Passing Time

by Ajay Nair

'Have you seen my Yossarian?' The moment I see him I know he is trouble. Not that I mind it much. It has been an uneventful day so far and it could use some excitement. Even if it is in the form of an old pervert.

I have had my share of stalkers and lechers and most times, I am careful enough not to allow it to lead to something dangerous. This guy though, takes the cake. Of all the places that I can think of that someone might want to accost a young woman, a public library seems to be a rather poor choice.

I am in the library because it was hot outside. Baking hot; the kind of heat where my skin does not want to be touching the bones underneath. It is cooler here, even though this place could do with some air-conditioning; these giant fans after a while start to stream hot air down my neck and back and it becomes uncomfortable. Equally uncomfortable is the process of pretending to read this appreciation of E M Forster. But I have to wait till Mavaisa is free, and this is as good a place as anywhere else.

Mavaisa is my current boyfriend and possibly the love of my life. My friend Slikori — though it's a stretch to call her my friend, really; she's more a leech that I have grown attached to —says that I am too young to know these things for sure. She may have a point; I used to think that Pivion, my boyfriend-before-last, was also the love of my life till I grew so bored of his histrionics that I dumped him over the telephone. I can still hear him sob into my ear.

Anyway, this guy is old, perhaps over sixty years old. He has a droopy white moustache that reminds me of a wick dipped in oil; ready to be lit at both ends. The way he is peering at me, he probably can't see very well. He has a stoop thing going which makes me want to jump on his back and ride him.

He repeats, standing right in front of me — 'Have you seen my Yossarian?'

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‘What is that? Pervert-speak for dick?' I reply. The setting — lots of people milling about aimlessly looking at old, sad books — emboldens me.

He smiles — it's a rather attractive smile; all sunshine and happiness. He has very white, healthy teeth for a sixty year old. They look like the real thing too; not those scary, artificial dentures which remind me of the Cheshire cat when I see them somewhere. Though the wearers of those are not nearly as wise as the cat.

‘You have a filthy mouth, don't you? I expected a more refined manner of speaking, given your appearance.' His words are speckled with a light, engaging sarcasm.

He has a point, too. I do have a rather cultured look; my hair is long and clean and tied up properly, my clothes are always presentable — for example, I have this beautiful sundress on right now, a genial yellow. My face is quite fetching too — clean, attractive lines; slim, aristocratic nose; firm mouth; the works. I don't look angelic, but I do look like the product of rich genes and a comfortable upbringing.

‘I, on the other hand, expected nothing better, given your appearance. Quite the slovenly, man, you are' I respond. My eyes deliberately rove up and down, subjecting him to an insolent examination. He laughs as he sits down opposite me. I notice that he has exquisite hands; the hands of a much younger man with slender fingers and what appear to be perfectly manicured nails.

‘You haven't answered my original question yet. And to clarify, it means exactly what it says; there's no innuendo involved.' He has a gruff voice that's chewed out a few words of various shades and colours in its lifetime.

‘It can't be a literal question — unless you have a dog or a son named Yossarian. Do you?' I guess I am involved by now, and my initial phlegmatic demeanour is unlikely to wash any more.

‘No, I don't. Though I wish I had a son. And a dog. Unfortunately, I am, and have always been, sterile. And I am allergic to dogs. Is that too much information?' He is involved too. I am convinced he picked me out among all the other targets. Good choice. I lean forward,

resting my arms on the broad table between us so as to block the heavy murmur that's suddenly arisen around us.

‘Then I guess Yossarian is some metaphor, or something like that. For your mind? You do seem to have lost your mind, or at least, temporarily misplaced it. In any case, you are a vain old man, naming your mind after one of the funniest characters of all time.' That should show him. I am not as ignorant as he thinks I am.

He smiles that smile again.

‘Ah, so you do know. I am impressed. Though, probably, you don't really know it all. Funny is not how I'd describe him. Tragically sane, perhaps, or maybe the loneliest person in the world.' Why do I get the feeling he's testing me? Somewhere a book falls to the ground with a heavy thud followed by a silky rustling of the pages as they flutter helplessly. The sound reminds me of a pigeon that I saw with its wings broken, desperately trying to beat them to life and failing.

‘And you — or to be precise — your mind is like that? Tragically sane and lonely? Somehow, you don't strike me as the lonely type.' He does have a certain charm; a way with words. As a rule, I loathe talking to anybody, especially strangers. He has successfully ensnared me in a conversation that's half interesting. I bet he has not been alone for any length of time.

‘Well, that'd be tough to establish over a ten minute conversation. You'd have to marry me to know that.'

He's a pervert after all. The nerve of this guy, forty years older than me. I have been with older men sometimes, but not this old.

‘There you are. I was wondering where the freak I first saw disappeared. You are back. Grandpa, I think you are dabbling in territory that's way out of your league'. I wield an acerbic tongue when needed, but maybe there's something half-hearted about my response because he guffaws at it nonchalantly.

‘That's true. I doubt it's the age gap though. It's probably due to the fact that I am not attractive enough, superficially? For example, if I was forty five, and looked like that man' — he pointed at this stylish, balding man sitting at the end of our long table — ‘I am sure

I could interest you, even if I spoke the same way as I have been doing so far.'

I decide to give him a small jolt. ‘That man you are pointing at is my father. I have half a mind to tell him what you are up to.' I have often found that invoking familial ties in unrelated conversations — such as implying impropriety the way I did now, or referring to some sad incident to do with a parent — always sets the other person back.

‘Please go ahead. Besides, you probably have a daddy complex, you know? Buried beneath those curls of yours.' His smile had an electric edge now. Evidently, he knows how to call a bluff.

‘I can only imagine all the complexes you have. Have you always liked them young?' I try to lace my voice with as much venom as possible. I sense something's missing. It's as if I have two voices, one removed slightly from the other. And it's this other voice that's going out. Sometimes, I feel the same way about my body. There's a slightly displaced body that vibrates at an angle to mine. I try to shake myself then so that the bodies converge and I am one again. The feeling is unpleasant; as if I am lost just out of sight but I cannot find myself however hard I look.

‘Not really. Maybe we should talk about you now. Why are you here? I don't think that book is the reason.' His eyes point at the book spread out in front of me. A woman passing by in front of us looks at me with querulous eyes. Her hair looks like it nests spiders. I feel like sticking my tongue out at her, but refrain.

‘Well, it could be. But yes, you are right, it's not. I am waiting for someone who should be here any minute now.' I am stretching the point when I say I am waiting for Mavaisa. Waiting implies a certain purpose at the end of the waiting period. I am just passing time.

‘A boyfriend?' There's a sincere deep interest in his question that I find refreshing and disturbing at the same time. I want to take his weather-beaten face in my hands and tell him it will be alright. Or maybe I want his hands to cup my face and for him to tell me I'll be alright.

‘Yes. You will love him. He will probably beat you up though. He is like that sometimes.' Mavaisa is indeed like that. He is very protective of me. He is always jealous. He prefers to deal with things quickly, physically. He has no clue why I go out with him. Neither do I. He's something to do, I guess. He kisses alright.

‘Don't worry. I can take care of myself. I pack a good punch.' He balls his right fist up and shows it to me. His knuckles are well-formed, spiky. ‘Are you going to leave him soon?' This question does not surprise me as much as it should. Instead, it hangs in the air between us and I probe it from all corners, considering it. The question is like a hard ball of stone, and if it drops, it will break the table between us.

‘Yes, soon. Right now, I need to focus all my energy on some things to do. He's one of those things. Otherwise, I fear I will drift away. And it's useful to have someone to catch me, or at least try to. I can't do it myself because I am distracted by the horrible racket in my head.' I lean forward further till my nose is a few inches away from his. My voice hints at a conspiracy. He frowns at me, but it's a frown fraught with concern.

‘Is that why you come to places like this?' I nod in agreement. He looks troubled. This does not remind me of my mother. She is always dismissive of the voices in my head. My father is dismissive of her and me. ‘I hope you are not thinking of any radical solutions to shut down the noise.'

‘Are you asking whether I am suicidal?' He nods. ‘Not yet, no.' I am not solution-oriented.

A fortnight ago, I had woken up at dawn on a Sunday. The house — my home — was emitting a gentle buzz, like the static on television when nothing's on. I had edged the blanket that had covered me through the night down along my body till it only covered my toes. The patch of even pale skin between the ends of my pyjamas and the blanket-covered toes looked so innocent and perfect that I cried. Things began to change after that.

‘Tell me about the racket in your head.' He sits back in his chair, as if he is relaxing after a heavy meal. I see that his buttons are

golden in colour. They remind me of the eyes of a cat that patrols my neighbourhood.

‘Well, they started about two weeks back, but I think they have always been there; it's only that I am paying attention to them now. They are very persistent now and cranky.' I realise my eyes have drifted off into the distance and everything is out of focus. It is dusk now and the last rays of the sun have rushed in to the library to escape the pursuing darkness. Everything around me is suspended in melancholy. I make an effort to look at the old man again. Concentrate.

‘Are they saying something specific?' His cracks his fine knuckles absent-mindedly. The noise is like the crack of a gunshot. I cringe and pull myself back into my chair. A thin strip of his white hair writhes down his forehead and settles in a ‘C' shape.

‘Not anything that I can make out. But there's a feeling. I feel that they feel they have been trapped underneath my memories and childhood and want to be let out. That's why they are knocking down the walls.' There's a hush around us. I imagine that everyone's listening to us talk, but when I look around, no one is paying us the slightest attention.

‘It's been only a fortnight, isn't it? Maybe you can push them back where they came from. Can you do that? For me?' There's a terrible fear in his voice now and it's shed its gruffness and gone smooth. If I am not careful, I may slip on his voice and fall down.

I nod. I am a brave girl.

Someone touches me on my shoulder. I look up to see Mavaisa's trusting face. I hate him so much. I hate all this so much. As I stand up, I look across the table. The old man's disappeared.

It is as if he had never been there.