

Entertaining Unhappiness

Sebastian Sunday

I

A bystander, upon realising that the person who just sat down on the same park bench happens to be in a truly miserable state and is talking as if there were someone else with them, quietly leaves the scene. The scene, however, continues. Woody Allen's film *Blue Jasmine* closes on just such a scene. Following the departure of the bystander, viewers of the film continue to enjoy watching the main character alone on the bench and listening to her delusional speech.

How can someone's deep unhappiness be so entertaining? The film itself is designed to ask this kind of question. It is framed by the aforementioned closing scene and a corresponding opening scene. The opening scene shows a different bystander, who is not so lucky as to get away in time. At first, it is not clear that this person is merely a bystander; this is only revealed at the end of the scene. Having listened to Jasmine throughout the first one and a half minutes of the film, the woman suddenly hurries away, saying, 'Oh, there's my family.' She politely adds, 'It was really nice'—here she hesitates—'talking to you.' Presumably she hesitates because she herself has hardly said a word. In fact, the only thing she said was 'sure, sure' once, when asked whether she knew the song 'Blue Moon'. It is obvious that she did not enjoy this experience. Her family ask, 'Who's that woman you were talking to?' She responds, 'I was sitting next to her on the plane. She was talking to herself. I thought she said something to me. I said, "What?"' But she couldn't stop babbling about her life.'

It seems safe to say that no one would enjoy this kind of experience. Yet, the film seems to be asking, is this not what someone wants when they go to see a film such as *Blue Jasmine*? Being trapped in your seat, following the sad life story of a stranger? The film's answer is an unqualified 'yes'. The answer is provided in the form of the film itself, which is an example of how someone's deep unhappiness can become a piece of joyous entertainment.

The fact that unhappiness can in principle be somehow entertaining should not be very surprising. Seeing one's enemy suffer is bliss. Moreover, the tradition of ancient Greek tragedy is evidence that all kinds of people find unhappiness entertaining. There are, however, important differences. For example, ancient Greek tragedy has no happy ending. In general, the entertainment provided by the representation of unhappiness in tragedy is more direct than it is in comedy; for the same reason, the unhappiness represented in tragedy tends to be more realistic. The comedic representation of unhappiness, by contrast, is ultimately designed to make the audience laugh—never to make the audience cry—and therefore tends to be less realistic. The tragic representation of unhappiness, again, is not ultimately designed to make the audience cry either. Tragedy is more complicated than that. Arguably, the best tragedians know how to both represent someone's deep unhappiness in a realistic manner and make such a representation a piece of joyous entertainment. The attentive viewer, as Nietzsche puts it, 'sees before him the tragic hero with all the clarity and beauty of the epic, and yet he takes delight in his destruction' (1872, §22). Like the great ancient tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles—the *Oresteia*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, etc.—*Blue Jasmine* manages to achieve this paradoxical attitude in the viewer.

In what follows, I will try to demonstrate this fact. And I will try to explain the philosophical and psychological importance of this kind of achievement.



Figure 1. From the closing scene of Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013): the film manages to show Jasmine's final mental breakdown with all the 'clarity and beauty of the epic' and yet in such a way that, at the same time, the attentive viewer takes delight in it.

Let me first give a more detailed indication of where the discussion will lead. The heart of the matter is encapsulated in the ambiguity of the phrase that provides the title of this essay—'entertaining unhappiness'—which can refer either to someone being entertained by unhappiness or someone entertaining unhappiness. The latter, someone entertaining unhappiness, is like someone entertaining a thought. Someone who is entertaining a thought need not believe it. Analogously, someone who is entertaining an emotion, a feeling or a mood need not experience it. Thus, it will sometimes be merely an exercise of the imagination. However, there are also thoughts that are such that unless you assent to their truth you will not have fully entertained them (for example, that red is a colour). Similarly, it is at least arguable that you have not fully entertained a given emotion, feeling or mood unless you are actually affected by it. And it is certainly possible for at least some particular emotions, feelings, and moods that someone's merely entertaining one of them will result in them actually experiencing it. For example, my imagining someone else's anger may result in my experiencing this anger myself, or at least something very similar. This is especially obvious in cases where I happen to find myself in qualitatively the same situation as the other person. But where I find myself in a situation different from that of the other person, it is naturally less likely that my imagining their mental state will result in my actually experiencing it, or something very similar, myself.

Now, the philosophical and psychological importance of the sort of achievement that is the representation of someone's deep unhappiness in a realistic manner, such that it is simultaneously a piece of joyous entertainment, lies in the fact that the author thereby represents an aspect of the world (namely, unhappiness) that can rarely, if ever, be experienced so reflectively. Thus, returning to the two senses of 'entertaining unhappiness'—someone being entertained by unhappiness and someone entertaining unhappiness—we can say that entertaining unhappiness in the first sense enables entertaining unhappiness in the second. In a word, the extraordinary thing that this kind of representation enables one to do is to happily entertain unhappiness.

II

Blue Jasmine is so very pleasant to watch that it is easy to forget some of the deep unhappiness which the film depicts. Let me give a brief summary. Jasmine finds out that her husband has enjoyed sexual relations with other women, including mutual friends and acquaintances, and that many people, including her close friends, have known about this for years. When she confronts her husband, he makes no apologies. In fact, he tells her he has fallen in love with a younger woman, who works as an *au pair* for some of their friends, and that the two are making plans for the future together. Soon after, he gets arrested for some of his business practices. He is tried and indicted and hangs himself in his cell. The government seizes all of his assets, and Jasmine loses nearly everything she owns. She used to live in Manhattan—5th Avenue with a view of Central Park—with a beach house in the Hamptons, she had servants and a driver, and she would spend her time hosting dinner parties, going to yoga classes and buying expensive clothes. Now she is forced to get a job at a shoe shop, and cannot pay her rent in Brooklyn. She has lost all of her friends, and so she turns to her estranged sister in San Francisco for help.

The film offers a detailed and multifaceted depiction of Jasmine's resulting mental illness and general unhappiness, including reports by herself and others. When she first meets her sister again, Jasmine tells her almost immediately, 'I can't be alone, Ginger. I really get some bad thoughts when I'm alone.' When tasked with babysitting Ginger's two sons, she takes them to a restaurant, where one of them tells her, 'Mom said you used to be okay, but you got crazy.' The other one adds, 'Yeah, and then you talked to yourself.' Jasmine looks at them intensely for a moment—leaning over the table, appearing drunk and tired—then she begins muttering, her speech slightly slurred, 'Well, there's only so many traumas a person can withstand until they take to the streets and start screaming.' She takes a shallow, unsteady breath and continues, 'That's right, boys, they picked me up on the street talking to myself and gave me something called Edison's Medicine.' She gathers herself a little—'Why Edison? Because they use electricity to get you thinking straight'—then she falls back into the pattern of confusion and desperation that characterises much of her speech. She continues:

See, everything unraveled so quickly. You know, I started experiencing anxiety and claustrophobia and this acute fear of death. [The children look slightly scared.] You know, I had nightmares and a nervous breakdown. I mean, you must have heard of Prozac and lithium. Well, all those drugs just made me worse. Of course, you know, I probably did suspect that not everything Hal did was always 100 percent above board. Christ, I mean, you'd have to be an idiot not to think his phenomenal success was too good to be true. Heh, heh, heh. But a cheat is a cheat. And when he had other women, I just flipped out. You know, and one thing led to another and... (*Blue Jasmine* 2013; parenthetical insertions, here and elsewhere, are mine)

Here she breaks off.

Considering she is talking with young children, whom she is babysitting, both the content and form of what she says are of course inappropriate. Similarly, on a day out with Ginger and her boyfriend Chili, she cannot stop going on about Hal's suicide. Her initial explanation to Chili is perhaps reasonably calm: 'No, it wasn't strangulation. When you hang yourself, your neck breaks.' But her sudden return to the topic, after the conversation has already moved on, is awkward and chilling. 'A lot of people are under the misapprehension you strangle, but your neck snaps,' she says, with an empty but serious look on her face.

Her insensitivity in these situations may be partly due to medication or intoxication. She seems to have a high-dosage prescription of Xanax (alprazolam), and she often drinks alcohol (Stoli vodka martini). It also appears to be related to her frequent absentmindedness

and occasional delusions. Her absentmindedness is especially pronounced when out drinking with other people, as her lifeless facial expression stands in stark contrast to the gaiety around her. She has delusional episodes throughout the film, including in the closing and opening scenes, which the other characters generally refer to as her talking to herself. More often than not, however, it is obvious that she is actually talking to her late husband.

Notable low points of Jasmine's unhappiness include her crying after the long-awaited call from Dwight, an attractive, wealthy, intelligent man she has recently met, when the natural reaction would have seemed to be elation. Similarly, she panics when Dwight proposes to her.

Jasmine: So you're saying you love me. [throws a pill in her mouth]
 Dwight: Can't you tell? I hope I didn't cause you to become ill over the prospect of being my wife.
 Jasmine: You know, sometimes I get these headaches. [downs the pill with water]
 Dwight: You always take Xanax for a headache?
 Jasmine: I'll admit, my heart's beating a little fast.
 Dwight: Yeah. Ooh, your hands are shaking.
 Jasmine: [panting] I wanted you to want me and now you do.

Another low point of Jasmine's unhappiness—immediately preceding the proposal scene—is her way of ending her confused monologue in front of the children, announcing in triumphant fashion: 'But that's all history, boys. I met someone. I'm a new person.' Her words are unconvincing, however, because at the same time her appearance and behaviour are very clearly still those of someone who is mentally unstable.

Sure enough, the engagement is cancelled in dramatic fashion, even before they can buy an engagement ring. In fact, things begin to fall apart just outside the jewellery shop. Jasmine is left, once again, devastated—returned to the state of a debilitated, nervous wreck. And this is how the film ends.

III

Now, how does *Blue Jasmine* turn the realistic representation of someone's deep unhappiness into a piece of joyous entertainment? This is of course the collective achievement of everyone involved in the making of the film. But the following seven elements and techniques deserve special attention.

First, Jasmine is portrayed as a character who is not only miserable but also irritating and sometimes despicable. This begins in the very second shot of the film when, once off the aeroplane, the incoherent and annoying nature of Jasmine's continued blathering, to which she has subjected the woman she met on the flight, becomes apparent. Naturally, the more the viewer comes to dislike Jasmine, the more they will enjoy witnessing her misfortune. When Jasmine arrives outside Ginger's apartment, in the second scene, the viewer gets a further taste of her arrogance when she treats the taxi driver like a servant. The third scene adds to this a touch of ruthlessness, when Jasmine and Hal are shown, in a flashback, viewing their future home on 5th Avenue. After expressing how much she likes the high ceilings, and just before exclaiming 'The view!', Jasmine makes the most inconsiderate throw-away remark, asking, 'How can anyone breathe with a low ceiling?' Next, Ginger picks up her sons from her ex-husband, Augie, who is upset to hear that she is helping out her sister, whom he accuses of being selfish and dishonest:

When she had all that money, she wanted nothing to do with you. Now that she's broke, all of a sudden she's moving in ... She stole our money. You understand? We could have been set. That was our whole chance in life.

The next scene, another flashback, provides evidence of Augie's claim that Jasmine stole his and Ginger's money by showing Jasmine's habit of looking the other way, as the film calls it, in this case in relation to Hal's questionable business practices. The scene that follows provides further evidence. During the sisters' reunion in Ginger's apartment, Jasmine mentions, 'I wasn't sure how angry you still were,' with Ginger's short reply 'Oh, well' seeming equally unsure. Then one of Ginger's sons, neither of whom Jasmine has ever met before, confronts her with Augie's, his father's, first claim: 'My dad said you were glad we lived far away.' This introduces yet another flashback, which gives detailed and unambiguous proof of the truth of this allegation and, more generally, proof of Jasmine's low opinion of and negative attitude towards her sister. In addition to being arrogant, selfish, and generally dishonest, Jasmine is also portrayed throughout the film as almost constantly lying. To sum up, there is hardly a scene that does not underscore some obviously objectionable aspect of her character.

Second, one particular way in which it is suggested to the viewer that Jasmine somehow deserves her misfortune is the explicit blame she receives from various other characters for their own misfortunes. Both Ginger and Augie blame Jasmine for losing their lottery winnings, which she convinced them to invest with Hal. During the sisters' final meeting, Ginger tells Jasmine that she is to blame: 'Because you married the biggest loser of all and went your own sweet way while he pissed away my one big chance to make a better life.' Chili explicitly blames Jasmine for driving Ginger away from him. 'I blame this on Jasmine,' he says. Dwight blames her for the breakup of their engagement ('Of course we can't get married. You lied to me up and down the line!'). Finally, her stepson Danny holds her responsible for his own misfortune following his father's arrest ('As disillusioned as I was with him, I hated you more.').

Third, the film is by no means all doom and gloom, but also contains plenty of humour. Notably, none of it ever seems to go beyond the bounds of realism. For example, Chili's saying 'But I appreciate it anyway' in the middle of his tearful speech to Ginger at the grocery store when the manager offers him to sit in his office is funny, indeed absurd, but not unrealistic. Similarly, the character of Dr Flicker is largely ridiculous, but not therefore unrealistic (I will say more about Dr Flicker towards the end). Particularly noteworthy, in the context of the present analysis, are the small injections of humour that directly soften particular representations of Jasmine's unhappiness, such as her being asked 'You always stare into space like that?' when doing just that, or showing the viewer the children's stunned faces whilst they are listening to her confused and inappropriate monologue in the restaurant about her history of mental illness.

Fourth, there is the dramatic structure. On the most basic level, the parallel story of Jasmine's sister Ginger lightens the mood of the film. On the narrative level, the non-linear time structure further helps to balance the viewer's emotions. For example, as the tragic plot surrounding Jasmine thickens and her story inevitably approaches its unhappy ending, the film subtly weaves in scenes and shots of the merry reunion between Chili and Ginger. Similarly, what is perhaps the happiest scene of all shows Jasmine returning to Ginger's apartment with a bouquet of flowers she has just bought and being greeted by her sister, who lovingly exclaims 'You seem up,' and then sharing with excitement the news of her engagement to Dwight; this scene is immediately followed by a flashback showing how Jasmine found out about Hal's numerous affairs and learned that people around her had known about them for years.

Fifth, there are the excellent performances across the board, first and foremost by Cate Blanchett in the lead role of Jasmine, but also by Sally Hawkins as Ginger and by the rest of the cast. Often the beauty of the acting smooths over the pain that is being represented

to such a degree that the viewer is able to actually take some direct pleasure from it, including in the final scenes in which Jasmine's tragedy unfolds.

Sixth, the beauty of the photography has a similar effect. Angles, colours, light, locations, costumes, makeup, etc. often compose stunning pictures that directly please the eye; this again includes scenes in which pain or violence are the main subject.

Finally, there is the music. Most importantly, the film uses jazz and blues recordings from the early twentieth century which it employs to achieve various effects including, in the cases of 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' and 'My Daddy Rocks Me (Part 1)', driving the narrative forward. At other times, the music builds a lively contrast with the otherwise depressing action of a given scene, most notably the guitar at the beginning of 'Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gives to Me', which is played first during Jasmine's arrival at Ginger's apartment in the second scene and again during her exit at the end of the film, when it extends into the final scene on the park bench.

IV

Supposing that what I have said so far is more or less correct—namely, that *Blue Jasmine* does indeed manage in the manner described to turn the realistic representation of someone's deep unhappiness into a piece of joyous entertainment—what valuable reflections on happiness may this allow us to draw from the film? For the claim I made earlier (in section I) was that the representation of someone's deep unhappiness in a realistic manner, such that it is simultaneously a piece of joyous entertainment, yields a representation of an aspect of the world that can otherwise rarely, if ever, be experienced *so reflectively*.

I have also already hinted at the sort of principle on which this claim relies. To reiterate, what the film enables the viewer to do is to happily entertain unhappiness. Whilst it may seem fairly intuitive that this sort of activity will enable the viewer to have an exceptionally reflective experience, up to this point I have allowed myself to gloss over one crucial complication, which must now be briefly explained. For there is the question of whether the reflective experience that the film enables one to have is an experience of the relevant aspect of the world itself (in this case, unhappiness) or merely an experience of the representation of this aspect. It should also be noted, however, that the main argument of this essay will succeed regardless of which answer is deemed correct. Even if someone holds that the film cannot enable its viewers to have an actual experience of unhappiness itself, an exceptionally reflective experience of the representation of unhappiness may still be of philosophical and psychological importance (including in the ways proposed in section V below).

The general principle, according to which happily entertaining unhappiness enables exceptionally reflective experience (of either unhappiness itself or the representation of unhappiness), can be derived in three steps as follows.

The first step consists in formulating a necessary condition for unpleasant experiences based on the assumption that unpleasant experiences are at some level constituted by one or more mental states.

Step 1: Unpleasant experience

If a subject has an unpleasant experience (for example, the death of a loved one), then the mental states that constitute the experience (for example, shock, grief, fear, etc.) naturally tend to be, on aggregate, entertained not happily but rather unhappily.

The precise conception of experience and mental states does not matter much in this connection. For instance, another example of an unpleasant experience might be listening to

an awful piece of music in a concert hall, which could be said to be constituted by mental states such as hearing, seeing, feeling, and thinking various things.

The second step consists in adapting the platitude that one will usually be better at doing something if one enjoys doing it.

Step 2: Degrees of reflectiveness

For any given experience or kind of experience, the overall degree of reflectiveness that a subject may achieve with regard to it will be higher if the relevant mental states are, on aggregate, happily entertained (as opposed to their not being happily entertained).

Finally, Step 3 consists in deriving the relevant principle from an instantiation of Step 2 that employs the notion of an unpleasant experience from Step 1. More specifically, substituting ‘unpleasant experience’ for ‘experience’ in Step 2 permits us to infer an exceptionally high degree of reflectiveness for unpleasant experiences that are happily entertained.

Step 3: Exceptionally high reflectiveness

For any given unpleasant experience or kind of unpleasant experience, the premise of Step 2 (degrees of reflectiveness) holds. Moreover, since the relevant mental states in the case of unpleasant experience naturally tend to be, on aggregate, entertained not happily but rather unhappily (Step 1), the overall degree of reflectiveness that a subject may achieve with regard to it will not only be higher but, indeed, higher than it naturally tends to be, and thus exceptionally high.

Obviously, substituting either ‘experience of unhappiness’ or ‘experience of a realistic representation of unhappiness’ for ‘unpleasant experience’ in Step 3 will be equally truth-preserving (QED).

However, ideally the joyous entertainment that is the realistic representation of unhappiness in *Blue Jasmine* lets the viewer have not merely an exceptionally reflective experience of a realistic representation of unhappiness, in virtue of the viewer’s happily entertaining relevant mental states, but an exceptionally reflective experience of unhappiness itself.

In fact, this is quite likely to happen. As noted earlier, just as someone who is entertaining a thought need not believe it, someone who is entertaining an emotion, a feeling or a mood need not experience it. Thus, both types of activity will sometimes be merely an exercise of the imagination. Arguably, just as there are thoughts that are such that unless you assent to their truth you have not fully entertained them (for example, that red is a colour), you have not fully entertained a given emotion, feeling or mood unless you are actually affected by it. More to the point, it is certainly possible for at least some particular emotions, feelings, and moods that someone’s merely entertaining one of them will result in them actually experiencing it. For example, my imagining someone else’s anger may result in my experiencing this anger, or at least something very similar, myself. In the same way, my imagining Jasmine’s fears, anger, sadness, etc. may result in my experiencing some of the same, or at least something very similar. Thus, the exceptionally reflective experience of a realistic representation of unhappiness that the film enables the viewer to have—in the form of their happily entertaining relevant mental states (for example, some of Jasmine’s fears, anger, sadness, etc.)—could well result in an experience of unhappiness itself. And since such an experience of unhappiness would be the result of one’s entertaining relevant mental states *happily*, it could well be an exceptionally reflective experience of unhappiness.

V

My aim in this final section will be achieved if I can make it plausible to the reader that there are in fact valuable reflections about happiness to be drawn in virtue of the sort of achievement by the film *Blue Jasmine* that I have described in the sections above. I shall therefore use the remainder of this essay to focus on just one broad kind of lesson about happiness that I personally take from this film, after having enjoyed watching it many times. Moreover, this broad kind of lesson ties in well with what has been my main theme throughout. As I understand *Blue Jasmine*, the film strives to provide joyous entertainment on the subject of unhappiness in order to help the viewer not only attain a certain perspective on its own specific content, but also adopt a similar attitude towards life in general.

The first shot of the opening scene ends awkwardly. Jasmine has been speaking to the woman sitting next to her on the plane about her ex-husband, beginning, 'There was no one like Hal. He met me at a party and swept me off my feet.' Then she says: 'And one more year and I would have graduated. But I quit BU to marry him. And what the hell was I learning at school anyway? I mean, can you picture me as an anthropologist?' They both chuckle. But Jasmine's chuckle almost immediately gives way to a shake of the head and a frozen smile, then she sighs whilst looking down and suddenly asks in a desperate-sounding voice, 'Is that a joke?' Here the shot ends, and the next shows Jasmine and the other woman already inside the airport terminal. Thus, the attentive viewer is left to wonder: was it a joke?

Later, it becomes clear that Jasmine does not want it to be one. Although Chili scoffs and Ginger smirks at her suggestion of going back to school, Jasmine, remarkably composed, continues to explain: 'The biggest mistake I made was leaving college in my last year and not completing my education.' And when asked by Chili's colleague Eddie 'What would you be?', she responds confidently, 'An anthropologist'. However, the impression of Jasmine's sincerity is immediately broken for the viewer by Eddie's incredulous response, 'Really? Like digging up old fossils?', from which the conversation quickly moves on to a different subject. Similarly, the film makes Jasmine's subsequent decision to study interior design online seem both ridiculous and unreasonable. But, in fact, it is neither. Moreover, her resolve to make it work is strong. The next scene already shows her starting work as a receptionist in Dr Flicker's practice, in order to pay for the computer class she is now taking in preparation for her planned online studies. At this point, even Chili applauds her effort: 'I want you to know I think it's great when a grown-up continues with their education. Not for nothing.' By the end of the film, however, it may well seem as if it had been for nothing after all.

Where did it all go wrong? The film itself asks this question, not least by having everyone blame Jasmine. But above all it asks this question when she ironically blames herself after Dwight accuses her of lying and cancels their engagement. After pleading with him for a while, Jasmine says: 'I get it. You're not marrying me. I brought everything on myself. I've only got myself to blame. I did it to myself again, as usual, as usual.'

Chronologically, the car scene marks the beginning of Jasmine's final mental breakdown. So let us begin by going back from here, and ask who or what is really to blame. Dwight cannot be blamed for his reaction to finding out about the ways in which Jasmine has kept the truth from him. Augie, who appears outside the jewellery shop ('surprise, surprise') and reveals the truth about Jasmine's ex-husband, cannot be blamed for doing so. But Jasmine cannot really be blamed either for keeping some of the truth from Dwight. Who is going to say, when asked about their ex-husband by someone they have only just met at a party, that he was imprisoned and hanged himself? So the worst part is perhaps her pretending to have worked as an interior designer for a while when she is only trying to become one. And for that she can probably be forgiven (and in any case, Dwight is not particularly worried about that detail).

Thus far, then, it seems that Jasmine has done nothing seriously wrong, and that had she just been a little bit more fortunate, things might not have gone so badly at all. In addition, there is a positive sense of necessity, which calls for further exploration. Is not the story of her new fiancé Dwight in a way the same as that of her late husband Hal, which Jasmine keeps telling people about? Like Hal, Dwight met her at a party and swept her off her feet. As with Hal, Jasmine is ready to quit her education to marry Dwight (and live with him in Vienna). And Ginger's diagnosis of Jasmine's falling for Hal seems equally correct of Jasmine's falling for Dwight: 'He was a handsome guy with money. He was a smooth talker, and he pampered her. What's she gonna say? "No"?'

Before continuing with this line of interpretation, we must consider the central accusation that Jasmine has been more or less complicit in the business practices for which Hal is indicted and imprisoned. If this is so, and if Dwight is right when he tells her 'Your ethical behavior is equal to your ex-husband', then it will seem—as no doubt it does to many viewers—that Jasmine indeed only has herself to blame.

Viewers who find it surprising that Jasmine may have been ignorant for such a long time of Hal's affairs with other women—like Jasmine's (now formerly) good friend who says 'I'm surprised it took so long'—should be open to the possibility that Ginger's observation 'when Jasmine don't wanna know something, she's got a habit of looking the other way' applies generally. Then the crucial question becomes the disjunctive one that Danny, Hal's son and her stepson, asks her: 'Did you not suspect anything or did you not care?'

Incidentally, the same question could be asked of Danny, who lived with them throughout his adolescence. Evidently, Danny was present when business was done, and he took pride in his father's success. In the same scene, viewers are told that he accompanied his father on golf weekends, and an earlier scene shows Danny as a young child receiving a set of clubs for his birthday together with a word of advice from his father, 'You gotta remember as you go through life to share some of what you earn with the less fortunate. Not everyone is as lucky as we are.' Golf is of course well known as a leisure activity that is often combined with business meetings. Jasmine's delusional shouting outside Dr Flicker's practice—'Be careful! Don't get hit by a golf ball!'—in the scene that immediately follows can be interpreted as a warning to the younger Danny, out of sync with the present moment, not to get involved in shady business.

Many viewers will perhaps be inclined, like Danny appears to be, to take the revelation, in one of the final scenes, that Jasmine called federal law enforcement on Hal after he told her he was planning his future together with another woman as proof that she knew enough to be complicit in her husband's criminal activities. However, they would be ignoring an important scene in the middle of the film showing Jasmine and Hal relaxing outside their house in the Hamptons. In this scene, Jasmine tells Hal that she is scared because her friend told her the reason one of Hal's ex-business partners (presumably the friend's husband) had left was in order to avoid prosecution. The scene shows Jasmine as caring but relatively unsuspecting, and quickly—too quickly?—giving in to her husband's loving reassurance: 'Hey, let me deal with it, okay? Is there anything you want that you don't have? Is there? So stop worrying and let me spoil you.'

The phone call was bittersweet vengeance, whatever else it may have been. Jasmine later says she regretted the call, but she does not say why. The bitter part, of course, was the collateral damage that was her own downfall. But regardless of whether making that phone call was morally right or wrong, wise or unwise, and regardless of how much she really knew or merely suspected, Jasmine can hardly be blamed for this being her reaction to discovering the full extent of Hal's betrayal of their marriage.

We now need to try and understand what exactly happens before Jasmine's story begins to repeat itself. How does Jasmine end up being at the party where she is going to

meet Dwight? How does she suddenly end up asking her computer course acquaintance, ‘Sharon, do you know any men? ... Men that would be good for me ... someone substantial,’ when shortly before she had said that she was not ready to go out yet, that she was concentrating on school and that what she wanted was to *become* ‘something substantial’? The event that brings about this radical change takes place in the previous scene, which shows Jasmine at the height of her recovery, coping with ease in her job as a receptionist, until Dr Flicker sexually assaults her. Jasmine wrestles herself free and says as she leaves, ‘Now look what you have done!’ Sharon is of course right to say afterwards, just before Jasmine suddenly asks her about men, ‘I don’t blame you for being shaken up.’

Thus, we have our answer: Dr Flicker—this ridiculous and slightly annoying, but apparently harmless clown who turns out to be a sexual predator—he is where it all goes wrong again for Jasmine. His sexual assault on her is what sets her on a path of destruction, ultimately leading her to the park bench, once again talking to herself and ready to be picked up on the street.

Again, there is a clear sense of necessity present in this recurring structure of events, in addition to that residing in the fact that Jasmine does not seem to have done anything seriously wrong. At the same time, it seems that had Jasmine just been a little bit more fortunate—had Dr Flicker acted in a more civilised way, or had Augie perhaps not turned up outside the jewellery shop—things might just have gone a different way. Thus, the recurring structure of events such as it is—also including significant variation—contains a sense not only of necessity, but also of having another chance.

The film offers two more structural analogies that are useful in this connection. First, there is the story of Jasmine’s stepson, Danny. Both Danny and Jasmine have suffered immensely from the events surrounding Hal’s arrest, and they have both struggled to leave the past behind. It has not worked out for Jasmine so far, but it has for Danny—or at any rate, he is doing better—so there is hope for Jasmine.

Finally, there is of course the parallel story of Ginger, which is of fundamental importance. Here are two sisters, adopted by the same parents though long estranged from each other, who have turned out very differently, but now are both looking to build a new life following the end of their failed first marriages. The film includes many verbal comparisons between the sisters, often explicitly formulated—like so much else in this film—in terms of chance, luck, and necessity. In particular, there is a lot of talk in this connection about desert, responsibility, good and bad genes, being more or less fortunate, and so on, including in the scene that directly precedes the one showing the sexual assault. The conversation in this scene, which takes place in Ginger’s living room, and specifically Jasmine’s sudden change and confusion, can be seen as foreshadowing the change that the assault brings by crushing Jasmine’s developing sense of autonomy.

Jasmine: Ginger and I are completely different people.

Ginger: Yeah, she got the good genes.

Jasmine: It’s not genetic. You can’t always blame everything on your genes. If you’re prepared to work hard and not settle— [suddenly stops]

Ginger: What, you mean Augie?

Chili: She means me.

Jasmine: Aw, who do I have to sleep with around here to get a Stoli martini with a twist of lemon!?! [she looks confused, other people watch her] Oh. That’s what I... What—? What—? Oh, Christ, I can’t remember. [walks over to the Stoli]

Perhaps the others are slightly more shocked by Jasmine's outburst than would normally seem appropriate because they think she is expressing a truth about herself.

But the centrepiece of the sisters' parallel stories is their meeting men at the same party, Dwight and Al, who sweep each of them off their feet. Al, like Dwight and Hal, is—following Ginger's classification—a handsome guy with money (notice Ginger's reaction to hearing he is from the affluent Marin, where Dwight has also bought his impressive house) and a smooth talker (Ginger tells him, 'You know what clinched it for me? Because you were so smooth'), and he pampers her (for example, he gives her a sound system as a present). 'He's such a gentleman,' Ginger tells Jasmine, and asks her, 'You think Al is a step up from Chili?' It soon becomes clear, however, that Al is mainly a version of Hal—like Hal, Al seems mostly interested in sex—even though Ginger, like Jasmine, is slow to recognise the problem. When Ginger eventually finds out that Al is actually married, she reunites with Chili. And she counts herself lucky for it: 'You didn't lose me,' she says to him, 'I almost lost you.'

The remaining scenes show the sisters returning to their respective starting positions. Ginger and Chili are again ready to move in together, happy to have each other even if they have little else. In their final appearance, they lovingly play around, lying on the sofa, teasing each other over the last slice of pizza, before chasing each other, presumably to the bedroom, where we can overhear them continuing to play. Meanwhile, Jasmine reverts to a state of acute insanity. Having suffered another trauma, she takes to the streets again, delusional, talking to herself and hearing music. Her final words are: 'This was playing on the Vineyard. "Blue Moon." I used to know the words. I knew the words. Now they're all a jumble.'

Jasmine's having forgotten the lyrics of the song she has kept telling everyone was playing when she and Hal first met can be interpreted as simply a sign of her ultimate disintegration. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a sign of progress, not least since the lyrics—which are not part of the soundtrack, since it uses an instrumental version—represent a kind of happiness that is entirely dependent on romantic love (hence, precisely the kind of happiness that has not worked out for Jasmine). It would then be another one of those elements of variation by which the film ever so slightly breaks the sense of necessity and inevitability that lies in the repetition of Jasmine's story and the fact that she has not really done anything wrong. One important such element, as I have just argued, is the happy ending of Ginger's version. Things have not worked out for Jasmine so far, but they have for Ginger—or at any rate, things are going better for her—so there is hope for Jasmine. Yet this is only one way of looking at it, and moreover one it would be naïve to cling on to. The same holds for Jasmine's facial expression before the film cuts to the final credits. Her smiling as if something or someone nice were approaching can be interpreted as a sign of hope. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as simply another sign of her mental breakdown. The closing scene, as well as the film as a whole, will have offered joyous entertainment either way. Furthermore, if the interpretation that I have presented in this final section is plausible, then the attentive viewer may equally take Jasmine's closing smile as confirmation of the generalised lesson that can be drawn from the fact that the joyous entertainment that has come from a realistic representation of someone's deep unhappiness has enabled that viewer not only to have an exceptionally reflective experience of unhappiness, or at least the realistic representation of unhappiness, but indeed to happily entertain some of the relevant mental states and, thus, to entertain unhappiness happily. The generalised lesson is simply to try, in life, to entertain unhappiness happily. That is, of course, not to desire unhappiness, but for any given episode of unhappiness that one experiences to entertain it happily rather than not happily. And perhaps, even more generally, not to desire pain but, for any given pain that one experiences, to learn to entertain it happily rather than not happily.

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