

Joseph Heller (1923-1999)

Catch-22 (1961)

Ch 18: The Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice

That was the most illogical Thanksgiving he could ever remember spending, and his thoughts returned wishfully to his halcyon fourteen-day quarantine in the hospital the year before; but even that idyll had ended on a tragic note; he was still in good health when the quarantine period was over, and they told him again that he had to get out and go to war. Yossarian sat up in bed when he heard the bad news and shouted.

'I see everything twice!'

Pandemonium broke loose in the ward again. The specialists came running up from all directions and ringed him in a circle of scrutiny so confining that he could feel the humid breath from their various noses blowing uncomfortably upon the different sectors of his body. They went snooping into his eyes and ears with tiny beams of light, assaulted his legs and feet with rubber hammers and vibrating forks, drew blood from his veins, held anything handy up for him to see on the periphery of his vision.

The leader of this team of doctors was a dignified, solicitous gentleman who held one finger up directly in front of Yossarian and demanded, 'How many fingers do you see?'

'Two,' said Yossarian.

'How many fingers do you see now?' asked the doctor, holding up two.

'Two,' said Yossarian.

'And how many now?' asked the doctor, holding up none.

'Two,' said Yossarian.

The doctor's face wreathed with a smile. 'By Jove, he's right,' he declared jubilantly. 'He does see everything twice.'

They rolled Yossarian away on a stretcher into the room with the other soldier who saw everything twice and quarantined everyone else in the ward for another fourteen days.

'I see everything twice!' the soldier who saw everything twice shouted when they rolled Yossarian in.

'I see everything twice!' Yossarian shouted back at him just as loudly, with a secret wink.

'The walls! The walls!' the other soldier cried. 'Move back the walls!'

'The walls! The walls!' Yossarian cried. 'Move back the walls!'

One of the doctors pretended to shove the wall back. 'Is that far enough?'

The soldier who saw everything twice nodded weakly and sank back on his bed. Yossarian nodded weakly too, eying his talented roommate with great humility and admiration. He knew he was in the presence of a master. His talented roommate was obviously a person to be studied and emulated. During the night, his talented roommate died, and Yossarian decided that he had followed him far enough.

'I see everything once!' he cried quickly.

A new group of specialists came pounding up to his bedside with their instruments to find out if it was true.

'How many fingers do you see?' asked the leader, holding up one.

'One.'

The doctor held up two fingers. 'How many fingers do you see now?'

'One.'

The doctor held up ten fingers. 'And how many now?'

'One.'

The doctor turned to the other doctors with amazement. 'He does see everything once!' he exclaimed. 'We made him all better.'

'And just in time, too,' announced the doctor with whom Yossarian next found himself alone, a tall, torpedo-shaped congenial man with an unshaven growth of brown beard and a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket that he chain-smoked insouciantly as he leaned against the wall. 'There are some relatives here to see you. Oh, don't worry,' he added with a laugh. 'Not your relatives. It's the mother, father and brother of that chap who died. They've traveled all the way from New York to see a

dying soldier, and you're the handiest one we've got.'

'What are you talking about?' Yossarian asked suspiciously. 'I'm not dying.'

'Of course you're dying. We're all dying. Where the devil else do you think you're heading?'

'They didn't come to see me,' Yossarian objected. 'They came to see their son.'

'They'll have to take what they can get. As far as we're concerned, one dying boy is just as good as any other, or just as bad. To a scientist, all dying boys are equal. I have a proposition for you. You let them come in and look you over for a few minutes and I won't tell anyone you've been lying about your liver symptoms.'

Yossarian drew back from him farther. 'You know about that?'

'Of course I do. Give us some credit.' The doctor chuckled amiably and lit another cigarette. 'How do you expect anyone to believe you have a liver condition if you keep squeezing the nurses' tits every time you get a chance? You're going to have to give up sex if you want to convince people you've got an ailing liver.'

'That's a hell of a price to pay just to keep alive. Why didn't you turn me in if you knew I was faking?'

'Why the devil should I?' asked the doctor with a flicker of surprise. 'We're all in this business of illusion together. I'm always willing to lend a helping hand to a fellow conspirator along the road to survival if he's willing to do the same for me. These people have come a long way, and I'd rather not disappoint them. I'm sentimental about old people.'

'But they came to see their son.'

'They came too late. Maybe they won't even notice the difference.'

'Suppose they start crying.'

'They probably will start crying. That's one of the reasons they came. I'll listen outside the door and break it up if it starts getting tacky.'

'It all sounds a bit crazy,' Yossarian reflected. 'What do they want to watch their son die for, anyway?'

'I've never been able to figure that one out,' the doctor admitted, 'but they always do. Well, what do you say? All you've got to do is lie there a few minutes and die a little. Is that asking so much?'

'All right,' Yossarian gave in. 'If it's just for a few minutes and you promise to wait right outside.' He warmed to his role. 'Say, why don't you wrap a bandage around me for effect?'

'That sounds like a splendid idea,' applauded the doctor.

They wrapped a batch of bandages around Yossarian. A team of medical orderlies installed tan shades on each of the two windows and lowered them to douse the room in depressing shadows. Yossarian suggested flowers and the doctor sent an orderly out to find two small bunches of fading ones with a strong and sickening smell. When everything was in place, they made Yossarian get back into bed and lie down. Then they admitted the visitors.

The visitors entered uncertainly as though they felt they were intruding, tiptoeing in with stares of meek apology, first the grieving mother and father, then the brother, a glowering heavy-set sailor with a deep chest. The man and woman stepped into the room stify side by side as though right out of a familiar, though esoteric, anniversary daguerreotype on a wall. They were both short, sere and proud. They seemed made of iron and old, dark clothing. The woman had a long, brooding oval face of burnt umber, with coarse graying black hair parted severely in the middle and combed back austere behind her neck without curl, wave or ornamentation. Her mouth was sullen and sad, her lined lips compressed. The father stood very rigid and quaint in a double-breasted suit with padded shoulders that were much too tight for him. He was broad and muscular on a small scale and had a magnificently curled silver mustache on his crinkled face. His eyes were creased and rheumy, and he appeared tragically ill at ease as he stood awkwardly with the brim of his black felt fedora held in his two brawny laborer's hands out in front of his wide lapels. Poverty and hard work had inflicted iniquitous damage on both. The brother was looking for a fight. His round white cap was cocked at an insolent tilt, his hands were clenched, and he glared at everything in the room with a scowl of injured truculence.

The three creaked forward timidly, holding themselves close to each other in a stealthy, funereal group and inching forward almost in step, until they arrived at the side of the bed and stood staring down at Yossarian. There was a gruesome and excruciating silence that threatened to endure forever.

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“Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy.”

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.