

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving Day came and went without any fuss while Yossarian was still in the hospital. The only bad thing about it was the turkey for dinner, and even that was pretty good. It was the most rational Thanksgiving he had ever spent, and he took a sacred oath to spend every future Thanksgiving Day in the cloistered shelter of a hospital. He broke his sacred oath the very next year, when he spent the holiday in a hotel room instead in intellectual conversation with Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife, who had Dori Duz's dog tags on for the occasion and who henpecked Yossarian sentimentously for being cynical and callous about Thanksgiving, even though she didn't believe in God just as much as he didn't.

"I'm probably just as good an atheist as you are," she speculated boastfully. "But even I feel that we all have a great deal to be thankful for and that we shouldn't be ashamed to show it."

"Name one thing I've got to be thankful for," Yossarian challenged her without interest.

"Well..." Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife mused and paused a moment to ponder dubiously. "Me."

"Oh, come on," he scoffed.

She arched her eyebrows in surprise. "Aren't you thankful for me?" she asked. She frowned peevisly, her pride wounded. "I don't have to shack up with you, you know," she told him with cold dignity. "My husband has a whole squadron full of aviation cadets who would be only too happy to shack up with their commanding officer's wife just for the added fillip it would give them." Yossarian decided to change the subject. "Now you're changing the subject," he pointed out diplomatically. "I'll bet I can name two things to be miserable about for every one you can name to be thankful for."

"Be thankful you've got me," she insisted.

"I am, honey. But I'm also goddam good and miserable that I can't have Dori Duz again, too. Or the hundreds of other girls and women I'll see and want in my short lifetime and won't be able to go to bed with even once."

"Be thankful you're healthy."

"Be bitter you're not going to stay that way."

"Be glad you're even alive." "Be *furious* you're going to die."

"Things could be much worse," she cried.

"They could be one hell of a lot better," he answered heatedly. "You're naming only one thing," she protested. "You said you could name two."

"And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways," Yossarian continued, hurtling on over her objection. "There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena, as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain?"

“Pain?” Lieutenant Scheisskopf’s wife pounced upon the word victoriously. “Pain is a useful symptom. Pain is a warning to us of bodily dangers.”

“And who created the dangers?” Yossarian demanded. He laughed caustically. “Oh, He was really being charitable to us when He gave us pain. Why couldn’t He have used a doorbell instead to notify us, or one of His celestial choirs? Or a system of blue-and-red neon tubes right in the middle of each person’s forehead. Any jukebox manufacturer worth his salt could have done that. Why couldn’t He?”

“People would certainly look silly walking around with red neon tubes in the middle of their foreheads.”

“They certainly look beautiful now writhing in agony or stupefied with morphine, don’t they? What a colossal, immortal blunderer! When you consider the opportunity and power He had to really do a job, and then look at the stupid, ugly little mess He made of it instead. His sheer incompetence is almost staggering. It’s obvious He never met a payroll. Why, no self-respecting businessman would hire a bungler like Him as even a shipping clerk!”

Lieutenant Scheisskopf’s wife had turned ashen in disbelief and was ogling him with alarm. “You’d better not talk that way about Him, honey,” she warned him reprovingly in a low and hostile voice. “He might punish you.”

“Isn’t He punishing me enough?” Yossarian snorted resentfully. “You know, we mustn’t let Him get away with it. Oh, no, we certainly mustn’t let Him get away free for all the sorrow He’s caused us. Someday I’m going to make Him pay. I know when. On the Judgment Day. Yes, that’s the day I’ll be close enough to reach out and grab that little yokel by His neck and—”

“Stop it I Stop it!” Lieutenant Scheisskopf’s wife screamed suddenly, and began beating him ineffectually about the head with both fists. “Stop it!”

Yossarian ducked behind his arm for protection while she slammed away at him in feminine fury for a few seconds, and then he caught her determinedly by the wrists and forced her gently back down on the bed. “What the hell are you getting so upset about?” he asked her bewilderedly in a tone of contrite amusement. “I thought you didn’t believe in God.”

“I don’t,” she sobbed, bursting violently into tears. “But the God I don’t believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He’s not the mean and stupid God you make Him out to be.”

(Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*)