



## HAPPINESS COMES WITH A PAPER UMBRELLA AND A MEASURE OF GRENADINE Aliya Whiteley

Here you go, sir. One Happiness, the cocktail of cocktails, served with a twist.

What's that? A pretty face? It's kind of you to say, but I think you'll find it's the dim lighting and the glamour of my occupation evoking that illusion. Plus the tiny uniform and the ridiculously high heels. It's all part and parcel of the role, one might say.

A slick talker? That's me, all right. But only since I started working here. I find it's done wonders for my chakra. I used to be such a shy little rabbit, with big frightened eyes and a twitchy little nose, but now I find I have a lot to say, and have no difficulty in saying it. Words flow from my new and amazing confidence – it's an incredible transformation. One could comment that I was born for this job.

Do you mind if I rest my tray on your table for a moment? I've got a jug of Happiness for table fifteen, and it's tiring on the arms.

Not that I'm complaining. Each and every one of these cocktails sold gives me a personal sense of satisfaction. Would you like

to know why?

Let me tell you.

Before this evening, before I met you, and back before I began working as a waitress in a cocktail bar, I was that most downtrodden of creatures, a Clerical Worker. I used to process information for life assurance applications, and that gave me access to medical records. I could see every ailment people had visited their GP about, and apart from the usual high points involving sexually transmitted diseases and injuries involving vibrators or vacuum cleaners, it made for boring reading. Most people are a lot less unique in the medical department than they would like to think.

The two ailments I saw most often were, without a doubt, back pain and depression. One in three people, I would say, suffered from one or the other, and one in five from both. I used to wonder if one illness caused the other. Did depressed people stoop more? Or did having a bad back make a person really glum? How was it possible that so many people could be suffering from the same diseases? At that time, I didn't suffer from either.

How about you? You look like the afflicted type to me. Pain in the lumbar region? Worries about the world? Mmm.

Believe me, nowadays, I know where you're coming from.

But I was a different person back then, in lots of ways. I was keen to succeed in the field of clerical work, and in order to do that I had to impress one person in particular: Kirstie Kay.

Kirstie Kay was the head of my department, and she was everything I wanted to be. Kirstie wore expensive black skirts that made my grey trousers look like bespeckled victims of a lint attack. Kirstie smelled of perfume that could never have been bought from the old lady who came to my doorstep regularly, pronouncing her

Ding Dong catchphrase in a high wheeze. Kirstie had her hair cut more regularly than just at Christmas and Easter so her mother didn't complain about her fringe getting in her eyes. Kirstie commanded respect.

What's that? You want another cocktail? You drank that one a little too fast, huh? I'd be careful, if I were you. These ones have a kick. But, since you're doing such a good job of listening, why don't you top yourself up from the jug on my tray? Help yourself – just don't say I didn't warn you.

Where was I? Oh yes. Respect. I respected Kirstie. I wanted to be just like her, but in order to climb the greasy pole of management, I needed to find a way to gain her attention; a way to make me worthy of her notice.

It was only after watching the way she shrugged off all responsibility for any actual work by alternately charming and bullying her employees in group weekly update meetings that a solution came to me. And do you know what that solution was?

Manipulation.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that hard work and puckering to the boss's posterior might have offered a more traditional answer, but hear me out.

It was all very well to be mindlessly keying in all day, as requested, but to rise above the rabble I had to prove I could get results by analysing to my advantage. After all, that was the point of having a manager, wasn't it? To get results. And I intended to get the kind of results that would reveal my intelligence and capability to the world.

I read up on spreadsheets and put together a database of gargantuan proportions; one which allowed me to input the age,

postcode, occupation, pastimes, and alcohol and cigarette consumption levels of every person who disclosed both back pain and depression on their applications. I was determined to find some common linkage. When I tracked it down, I was going to present it to Kirstie Kay, proving that I was capable of thinking outside the box and inside the management mindset.

It took three months of collation before results started to emerge, and another three months before I was sure of what I was seeing. During that time I worked overtime every day, even weekends, in the excitement of surreptitiously establishing a pattern, and had given myself chronic eyestrain and a permanent pain between my shoulder blades from all that screen staring and keyboard tapping, but those were minor considerations in the face of the information my project was providing. I had uncovered something astounding, and it was with trembling hands that I e-mailed Kirstie Kay and arranged a one on one meeting with her for the following Monday morning. I spent an anxious weekend checking my results again and again; I don't think I slept at all.

Another cocktail? Mind you, I really don't think you should. I wouldn't advise anyone to consume three in a row. You're making fast work of that jug. I suppose I should go and get a refill for table fifteen, but they look pretty out of it. They won't notice if they wait for a little longer.

To continue – we sat down in her office at 10:45am, facing each other over her walnut desk, Kirstie sitting with legs crossed in her leather armchair, me sitting with arms crossed in a standard plastic chair.

'Well, Leanne, you've intrigued me,' she said. Leanne isn't my name, but I was much too in awe of her to correct her. 'What did you

want to chat about?’

I launched into my set speech, trying not to be distracted as she tapped the fingers of her left hand against the dial of the watch on her right wrist.

‘What, Kirstie, in your opinion, would be the two illnesses we see disclosed on life assurance applications more often than any others?’

She leaned back in her chair. ‘Well, Leanne, I wouldn’t know. I could phone up our Statistical Analysis Department and get an answer for you.’

It came as a blow to learn of the existence of a Statistical Analysis Department, but I had put in too much work to refuse at the first fence.

‘Actually, I already know the answer. It’s back pain and depression. I calculated it myself – in my own spare time,’ I added, when she raised one fine line of an eyebrow. ‘And I also looked into what kind of people suffer from those illnesses, particularly when they occur together.’

For the first time since we had started working together five years ago, she looked at me with interest. ‘Oh yes?’

‘And I found out that, according to a database I’ve been keeping...’

‘Yes?’

‘...there is a ninety-three per cent correlation between back pain and depression appearing in tandem on the medical disclosures of life assurance applications...’

Her fingers had stopped tapping on her watch. They were curled into her palms, the knuckles white, and her elbows were on her desk as she leaned towards me. ‘Yes?’

‘...submitted by those people who list their occupation as Clerical

Worker.’

There was a silence. It stretched on as she stared at me. I shuffled my papers in embarrassment, and the rustle seemed to prompt her back into action. She jumped up from her leather armchair and spoke, without her usual eloquence, I have to say.

‘Sit there,’ she said. ‘Don’t move.’

Then she walked out of the office.

In the forty-five minute wait that ensued I harboured a number of fantasies. I imagined she would return with the Managing Director, a five feet one inch tall Australian tycoon, who would listen to my revelation and immediately to promote me to head of the Statistical Analysis Department. At the half hour point I wondered if she would return with a media crew from the local television network, and urge me to divulge to them what I had just told her. At around the fortieth minute I began to feel concerned that she wasn’t coming back at all.

So it was rather a disappointment when she returned with only a piece of paper, and her usual expression of smooth superiority firmly back in place.

She started talking as she walked around her desk to the window, and she looked alternately from the view of Reading high rises to a spot between my eyebrows.

‘I’ve checked with the manager of our legal department and he asked me to remind you that, under section 17e of your contract, you are not at liberty to divulge any information pertaining to or, indeed, extrapolated from the processing of company application forms, okay Leanne?’

I didn’t even remember seeing a contract, let alone section 17e. Then a vague memory of Induction Day came back to me – something had been whisked under my nose, something with thirty plus pages of

very small print I had duly signed along with the other new starters. I suppose that must have been the arrival of the shackles, to which she was now drawing attention for the first time.

‘Nobody needs to know,’ she said, pronouncing each word very slowly.

‘But we have to make the public aware about the dangers of clerical work...’

‘No, we don’t.’

‘But they need to be told...’

‘No, they don’t.’

And then it dawned on me.

The company already knew.

They knew what illnesses were waiting to befall nearly all their ground level employees.

That explained why the managers got better chair with ergonomic support built in, and spent more time walking around than staring at the screen. That explained the long tea breaks and active holidays. These weren’t just perks. They were measures designed to take care of the employees the company actually cared about.

Kirstie must have seen the moment of revelation on my face. ‘If you tell a soul, they’ll get you,’ she said, not unkindly, I thought. ‘And I’m not talking about a lawsuit. I’m talking about revenge. There’s a lot of money at stake.’

I sat still in the chair and thought about it.

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘Keep quiet. Go back to your desk, delete that database, and get on with your job.’

I got up. I went back to my desk and picked up the top application form on the pile, and processed it. And after that one I did another, and another, and it transpired that I worked solidly, without

speaking one word to Kirstie Kay or anybody else for that matter, for the rest of the month.

It was about that time that I was diagnosed with serious depression.

The doctor prescribed Prozac. It's amazing stuff, giving an instant lift that is not so much a rush as a spreading sense of relaxation, and after every pill I could forget what I was worrying about for a while. And the best thing is, it's easy to get more, to get a huge supply by registering at different practices around the city. Nobody ever checks.

The second best thing is that it can be taken in conjunction with a high dosage of codeine – the codeine keeps the pain from my back and neck problems at bay. Those started when I worked all those overtime hours, hunched over the computer screen.

Anyway, at the end of that month the company announced a downsizing initiative, and I was one of the first to go, rewarded with a lump sum for not making a fuss. I put that money towards my new hobby: drinking. It seemed as good a pastime as any, and fulfilled all the criteria which a hobby should – it made the time pass more quickly and gave me a warm glow inside. I had a beer phase, followed by a wine phase, and then I moved into cocktails.

I've tried just about every combination known to man, from the standard gin base – Rickey, Gimlet, Honolulu Shooter – through the vodka based drinks – Moscow Mule, Corniche, Screw-Up – and even the most obscure cocktails – Hammer Horror, Munchausen, Cute Fat Bastard In The Sack – and all of them tasted pretty great to me. There's something about those little paper umbrellas and precise wedges of exotic fruits that make me feel wonderful, particularly when combined with the pills.

I saw the advertisement for a waitress at this place about two months ago, and I knew I could do a good job of it. I know by heart the recipe of any drink you can name; that's something the boss found out when he interviewed me. He gave me the uniform right after that first meeting, and I was working the next day.

I was hardly expecting – and you'll love the irony of this – one of my very first clients to be Kirstie Kay.

She was slumped, alone, at one of the tables – in fact it might have been this very table – and she beckoned me over to order a clutch of Zombies without once looking at me.

Her choice of tipple told me all I needed to know. Zombies have a reputation in the cocktail community. They do the job quickly and very thoroughly. She was out to get hammered.

I drank in her radically altered appearance as I returned, weaving my way through the tables, with her order. The black skirts had been replaced with mustard yellow leggings that showed off rather less than taut skin tone around her thighs. The designer jacket had been replaced with a black tee shirt that was emblazoned with a hot pink paint stain over her right breast.

'Been decorating?' I asked her as I placed down her order.

She took a mouthful of the first zombie before replying, 'Mmm,' she said, which I took as an affirmative.

'New house?' I asked.

'Flat,' she said, and downed her first drink. Then she looked up at me.

It took a moment for recognition to sink in. She squinted, and then laughed. 'Leanne,' she said. She still had my name wrong, but this time round I didn't have the heart to correct her. 'Leanne. They downsized me. To a worker. To a sodding Clerical Worker.'

I had to ask. 'Back pain?'

She winced and laid one trembling hand on her coccyx.

'Depression?'

She nodded and burst into tears.

'You know what really gets me?' she said through the sobs. 'I've had to sell my house and get a crummy flat just round the corner from this dump, and I've had to apply for a new mortgage to do it. Do you know what the bank said? They said I had to get life assurance to cover the mortgage. Do you know what the life assurance company – my employer – said? They said I'd have to pay triple premium because of my back pain and depression. The back pain and depression that they sodding caused!'

I shrugged as I handed her a paper napkin. I have to admit I didn't feel much sympathy for her. 'Bad deal, Kirstie.'

'You still don't get it, do you? It's no bad deal. It's planned. It's all been planned.' She downed the second Zombie in one swift movement. 'Why do you think the insurance sector is the biggest grossing business in the UK? Why do you think they employ so many clerical workers who they encourage to sit on their arses and do very little work all day? Why have we become a nation of Administrators?'

As I walked away from her table, leaving her to a lifetime of crippling mortgage repayments and medication, it occurred to me that she was absolutely right. This was no series of coincidences.

We are a nation plagued with sad faces and bad backs for a reason. The terrible seating position and the grindingly boring jobs ensure that our money will be returned, in large, unavoidable amounts, to the people who employ us in the first place.

And from that knowledge, the cocktail known as Happiness was born.

No-one but me knows what goes into my cocktail. I made the first batch that very evening, and gave one to the boss to taste, and he's been selling them like crazy ever since. It's going to make my fortune. I've already had an offer to go nationwide through a distribution company based in Swindon.

You really want to know what goes in them, huh? Well... will you promise not to tell anybody? You will? Cross your main aortic valve?

Happiness consists of the following ingredients: three measures of gin, one measure of cherry liqueur, one egg white, one measure of grenadine, half a measure of whipped cream, one crushed up codeine tablet to be dissolved in the gin, one crushed up Prozac tablet to be applied around the rim of the glass, one optional squeeze of lemon, one umbrellas and three maraschino cherries to garnish.

Of course, I wouldn't have told you if I wasn't absolutely sure that you'll keep my secret. Look at you. Such a kind face, as you sleep like a baby, slumped over the table top. I warned you not to drink so much, but would you listen to a mere waitress at a cocktail bar?

You're not the first OD we've had here, and you won't be the last. The ambulance will get here shortly, I'll tell them you've drunk far too much, you'll get your stomach pumped, and you'll probably wake up with one hell of a hangover and no memory of this conversation. That's a shame, because I like you. I really do.

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)  
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/19/happiness-comes-with-.html>

This file is for personal reading only. No element of this story may be reproduced, resold or retransmitted in any way without the permission of the author.