

GEE

It was a game they liked to play. They fancied themselves smart, which they were, and they liked to think of themselves as a cut above. It was a phrase their mother had used – “a cut above” – and they supposed that they were. Not that it was apparent from the way that they lived, a brother and sister sharing a two bed apartment and working low status jobs, but there it was. She was a cut above the fat bitches who came into the art store and talked about the pictures and the sculptures like they were actual art and not just interior decoration for the might-as-well-be-blind, and he was a cut above the immigrant seat-fillers at the DVLA. “Finally, someone who speaks English,” an old guy had said to him once, and while that should have made him feel good, it just caused him to wonder for the ninetieth time how come he was the one behind the counter dealing with the death-breaths while Ahmad, who had hands like donuts and one bald place on his whole body, namely the top of his head, was his manager.

They were a cut above all right. They never went to college because there wasn't the money, and besides anyone could go nowadays, if you knew what that meant, and they never had a cent to rub together, because mother invested her money with anyone who had a cock as far as they could see, but they were a cut above. You could tell from the apartment. It was in a bad part of the city that had once been a nice part and was going to be again, only the wrong kind of nice, with sixteen different kinds of coffee stalls and grown men with topknots and trousers that gave up the ghost halfway down their calves. But it was a *good* apartment. The pictures on the walls were tiny, and not valuable (they'd made discreet enquiries), but very tasteful, as were the knickknacks and the books. The whole place was just right. Even the television, which was unavoidably big, because you couldn't buy a small TV these days, was as small as a big TV could be.

Not that they spent a lot of time in the apartment. It had been mother's, and her ghost seemed to be in every room. Certainly her perfume was, and the smell of her talc, and her clothes, and her somewhat old-fashioned taste in décor (one day the siblings were going to get the place decorated, if they could just find something to sell that was worth selling). So they spent a lot of time eating out in cafes and restaurants that weren't too dear, going to shows in the park (there was a lot of good free drama if you knew where to look), and taking out books from the library (and sometimes even putting them back).

It wasn't a good life, but it wasn't bad, and there were worse lives. And sometimes they played games to pass the time.

They'd sit outside a café and invent lives for the passers-by.

“She's a whore who was in love with the one client, who was a wife beater,” he said. “She used to let him hit her because that way she thought he might fall in love with her.”

“No,” said his sister. “She's an art dealer who never got over telling Jeff Koons he had no talent.”

“She was right, though,” said her brother, and ordered two more cups of tea.

They'd make up words and see if they could get them into conversations with third parties.

"This is Darla from admin," he said one day, introducing a pretty red-haired girl. "She and I are going to see His Girl Friday at the Retro tonight."

"I heard it's a cool movie," said Darla.

"Oh, it is," he said, sending his sister a brief, flickering look. "It's muniliquent."

Then they would both snort at each other, and later that morning Darla would find an excuse to call him up and cancel.

They would invent secret categories to put people into, but not tell the other what the category was.

"There's one," he said one day as they both sat on a park bench, eating home-made celery sandwiches.

She looked where he was pointing, and saw a small, round Jewish woman with a bichon frise.

"OK" she said, "Is he one?" Indicating a skinny black guy holding hands with his freckle-faced boyfriend.

"God no," he replied, "But Freckles might be."

And she pursed her lips, and thought, and nodded at a pair of girl twins coming down the path.

"Them," she said decisively.

"Damn," he answered, and she smiled at him.

The games were fun, and broke up the monotony a little. But the monotony kept sweeping in, like dust under the door. Everything was a little bit samey. Things were routine, which was good because it meant they still had their jobs, but bad because they weren't exciting.

"It's like some days I don't say a single new thing," she said as they were getting ready to go to their jobs one morning. "Like everything I said yesterday, I'm going to say today. From 'good morning' to 'that's a nice dress to 'if you'll just sign here'."

"You can hardly say, 'screw you, you dumpy fucks'," her brother pointed out. "But I know what you mean. I haven't had to think of an original comment in six months."

She wasn't listening. Possibly even this conversation was made out of other, similar conversations, with the same words in a slightly different order.

"I might as well just hold up cards," she said.

"Too obvious," he said. "Besides, it looks like an Art Statement."

She shuddered. They both hated Art Statements.

"I could just keep the cards in my head," she said. "Make a list of, I don't know, twenty or so dumb phrases."

"Ten," he said.

"Ten's too few," she replied.

"Ten," he repeated. "I'll do it too."

She thought about it.

"All right," she said.

She raised her hand in a high five. He raised an eyebrow.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

“Sorry,” she said.

The next day was Saturday so they stayed home and made a list. They started out with 30 phrases, and by dinner time they’d narrowed it down to ten. Sunday they had a few practice conversations, seeing if they could interact with each other just using the ten.

It pretty much worked fine.

On Monday night they met in a bar to compare notes.

“This old cooze came in today,” she said, “She comes in twice a week, always asking for whatever shit was in the magazines last month. It’s easy to serve her because she literally has no ideas of her own. So today I just used two phrases on her – ‘You made the right choice’ and ‘That’s great.’”

“That’s great,” said her brother. “You made the right choice.”

“Very funny,” she said.

‘Very funny’ was number six on their list. They figured it was cheating just to make the phrases too bland. Number ten on the list was ‘fuck you.’

“My day was less successful,” said her brother. “On account of I have a new supervisor who likes to *interact*.”

His sister made a face.

“It’s not enough I have to hear about her weekend, and her family, and her health,” her brother said. “I have to join in, and empathise. And if I don’t show that I’m taking all her shit on board, she gets angry and says I’m not listening.”

His sister thought for a moment.

“We need to take out some things,” she said, “and replace them with stuff that sounds emotional. ‘I’m sorry to hear that’ and ‘Gee, how sad’ and so on.”

The next day her brother reported back.

“It worked a treat,” he said. “I just said those two phrases like a million times and the cow was in fucking tears by the end of the afternoon. She tried to hug me!”

They both grimaced.

“This is a fun game,” she said. “Let’s keep going.”

So they did. Over the next few weeks, they refined and refined the list until it covered the whole gamut of human activities and feelings without once containing a single grain of real sincerity or actual listening.

It was a good time. The game made the days more bearable, and the results of the game made them more popular.

“This morning I listened to a woman talk about her burglary and her husband’s death without using a single phrase that wasn’t on the list,” she said, proudly. “And then I sold her a painting for a hundred grand that wasn’t worth nine.”

“I got a promotion,” he said, frowning slightly. “People keep stopping by my cubicle to ask my advice because I’m a ‘good listener’.”

“Wow,” she said.

“I know, right?” he said.

Both those phrases were on the list.

Then one day, she was serving a customer and:

"Everything I said was on the list," she said, "But everything *she* said was on the list too."

"Same here," he said. "At first I thought the guy was taking a rise out of me. But when the next one did, and the next one, I realised it couldn't be deliberate."

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Number four," he said.

"No, I mean *what's going on?*"

"I don't know," he said.

The next morning she called him at work.

"I'm at work," he said.

"I need to see you right now," she said.

She sounded frightened so he said yes.

"I was talking to my boss," she said, "About a dealer we were thinking of using. I said something about his prices being too high, and she said - "

She trembled.

"Said what?" her brother asked.

"*Generic remark.*"

"What?"

"That's what she said."

"Literally? She said 'generic remark'?"

"Yes! That's what she said!"

He narrowed his eyes.

"Was she mocking you?"

"No, I can tell when she does that. This was different, like she didn't know she was saying it."

"Wow."

"It happened to me."

They were having lunch in the park.

"The same thing?"

"Nearly," he said. "A guy came in to get a new headshot and I gave him the right form, and he looked like he was about to thank me, but instead he said, 'Appropriate answer.'"

She shrugged.

"That's not the same thing."

"I said it wasn't. Jesus."

They walked off, silence between them.

A toddler on a bike nearly ran into them.

"Watch it, sonny," she said.

The toddler looked at her.

"Insert response here," it lisped.

"Oh, shit," she said. "Look at that."

She was pointing at a newspaper, abandoned on a bench.

The headline said HEADLINE. The newspaper was called A NEWSPAPER.

"What the fuck have we done?" she asked.

They went home. A homeless man shouted, "Request!" at them. A young couple passed, both murmuring the word "Words" to one another.

"We have to get out of here," she said. She fumbled for her keys and dropped her purse. Its contents spilled across the sidewalk.

"You're panicking," he said.

"Am I?" she said. She held up a ten dollar bill. It had the word MONEY printed on it and a circle with the words A MAN'S HEAD inside it.

There were tears in her eyes.

"What's going on?" she said.

He couldn't look at her.

"Very funny," he said.

"Fuck you," she said.

"Gee, how sad," he replied.

"Wow," she said.

"What's going on?" he said

"What's going on?" she repeated.

"Fuck you," he replied.

"Gee" he said. Or she said. Fuck you. How sad. What's going on? What's going on? Insert response here. Have a good day. Generic comment. Gee. Fuck you. How sad. Fuck you. Gee. Generic comment. Gee. What's going on? Insert response here. Have a good day. Gee.

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