

MASTER MEEF

1 THE TEXAN

I

IT WAS LOVE at first sight.

The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him.

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.

Each morning they came around, three brisk and serious men with efficient mouths and inefficient eyes, accompanied by brisk and serious Nurse Duckett, one of the ward nurses who didn't like Yossarian. They read the chart at the foot of the bed and asked impatiently about the pain. They seemed irritated when he told them it was exactly the same.

'Still no movement?' the full colonel demanded.

The doctors exchanged a look when he shook his head.

'Give him another pill.'

Nurse Duckett made a note to give Yossarian another pill, and the four of them moved along to the next bed. None of the nurses liked Yossarian. Actually, the pain in his liver had gone away, but Yossarian didn't say anything and the doctors never suspected. They just suspected that he had been moving his bowels and not telling anyone.

Yossarian had everything he wanted in the hospital. The food wasn't too bad, and his meals were brought to him in bed. There were extra rations of fresh meat, and during the hot part of the afternoon he and the others were served chilled fruit

juice or chilled chocolate milk. Apart from the doctors and the nurses, no one ever disturbed him. For a little while in the morning he had to censor letters, but he was free after that to spend the rest of each day lying around idly with a clear conscience. He was comfortable in the hospital, and it was easy to stay on because he always ran a temperature of 101. He was even more comfortable than Dunbar, who had to keep falling down on his face in order to get his meals brought to him in bed.

After he had made up his mind to spend the rest of the war in the hospital, Yossarian wrote letters to everyone he knew saying that he was in the hospital but never mentioning why. One day he had a better idea. To everyone he knew he wrote that he was going on a very dangerous mission. 'They asked for volunteers. It's very dangerous, but someone has to do it. I'll write you the instant I get back.' And he had not written anyone since.

All the officer patients in the ward were forced to censor letters written by all the enlisted-men patients, who were kept in residence in wards of their own. It was a monotonous job, and Yossarian was disappointed to learn that the lives of enlisted men were only slightly more interesting than the lives of officers. After the first day he had no curiosity at all. To break the monotony he invented games. Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but *a*, *an* and *the*. That erected more dynamic intra-linear tensions, he felt, and in just about every case left a message far more universal. Soon he was proscribing parts of salutations and signatures and leaving the text untouched. One time he blacked out all but the salutation 'Dear Mary' from a letter, and at the bottom he wrote, 'I yearn for you tragically. R. O. Shipman, Chaplain, U.S. Army.' R.O. Shipman was the group chaplain's name.

Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1961)

The voice on the telephone seemed to be sharp and peremptory, but I didn't hear too well what it said – partly because I was only half-awake and partly because I was holding the receiver upside down. I fumbled it around and grunted.

'Did you hear me! I said I was Clyde Umney, the lawyer.'

'Clyde Umney, the lawyer. I thought we had several of them.'

'You're Marlowe, aren't you?'

'Yeah. I guess so.' I looked at my wrist watch. It was 6.30 a.m., not my best hour.

'Don't get fresh with me, young man.'

'Sorry, Mr Umney. But I'm not a young man. I'm old, tired, and full of no coffee. What can I do for you, sir?'

'I want you to meet the Super Chief at eight o'clock, identify a girl among the passengers, follow her until she checks in somewhere, and then report to me. Is that clear?'

'No.'

'Why not?' he snapped.

'I don't know enough to be sure I could accept the case.'

'I'm Clyde Um –'

'Don't,' I interrupted. 'I might get hysterical. Just tell me the basic facts. Perhaps another investigator would suit you better. I never was an FBI man.'

'Oh. My secretary, Miss Vermilyea, will be at your office in half an hour. She will have the necessary information for you. She is very efficient. I hope you are.'

'I'm more efficient when I've had breakfast. Have her come here, would you?'

'Where is here?'

I gave him the address of my place on Yucca Avenue, and told him how she would find it.

'Very well,' he said grudgingly, 'but I want one thing very clear. The girl is not to know she is being followed. This is very important. I am acting for a very influential firm of Washington attorneys. Miss Vermilyea will advance you some expense money and pay you a retainer of \$250. I expect a high degree of efficiency. And let's not waste time talking.'

'I'll do the best I can, Mr Umney.'

He hung up. I struggled out of bed, showered, shaved, and was nuzzling my third cup of coffee when the door bell rang.

'I'm Miss Vermilyea, Mr Umney's secretary,' she said in a rather chintzy voice.

'Please come in.'

She was quite a doll. She wore a white belted raincoat, no hat, a well-cherished head of platinum hair, booties to match the raincoat, a folding plastic umbrella, a pair of blue-grey eyes that looked at me as if I had said a dirty word. I helped her off with her raincoat. She smelled very nice. She had a pair of legs – so far as I could determine – that were not painful to look at. She wore night-sheer stockings. I stared at them rather intently, especially when she crossed her legs and held out a cigarette to be lighted.

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'Christian Dior,' she said, reading my rather open mind. 'I never wear anything else. A light, please.'

'You're wearing a lot more today,' I said, snapping a lighter for her.

'I don't greatly care for passes this early in the morning.'

'What time would suit you, Miss Vermilyea?'

She smiled rather acidly, inventoried her hand-bag, and tossed me a manila envelope. 'I think you'll find everything you need in this.'

'Well – not quite everything.'

'Get on with it, you goof. I've heard all about you. Why do you think Mr Umney chose you? He didn't. I did. And stop looking at my legs.'

Raymond Chandler, *Playback* (1958)

CHAPTER V

CREDIT

WHEN ONE day about a week later, he didn't come to the library. Miss Crail was delighted; by half-past eleven she had told her mother, and on returning from lunch she stood in front of the archaeology shelves where he had been working since he came. She stared with theatrical concentration at the rows of books and Liz knew she was pretending to work out whether Leamas had stolen anything.

Liz entirely ignored her for the rest of that day, failed to reply when she addressed her and worked with assiduous application. When the evening came she walked home and cried herself to sleep.

The next morning she arrived early at the library. She somehow felt that the sooner she got there, the sooner Leamas might come; but as the morning dragged on her hopes faded, and she knew he would never come. She had forgotten to make sandwiches for herself that day so she decided to take a bus to the Bayswater Road and go to the A.B.C. She felt sick and empty, but not hungry. Should she go and find him? She had promised never to follow him, but he had promised to tell her; should she go and find him?

She hailed a taxi and gave his address.

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She made her way up the dingy staircase and pressed the bell of his door. The bell seemed to be broken; she heard nothing. There were three bottles of milk on the mat and a letter from the electricity company. She

hesitated a moment, then banged on the door, and she heard the faint groan of a man. She rushed downstairs to the flat below, hammered and rang at the door. There was no reply so she ran down another flight and found herself in the back room of a grocer's shop. An old woman sat in a corner, rocking back and forth in her chair.

"The top flat," Liz almost shouted, "somebody's very ill. Who's got a key?"

The old woman looked at her for a moment, then called towards the front room, where the shop was.

"Arthur, come in here, Arthur, there's a girl here!"

A man in a brown overall and grey trilby hat looked round the door and said:

"Girl?"

"There's someone seriously ill in the top flat," said Liz, "he can't get to the front door to open it. Have you got a key?"

"No," replied the grocer, "but I've got a hammer," and they hurried up the stairs together, the grocer, still in his trilby, carrying a heavy screwdriver and a hammer. He knocked on the door sharply, and they waited breathless for an answer. There was none.

"I heard a groan before, I promise I did," Liz whispered.

"Will you pay for this door if I bust it?"

"Yes."

The hammer made a terrible noise. With three blows he had wrenched out a piece of the frame and the lock came with it. Liz went in first and the grocer followed. It was bitterly cold in the room and dark, but on the bed in the corner they could make out the figure of a man.

"Oh God," thought Liz, "if he's dead I don't think I can touch him," but she went to him and he was alive. Drawing the curtains, she knelt beside the bed.

John le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963)