

Mr Victim and the Ice Cream Van

Howard Firkin

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"It's a cruel world," said Mr Victim.

"It *is* a cruel world," his wife agreed.

Mr Victim said no more. He was on hold, and couldn't keep up a conversation in case someone in the Department of Consumer Affairs answered his call. To help pass the time, the Department's answering machine chimed a simple electronic peal. Over and over.

Mrs Victim sat on the couch facing him, her breasts popping out through the two windows of her maternity bra for Victim Junior to browse on.

It was not a happy home. Mr Victim had recently bought a new shirt from the Venom Emporium and discovered when he got home that it didn't fit. He hadn't tried it on at the Emporium because the salesman couldn't unlock the changing rooms, and Mr Victim didn't like to bother the salesman's supervisor.

"You can always exchange it if it doesn't fit."

"Yes, I can always exchange it."

Mr Victim couldn't know that Venom's had a policy of never exchanging anything.

Mrs Victim was wrestling on the couch with her little girl. Baby Victim was a real handful – just like her father, unfortunately, and nothing at all like Mr Victim.

"I'll have to tell him one day," she thought. Mr Victim would understand, because he'd met her former boss and knew what a very determined fellow he was. One just couldn't say no to Warren Bicep. He was such a moody fellow besides. Friendly and sympathetic one minute and cold the next. When he found out about her pregnancy, he spoke about helping to support the child. Then, not a week later, he sacked her. There was no predicting his behaviour.

"Darling... " began Mrs Victim, but Mr Victim had got through. He held up his hand to silence her and began speaking to the Government employee.

"Hello? I was wanting... oh..." He put his hand over the mouthpiece and continued to his wife, "Just another recorded message. Sorry, darling, what were you going to say?"

"Nothing really. I'll... It can wait till you're finished on the phone."

"Whenever that is. I can't think why it takes so long to make a simple enquiry."

"It is Friday afternoon, dear. You never have much luck on a Friday afternoon."

Mr Victim beamed at his wife.

"No luck? No luck on a Friday afternoon? Don't you remember? That's when we first kissed, on a Friday afternoon!"

Mrs Victim blushed at the happy memory.

"You were so sweet, Victor. And so shy."

"Well, I'd just been to the dentist, and one side of my face was numb. I was worried I might slobber on you."

"Silly thing. I wouldn't have minded even if you had. You did dribble a little bit afterwards, remember... in the cafe? I used my napkin to wipe the corner of your mouth and you – quick as a flash – you caught my hand and kissed it. Remember? You weren't worried about slobbering then."

Mr Victim put the phone down and walked over to his wife. He bent down and kissed her tenderly on the lips. Baby Victim reached back and began clawing his face. Mr Victim laughed at his darling little girl and Janice Soil, Clerk Class 2, answered the phone. No one responded. After a few Hellos, she rang off and answered her next call.

"Let your Daddy go, now. Come on, sweetie, let Daddy go back to the phone. I just came over to give Mummy a kiss."

He walked back to the phone and held it to his ear.

"Cut off! Would you believe it!"

He dialled again, was thanked for calling, and, as all the enquiry officers were busy, his call was placed in a queue. Ding dong, ding dong. As he listened, his mind recalled the magic of his childhood.

“You know what this reminds me of?”

“What’s that, darling?”

“These chimes on the phone. They’re so damned irritating, but when I was a boy this was the sound of the ice cream truck coming down your street. Remember? And I used to rush to find Mum and beg her for some money for an ice-cream, and if she said yes, I used to grab the money and tear out into the street, and... and the ice-cream truck had always gone. I don’t know how he made any money. By the time I got there, he’d driven off. Never made any sense. Still doesn’t.”

Mrs Victim was only half listening to her husband. The baby was keeping her fully occupied, writhing, turning, kicking. Although Mrs Victim wanted to start weaning the bub, the bub was now insisting on hourly feeds at the breast.

And she was so wilful!

Mrs Victim had to bare both breasts at once and allow her to suck first at one, then at the other, and back to the first at her whim. Otherwise she would scream and wriggle and claw at her mother until she gave in.

“I must start her on solids again... Owwww! Don’t bite your Mummy... Darling?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“When you’re off the phone, would you mind making some baby cereal for our little girl? We have to get her started on solids.”

“Sure. Do you... Oh yes, hello. Sorry to trouble you. I want to make an enquiry about my rights as a consumer. It’s about a shirt I bought at the Venom Emporium.”

Janice Soil rolled her eyes. At one time she had been on the side of the little man, wanting to defend him against the villainy of the giant corporations, but too many

calls from too many little men had turned her away from him. She hated the sound of the little man, and she hated the sound of Mr Victim more than most.

“Well why did you shop there in the first place, you silly prick?”

“I beg your pardon?” Mr Victim was shocked.

“I said, ‘Why did you shop there in the first place?’ Haven’t you learned by now that the place is one giant rip-off?”

“To whom am I speaking, please?” asked Mr Victim in his most dignified tone.

“You’re speaking to Janice Soil, shit-for-brains, ex-public servant.”

Janice hung up, quit, and went trekking in Nepal.

“What happened, darling?”

“I didn’t get very far,” said a mystified Mr Victim. “She just swore at me, I think, and then hung up.”

“It’s Friday, Victor. Everyone’s a little edgy by Friday.”

“Yes, but they shouldn’t be. They’ve got a job to do. Right up until five o’clock. I ought to ring that woman’s superior.”

“Make the cereal, would you, sweetheart? She’s very hungry.”

Mr Victim fumed as he made the cereal. The whole thing was ridiculous. He had bought a shirt which was too big for him. He had taken the shirt and the receipt back to Venom’s. Instead of exchanging the shirt, the salesman at Venom’s had told him, more or less, to push off.

He whipped the baby cereal angrily with a fork. No, not more or less, he had been told in so many words to push off. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. He should have said something at the time. He was so agitated he whipped baby cereal down the front of his trousers.

“Damn! Well, that does it!”

“What is it dear?”

“I’m going to ring Venom’s and speak to that man’s superior. I shouldn’t have allowed myself to be fobbed off by that salesman.”

“Have you made the baby cereal, darling? It’s just that she’s very difficult... ”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr Victim testily as he returned to the living room, “it’s cooling. I’ll just make this quick call before I feed her.”

Mrs victim recognised her husband’s moods and knew he oughtn’t be crossed. He was just like a little boy when he was angry, she thought fondly, and continued wrestling with the baby.

“Hello? Venom’s? Put me through to Menswear, please. The Manager.”

Mr Victim took a couple of deep breaths and began silently composing his complaint.

“Hello? Menswear? My name is Victim. I’d like to speak to the Manager, please. I have a complaint to make.”

The salesman remembered Mr Victim at once. Despite his shabby treatment of Mr Victim, he was a young man of considerable experience and resource. He apologised at once.

“I’m sorry Mr Victim, but I’m afraid they’ve put you through to Hardware. Hold on a moment and I’ll try to divert the call to Menswear. It may take a moment. Hold on please,” he said and hung up.

Mr Victim stood at the phone breathing heavily, still composing the dressing down he would deliver to the Manager of the Menswear Department. What sort of operation were they running out there? Even the simple act of transferring his call seemed to take forever.

The baby began screaming.

“Darling? Will you be much longer? I think we ought to try the cereal.”

"All right, all right," he said, slamming down the phone. "I can't wait for these people all day."

He stormed off to the hall cupboard, put on his raincoat, and then came back to the kitchen where his wife was struggling to fit the baby into her high chair. Mr Victim loved his baby girl dearly, but he hated feeding her. Did every father have these problems? Mrs Victim arranged the plastic sheets around the kitchen, and Mr Victim, armed only with a bunnikins bowl and teaspoon, walked into a screaming whirlwind of arms, legs, and baby mush. His wife retired to the bedroom.

He was engaged in a war of nutrition with his baby girl for only a few moments when he became aware of someone standing in the kitchen doorway. Through the cereal smeared lenses of his glasses Mr Victim saw two strange women, one holding a clipboard, the other carrying a briefcase and a lollipop.

"Can I help you?" enquired Mr Victim weakly.

The sharp faced woman with the clipboard answered.

"I apologise for not knocking Mr... Victim, is it?"

Mr Victim nodded.

"The door was unlocked and we heard the baby screaming. I am a Social Worker," she explained, laying special, ominous emphasis on the words, "and the baby sounded distressed."

"Social worker?" repeated Mr Victim, not getting the inflection quite right.

"Lisabeth Hatchet. I work for the Department of Family and Domestic Concerns. This," she added, indicating the woman with the briefcase and lollipop, "is Ms Eschew."

"Bless you," said Mr Victim absently, "but we didn't send for a social worker. I've never even heard of the Department of Family Concerns."

"Created after the last election," explained Hatchet, flashing the identification card fastened to her clipboard, "and you don't *send* for us. We just come."

She looked around at the kitchen and then at the extraordinary figure of Mr Victim. She snapped a quick description to be used later for the files: unwashed; dressed in plastic raincoat; kitchen a mess; inadequate personality.

“Well, what do you want here?” asked Mr Victim.

“We’ve come for the baby, Mr Victim. We have a court order granting custody of the child to the father. Ms Eschew will take the baby; I’m here to offer you professional grief and separation counselling.”

Mr Victim almost laughed.

“Look, Miss Hatchet, I’m just in the middle of feeding her. If you’d like to come back when I’ve finished I’m sure we can sort it all out. There’s been a mistake.”

“No mistake, Mr Victim. I have the order here.”

“What’s going on, Victor?” asked Mrs Victim, from the hall. “Who are these people?”

Mr Victim smiled at the social workers.

“My wife, Vicki,” he said by way of introduction. “Vic, these two ladies are social workers who think they’ve got to take our baby away, or something. could you take them through to the lounge and I’ll get cleaned up and we can sort out this mess?”

“Take away the baby? What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Victim,” explained Hatchet, pleased to have met the slut at last, “but I have a court order here awarding custody of the child to the natural father.”

“Good,” said Mr Victim, “because I’m the natural father. Now please leave our home before I call the police.”

“I think if you consult your good wife,” responded Lisabeth Hatchet, turning to face the horrified Mrs Victim, “you’ll find that the *natural* or *biological* father is...”

She consulted her clipboard while timing her pause.

"The biological father is one 'Warren Bicep'. That's what we have here, at any rate. What do you recall of the conception, Mrs Victim? Warren Bicep sound likely?"

"I'm afraid it's true, Victor," whispered Mrs Victim, too ashamed to look him in the face.

For a moment Mr Victim was lost for words. He pushed one hand through his thinning hair, and then looked blankly at the film of baby food left on his palm. Hatchet smiled with triumphant compassion, a picture of the professional grief and separation counsellor.

"Well bugger biology, then. I don't give a damn who the biological father is. I am the child's father; Vicki is her mother. You are complete bloody strangers and have no right to take her away. Now get out before I throw you out."

Mrs Victim thought her husband magnificent at that moment. Hatchet thought him an arsehole.

"Perfectly natural reaction, Mr Victim. I'll overlook it this time, but I warn you, if you behave in a violent or threatening way again, I will be forced to make a note of such action and you will ruin your chances of gaining access to your wife's child. Understood?"

"But see here, woman, *I'm* the father. I've fed her and changed her and bathed her... Isn't that fatherhood? What has Bicep contributed? A sperm! Has he ever got up in the night to change her or rock her to sleep? What do you call fathering? Losing a single cell? That's just bloody lunacy!"

"You had your chance to contest the decision at the hearing, Mr Victim."

"We didn't even know there was a hearing!" He looked over desperately at his wife, "Did you know anything about a hearing?"

Mrs Victim shook her head miserably and began sobbing.

"You see?" shouted Mr Victim, "How could we contest the decision if we didn't even know it was on? Nobody told us anything."

Ms Eschew piped up for the first time, trying to be helpful.

“Mr Bicep’s lawyers were unable to locate the Victims at the time of the hearing... I believe an ad was placed in the paper, though. It was pure good luck that he managed to track you down now.”

“Track us down? You make us sound like criminals! We’ve been living here since our first home burnt down four years ago¹. Warren Bicep must have had this address for Vicki on his files ever since she began working for him. This is outrageous!”

“If you’re not happy with the decision, Mr Victim, you can always appeal,” said Hatchet wearily, “but I’m afraid we are legally bound to carry out our duties as directed by the courts.”

“Here is your copy of the order,” she continued before Mr Victim could butt in again. “You’ll see that maintenance has been set at forty dollars a week, but you don’t have to worry about that – it will be deducted from your wages automatically.”

“Maintenance? Warren Bicep owns the entire Bicep Corporation! First you tell me you’re taking my child away, and now you tell me I have to pay Warren Bicep forty dollars a week for the privilege? You’re crazy!”

“In this country, Mr Victim, justice is available to us all, even to the rich. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have a job to do. Ms Eschew?” she nodded towards the baby.

Ms Eschew looked first at the cereal covered baby and then at the dark linen suit she was wearing and flashed a meaningful look at Mrs Victim.

“Do you think... ?”

“Oh yes,” said the still teary Mrs Victim, “I can change her first.”

“Thanks so much. Do you mind if I come and watch in case I have to do it some time? I haven’t had much experience with babies.”

¹ See “Mr Victim’s Christmas Barbeque”.

Mrs Victim and Ms Eschew went off to the nursery together, leaving Lisabeth Hatchet and Mr Victim to sort out the arrangements for counselling. Hatchet flicked over a couple of pages on her clipboard.

“Tomorrow afternoon all right?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Hatchet looked irritably at Mr Victim, trying to work out whether he was being deliberately obtuse. Just a bit thick, she decided.

“Is tomorrow afternoon all right for the counselling? The grief and separation counselling?”

“I’m really not interested Miss Hatchet. You can come tomorrow afternoon if you want to, but I’m much more likely to be out talking to a lawyer than here talking to you.”

“As you wish, Mr Victim. You are not compelled to have professional counselling, of course; although if you do apply to the courts to review this case, your refusal to confer with a professional counsellor may look rather odd.”

“Don’t bother trying to threaten me, Miss Hatchet,” replied Mr Victim, struggling to take off his raincoat, “I am well aware of my rights, and I am quite capable of making sure those rights are respected.”

Hatchet smiled thinly and made a couple more notes for the files: threatening behaviour; abusive language; suspicious stain down the front of trousers.

Mr Victim threw down the raincoat and went straight to the Bakelite Teledex next to the phone and looked up the number of his solicitor. Hatchet eyed the Teledex – it looked original twenties. Bakelite had just been featured in *Vogue*.

“Hello? I want to speak to Mr Viper, please. It’s extremely urgent. This is Victor Victim... Yes, yes Mr Viper handled all the paperwork when we bought our house... About four years ago.”

Mr Victim tried taking deep breaths to calm himself as he waited for the clerk to look up his file.

“What? Yes, I suppose so... No, it has to be today. It’s an emergency. Any time today. The sooner the better... Fine. That will be fine.”

He turned to Miss Hatchet.

“We’ll soon sort this out. Wait and see. I’ll spend every cent I own to get that child back.”

“I don’t doubt it, Mr Victim, but it’s no concern of mine. I’m just trying to do my job in a professional manner. Wouldn’t you be better off seeing if you can help your wife with the infant?”

Mr Victim hurried out of the room; the Teledex disappeared into Hatchet’s shoulder bag.

In the nursery Mrs Victim and Ms Eschew were chatting about baby things. Ms Eschew was clearly overwhelmed by all the paraphernalia and was making notes in a leather-bound note book with gold corners.

“And how often do you bathe her, Vicki?”

“Every day usually.”

“*Every* day?”

“Oh well, I like her to be clean. I’d hate her to be getting nappy rash. She seems very robust, but she’s quite a delicate little girl, really.”

“What about feeding?” broke in Mr Victim suddenly. “She’s still breast feeding, you know.”

“Doesn’t she take a bottle? Formula?”

“On no! No, she vomits,” said Mrs Victim guiltily. “I wasn’t even thinking of how you’ll feed her. You could try solids...” and she burst into tears again.

"This is bloody ridiculous!" exploded Mr Victim. "You can't separate a child from its mother when she's still breast feeding! It's inhuman!"

"I don't really know," said Ms Eschew. "I haven't had a lot to do with babies."

"Perhaps Mrs Victim could accompany the child," suggested Hatchet from the hall.

Ms Eschew, Mrs Victim, and Mr Victim looked relieved, reluctant and triumphant respectively.

"Yes, yes," he urged his wife, "you must go for the baby's sake. At least she won't be left to strangers."

"But where will I stay? Will there be room for me with the baby?"

"Don't worry, Vick, they'll be plenty of room. It's best for the baby. If Bicep doesn't like it... stiff."

But Mrs Victim *was* worried. She wasn't ready for another, and she had hoped that her husband would be the father next time.

* * *

Mr Victim was shaved, showered and dressed. His shirt was miles too big. It was the one he'd bought at Venom's – the only clean one left. He didn't care. Mr Victim just wanted his child back.

He paced distractedly through the house.

He still had an hour before he had to leave for his appointment with the solicitor. He looked up the phone number of the Department of Family and Domestic Concerns and went to write the number down in the Teledex. It had gone.

"I'm going mad," he thought.

He rang the Department and asked to speak to one of their legal officers and was put on hold. Ding dong, ding dong... The phone chimes penetrated deep into Mr Victim's memory. He recognized the sound of the ice cream van and raced out into the street, his shirt ballooning out behind him, his money in his hand.