

Fuck With Kayla and You Die

by Louise Erdrich

Roman Baker stood in the bright and crackling current of light that zipped around in patterned waves underneath the oval canopy entrance to the casino. He wasn't a gambler. The skittering brilliance didn't draw him in and he was already irritated with the piped-out carol music. A twenty, smoothly folded in his pocket, didn't itch him or burn his ass one bit. He had come to the casino because it was just a few days before Christmas and he didn't know how to celebrate. Maybe the electronic bell strum of slot machines would soothe him, or watching the cards spreading from the dealer's hands in arcs and waves. He took a step to the left, toward the cliffs of glass doors.

As he opened his hand to push at the door's brass plate and enter, a white man of medium height and wearing a green leather coat pressed his car keys into Roman's palm. Without waiting for a claim ticket, without even looking at Roman beyond the moment it took to ascertain that he was brown and stood before the doors of an Indian casino, the man walked off and was swallowed into the jingling gloom.

Roman waited before the doors, holding the keys. All of the valets were occupied. He held up the keys. A few seconds later, he put down his hand and clutched the keys in his fist. No one had seen this happen. Roman turned away from the doors, opened his hand, and saw that one shining key among the other keys belonged to a Jeep Cherokee. Immediately, he spotted the white Cherokee parked just beyond the lights of the canopy. An amused little voice in his head said go for it. He didn't think it out, just walked over to the car, got in, and drove away.

You couldn't call this stealing, since the guy gave me the keys, Roman told himself, but we are on a slippery slope. He checked the lighted gauge of the Cherokee, and saw that the tank was nearly empty. There was a Super-stop, handy, just down the road. Roman drove up to the bank of pumps and inserted the hose into the gas tank. Eight dollars worth should do it, he thought, and then he wondered. Do what? In the store, he decided he should be methodical, buy something to eat or drink. Afterwards, he would know what to do. The complicated bar of coffee machines drew him, and he stepped up to the grooved aluminum counter, chose a tall white insulated cup, and placed it under a machine's hose labeled French Vanilla. He held the button until the cup was three quarters full, and let the nozzle keep drizzling sweet foam on top. Then he figured out

which plastic travel lid matched his cup and pressed it on, over the froth. So as not to burn his hand, he fitted the cup into a little cardboard sleeve. He paid for everything out of his twenty, and walked outside. It was a warm winter night in the middle of a thaw. Bits of moisture hung glittering in the gas-smelling air. There was a very light dust of sparkling fresh snow sinking into the day's brown slush.

"A white Christmas, huh?" said a woman's voice, just to the left.

"Yes, it will be enchanting," Roman answered.

He was the kind of person people spoke to in situations that could easily stay completely impersonal. His face was round, his nose pleasantly blunt, his eyes wide and friendly. His smile was genuine, he had been told. Yet women never stayed with him. Perhaps he was too comfortable, too nurturing, and reminded them of their mothers. Desperate mothers who wanted their children home before dark or wouldn't let them out of sight. Now, in addition to being motherly, plus the kind of person people spoke to on the streets or while pumping their gas, he was the type into whose comfortable palm strange white men trustingly pressed their car keys.

And house keys, too, and other keys. Roman jingled the set before his eyes and then fit the correct car key into the lock. He got into the car and carefully set the cappuccino into the cup holder before he drove to the edge of the parking lot. There, he turned on the dome light and opened the glove compartment. He found the car's registration, folded in a clear plastic sleeve, and the proof of insurance, too, with numbers to call. The owner's name was Torvil J. Morson and his address was 2272 West 195th Street, in the closest suburb. Roman took another drink of the milky, sweet, deadly tasting cappuccino. Then he put the cup back into the holder and drove carefully out of the lot.

The casino was prosperous because it was just far enough from the city to be considered a Destination Resort, and yet close enough so only an hour's quickly diminishing farmland, pine woods, and snowy fields stood between the reservation boundaries and the long stretch of little towns that had blended via strip malls and housing developments into the biggest population center in that part of the Midwest. Roman knew approximately how far he was from 195th street, and it took him exactly the 45 minutes he'd imagined to get there, find the house, and pull into the driveway, which he wouldn't have done unless he'd seen already that the windows were dark. The house was a small one story ranch style painted the same drab green as the jacket of the man who gave Roman the car keys.

Roman got out of the car, walked up to the front door, used the key. Just like that, he entered. Once in, he shut the door behind him and wiped his feet on a rough little welcome mat. The house had its own friendly smell—slightly stale smoke, cinnamon buns, wet dried sour wool. A powerful streetlight cast a silvery glow through the front picture window. As his eyes adjusted, Roman stepped onto grayish, wall-to-wall carpet, and padded silently across the living room. His heart slowed. The carpeting soothed him. He went straight across the room to the kitchen, divided off by only a counter, and opened the freezer section of the refrigerator. He'd heard that people often kept their jewelry and cash there in case of a burglary or fire. There was a coffee can in the freezer, but it only held ground coffee. A few other promising Tupperware containers held nothing but old stew, alas. Roman shut the insulated door and rubbed his hands together to strike the chill from his fingers. Then he walked down the hall. He stepped into a bedroom, turned on the light. Posters of pop stars, stuffed animals, pencil drawings and dried flowers were taped to the walls. A teenage girl's room. Nothing. He turned out the light and found the master bedroom, the one closest to the bathroom. He was just about to turn on the light when the sound of breathing, or the sense of it, anyway, in the room, stopped his hand.

Then it didn't sound like breathing, but something else, sighing and watery. A fish tank, Roman thought. He listened a bit longer, then switched on the light and saw, on a table next to a window, a small plug-in fountain. The water coursed endlessly over an arrangement of smooth, black stones. Roman thought this must belong to the man's wife. He frowned at himself in the dressing room mirror, and adjusted the lapel of his jacket. The wife, or the teen, or another member of the family might return while he was standing in the lighted bedroom. Yet Roman had no prickles up his back, no darts of fear, no sense of apprehension. In fact, he felt as much at home as if he lived in this house himself. He was even tempted to lie down on the big queen-sized bed neatly made up with a purple quilt and pillows arranged upon pillows. Where had he read about this? Goldilocks! This bed looked comfortable. He thought of the three bears. There was a Mrs. Morson for sure, thought Roman. He pictured a bear meditating by the fountain. A meditator probably wasn't the type who would own gold and diamond jewelry, but he still had to check. There was not a safe on the closet floor, or even a velvety box on the top of the dresser or in the drawer that held underwear. No, there was only underwear, and it was decent, fresh cotton. What am I doing, thought Roman, with my hands in Mrs. Morson's underwear? He shut the drawer firmly and sat on the edge of the bed.

I'm not going to find any cash, he decided. Mr. Morson has taken it to the casino. Treading down the hall and back across the soft carpet, he felt cheated. What had happened with the car keys was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Roman had never before done anything that was strictly criminal. But this break-in, where he hadn't had to actually break in, this was given to him. It was as though Mr. Morson had invited him to travel to his house and look for valuables. And nothing there! The house was very still now, the street outside utterly deserted, the neighboring houses dim and shut. Roman sat down on the couch, wishing that he had the rest of his cappuccino, but he'd left the cup in the car. There was a tremendous energy to the quiet, it seemed to him, a seething quality. He felt that he should do something bold, or important, with this piece of fate that he'd been handed. As he was thinking of what he might do, someone knocked on the door. Roman's first instinct was not to answer. But the expectant quality of the silence was too much for him. He went to the door and opened it. There stood a woman and a man, both in coats but wearing no scarves or hats. The woman held a wrapped gift. The man carried a crock-pot out of which there issued a faint and delicious, smoky, bean-soup scent.

"Oh, thank god!"

The woman stepped into the entryway, the man also, both exuding an air of conspiratorial excitement.

"Very clever, keeping the lights off," said the man. "But isn't that his car?"

"He gave me the keys and I just drove it here," Roman told him. The man gave a scratchy laugh that turned into a cough.

"Where should I put this?" He lifted the Crock-Pot slightly.

"In the kitchen?" said Roman.

"Let's put his presents in there, too," said the woman. "You must work with T.J. Have we met?"

"I'm Roman Baker."

"You look like an Indian," said the woman.

"People tell me that!" said Roman.

"Okay, and I'm Willa and that's Buzz with the seven bean soup. It's his specialty. Just the countertop lights! No overhead!"

"Right!" Buzz sounded gleeful. "Is Zola back yet? Did she get the cake?"

"I think so," said Roman. His skull suddenly felt tight, his eyes scratchy and shifty in their sockets. "I feel bad," he mumbled. "I don't have a gift. Maybe I should go out for sodas or beer."

"Oh, T.J. won't notice. T.J. will have a shit fit. I think we should all hide behind the counters and the couch. Will you get the door, Roman?"

"Come on in," said Roman, as he opened the door. "Wipe your feet." Two young men and an older woman stood on the steps. One man carried a neatly foil covered bowl. The other held a large, pale, tissue-wrapped gift.

"We brought Mom," one of the young men squealed, "she's drunk. She's such a hoot!"

"I drank a strawberry wine cooler. I'm loaded," said the elderly lady in a prim and sober voice. "Let me in so I can ditch these two idiots. Does he suspect?" She eyed Roman with a flare of exasperation, her scarlet mouth down-twisted.

"Not in the slightest," Roman told her. He helped her out of her coat while the two young men settled their things in the kitchen.

"Very clever, all the lights out," the lady muttered, "Zola says he'll pee his pants."

"That's pretty much what Willa says, too," Roman told the lady. Steering her toward the couch, he startled himself. A picture formed in his mind. It was himself. Crouched on the carpet. Out of control. Pissing his own pants and howling with surprised mirth.

"They're sending me out for more strawberry wine coolers," he said. He patted the woman's hand.

"You're an Indian," she said, severely and as if imparting information to him.

"A big one," said Roman.

The others in the kitchen were whooping with secretive anticipation. Roman touched the keys in his pocket, walked out the door. As he neared the white Cherokee two more people stepped into the driveway, asked him in low and enthralled voices if anybody else was there.

"Go on in," Roman told them. "Willa and Buzz are organizing everybody."

"Oh God!" said the woman. "I saw his car! I thought he'd got home already. Zola's following us. She'll be here any minute with the cake."

Roman jumped into the car, backed down the driveway, and drove the opposite way down the street from the way he guessed Zola would arrive.

Back on the turnoff to the highway, he thought, right or left? But it was inevitable. He headed toward the casino. The cappuccino was still warm and on the way there he finished it. He

started to feel good. Yes, he had been given the Morson's keys, the keys to their life, and he'd visited that life. Enough. Nothing had happened after all. He hadn't taken anything except this car—for a drive. As he neared the vast casino parking lot he slowed and carefully reconnoitered, watching for extra security or flashing lights in case the Cherokee had been reported stolen. But all was bright and calm. Gamblers were walking to and fro, those who had self-parked. Others were waiting with their claim tickets on the swirl patterned carpet in the lobby underneath the lighted canopy. Roman eased the car into a marked space cautiously, far from the activity, and took his empty cappuccino cup with him before he locked the car's door.

That was your little adventure, he told himself. Now what? But he knew what. He walked back to the casino entrance and walked through, into the icy bells and plucking, continual ring that did predictable and pleasurable things to his central nervous system. He breathed faster in excitement. Possibly, the sound depressed left brain action. He felt connected to an irrational and urgent universe of lucky chance. His fingers twitched. First things first. He scanned the seated players looking for the green leather jacket, which was all he remembered about Morson. He decided to make a sweep, starting at the far end of the casino, checking the men's room first. He went up each row and down each row, passed behind each glazed, ghostly player. It took so long that he thought of giving up and simply turning the keys in at the lost and found. But then, there was T.J. Morson, green jacket slung behind him, staring into the lighted tumble of little pirate cove symbols on his machine's curved torso.

Roman tapped his shoulder and Morson waved him off, not to be bothered. Roman watched the man shove in three more quarters and hold his breath. Then sit back, dazed, rub his hand over his face.

Roman touched his shoulder again. "Happy Birthday."

"What?"

Morson turned and focused on him. His face was clean-cut and perfectly square, a solid Norwegian jawline, pale eyes, hair already white and thin, a little tousled. He was falling into heaviness around the neck and then below, like Roman, it was pretty close to a lost cause.

Roman dangled the keys. "You dropped these, I think?"

Morson slapped the pockets of his pants.

"For God sakes, thought I had it parked!"

Roman gave him the keys and turned to go, but he couldn't, not quite. He took a last look at Mr. Morson and saw that something was very wrong with him. T.J. Morson was sitting there with his mouth open, staring at the car keys. Not moving.

"Hey," Roman bent toward him, then waved his hand before the man's eyes, "you okay?"

"No," said Mr. Morson. He shut his mouth and then slowly, like a very old man, stood and shrugged on his jacket. He dropped the keys, picked them up. Sat back down and stared once more at the machine. Slowly, from his pants pocket, he drew a bit of change. Held it out questioningly to Roman, who rummaged in his own pocket and exchanged what Mr. Morson offered for a quarter. Morson held it a moment, then played it. Nothing.

"You okay?" Roman asked again.

But Morson was staring vacantly before him. His mouth was open and his hands were shaking.

"Not all right, not all right," he muttered.

"Hey," said Roman, "come on. Get up. Let's go sit in the cafe. I'll buy you a coffee."

"What I need is a drink."

"Yeah, well, maybe." Roman helped steady Mr. Morson. They walked down the aisle of light and sound, along a short hallway, and into a small interior restaurant where the waitress gave them a booth for two and poured their coffee.

"Cream. Lots of it. Thanks," Roman told her. She left the pot and a bowl of tiny plastic servings of flavored half-and-half.

"Thank you," said T.J. Morson, staring at the brown pottery cup. "And thank you for returning my car keys." His voice was heavy as a pour of concrete. The syllables seemed to harden as they fell from his mouth. "Well," he looked up, scanned the country-themed room, "this is it."

"What are you talking about?" asked Roman.

Morson put his face in his hands and then slowly pushed his hands up his face and over his hair. "That was it," he said again.

"Listen." Roman was beginning to feel alarmed. "It's your birthday. You should be heading home." He thought of all the excited people waiting in the living room of the Morson house, crouched behind the sofa and chairs and kitchen counters, the lights off.

"Weren't you supposed to be home a while ago?"

Mr. Morson looked at Roman, frowning now, momentarily distracted. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Buzz and Willa," Roman told him. "Look, I'm going to let you in on something that's going to cheer you up. You've got to go home now. I'm not supposed to say a thing about it, but they're planning a surprise party in your honor. Zola's got the cake. Even as we speak, they are in your house, waiting for you. They have presents."

Telling this to Morson was surprisingly difficult. Roman felt the bleeding sensation of envy when he imagined stepping onto the warm, thick carpet. The blast of noise from friends. The bean soup. Beer. Cake.

Mr. Morson said nothing.

"You can't just leave them waiting there." Roman heard a note of accusing desperation in his voice.

Morson shook his head, now, as though his misery was a fall of water washing over him. His brilliant white hair lifted in the staticky air. Roman felt like reaching over and patting it down, but he kept his hand curled around his coffee cup.

"Fuck's sake, I can't go back there," said Morson wearily. "They don't know. Zola has no idea about this . . ." he waved his hand toward the casino through the glass doors of the restaurant. "I play when she's at work, when I'm supposed to be at work, except I don't have a job, see. That's over. She doesn't know I put a second mortgage on our house, a line of credit, then topped it. Cleaned out every one of our accounts." He stared fiercely, disconnectedly, at Roman. "There's nothing," he said. His mouth was suddenly and frighteningly sharklike, an impersonal black hungry v. A bubble of spit formed at either corner. "They'll take the house and then my car. They'll take her car. And Kayla . . . Oh god."

Morson dropped his face into the bowl of his hands. Roman thought he might either break down and sob or leap up and rake his fingers down the wallpaper. Which would it be? He was feeling oddly disconnected. Maybe this was the way a shrink felt, listening to the woes of a client from behind a clear shield of therapeutic immunity.

With a thick, jerky movement, T.J. Morson struck his hands together.

"I don't even smoke," he said as though appealing to Roman, "I don't drink. But this ..." again he waved at the lights and bells outside the door. "I think, I know, I had the vision or whatever, that because it was my birthday I could turn it all around if I had just, say, a couple hundred. And I knew where to get it. So today after Zola went to work and Kayla was at school,

I sneaked back to the house and I searched Kayla's room. She has this little passbook savings account with me as her co-signer. But where does she keep the passbook? So I dug through the stuff in her drawers, her closets. Can you imagine this?"

Roman's mouth opened. Better than you know, he thought. But Morson went on quickly, "I found her secret things. They were under the bed, in this cigar box she had covered on top with a piece of paper. You wouldn't believe this knowing how sweet Kayla is, what a good girl. The box was labeled with a purple marker *fuck with kayla and you die*. Here she's a good little student, all As or Bs, never given anybody whatsoever any trouble in her life before. So this tough little message ... I mean . . ."

Morson stopped and drank some coffee.

"It got to you," said Roman.

"Yeah," said Morson. "Anyway, I took the passbook. Withdrew two hundred and eighteen dollars worth of baby-sitting money."

Roman nodded, poured another coffee for himself and stirred in three creamers. And yet, he thought. Here is a man for whom people will give a surprise party. Roman tapped the sugar packets, drank the rest of the coffee, put the money down on top of the check.

"I have to get out of here," he said to Morson, who stared at him for a moment, then widened his eyes and broke the look off with a cunning little grin.

T.J. Morson followed Roman out the door of the cafe. On the way past the banks of moving lights and bells and trilling knockers, he said, "C'mon. I hit, we'll split."

Roman kept walking. Morson grabbed the sleeve of his jacket. "Please," he said. Roman started at the sight of him. Morson's eyes were rolled back so the whites showed. His lips were drawn away from his gums in a guilty snarl. Roman felt in his pocket, flipped out a quarter. Morson opened the hand that held the car keys. Roman took the keys and gave the quarter to Morson, who played it. The two men watched the rolling tabs of symbols spin over and over, whirling, clicking into place in a disparate row.

"Okay, you satisfied?" said Roman.

Morson wiped his hands slowly on his hips and then followed Roman out the doors, across the gleaming, wet parking lot, over to the Cherokee. Roman still had the keys. He opened the doors and got into the driver's side. Passive, concentrating on something invisible just before him, Morson got into the passenger's seat and shut his eyes. But suddenly, as Roman pulled out

of the parking space onto the highway, Morson mumbled "thanks anyway," and opened his door to jump out. Roman managed to hook his hand in the collar of Morson's slippery jacket, and as he brought the car to a halt on the shoulder, he yanked the man back toward him with such surprising force that Morson's face smashed into the side of the steering wheel. There was an instant and surprising amount of blood.

"Don't worry," said Morson, his nose behind his hands, "I get these things real bad." There was a girl's striped knit stocking cap in his door's side pocket. Morson grabbed it and put it to his face. Then he said, "look, I'll just go clean up." He jumped out the door with the cap on his face, and was gone.

Roman pulled ahead about thirty feet into a blind driveway and shut off the engine. He found the lever next to the seat that dropped it backwards a few inches. He rested. A peaceful energy flowed through him. He nearly slept. Fifteen minutes, then half an hour passed. Traffic flowed by, snarled behind him, flowed again. A few people crossed before him at the far edge of an overflow lot. They swiftly entered their cars and drove away. Roman dozed another ten minutes and then he suddenly snapped to. He started the car and drove off.

As he pulled back onto the highway a screeching ambulance barreled past. The casino was filled with Senior Citizens and Roman imagined a whole scenario--a big payout, an old man elated, then clutching at his heart. This fantasy gave him the idea, as he drove toward Morson's house, of something he could say to get Morson off the hook. It wasn't that he liked Morson, but his friends were so eager, so well-meaning. It wasn't right to disappoint them. Things were going to be so bad with Morson that there was no way to make them worse. Roman decided he would announce that Morson was dead. He'd use that same scenario--payout, heart attack--and then while the pandemonium of reaction occurred he'd simply disappear. When Morson finally did show up, his being broke would not be quite as bad, at least, as being dead. Roman's lie would confuse the issue, muddy the waters, give Zola and the others a pause before they condemned. There seemed no harm in it as far as Roman could see, considering what Zola and Kayla were in for anyway. At least they would have the joy of having their worst fears reversed!

Roman arrived at the house and parked in the driveway—still empty in order to fool Morson into thinking that the house was deserted. Yet all the lights were on. The little house was blazing. Roman walked up the steps and then tentatively eased the door open and poked his head around the side. He remembered to set his features in a look of tragic concern. He nearly jumped back

out. All of the people he'd met before were standing or sitting at attention in the living room. They returned his look with identical stares.

"We know already," said the terse old lady who'd been drinking strawberry wine coolers. "He had his I.D. right on him, phone number. Kyle took Zola to the emergency room. Zola just called two seconds ago."

"Come on in," said Buzz. "Take a load off. I'll get you a beer. In fact," he said, "let's eat. It's some kind of custom that we all should eat together at a time like this."

Roman sat down on one end of the couch, leaned back into a stiff pillow. He looked down at his knees, then accepted a bowl of bean soup when it appeared in his line of vision. The bowl was warm and pleasant in his hands.

"They told Zola that he'd crossed the casino's main intersection, running. What is that, two lanes? Not so far, really."

"Four lanes," said Roman.

"Oh," said someone, "then."

"Zola said he was not quite DOA," said Buss, "but next thing to it. There just wasn't a thing they could do."

Now the others had bowls of soup, and bread, and were busily arranging themselves, patting napkins onto their knees, balancing coffee cups, offering butter around the group. "We shouldn't eat the cake."

"I agree," said Willa. "We should have his cake at the funeral dinner."

"Are you going to go?" She addressed Roman.

He looked at her. "It can't be true!"

Willa apologized. "I've never been much for denial. I go straight to acceptance. That's just me."

"You don't need to think that far ahead," said Buzz. He touched Roman's arm. "In fact, don't think ahead at all." Buzz put down his bowl of soup and sank forward, elbows on his knees. He cupped his hands over his head and leaned over like someone about to be sick. He stayed that way, motionless. Willa put her hand on his back and patted him with slow, regular beats. She looked over at Roman.

"Go on, eat your soup," she whispered. "It's okay."

Roman placed a spoonful of the soup in his mouth. A moment passed before he realized that the taste was unusually good. Something gave depth to the taste. Roman looked at Buzz, still hunched over. His specialty, he remembered. Maybe Buzz simmered his beans with garlic, or wine, or some kind of herb. Maybe it was the sorrow, or the strangeness. Perhaps Buzz had added a few drops from a vial of Liquid Smoke. Then again a ham bone. Or the fact that these beans were all different types. Roman finished the bowl and put it down.

"You want another?" said Willa.

"It's good," Roman nodded.

She got up to refill the bowl and Roman took over patting Buzz on the back, slow and regular, two or three pats to each of his sighing breaths. He kept feeling the wrench when he'd pulled Morson toward him, in the car, the way Morson had twisted, striking the bridge of his nose. There was the weight of Morson off balance, in his arms, the smell of his hair tonic, aftershave, and the smoke of the casino and the coffee on his breath.

Now here he was eating Morson's bean soup with Morson's friends and no doubt in two or three days he would be tasting Morson's cake. Roman shut his eyes. His thoughts flickered. "I'll be right back."

He set the beer down, got up, walked down the hall just like an old friend who knew the place. He opened the door to Kayla's room, walked in, shut the door behind him and knelt on the floor beside her bed. Reaching underneath, he groped for and found the box that he could see, once he turned on her little homework lamp, was indeed labeled *fuck with kayla and you die*. He handled it carefully. You shouldn't have fucked with Kayla. Psychic time bomb for the girl, though, wasn't it? Morson had replaced her little passbook. Roman flipped to the last page, then tore out a deposit slip. Same bank as his. Anyone could make a transfer, he supposed. He put the passbook back, lay the cigar box on the floor and snapped the sides flat. Then he slipped the box back underneath the bed. He walked back to the living room, passed behind an intense discussion of who should go now to the hospital, who was needed, what arrangements. In the kitchen, he paused at the sink for a drink of warmish, chemical-tasting suburb water. He set the keys to the Cherokee on the counter. Then he slipped out the back door.

I see a couple of very big plot turns here. First is that Morrison dies. It's both a key event and a key discovery. Second is then Roman decides to deposit money for Kayla. That's a key decision. Very clear key event is the inciting incident.

Now, we can test all of these for causality, character motivation, and the extent to which the set up was disguised. Chi decision end of the story, we can also look at incremental build. What were the steps along the way that moves Ramen from a man who is sort of willing to steal to a man who ended up gifting money?