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REWARD SYSTEM

I Want You to Be Happy

Jem Calder

faber

I

He had promised himself he wouldn't talk about it and now here he was, talking about it.

Not just talking about it, but shouting specific details directly in her ear. Certain things, obviously, he left unsaid. Over her shoulder, he looked out at the dancefloor, at the other men and women. Briefly, he wished he were a decade younger.

After shouting solidly for the length of three entire songs, he came to the end of it. He had worried he wouldn't know when to stop right up until he did.

She pulled back, nodding, eyes wide. 'Pretty intense,' she yelled.

'Sorry,' he yelled.

'No-no, I like it,' she yelled, a little quieter. 'It's like boarding a plane. You go baggage first.'

He tried to yell a laugh.

An interpersonal silence containing all the bar-noise surrounding them developed. He couldn't think of a good thing to say next; was torn between wanting to move on from what he'd told her and wanting to re-apologise for having over-shared—her being, after all, a total stranger.

'It's honestly fine,' she yelled, after he'd yelled a few more sorries. 'I did ask.'

That was true, he was happy with that. There were no immediate follow-up questions regarding anything he'd just said. 'Let me buy you a drink.' He turned around to face the counter.

And made self-eye-contact in the mirror behind the bar; glimpsed his posture. He straightened up. To her: 'G&T okay?'

She smiled. 'Sure.'

He ordered two doubles and got what really looked more like a pair of singles; glad, though, to have bought her something; to have a tangible claim on her attention.

They left the main bar area and stood by a wall perpendicular to it, facing the dancefloor sideways.

He winced; his drink was weirdly flat-tasting. 'I think they might've put slimline tonic in these.'

She sipped hers. 'Definitely.' Another sip. 'Love a guy who limits my calories.'

'Yeah,' he said, checking her face to make sure she was being sarcastic. 'That was my plan all along.'

'So, like—' she said, at the same time as he said: 'Do you—' She gestured like: *Go on*.

'Do you,' he restarted, 'live around here, or—?'

'Yeah,' she said, then explained her complicated sublet situation and its whereabouts.

'No way,' he said, 'I used to live right by you. We could've been neighbours. Well, I guess that was, like, forever ago now.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'How old are you?'

'Thirty-five.'

'Oh,' she said, without hesitation, 'I thought you were older than that.'

He laughed very hard to prove he wasn't offended by her brute sincerity. He suspected, he said, being around all the young people at the bar tonight made him seem older.

'Or you just look old for your age.'

He bobbed his head, pretending to weigh the thought. 'Maybe. I think it might just be what I said, though. You're what, twenty-something?'

'-Three.'

'Jesus.'

Now she laughed. 'Is that a problem?'

'No,' he said, although it wouldn't occur to him to seriously consider the issue until later that night.

He threw back his drink; felt flushed; took a moment to steadily place his empty glass on a nearby table. He was finding it hard to judge the exact distances of spaces between things.

'Thirsty,' he didn't hear her say, but all the same acknowledged that she'd said something by replying: 'Yeah.'

'I might get another,' he added, pointing at her—it was a question.

'Sure,' she said.

At the bar, it took him a while to get served; he worried, with the twenty-three-year-old woman out of his sightline for too long, he might return to find her gone.

He didn't, though, and when she re-emerged into view as he cornered the L-shaped room, he made sure to downplay his relief.

She was intently typing a message on her phone. 'One second,' she said, without looking up.

He waited for her to finish texting, holding both their drinks in front of his chest. He resisted making a joke about the seeming length of her message, which, he knew, would just come across as passive-aggressive and annoying.

'Thanks,' she eventually said, locking her phone, accepting her drink.

'Everything good?'

'So far,' she said.

He frisked his jacket pockets, slipped a hand into one of them, produced a pack of cigarettes. Before he could even ask, she said: 'Yeah, let's.'

Outside, he found himself surprised by the lightness of her hair; back inside, it'd just looked the same colour as the room.

The smoking area was wood-panelled, narrow, and if not busier, certainly more population-dense than the bar itself.

They shouldered through tens of people to sit on a bench occupying the warm circle of light cast by an overhead halogen heater.

'So, who'd you come here with?' the woman said.

The man cleared his throat. 'Some friends. But I'm not sure where they went.'

He lit a cigarette, went to offer her one, realised she was vaping. 'She vapes,' he said flatly, and was surprised to hear her laugh.

'I know, embarrassing. I started as an alternative to smoking, but now I just do both.'

'Want?' he said, offering her a cigarette; she accepted, almost lit it the wrong way round, lit it the right way round, smiled at him.

'Wait, so,' she said, exhaling a faint tobacco contrail, 'where'd you say you live again?'

He said he hadn't said, and that his apartment was roughly the same distance from the bar as hers but in the opposite direction.

'Oh, cool,' she said. 'Live on your own?'

'N— Yeah.'

'Had to think about that.'

'Right,' he said. 'Because of the thing I told you about. Earlier.'

She knocked the heel of her palm against her forehead, remembering. 'Doy. I'm sorry. And where's she at now?'

'She's been—' he started saying, then interrupted himself. 'Does it matter?'

'No, not at all, definitely not.' She busied herself fiddling with her nearest available physical distractions: cigarette; drink; her hands themselves.

The heater shut off, consigning them to cold and darkness; he reached up and pressed its timer switch, renewing the warmth and light. 'No need to thank me.'

She bowed her head. 'Thank you.'

He forced himself not to notice as she spilled her drink a little. He sipped his in slow-motion, careful not to repeat her mistake. 'So, what're you doing the rest of your weekend?'

'Well,' she rolled her eyes up at the night sky, then back down to him, 'I'm working tomorrow.'

He discarded the butt of his cigarette and chained another; frowned. 'Tomorrow's Saturday.'

'I'm aware. I work at a coffee shop on weekends.'

'And on weekdays?'

Microexpression of discomfort crossing her face: 'I also work at the coffee shop.'

'So you don't have, like, a real job?' He knew, as soon as he'd said it, exactly how this question sounded; grimaced to play it off retroactively as a tease.

'No, *Father*, I don't have a real job.'

He was pleased she'd taken his words with unintended humour. He feigned concern: 'Because this is an expensive city to not have a real job in.'

'Insightful, thanks. And you are a—?'

'Copywriter. *Lead* copywriter. At a creative agency.'

'Wow. Sounds *really* real.'

'It is, yeah,' he said, refusing to take the bait. He withheld that he was lead copywriter at a barely solvent creative agency top-heavy with senior staff; redundancy looming every quarter. 'And, so, working at a coffee shop. D'you have, like, an ultimate career path in mind?'

She pretended to gag. 'No. Gross.'

'Good to have a plan, though. Good to have, like, y'know. Dreams.'

Her voice pitch-shifted higher, defensive: 'I do have dreams. Just not very career-y ones, I guess.'

'Such as?'

Short pause while she decided whether or not to say. 'I write stuff. I like to write.'

'Write as in? Fiction?'

'Actually poetry mainly.'

'Poetry,' he said softly, the word itself somehow poetic. 'I write too, sometimes. Or, I did write. I used to.'

'But then you gave up on your dreams and now you just go to work all day and feel like something's missing?'

Her words, though clearly spoken in jest, had struck at the central insecurity of his life with a precision and force that left him momentarily speechless; crushed.

After a second, he managed: 'Something like that.'

He tried; couldn't remember what they'd been talking about before they'd started talking about writing. He attempted: 'So, d'you live near here?'

'You already asked me that.'

He remembered now. 'That's right, I did.' Then: 'That was actually just a test. I was testing you.'

'And I passed,' she said, extinguishing her cigarette.

She offered to get the next round; he refused; she insisted; he relented.

When she left, he pre-emptively reactivated the heater's timer switch. He checked his phone; struggled to keep a

steady eye on its screen: no new notifications.

He was fully drunk now, he realised—his attention kept digressing from whatever he tried to focus on. For stress-reasons, he hadn't been eating much lately; imagined the night's gin reservoiring up inside him with no real digested food to absorb it.

He had the feeling of knowing he was about to sneeze, but didn't sneeze. Then a few seconds later, he did sneeze.

'Bless you,' the twenty-three-year-old woman said, approaching him.

'It's so busy tonight,' the thirty-five-year-old man observed, just to say something as she set their drinks down, ice clicking in their glasses.

'Payday,' she said, reseating herself. 'It's why I'm out. Next Friday we'll all be broke again.'

'Right,' he said, sipping and feeling guilty about the drink she'd bought him. 'Thanks. For this.'

'You're welcome,' she said.

They fell quiet. He looked around for something else to notice.

He asked her some basic life questions and she spoke about herself for several minutes. She didn't ask him a single return-question but that was fine—it saved him the effort of having to try and be funny. He finished his drink.

That last drink made the already pretty woman seem even prettier; she was very pretty now.

'What?' she said, being nice. 'Why're you looking at me?'

He unfolded his arms; couldn't recall having folded them in the first place. 'I wasn't.'

She smiled. 'Creep.'

He should kiss her soon, he knew—if she turned him down, he'd still feel like he'd done his best.

He leant in toward her and only became aware that they'd kissed at the moment of their pulling away again. Their second kiss was deeper and tasted minerally. When they kissed a third time, their hands floated blindly toward each other. Eventually, she leant out of the kiss.

Afterward, the first person to talk was neither of them.

'*There* you are,' called a new woman's voice from further on down the smoking area. The voice's owner was short-haired and appeared to be about the same age as the twenty-three-year-old woman; evidently they were friends.

'Here I am,' the twenty-three-year-old woman replied.

The short-haired friend interposed herself on the bench between the twenty-three-year-old woman and the thirty-five-year-old man, putting her arm around the former and totally ignoring the latter.

As the two young women talked, the thirty-five-year-old man sipped the icemelt at the bottom of his glass. He resisted the urge to check his phone.

After a while, the twenty-three-year-old woman raised her voice and, referring to the thirty-five-year-old man, asked her short-haired friend: 'How old do you think he is?'

The short-haired friend surveyed the thirty-five-year-old man's face; thought for a moment. 'Forty?'

The twenty-three-year-old woman snort-laughed. 'He's thirty-five.'

'Sorry but you do look old,' the short-haired friend said, not even trying to sound apologetic. 'Like, you have an old vibe.'

The thirty-five-year-old man made sure to react smilingly, even though he felt that the twenty-three-year-old woman had sold him out to amuse her short-haired friend. 'Someday it'll happen to you,' he said.

The short-haired friend with her arm still around the twenty-three-year-old woman asked the thirty-five-year-old man to take a photo of them using her phone and he said sure. When he leant back and raised her phone to take the picture, both women tilted their heads to the side and smiled. He took a couple with the flash off, one with the flash on, gave her back her device, and watched as the women reviewed the photos.

The short-haired friend went on to ask the thirty-five-year-old man a few questions which he answered politely, waiting for their interaction to be over so the good part of his night could continue.

Eventually the short-haired friend booked an Uber home. The thirty-five-year-old man expected the twenty-three-year-old woman to announce that she was heading home also, but that didn't happen. 'I'll stay here for a bit,' she said.

Before leaving, the short-haired friend told the twenty-three-year-old woman and the thirty-five-year-old man to have fun; implored him: 'Please don't murder her.'

'I'll try my best,' he said.

'Sorry,' the twenty-three-year-old woman said as her short-

haired friend receded from view into the smoking area; other bodies. 'She can be a bit much sometimes.'

The thirty-five-year-old man lied: 'I thought she was funny.'

He didn't want to push his luck by trying to kiss her again too soon, and anyway his drink was empty. 'Shall we go back inside?'

Headrush now as he arose from the bench, swaying a little when standing.

Inside, the music had gotten louder, the lights lower. She walked before him across the dancefloor, her back occasionally snapshotted into frames by a strobe light that flashed in rhythmic time to the very loud song.

They stood by the bar, close to where he'd first approached her.

'When's this place close, d'you think?' he yelled.

She said something he couldn't hear; he turned his ear to her; she repeated: 'I don't know.'

'You like this music?' he yelled.

She shook her head.

'Wanna go somewhere else?'

He lipread: *Please*.

After they left the bar, she said: 'What about your friends?'

'I think they've gone already,' he said.

The air was damp and coldening—the first such night since the summer. She clasped her hands together into a single fist and breathed on them. 'Where to now?'

He spoke fast to get it over with: 'How about back to mine?'

'Sure,' she said, either nonchalant or performing nonchalance.

He set them walking in the right direction, striding carefully so as not to trip—keeping ahead of his own drunkenness. The pavement was wet-dark and petrichor-smelling, but at no point had he been aware of rainfall. They walked between the misty illuminated globes of streetlights.

'What's your name?' she said.

'Charles,' Chuck said. 'But everyone calls me Chuck. I remember your name.'

'I never told you it,' she said, defiant, like she'd caught him in a lie.

'You did, actually.'

'I didn't, actually.'

'Yes, you did.'

'Okay then, what is it?'

'It's Joey.'

Joey lowered her face. 'Oh. When'd I say that?'

Chuck thought. 'It was, like, the first or second thing you said to me. At the bar. Right after I said my name.'

'Oh,' she said again. 'Sorry. My memory's pretty bad.'

'No problem,' he said, cautious not to sound any more invested in her than she was in him, as though he could have just as easily forgotten her name.

'I think you're probably the oldest person I've ever gone home with,' she said. 'But I don't usually do this sort of thing.'

He selectively ignored the first part of what she'd said. 'And what sort of thing is that?'

After a longish pause: '*This* sort of thing.'

He took that as a cue to kiss her again so he turned to her and tried but she halted him midway; flatted a palm against his chest: 'Wait.'

Immediately he felt afraid, horrified, like he'd done something really wrong; maybe the gap between their ages was problematic and he was a bad person. 'Y'okay?' he asked thinly; his heartbeat louder in his ears than his voice.

'Yeah,' she said, 'sorry, I think my breath is probably all cigarette-y.'

'That's fine,' he said, so disproportionately relieved it felt like a religious experience.

'D'you have any gum?' she said.

'No,' he said.

When they next encountered an all-night corner shop she went inside. He stood outside alone and wondered what was happening with his life.

Shortly, she came back out with an open pack of spearmint-flavoured gum.

'Gum?' she said, chewing.

'No,' he said. He ought to be nicer. 'But thanks.'

He led them along a declivity to where the pavement met a flight of stone steps down to an embankment of the city's easternmost canal.