

Hardboiled

(1929 words)

The cinema was quiet. Only Leonard, Charlotte and another man in. Leonard wasn't really paying attention to the film: too preoccupied with when to make his move on Charlotte.

Charlotte worked in the cafe he lunched in. After a few meetings he spoke her name at the end of his order. It was not intentional. He was frowning her necklace's pendant, her name cut in fancy, flowing letters, and the word simply attached itself to the sentence.

'Beans *and* toast, on separate plates, and a cup of tea please – *Charlotte*.'

Through her make up and spots a blush radiated. She followed his gaze to the pendant, dangling over the top of her close fitting tee-shirt and tucked it out of sight. The adjustment made her seem approachable.

'It's your name isn't it?' he said.

'Ah ha.'

'Shouldn't put it on the necklace if you don't want anyone knowing.'

She smiled uncertainly - good teeth - then turned on her heels to get his order. Her gait was awkward, as if she knew he was watching. He tried to imagine her slender figure through the baggy jog bottoms. That was two days ago. And now they were on a... a what? A date? He was not sure. But this time it was intentional. Learning the route she took home, he had contrived to bump into her leaving work. Meeting outside the café it worried him that she might act differently, more assertive, but immediately her face reddened and, encouraged, he asked her out for a drink.

She accepted.

She accepted!

Intoxicated with success he babbled about the weather, his job, a story he heard on the radio, adding flourishes of his own, all the while passing comment on things he saw, 'look at that dog... that man with the...' Ha-ha, nothing escaped his attention. Charlotte, for her part, said very little. It did not matter; he was in full flow, surprising himself with his wit, and the longer things went well, the greater his hopes became. Where might the night end? But as the weight of expectation grew, doubts emerged... He had not bathed today, not even deodorised his armpits, his teeth needed a brush and his breath – god he could taste it! He became jittery, cold sweat burst out all over him and he developed the need to use the toilet. Nerves. Nerves! How could it be nerves? The pressure on his bowels was real, would give way to an abhorrently tangible form, and the dampness seeping out of him, dribbling down from his armpits, over his ribcage, that was real too... His walk became stiff, arms tight to his sides, buttocks clenched, and his bad breath made it impossible to speak. The silence was unbearable. Why didn't Charlotte say anything? A word from her and everything would be fine. Something to let him know she was happy. As it was, he could not help but wonder if she had accepted his offer because she was too timid to decline it. No need to be. If she wanted to escape he would not get in her way, rather than she string him along.

After a few minutes, unable to endure any more, he stopped dead, throwing his arms out imploringly. 'Look, are you sure you want to go? You've nothing better to be getting on with?'

Charlotte nodded. 'I can't stay too long though.'

'Aye well yeah, fine... I just wanted to be sure.'

She laughed. A warm tingle soothed his body and his heart leapt excitedly. A laugh. The first she had shared with him. They began walking again. He wondered whether to try holding her hand but his bliss was such he would risk nothing to ruin it. He imagined the faces of Tom and his cronies when they entered the pub - all double takes and eyes agog! What would they think? The usual to begin with: Here comes Leonard Pepper. Sure he's harmless enough but he puts the customers off their drinks. But what's this? Ay-ay! Company - and female to boot! Maybe we were wrong about him... Tom almost drops the glass he is cleaning and the old-timers get so distracted

from their domino game they clean forget whose turn it is to play. Ha-ha.

Upon reaching The Halt his confidence was higher than ever: the pressure on his backside having been nothing but wind and if he smelled a little sweaty, well clearly Charlotte was unfazed by it. He had landed on his feet with her!

She hesitated outside, raising herself on tiptoe, trying to get a glimpse of the place over the frosted glass windows at eye-level.

The Halt was the cheapest and quietest pub in town. Its façade, panelled in wood, once appeared classy but was now cracked and weather-beaten. The pub's name was rendered in important looking block capitals, done in gold leaf, flaking now, that a row of lamps illuminated at night. A sign above the entrance said FREE PINTS TOMORROW. Inside was as dingy as the outside suggested: the seats upholstered in brown vinyl; the ceiling, low and nicotine stained; the bar chestnut coloured and the drinks mostly likewise; the walls panelled in a dark wood that the orange light nestled into rather than brightened.

Charlotte screwed her face up. 'Looks a bit grim.'

'It's a front, so the place doesn't get too popular.'

She gave him a blank look, then ran her finger along a window ledge, cutting loose a spider's web in the corner. She indicated another sign, painted onto the wood panelling by the entrance, announcing, amongst other things, that Miss Ophelia Balls performed every Thursday. 'That's tonight.'

'That's ancient. Nothing like that happens here now.' Smiling tentatively, he held open the door. She could not change her mind, not now! 'It's nice,' he said. 'Really it is.'

She entered.

Cursory glances! All they received. Tom, hunched over a newspaper at the bar, hardly even made the effort to do that.

Leonard instructed Charlotte to sit down and went to the bar, above which a portable television, volume off, showed the news. After a minute Tom stepped across to serve him.

'Leonard,' he said flatly.

'A pint of Guinness and a... Hold on a second.'

Charlotte was sitting in a corner at the back of the room, alongside a flashing, bleeping slot machine. Leonard pondered whether she wanted the machine to draw attention to her or take it away. He took her order, relayed it to Tom, then nodded across his shoulder and said, quietly, so Charlotte would not hear, '*For my girlfriend*'.

Keeping his eyes on the pint he was pulling, Tom laughed to himself and shook his head.

'Seven sixty.'

Seven sixty. He could have rummaged for the exact amount but in a final bid to make an impression decided on a twenty pound note. 'I've nothing smaller,' he said handing it over.

'It's fine.'

Fine! As though he had handed over coppers. Cursing Tom's indifference, he seated himself opposite Charlotte. She smiled, thanking him for the drink. He opened the crisps, put them in the centre of the table.

'You're right, it is grim.'

'It's alright.'

'Sometimes.'

In silence they both went for the crisps. Charlotte took one, Leonard as many as he could. He sipped his pint. Swallowed. 'So what are you doing later then?'

'Going to the cinema.' She shrugged. 'Come if you want.'

'Who else is going?'

'Just me.'

Just her. And him. (And the bloke in front.) In the cinema. But was it a date? He needed to find out, contrive some subtle contact, something he could pass off as an accident if she objected.

He looked askance at Charlotte's figure, outlined by the glare from the screen. Then gripping the armrests, he parted his legs – which, until this point, had been angled uncomfortably away from Charlotte – and inched the right towards her. Their legs close, he anchored his foot to the floor and slowly inclined his knee in the direction of hers, keeping his gaze on the film as he did so. It was an old film from the seventies, a detective noir involving water and a missing girl. Not really a date movie. A horror would have been better. Something that encouraged cuddling, that

might have had her jumping into his arms. Or him into hers. He didn't really like horror films. Too icky. He liked things clean.

Their knees met. He tensed. Waited until he was sure Charlotte would not recoil, then pressed himself into his seat, loosening his hold on the armrests. He observed the point of connection – small, easily severed – then watched, amazed, as Charlotte, eyes never leaving the film, eased her calf and foot firmly against his.

Did she know what she had done? If so she was not letting on. Trying to appear equally blasé, he turned his attention to the film.

The lead woman had just saved the hero's life. She drove him to her house, poured drinks. Following an awkward conversation, they went into the bathroom so she could tend a wound he had sustained to his nose. The detective spotted something caught in the woman's eye. She explained it was a flaw in the iris. They kissed. The scene cut to them lying naked in bed, smoking.

Easy.

And maybe that was the thing. Leonard was overcomplicating matters, thinking them out of existence. What if he was to simply twist Charlotte's head to face him and plant his lips on hers? They would be kissing and that would be that. Who knows, beneath the shy demeanour, maybe Charlotte liked a bit of rough, in which case his softly, softly approach was probably doing more harm than good. But what if she did not want her attention distracted from the film? If she resisted so strongly he broke her neck? How would he deal with the corpse? While the film showed he could prop her head on his shoulder, pretend she was asleep but after, when the lights went up... Concerned, he looked around the cinema, a small, bland screening room in a theatre. A couple of rows ahead and to the left, the man picked individually wrapped sweets from a crackly plastic packet. Though the sweets were hardboiled the man never sucked them, just smashed them to bits with his teeth, swallowed the debris then dived back into the packet for another. The noise was impressively loud. If Leonard was going to break Charlotte's neck, he would synchronise it with this man's eating, using it to disguise the sound of the kill. Poising his hands as if her head was clamped between them, he waited for the crunch and made a quick swivel motion, repeating it a couple of times until satisfied with his timing. He looked at the screen. But now he had given his

consideration to the racket he could not block it out. Glowering across at the man, he made a series of tuts and snorts that never quite exceeded the volume of the film or the man's eating. Then he flinched. Charlotte's hand was on his, squeezing it. His heart charged. It was now or never. What or never? Silly phrase. Distracting. He glanced at her. She smiled. He returned it, aware of the insincerity, his muscles resisting. A sweet exploded. He reached forward and took Charlotte's head in his hands, gently steering it away from the screen. She smiled. Her pendant caught the light from the screen. His grip tightened on her head. A sweet exploded.