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Abstract

The Korean woman what tell Jerry to bring some Frank Sinatra records for me (I don't know what kiskadee tell she I even listen to Frank Sinatra record), that same bitch pushing her mouth against my ears as if is a trumpet, getting on just like that writer feller what look at a big man like me and tell me he love me.

KEN RAMCHAND

The Patient (for Michael, Leslie and Debbie)

Editor's Note: *This story is based upon the last weeks in the life of Sam Selvon who died in a hospital in Trinidad.*

The Korean woman what tell Jerry to bring some Frank Sinatra records for me (I don't know what kiskadee tell she I even listen to Frank Sinatra record), that same bitch pushing her mouth against my ears as if is a trumpet, getting on just like that writer feller what look at a big man like me and tell me he love me.

She come to announce that they carrying me to Canada in a special plane: 'Saam, Saam darling, I know you're hearing me, Saam, I have something to tell you but you mustn't get angry you hearing me? I want you to be a good boy?'

What the ass is this? Who have more causes to be obedient more than me? Who could want this sickness to pass more than me?

Afterwards, the boy in whose veins the poem sang left his companions sitting on the steps of the railway station and wandered off for more poetry, discovering it in the sleeping village and the flower-strewn lane by the cemetery, and in the flowers which appeared to explode into efflorescence. A clear stream ran through the village. Engraved on a clock high on the steeple of an old church were the words. 'Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.'

It surprise everybody how meek I get in the hospital. I abide by all the rules, and I follow every instruction. Keep my mouth quiet when I know the care is not intensive care. Kick up no fuss when a female patient whose head can't be right, leave her own bed and come to lay down in mine, and nearly tangle on all them wires and hoses that tying me down. Make no complaint when a nurse get confuse and try to give me a tablet and I know, from the colour, that is a tablet the doctor who come this morning decide he not giving me again.

I have no dignity in it this helplessness. I keep still while they do all the shit that they have to do for me. I don't flinch when they invent some new procedure, some new pain that they have to inflict. I make no complaints. Sometimes I think I will go mad on this hopeless, heartless mount, but I refuse. If it is time they want to clear up what has to clear up, is all right, I am fighting. I am giving them time.

Blinding shocking sensations crossed crisscross in his brain as the little men

began their macabre work. He longed for death as the blunt pegs thudded against and split open the skin of his forehead, then met unresisting bone. Armies marched in his brain, all the drums in the world boomed, cymbal clashed, the Kalteur Falls roared. And yet, with a grimness impossible to conceive he clung tenaciously to reason, preferring to die than be driven into the looming limbo of the ring of deep purple, and everytime he thought that he could bear it no more, some itch of life stirred and came forward.

Haul all you ass, little men.

The first time the hospital send me home was a happy time. I remind the short bitch how he make me go outside in the Colgate snow everytime I want to light up and smoke. Then I tell him not to worry it wouldn't happen again, I finish with that, boy. If they are looking for a famous face to advertise how smoking is bad, and how liquor will lick you up before your time, they don't have to look far, they could come and take out my photo any day.

Three times they let me out, and is three times I had was to go back. The Black Englishwoman tell Junior they didn't really have to admit me again, but they like to be absolutely sure.

When they let me go for the third time, they still telling me I can't leave right away. They playing up in they ass. I didn't want to wait to ten days again just for them to make sure I could go by myself. But seven days pass and I am feeling so nice, I start to believe I will travel on Sunday for sure. I drink a cold Carib because the doctors say one drink a day is good medicine for the heart. I almost feel I could take a smoke. The temptation strong. But not me, boy. A year or two from now when I forget the terror I pass through. I have a feeling the battle will be hard. But not now. Not so soon.

But Friday morning it is fever and pain, and when Junior come for us to drink some coffee before the Test match start, I don't have the pride to put on appearance to fool no man. I have to hold on to the walking stick with two hands, bend my head over; and let my belly squeeze in order to breathe. The Black English doctor ask me some fucking questions she shouldn't be asking a man of my age, and shouldn't be asking after I in the hospital so long. I am glad Junior didn't hear because he would have make some joke about how I am just like Syl and I can't even recognise a drawing of the thing, and how it is so long since I bounce up one he could bet I wouldn't know the difference between a picture of it and a dry coconut.

I feel as if I am dying this time. As if something clog and the air reach a wall at the top of my nose, and when I pull with my mouth, air jamming again at the back of my throat. I can't believe it. These mother asses don't know what is wrong with me. They are putting me under observation which mean I have to lie down, and they are going to wait and see.

For three days nobody observe that I am fighting for air. On Sunday I prop up in the bed struggling as usual to breathe, and the nurse get up

and leave saying your friend come. The next thing I know is like Junior gone crazy in the place. I hear him telling somebody he don't care one fuck, he is a fucking doctor too, and he know that fucking man stifling, and they better find some way of giving him some fucking oxygen before he dead. The fucking man he talking about is me. If I wasn't frighten before, I frighten no arse now.

By Sunday night they have me on something called a life-support system. They tell everybody they ventilating me. Ventilating. After weeks and weeks of 'Nothing ain't wrong is only the medication to adjust', they change they mind and decide the problem is the lungs. The Black woman with the English accent say in she funny voice that the lungs full of Gunk. If is scrabble she playing, I could think of plenty other four letter words.

Weeks now of the needle's prick, of black and blue and red, of the flesh bruised and dug up and plastered over, of tubes in my mouth, in my nose, in my throat, and in openings drilled in chest, in neck, in arm, in leg. I studying how I am paying all this money and they are tearing me up, and just so I start to remember the song they teach you to sing when you small and stupid in school. *Je te plumerai la tete. Et le nez. Et le dos. Oh Oh.* They suctioning through my mouth, they suctioning through my nose, and the same Korean woman wants to make a by-pass and suction through an opening she will cut in my chest.

Every day is a different doctor, everyday is a different story. Each new doctor have his favourite medicine he itching to try. You remember 'goes in goes out' where who get the ball, bowl and whoever knock down the wicket, bat? It is goes in goes out they playing on my head, and every man Ambrose pelting ball at my arse. If things wasn't so serious in truth, I could raise a laugh and make a ballad out of these hospital blues.

I am a man of words and I could tell you, the metaphors and similies these doctors using would put Lamming and Naipaul to shame. Some of them playing police and thief, some of them fighting guerrilla war. Hear them. They can't make a positive i.d. but they have some clues. They eliminate some suspects, and they closing in on the elusive bacteria. Getting on as if they want to hold press conference to announce they have a strong lead, but time after time, the lead led to nothing in the end. The pot-belly man say he can't be sure if the one they pin-point is the culprit for true, or just an innocent bystander. Assness.

I should be glad they put me in a coma to keep me alive, but this is not the way I want to live. Day in day out, I can't talk, I can't eat, I can't drink, I can't pee, I can't shit. Most of the time, the shapes and colours that cross my eyes are shadows I can't name. If I imagine hard, some of the sounds I hear turn into words. I know in my heart of hearts that I am going. The day Jerry and Junior look at me and say I had lovely skin and now they looking at dead man's flesh, water tried to come to my eyes: I am angry that it is ending like this, but I try to tell myself there is always

an ending. I have always known.

There is a joy in living because you know you are going to die, and nothing can affect that one way or another. But what I am deeply afraid of is that when the final call comes, I may break down and become a jibbering piece of frightened humanity.

But when the *bodi* vine finish bearing aint it does dead? Everything does dead when it finish the work it have to do. Still for all that I am glad this dying is slow. Have I finished my work? This absorbing silence is an infinite space, and I have drifted in it towards truths that give fight to words. The work I have done. The work I did not do.

There is greatness in the written word, and when men die what they have said will live and sing for other hearts.

Aspirations of the artist as a young man. Sunlight. Thunder. Islands. Worlds. Pinpricks on an unmarked sky. Little drops of water. Little lights.

I lie and think of those I love and those who love me, I have never been this close to the woman since those windy days, and I cannot even raise a finger to let her know.

My girl, she is beautiful to look at. I have seen her in sunlight and in moonlight, and her face carves an exquisite shape in darkness. These things we talk, I burst out, why musn't I say them? If I love you, why shouldn't I tell you so? I love London she said.

All the words I have gathered to say to her at last. I had gathered many times before, and always when I reached to the edge of utterance, something would happen to make me hold back, as if saying the truth would be too complete a surrender, as if I must wait and let her be the one to break the silence, as if the heart that sang in the darkness of the lonely city could not free itself from its own choking. 'What's the Use', as if love's innocent life-line snaps as soon as it starts to find out about life.

I have not said it, but she knows it now.

Eh, eh. All of a sudden the great hospital changing their tune. The long 'Je te plumerai' is over. They have plumerai'd me into silence, immobility and the odour of death. *They have done all they can. They cannot find the bacteria. If I improve, it will not be because of anything they do. The best course now is to send me abroad. It might be a virus and the colder countries have more experience with viruses.*

I smile to myself, and Junior is looking at me as if he is expecting me to say 'What fuckery'. I do not know what a nancy story they spin for the insurance company to spend all that money and send flying ambulance for me.

My wife, she loves me, and she wants me to come home. Oh, but when I think. Still, if this journey and this peace between the woman and me can bring some healing, and make me at last the father and family man I have been in my secret heart, my spirit shall return to day and life like a backward sunset.

My private jet is waiting. But I know what the native legend says.

Whether I go or whether I stay is not for me to decide. I don't know what will happen when they move me from this bed. I don't know what will happen on the road to the airport. I can't tell what will happen when they try to load me onto the aeroplane.

The land knows, I have always trusted the land. Whatever it decides will bring me peace.

Leaving the island this time; there was a great deal of anguish because so much had been left unsaid and undone...let cockcrow and early bird whistle make the decision for me: let the green mountain spin a coin in the first rays of the sun, and when it was light enough I'd enlist the crystals of dew and the gossamer strands that spiders had miraculously spun in space, and pass the buck to them too.

I have always loved the land (even more than the people) and it was not too much to ask. Whatever the land gave I took without question, and it had sent me away and it had brought me back, and it had a certain responsibility which it respected.