

New Year's Day

(See last page for content warnings.)

You could never be too prepared for a job interview. That was what I was telling myself to justify why I was still nervous, running through contingencies in my head, even after a week of practice.

“What if they’re mean?” I asked John in a pleading voice.

“They’re professionals, Mary. They’re not going to be mean,” he claimed, but I wasn’t so sure.

“But what if they *are*?”

John took a pause from combing to fix me with a suffering stare. “You’re going to be *fine*. We already practiced how to deal with difficult interviewers, right? And you did great.”

My stomach was still filled with butterflies, but I knew he was right. “Alright, alright. Thanks, love.” I looked back at the mirror, regarding the well-groomed young woman whom I couldn’t quite connect to myself. Long, wavy blonde hair, now tied back into a neat bun. Tall face with features that I would describe as pointy, John would describe as sexy, and my interviewer would with luck describe as friendly. I had gotten myself a nice suit in dark gray for the occasion; John had come with me to the tailor and he’d been swift to point out that this suit would match well with my gold earrings. Maybe overkill for a job at the New York Public Library, but hey, I was never one to go halfway.

By now, it seemed John had decided that nothing more could be done with the comb. “You look amazing,” he declared.

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “I’m going to be fine. Just have to not be weird. Don’t be weird.”

John chuckled. “All right, Mary, if you say so. As long as you’re still weird when you get home. You know I love you just how you are.”

I wrapped my arms around John and nestled my head into the crook of his neck. We fit right together, like always. “Mmmm,” I hummed, breathing in the light earthy scent of his Jōvan Musk.

For a minute we just stood like that. Then it was time for me to go. I gave John a quick peck on the cheek, grabbed my briefcase, and headed out the door of my apartment.

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I gazed at John across the candlelit table we occupied at La Grenouille. He looked right at home surrounded by the elegant floral arrangements and immaculate waiters of the restaurant. His dark brown mop was combed back with care and his goatee didn’t have a strand out of place. A suit jacket (no service without a jacket here) completed the picture.

The dinner was pricey, but I wanted to celebrate. It was my birthday, after all. Working at the library was even better than I had imagined—and plus, John was turning heads at Tiger Management. My knowledge of stock trading was limited to “buy low, sell high,” but it was obvious John knew what he was doing, if the size of his last bonus was

any indication.

“So tell me more about what’s going on at the company,” I said.

“Well, it’s a pretty exciting time. Lots of money to be made.”

“And you’re just the guy to make it?” I inquired in a playful tone.

“Yeah...” He trailed off, not meeting my gaze.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know... Mary, what if I don’t have what it takes for this job? People keep asking for more and more.”

“Hey.” I reached my hand across the table, brushing aside a decorative napkin, and waited in expectation. He seemed distracted, but after a few seconds he offered his own hand. I grasped it and held on tight. “I know you’re going to do a great job. Tiger is lucky to have you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, still looking down.

“Hey, what are you worried about?”

“I don’t know. Nothing. Everything?” He looked up. Tense. The flickering candle-shadows cast across John’s face now seemed more sinister than romantic. “It’s just... every time I close a good trade, the other guys congratulate me. And I’m supposed to feel great. But I can’t breathe. All I can think about is what happens next. How long am I going to be able to hold this together? And what’s even the point? You make a thousand, and then what? You need to do it again, and again, and again.”

My mind was spinning and I felt a sense of detachment. The refined tables of La

Grenouille faded away as I stared at John. I needed to think of something to say, fast.

“You... don’t need to work at Tiger if you don’t like it. We can figure something out,”

I tried.

“No. I can’t do that.” He said it like he was describing a novel and excruciating form of torture. I decided not to press.

“A vacation?”

“Not right now. There’s too much going on.”

“Okay, but, um...” I started, but found myself at a loss for further ideas. We sat there in the candlelight for some time, my throat dry.

At length, I began again, “Okay. I won’t pretend like I have an answer. But the important thing is I’m going to be here for you. I know we can figure this out together. Alright?”

“Yeah?” His voice seemed a little less strained, which encouraged me.

“Yeah. I know you always put in your all and I love that about you. You don’t have to be fearless. I was afraid of that interview, but you got me through it no problem. We can do the same thing for you. Deal?”

“Alright. Deal,” he agreed, and I felt the tension seep out of me. I hadn’t realized until just then that I had been on the edge of my chair.

He inhales, then exhales. All of a sudden, it was as if nothing had happened. John was beaming. “God, I love you so much, Mary. In fact, I’d rather like to be making love to you right now, but I think the waiter might disapprove.”

I laughed. “Well, you’d have to keep your jacket on.”

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It was a slow day at the library when I got a call on my mobile phone. The phone was a gift from John. It was the latest model, just one and a half pounds—and you could talk for almost an hour on a single charge. Nobody else I knew had one—it seemed that being a big-shot trader came with some perks. John had his own. It seemed a little extravagant to me, but I did have to admit it was nice to be able to step away from my desk to take the call.

“Hello?”

John’s voice crackled through the static. “Hey, Mary.”

“Hey John, what’s up? Are you getting ready for the talk?”

“No, I... I’m not at work.”

With a sinking feeling—*again?*—I asked, “Why?”

“You know why.”

And indeed I did. I reflected that one disadvantage of mobile phones was that you didn’t need to get out of bed to use them. Starting through my mental script, I asked, “What is it this time?”

“I can’t give a talk to the entire securities floor. I’m a mess. How the hell am I supposed to tell everyone else what they should be doing?”

“Okay, so you’ve got some personal stuff you’re working on, but you’re still one of

the best traders at Tiger, right? You're the one that got nominated to head the new team."

"I know, that's what everyone tells me. But, I just... it's getting harder and harder. And I have to *speak* now, on top of everything else? What if I fall apart in front of everybody?"

"I just think you should think about taking a break."

"No, I—I can't."

"*Why?*" I exclaimed, louder than necessary.

"I need to get things back on track. If I can't even handle my job, then what am I going to do? At least now I'm trying to do *something*."

"Well—" I wrung my free hand in frustration. The things he was saying didn't make any sense, like usual. Why couldn't he just—god! "Well, what do you want *me* to do about it?"

"I don't know. I'm so sorry. I know this hurts you. I shouldn't have called. I should let you get back to work."

And there we were at the end of the script. Different but the same each time. I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway, "Are you going to go in for the talk?"

The handset was quiet. How was I supposed to deal with this? At last, I snapped, "I just don't get why you keep saying you need to keep doing this. It's not working! I *wish* you would just *listen* to me. You are *falling apart*, and frankly I'm not seeing that stopping anytime soon!"

Again, there was quiet for a few seconds. Then, his voice. "I know." Click. In a

flash, I went from angry to hollow as I realized what I had just said. Damn it!

I tried to call back, but nobody picked up.

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“Just a second,” I whispered to John.

He stopped planting kisses along my neck for long enough for me to get my bra off, then got back to it with renewed vigor. After a bit, he drew back and asked me, “What do you want to do this time?”

That was always how it went. *Always what do you like? how was that? what do you think of trying this?* Not every guy would do that. I hadn’t realized how nice it was until I met John.

Sometimes, though... “What do *you* feel like?” I asked.

“Hmmm... I liked what we did on your birthday. Do you remember that?”

A shiver of desire ran through my body. “Uh huh,” I get out. “Definitely.” I couldn’t stop looking at his mouth.

“Well alright then,” he said in an eager voice. Any thoughts of coming up with something clever to say in response died on my tongue as I felt the touch of his hands on my breasts and my eyelids fluttered closed involuntarily.

After finishing, we lay in peace for a few minutes before I said, “You know, you don’t have to try so hard just for me. It means a lot to me, but I want you to have fun too.”

“I *am* having fun. And it makes *me* happy to make *you* happy. Plus, it’s nice to be

able to do something right once in a while. With you, I can just... get away from everything, you know?”

“Aw, but I want you to be happy all the time, not just when you’re in bed. Talk to me about what’s going on?”

“Do I have to? I kind of like feeling like everything is normal for once.”

“It would make me happy. I care about you and I want to help.”

He grunted and looked away, at the wall. “Alright. I guess I’m just... angry, these days.”

“At what?”

“I don’t know. Nothing. Everything. It’s stupid. I’m angry at the people at work that keep giving me more to do. I’m angry at them for being so goddamn happy all the time. It’s like they’re mocking me. I can see it in their eyes. Every day at that place I feel like I’m seeing red.”

“I’m sure your co-workers think you’re great.”

“Yeah, sure. How do you know?”

“I’m just saying. Maybe you’re reading into things a little too much.”

John sat up and stared at me, disbelieving. His voice was loud, now. “Well, what do you *want* me to say, if I don’t get to be angry at them? I’m angry at myself?” I had never seen him this agitated before. I inched toward the other side of his bed. “Well, yeah, maybe I *am*! Maybe I’m angry at myself because I have a great job and I can’t just sit down and do the damn work! Maybe I’m angry at myself because nothing I do is ever good enough!

Maybe I'm angry at myself because I know how disappointed you are and I can't stand letting you down over and over again!"

As he spoke, my muscles tensed. "You need to calm down, John."

"Oh yeah? Or maybe! Maybe *you* need to stop pretending like you have all the answers! *Here, John, you just need to do this, you just need to do that.* It's not that goddamn simple!"

Then he stopped, panting. He blinked several times, as if waking from a daze. "Oh my god, Mary, no, I am so sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

I was feeling too exhausted to think of a response. I could see dampness on John's cheek. When had that happened? All I could think to do was close my eyes and wrap my arms around him. Tight.

~

I basked in starlight. Above me, I saw the bands of the Milky Way winding their way across the sky, surrounded by thousands of other points of light. I savored the clear air and spun around to admire the maple trees surrounding me. The solitude of the library had nothing on this.

Soon enough, though, my thoughts turned back to John. We had a whole week planned in Cherry Springs; he was back at the tent right now. Convincing him to come out here had been quite the task. But it was what he needed, I was sure.

Right?

But it was so exhausting. Time after time, ground gained and lost. I kept saying he needed a break, but the truth was I wasn't sure what he needed.

These days I had started thinking a lot about the new year. It was December 13. Just nineteen days left in 1989, and it seemed like life was turning inside out. The news was overwhelming. Revolutions in Poland, Hungary, Germany. Glasnost exploding quietly across the Soviet Union. Even the Berlin Wall was opening. But sometimes it was hard to believe that all the violence and unrest was for the better. What would it cost, in the end, for us to get things on the right track? Were we ever going to get there? Either way, the decade was coming to an end, and everything was going to be different soon.

I lingered a long time under the stars that night.

~

I gazed at John across the candlelit table we occupied in my apartment. He'd trimmed his goatee, and I didn't want to tell him but I was sad to see it go. He was still wearing that same suit jacket, though, and if I filtered out the kitchen in the background, I could almost imagine we were back at La Grenouille.

The dinner was cheap, but good. John had suggested the idea. *It'll be fun, and besides, we should really get our spending under control.*

"So tell me more about this new project at the company," I said.

"Well..." He pursed his lips. "I'm sorry, Mary, I don't know how to tell you this. I got fired."

My last spoonful of macaroni is arrested on its way to my mouth. “What? Why? How?”

“I... may have gotten in a fight with my manager. And kind of punched him. In the face.”

“Wha—how did that happen?”

“Well... the new strategy was a huge success. We were making tens of thousands. I thought we could go bigger. The execs didn’t. But I kept going, and we bottomed out. Net loss. My manager was yelling at me in front of everyone, and I guess I just couldn’t take it anymore.” He ran his hand across his head. “Well, there wasn’t any coming back from that. He *used* to have a really nice-looking nose.”

I felt what was now a familiar sense of detachment. What to say? I couldn’t think of anything.

John shook his head. “I should’ve said no to that first promotion. That was my problem. Couldn’t say no. Now my reputation is ruined. Who’s going to hire a guy that punched his boss?”

“I—I can’t—You need to do better, John.”

“I know. I know. And I’m sorry.”

“You always are.”

“I know. But I want to be better.” He leaned over, putting both of his hands on the table. “You make me a better person, Mary. I... I don’t even care about the job. I just want to be with you. You’re the only thing that makes sense to me anymore. You... you always

saw the good in me, even when I couldn't. You know I'm a good person, deep down, right? That I can be different? Please. I need you, Mary."

I stared at the figure sitting across from me. After some time, I clasped my hands in his and told him that I would always be there for him. Perhaps he even believed me.

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There were just ten minutes left until the new year, and I was sitting by myself in John's bedroom, sorting through the pile of Polaroids I had scattered across his white lacquer desk. There we were in Times Square. At the entrance to the Palace Theatre. On Brighton Beach. I picked up each print and inspected its details with care, as if the faded film held some ancient wisdom that I alone could decipher.

One picture at the back of the desk caught my attention. The photo wasn't lit very well, but it wasn't hard to make out John leaning against my bed. He was wearing a rumpled turtleneck and matching pants, both with an absurd triangle pattern that made him look like the victim of an explosion at the Dorito factory. We'd both taken pictures of each other that night. I couldn't quite remember why, but at the time it had seemed hilarious.

We had stayed up until morning talking about the future. I could still picture his face with ease, lit by the sunrise coming through my apartment window. *You deserve a lover who can always make you happy.* I sniffed and realized there was a small stream running down my cheek.

After finishing, I opened the door to the living room and saw John looking out the

window of his apartment, through which I could see the Times Square Ball making its way down its flagpole. The television was tuned in to ABC, reporting live on the event. We were down to the last minute, and it was time to say goodbye to the old decade. New Year's Day had to come eventually.

I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to speak.

Content warnings: anxiety, depression, mild sexual content, mention of violence