

Easier Than Love

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“It’s okay. We’re here for you.”

He couldn’t quite understand what that meant. Obviously, they’re here. They’re sitting in front of him at this very moment. He didn’t need them to tell him such an undeniable fact. One might even consider the idea that he was here for *them*, but he wasn’t. They are all here for each other, but also for themselves. It is a necessary phrase to say at this point, that “They will be here for him.”, but he didn’t really care.

She was here, that was more than necessary.

“What did you do after you found out?”

He punched a wall.

“I punched the wall, and a painting was hanging on it, so it fell...when I punched the wall.”

“You punched the painting too?”

“I think?”

They all pitied him, he could see in it their expressions and the way their lips quivered at the mere mention of heartbreak. It confused him. That’s what they were here for, to talk about their own experiences of heartbreak. Did they not know that? Regardless, the interrogation continued, their line of questions consisting of subjects that had absolutely nothing to do with her or what became of her afterwards. They were all about him and how awful he should feel.

“Do you hate her for it?”

Yes.

“No.”

“Why not?”

She was behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder and he could *feel* it. The eeriness was enough for his throat to obstruct itself in fear as the strangers continued to speak, not giving him a chance to answer.

“She should rot in hell.”

“Yeah, they all should.” This was a recurring theme, speaking horribly of the people they used to love. He figures it connects to their motto: “Where the lonely make the lonely feel less lonely.”, but he can’t find the connection between the two, so he says nothing.

“But not all of them cheated! Well, at least mine didn’t.” A praying mantis was speaking.

“Your girlfriend tried to bite your head off. I think we can all agree that’s much worse than cheating.” A chorus of nods and murmurs filled the room.

She was staring at him this time, still demanding an answer as the person next to him asked another question. He couldn’t hear them, but it was probably along the lines of “Who’s the guy she cheated on you with? Have you met him?”, and such a question would only make him feel worse. He was too focused on her eyes, which were a few centimeters away from his face. She was much too close and it made him uncomfortable, but no one else seemed to notice. No one could see her.

Why?

He can hear her.

“I don’t know why.”

The strangers stared at him, confused. “What?”

Oh. “Sorry, what was the question?”

“I asked if you know where she is now?”

She was still staring at him, a little further away than earlier, but still close enough for him to be uncomfortable. She wanted answers, that’s why she was being invasive. Even so, she doesn’t deserve them. In fact he should be the one demanding answers, but he refused to speak to her.

“She’s everywhere.”

The strangers seemed oddly satisfied with the answer, as if they understood what it felt like—to feel like ever since she left, she still won’t leave him. He thought the line of questions were finally over, but she asked him again.

Why?

He knew why, he was just afraid of saying it out loud because it brings the fact into reality, and he wasn’t very fond of dealing with such frustration at the moment. He knew he had to explain it at one point, and he tells himself that there’s nothing wrong with saying it now.

“I don’t hate her.” He began impulsively, interrupting a beaver who was just beginning to insult her husband and their crippling relationship. “She loved me, how could I hate her?”

“What do you mean?” They all turned their attention towards him, completely ignoring the beaver.

“She loved me and there were no exceptions to loving me. She knew I was screwed up, and she accepted that. There wasn’t anything to love, and yet she did.”

She was still staring.

“But she cheated on you.”

“I know but—I—” This time he looked at her, using his eyes to tell her how difficult this was for him. She didn’t care, she wanted to know. She was desperate to know, just as much as he was to not tell her. There *was* something wrong with now: he wasn’t ready and he scolded himself for thinking that now was good time to admit something so personal.

Then again, he didn’t think he had a choice.

“I feel like she settled. You know? Like, she didn’t think it could get any better than this, so she figured this would do. She probably thought about how horrible it would feel if she didn’t find someone, because she’ll grow up and realize that no matter what she does, a relationship doesn’t fill any holes or voids and it’s a stupid mess, so why care at all? And the worst part is that I don’t blame her, because I get it. Or maybe she didn’t want to settle. Maybe when she found something better, she realized that she *should* care because she has so much of her life ahead of her. Why would she stick with something so mediocre when she could have something better? Everyone deserves better.”

It was silent. Even she was at a loss for words, not that she spoke much anyway. He caught himself off guard at how much he rambled, but it was too late to retract his words. They were out in the open now.

“So you don’t hate her for wanting something better?”

He sighed. He knows how ridiculous it sounds, but—

“No.” He doesn’t hate her at all.

“Then why are you here?”

Right. He didn’t have a good reason to be here. He was praising her and that’s not what these strangers are doing. He should go.

“Sorry, I’ll go.”

“No! I mean, there’s nothing wrong with not hating her, but that’s the exact opposite of why the rest of us are here. So why are you here?”

He quickly came up with an excuse. “I guess I just wanted to talk about it.”

He was sure he had a more significant intention than simply talking about it, then again, he can’t even remember why he joined this support group in the first place. It’s possible he needed validation that other people were suffering from heartbreak as much as he was, or maybe he wanted to know how others manage their sadness. He doesn’t really know.

Someone suddenly spoke up. “Actually, I don’t really hate my ex either.”

Someone else scoffed. “Well, I definitely do. He was manipulative.”

Now he sees how this makes the lonely feel less lonely.

The strangers continue talking for the next hour until an outsider informs them that their time is up. Someone else will be using the venue, they said, and the strangers start stacking the chairs in piles of seven. They take down the ‘The Broken Hearts Club’ sign on the wall and place it in a storage room for them to use in the next meeting. The strangers exit the venue once they’ve cleaned up, receiving a sticker with the support group’s logo printed on it. They wave and bid each other goodbye before entering their cars and driving home. The praying mantis decides to take the bus instead.

He decides to take the bus as well, and she follows him out the door. When the praying mantis asks if he’s getting on, he explains that there’s not enough space for the three of them. The insect gives him an odd look before the doors close.

He waits at the bus stop. She stares at him as he waits.

That's all she does, stare. She uses it to ask for explanations or manipulate his decisions. Even back then she would do it. It's a strange habit and it seems she never grew out of it. He doesn't speak to her. He doesn't ask what she wants or why she is constantly following him, and he allows her to stare despite how uncomfortable it makes him.

"Hey."

He turns around, and so does she. It's him, the guy, but he doesn't know that he's branded as *'the guy'* by several broken hearted strangers. She says nothing, neither does he, but he can see her shoulders tense as the guy starts to speak.

"Do you know if this bus goes downtown?"

It does, but a part of him doesn't want the guy to know. The thought of giving the guy a difficult time by not providing any information is quite tempting. It's decided, he won't say anything.

No, it doesn't.

"Yeah, it does."

Ugh.

"Oh okay, thanks." The guy lights a cigarette and takes a seat beside him at the bus stop.

The three individuals remain silent, the sound of the burning cigarette as the only source of noise. It reminds him of her and her incessant need to make use of such a thing. What a tedious process, he thinks. Cigarettes kill slowly.

He looks up, only to find the guy staring at him and holding out his pack of cigarettes for him to take.

"Want one?" The guy has his lighter in his other hand.

“What’s in it?” He almost plucks one from out of the pack.

“Novocaine.”

And he does. He needs it for the pain.

He takes the lighter for himself, holding it close to the butt of the novocaine stick to ignite it. The guy stares, like her, and focuses on the sticker on his shirt pocket.

“*The Broken Hearts Club*,” The guy reads, taking one last puff from his cigarette before throwing it on the gravel and putting it out with the sole of his boots. “—what’s that?”

“It’s a support group. We talk badly about our exes.” He blows out a cloud of smoke, as if he’s done it one too many times.

“That’s kinda harsh.”

“Not really, only if they did something wrong.”

“Like what?”

Annoying. “Like—I don’t know. If they’re abusive, or if they—“

“—cheat?”

“Exactly.”

The man scoffs, taking out another cigarette and lighting it with the snap of his fingers. “I know someone who’ll fit right into that category.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just don’t trust women, kid.”

He sees her bend her head down in shame from the corner of his eye. He disregards it.

“I’m not a kid.”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not.”

“Look, whoever cheated on you, it’s not your fault. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“Who should I hate then?”

“I never told you to hate anyone. I just said don’t blame yourself because it’s not your fault.”

“How do you know I blame myself? I told you I came from a support group that talks about their exes. What if that’s all I was doing?”

“Were you?”

No, he wasn’t. He did quite the opposite actually.

“No.”

The man gestures to the air, as if the answer was already in the atmosphere. He just needed to admit it.

“Who’s fault is it then?” He asks.

“Maybe it’s everyone’s fault.”

“If it’s everyone’s fault, then doesn’t that mean it’s really no one’s fault?”

“Exactly.”

That doesn’t make any sense to him, but the guy continues speaking before he could retort.

“You’re allowed to feel bad, and you’re allowed to not hate her, but don’t blame yourself for her mistakes. Is it a woman’s fault for getting assaulted? No, it’s the sleazy guy that assaulted her, he’s to blame. Don’t wallow in self pity because who’s gonna care? Just get on with your life. It’s *one* girl. Get over yourself.”

The bus arrives on time. The guy gets on. He doesn’t.

The guy speaks before the doors close. “Remember that.”

He doesn’t need to.