terrarium.

‘I just saw Sally the Mani move,’ she announced. She watched the little black creature for another moment. Nope, that was it. She was done with her antics for the day.

Brody rolled over, blinked into the afternoon light. ‘She’s a *Urodacus manicatus*. Not a Mani,’ he said firmly. A hangover apparently no time to be loose with science. ‘And her name is not *Sally*.’

‘Well, Sally is better than no name at all.’

By then he’d buried his face in the pillow again.

‘I was thinking Thai takeaway.’

‘Sleeping,’ he said, muffled.

‘Or Japanese if you prefer. Brody?’

‘Please, Mum. I need to sleep.’

‘What were you even doing last night? You’re always telling me you hate alcohol.’

‘The guys at the arcade bought me a few shots for my birthday,’ he muttered without lifting his head.

‘Did they?’ She wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or annoyed. Brody had turned eighteen the week before and insisted on a family dinner at the local Italian. No fuss, no fanfare. Just Brody, Evie and

her mother. The three of them, sitting at a corner table: Brody cutting his margherita with a knife and fork, Jan flirting with the waiters and Evie trying to liven up proceedings with a round of limoncello. Brody barely even took a sip. She was happy he'd celebrated his eighteenth with friends, but she wasn't keen on Urban Games. She didn't know any of the guys he hung out with down there, but she imagined them pressuring him into a round of shots, then another, then another. No wonder he looked so rough.

'Well, definitely no more spirits for you. Look at the state you're in. And weren't you meant to be at work this morning?'

Brody peered at her with puffy, bloodshot eyes; even the irises had turned a dull grey. 'I went to work. I got off early.'

'Brody, that's not good form. And you can't just go out without telling me. I bet you walked home, too.'

'It's not far.' He closed his eyes, like he'd heard enough.

'That's not the point.'

She moved his cricket gear off the bed and sat down, gazing at him. The thick brown hair, the wide jaw, the light shadow of stubble. A fully grown man – on the outside, anyway. Inside, he was still fragile. The same kid who corrected his primary school teachers in front of the class, and possibly as a result, hadn't got a single party invitation until Year 5. She'd taken him for ice cream so often to make up for it, that she still got teary when she passed their favourite gelateria. Now, he was way too big to be fussed over, but she'd probably always worry about him. Her thoughts turned to Dan Weston, lying in intensive care. What if it had been Brody, in the wrong place at the wrong time? What if she'd been the one getting the call in the middle of the night? He'd walked home through the Valley. Probably right past the street where Dan was attacked. The back of her neck started to burn just thinking about it. *There but for the grace of God go I.*

'Did you hear about Dan Weston?' she asked. 'He got assaulted. In

the Valley. What he was even doing in that festering nightclub area ... He's seventeen, isn't he? Still, horrific. Scary stuff. Really scary.'

Brody opened his eyes for a moment and then closed them again. He probably knew about it already. That kind of thing travelled through the boys like gastro at a school camp. An attack on one kid affected everyone. Brody was no fan of Dan Weston but he'd still be upset – when he wasn't so hungover. Hopefully the tragedy would serve as a warning, a reminder that there were thugs out there. Just because he was male didn't mean he was safe in a dodgy part of the city. That's what she'd tell him. But not now. He wasn't in a state for more lectures. Gently, she touched his hair. He flinched, but let her hand rest there for a moment, a very rare privilege. *Love you. Love you so, so much. Don't know what I'd do without you.* 'So, what do you think? Thai or Japanese?'

'Just rice would be fine.'

She got to her feet. 'Okay. I'll let you and Ms Urodacus have some peace. I'll give you a shout when the plain rice is here.'

'Mum.' Brody pointed to the blinds with a limp hand.

She huffed loudly. 'What did your last slave—' She stopped mid-sentence. Were they bruises on Brody's knuckles? She reached for his hand. This time he pulled away, burying himself under the sheet.

'What happened? Let me have a look.'

'It's fine. Just banged it. This morning.'

'At the pet shop? More likely a pinball machine didn't see things your way.'

'I don't even play pinball machines.' He pulled the sheet over his head, bringing the discussion to an end. For the time being anyway.

She dropped the blind, turned to leave the room and stopped in her tracks just short of the door. Lying among the dirty clothes was an orange cap.