

Catch 22

Issy was the type of girl who, if you told her a story about the time your great aunt Mildred had to have surgery to remove her kidney stones, would listen quietly and smile until every last stone had been successfully removed. She had a particular smile for stories like that, well rehearsed and reserved for the lower half of her face, never extending above the bridge of her nose. It really wasn't that convincing a smile, all things considered, but then, when the great nieces and nephews of the great aunt Mildreds of this world have a story to tell, the subtleties of non-verbal communication are often forced to take a backseat.

When George saw Issy for the first time, she smiled at him, and George was convinced. He didn't know much about Issy at the time, except for her name. And he only knew that because they were in the same Spanish class. On the first day of class Issy sat down opposite George and when he looked at her she caught his eye and smiled at him before George could finish looking away. It was love at first half-a-glance for George and, brief though it was, he filled the glance with every kind of meaning that occurred to him, which meaning, he was now sure, was very insignificant, such as it was, outside of her eyes. After class, George rushed out of the classroom, coat and bag in hand, glancing quickly over his shoulder at Issy, who was busy zipping up her jacket.

Issy was an exchange student from France, staying in Chicago for the year. She was planning on spending six months at the university and six months working and traveling before going back home. George didn't know any of this, of course. To him, Issy was just the girl from his Spanish class. Had he known, he might have spoken to her sooner or louder or not at all. As it was, he kept his distance.

One day after class, Issy was talking to a boy named Marcus. George walked behind the two of them, careful to never get too close, picking up the louder moments of their conversations as they drifted down the hall. "Do you like Catch 22?"

"Yes," said Issy.

"Did you know that Catch 22 was originally published in Playboy magazine?"

"Oh"

"Do you know what Playboy is? It's like a pornographic magazine."

"I've heard of it."

They paused for a moment at the end of the hall when it became apparent they were headed in different directions. "Are you going that way?"

"Yes, to the classics building," said Issy.

"Clas—"

"Bye," said Issy.

"Oh. Bye."

George was struck with a little shiver of excitement when he heard Issy say she was going to the classics building. He was going there too, to the library on the third floor. George walked more slowly than usual and he watched Issy as she walked. She walked sluggishly, dragging her feet a little, head cocked to one side, like a child after a tantrum. But it wasn't so much like she was sulking, it was more as if she had something important on her mind, something worthy, slowing

her down. George looked at her eyes also, which were looking somewhere else. He followed her down the hall and onto and across the quad and he watched her enter the classics building, where George followed a moment later, losing sight of her in the crowd.

Issy was talking to another boy after Spanish the next day. His name was Danny. He was tall and his face had a little smirk on it like he knew something nobody else did, but George was sure he didn't know George wanted to hit him right in the face, right in the middle of his smirk. He was sure, also Danny didn't know his name. Issy walked just the same, day dreamingly, drag footed.

"Where are you from in France?"

"Marseille," she said.

"Do you like it there?"

"Yes," said Issy.

"Where are you going now?" Issy paused. "Where—"

"Classics building," said Issy.

"Oh," said Danny, "For what?"

"What?"

"Which class?"

"It's English lit. It's about Catch 22."

"You know Catch 22 was originally published in Playboy Magazine." Issy smiled. "It's, like, kind of a porn magazine, you know, porn?"

"Okay."

"Yeah, most people don't know that," said Danny.

"I think Marcus does"

"Oh, who's—"

"The other boy in our class, that one," Issy pointed at Marcus.

"Oh," Michael laughed, and his smirk went away for a moment.

On Wednesday, Issy was talking to Tyler. "I went to France once," he said, "Paris... It was pretty cool, I guess. You know what was disappointing, though? The Mona Lisa. I'm not into art or anything, but it was real small. Could barely get near the thing anyway. I went with my aunt and uncle. My aunt's this crazy lady, she's got a hoarding problem. You know, hoarding?" Issy nodded, smiling. "Yeah, it's hard for my uncle. He can't go take a piss in his own home cause of all the junk in the way. He built an extension on the house so she could put all her crap in it. So my aunt kept buying all of these little souvenir eiffel towers. Said she was gonna start a collection. Eiffel tower collection. And my uncles all like, 'why in the hell do you need a collection of eiffel towers? The real one's right over there.' That didn't stop my aunt though, Jennifer. She's a wild lady. You from Paris?"

"No," said Issy

"No? Where you from?"

"Marseille"

"I've never been there. What class you got now?"

"English. It's about Catch 22"

"You know Catch 22 was originally published in Playboy magazine?"

George made a habit out of going to the classics building after Spanish, checking up on Issy and whichever guy was brave enough to talk to her that day. He would hear snippets of their

conversations, their ums and ahs, their awkwardness. All their stuttering made George happy and he would sit smug in the classics library thinking about all the conversations he wasn't having with her. His friends thought he was crazy.

"It's creepy, dude. You're just following this girl."

"I don't know," said George, "I was already going to classics."

"Yeah, but you don't have to watch her like that."

"What do you want me to do? Walk backwards?"

"Does she even know your name?" "I don't know," George shrugged his shoulders, "does it matter?"

"Yes."

On Monday it was Stephen. "Why did you come to America?"

"I'd never been before," said Issy, "my university back home had a program so I did it."

"Your English is very good."

"Thanks. I have been to England a lot. My grandmother is English, she lives there."

"Yeah? Whereabouts?"

"London."

"I would've preferred to spend a year in London than Chicago."

"Not me. I've been to London. Chicago's a very cool place."

"So is London."

"Yeah, but London knows it."

"Maybe you're right." "I am right," Issy smiled. "I've got to go."

"Bye," said Stephen.

"Bye."

It was Stephen on Tuesday as well. "How's it going?"

"I'm good," said Issy, "How are you?"

"Not too bad."

"Where are you from, I didn't ask you before."

"I'm from Chicago. Northwest suburbs."

"Oh," said Issy.

"What?"

"That's why you don't like it."

"What do you mean?"

"No one likes where they're from."

"Is that why you left?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to go back?"

"Yeah."

"Why? If it's so bad."

"My Visa, for one. Besides, it's still where I'm from. Liking is only half the question."

"Yeah, what's the other half?"

"I'm not sure. I still want to go back."

"Let me know if you figure it out."

George, meanwhile, was on the edge of some sort of breakthrough. He had known for a long

time, possibly from the moment he first half-glanced her, that one day he would have to talk to Issy. George was not particularly attractive, though he wasn't ugly. He didn't charm women the way some of his friends did, or tried to, his method was more one of endurance. Love by proximity. But Issy wasn't the type of person to be swept off her feet either. In fact, George couldn't really understand why everyone found her so approachable. She was so quiet. Maybe quiet men are attracted to quiet women. Maybe they like to sit together in silence. George's friends didn't get it.

"Will you stop. Either talk to her or don't. I don't care. But stop telling me about this girl you've never met."

"Alright, man, relax." "Sorry. I'm a little stressed out. I just spoke to my mother on the phone forever. Apparently her sister needs to have some sort of kidney stone operation. It's an invasive procedure. It's kind of disgusting."

"Well shit, thanks for sharing."

"Oh, so now you have a problem with sharing."

"Fair point."

"What do you care anyway? She's going back to France in a year as it is."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. She really is gorgeous though."

"Then ask her out. A year's a long time."

"You're not good at this. I've got to go. I hope your aunt's kidney's are alright."

"Fuck you. That was serious."

"Later."

"Bye."

Tyler was back at it on Wednesday with the latest news about his hoarding aunt. "My uncle had to stage this kind of intervention. It was the weirdest thing I've ever done in my life. My whole family's sitting in the extension to my uncle's house, you know, where my aunt hoards all her crap, and we had to explain how her hoarding had affected us as individuals. Shit, I didn't have a clue what to say so I started talking about the trip to Paris. Like, I couldn't enjoy myself because she was too busy purchasing eiffel towers. And her box of eiffel towers happened, just by chance, to be open in the middle of the room and she bursts out in tears and she's hugging me and trying to apologize. I don't give a damn about her eiffel towers. I was like ten years old on that trip, I barely remember the fucking eiffel towers."

"Wow," said Issy.

"Yeah, right? Your family must be crazy too though, right? I mean, everyone's got a crazy family."

"No," said Issy, "Mine is normal."

"I don't believe you."

"Okay."

"What?"

"I said, 'okay,'" said Issy.

"Oh."

The two of them walked in silence after that. Tyler would occasionally look down at Issy, but she kept on walking, staring straight ahead. Neither of them said goodbye.

Stephen was back the next day. Issy smile when she saw him. "Hey."

"What's up?"

“Not much, just going to class. I’ve got a quiz.”

“That sucks. What’s it about?”

“Catch 22, the book.”

“Never read it,” said Stephen.

“Oh, it’s really good, you should read it. You know, it was originally published in Playboy magazine?”

“I didn’t know you read Playboy magazine.”

“Funny guy.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with Playboy.”

“No, there isn’t.”

George was only half paying attention to the conversation when Marcus ran past him. Marcus was wearing a wooly hat that was pulled down over his forehead, stopping right where his glasses started so that he had to bend his head back to get a proper look at people. “Issy, wait,” he said. Issy turned around. “What is it?”

“I was wrong.”

“About what?”

“About Playboy, about Catch 22.” “Oh.”

“Catch 22 didn’t appear in Playboy originally. I was wrong. Joseph Heller wrote a short story called *Yossarian Survives*. That story was published in Playboy nearly twenty years after Catch 22. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” said Issy, “I didn’t tell very many people.”

“Okay, good. Good.” Marcus was a little out of breath. “I don’t know where I got that idea from. The short story was a spin off of Catch 22, though. Apparently Heller thought about including it in the real book.”

“But he didn’t.”

“No. No, he didn’t.”

“Too bad.”

“Yes. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. Sorry about the confusion.”

“It’s okay.”

“Bye.”

Issy turned to Stephen, who looked back at her, confused. Issy started laughing. “He seemed very flustered,” said Stephen.

“Yeah. It was very nice of him, though. You almost believed me for a minute.”

“Yeah, that really would’ve been a tragedy.”

On Friday, George was ready. Issy was wearing a dark blue dress with a small pocket on the left side, just below her hip. As students filed out of class, George walked over to Issy and, amid a murmur of adioses and hasta luegos, said hello. “Hi,” said Issy.

“I’m George.”

“I know,” said Issy, “We’ve been in the same class for a month.”

“I know, I was just trying to be polite. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“How come you’re doing Spanish?” said George.

“I don’t really know. I took it before once, I thought it might be fun.”

“Where you headed now?”

“Classics building.”

“No kidding,” said George, “me too.”

“Do you have a class in there?”

“No, I like the library. No one ever uses it. What about you, you have a class?”

“Yeah.”

“Which one?”

“It’s English lit. About Catch 22.”

“That’s a good book.”

“I like it.”

“Are you studying English lit?”

“Yes, probably.”

“What’s your favorite book?”

“I don’t know. I like a lot of books.”

“One of your favorites then.”

“I like funny books,” Issy said.

“Yeah, Catch 22’s funny.”

“It’s one of my favorites.” Issy stopped.

“Anything else?”

“I like Kurt Vonnegut too. He’s very funny.”

“You know,” said George, “most people don’t know this, but Kurt Vonnegut was published in Playboy magazine.”