Terminus

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Abstract
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The madman hit her one morning when she was on her way to school. The terminus was crowded, and many people saw the man stop rooting around in a garbage bin to race over and hit her on the shoulder.

‘But, Jesuschrist, look how that blasted madman lick the pickney and dirty up her nice white blouse, eh?’ a fat higgler said.

Jeri had turned seventeen that day and for the occasion she had taken special care with her uniform. It had been spotless before the blow. Now the man stood staring at her with his broad grin. She felt like giving him a good box, but his grime restrained her. It was hard to tell his real complexion because he was covered in what seemed like black grease. His hair was matted and filthy, his feet bare. He had on no shirt, and his black pants had frayed into a loincloth. He stank.

She had seen him, and others like him, before at the terminus, always searching the garbage bins for food, but she had never looked directly at them. Mad people could be dangerous. She wondered why this one had chosen to attack her that morning. But as his bloodshot eyes stared into hers, she didn’t dare ask. She moved quickly away and joined the crowd shoving to get into the bus that had just arrived. When she reached school, she told her friend Anne-Marie about the man, and Anne-Marie said: ‘Is a whole heap of dem out dere now, you know. My mother say is hard times causing it, but mi father swear is ganja cause it. All dem people you see smoking it dese days, some of dem goin’ stark raving mad.’

She looked at Jeri. ‘You ever smoke it?’ Jeri shook her head.

‘My brother say it make you feel nice-nice,’ Anne-Marie said.

The next day, the madman was at the terminus again. She tried to avoid looking at him but she was aware of everything he did. He searched through the rubbish with one hand, immediately eating any food he found. When he’d had enough he came towards Jeri. People watched him and moved out of his way, some fanning their noses. Jeri moved with the others, trying to lose the madman; but he stalked her, wearing his foolish grin the whole time. The game continued for about five minutes, then Jeri’s fright turned to anger. She stopped trying to evade him and went to stand at the door of Mother’s Patty Shop, at the corner of the terminus. She stiffened as he came up to her, but he stopped three feet away and stretched out his hand.

‘You want it?’ he asked. She slowly looked away from his face and
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looked at his hand. A dirty piece of bread lay on his palm.
She raised her eyes again and shook her head.
'I ate breakfast already,' she said.
His grin went. His lower lip trembled. He turned and walked away.
She was afraid to go to the terminus the next day. She told her
mother and father about him and her father drove her to school. But
her father had to be at work by seven, which meant that when he
dropped her off she had to wait an hour for her first class. She didn't
mind being early for the rest of the week but the next Monday she
began taking the bus again.

The madman grinned happily when he saw her. But she managed to
push her way onto a bus before he could come near. He tried to enter
the bus too but the conductor, a thick young man whose neck was
concealed by gold chains, kicked him in the chest.
'Don't come on dis-ya bus wid you stinking-rass self,' he shouted.
The passengers laughed, and the conductor slapped the side of the bus
to tell the driver it was time to go. When Jeri looked through the rear
window, she saw the madman running after the bus. The people round
her, packed batty-tight, twisted to get a look and bellowed with
laughter. Those in the front of the bus thought the usual morning
quarrel had broken out.

The madman stopped as the bus drew away from him, and Jeri spent
the rest of the journey hating the conductor. She promised herself
she'd be nice to the madman if he was there the next morning. He
wasn't.

The King George Bus Terminus was a rectangle, which everyone said
was too narrow for its purpose but which would stay that way forever.
On one long side of the rectangle were Mother's Patty Shop, a Bata
shoe store, The National Bakery and a big pharmacy that sold
postcards, jewelry, toys, wigs, drinks ... everything but medicine.
On the opposite side of the terminus was a high red-brick wall
shielding the police compound. Sometimes swirls of smoke rose up
above the wall as the policemen burned sacks of ganja they had seized.
The terminus would then be filled with the herb's unmistakable aroma.
It was a smell that reminded different people of different things. For
Jeri, it brought to mind Sunday mass, a different kind of incense to a
different God.

The buses always raced into the terminus at breakneck speed,
spinning round the corner to screech to a stop alongside the police
wall. They came out one at a time, invariably late, and people from
every part of the rectangle converged in a frantic rush. The more
athletic climbed through the windows while others elbowed their way
in. The trick was to position yourself in front of a robust-looking person
and have him push you in along with himself. Jeri had developed this
into an art after much practice; she hardly had to exert any energy now.
But the madman brought her a better system.

He reappeared at the terminus three days after the conductor had
kicked him. Grimy as ever, he now carried a machete. People hurried away when he approached them. Once, when his eyes met Jeri’s before she could look away, he waved lazily and grinned. She sweated as he looked through the garbage bags in front of the bakery before sauntering toward her. The strength to run left her and she stood shaking, watching him approach. He stopped about two feet away.

‘You missed me?’

‘Yes,’ she said softly, as if talking with a friend. ‘What happened to you?’

‘I was sick, bad-bad.’

‘So, you alright now?’ His stench was killing her.

‘Yes ...’ The rest of what he said was lost as a bus screamed round the corner. Before it stopped, the madman ran off, holding his machete in the air. Would-be passengers saw him and held back their own rush. When he reached the door, he stopped and beckoned to Jeri. Confused and surprised, she didn’t budge for a few seconds, then she walked slowly into the bus, her shoulders hunched in embarrassment. When he moved off, letting the others resume their fight to enter the bus, she took a book from her bag and spent the whole journey with her eyes on one page. But she couldn’t help hearing the laughter and talk about the madman.

‘Must be her boyfriend, no?’ someone said, and the whole bus roared.

For the next few weeks, Jeri was always the first one on the bus, and the scene at the terminus became a familiar one, everyone accepting her special status with immense merriment.

Jeri was no longer afraid of the madman but she couldn’t get used to the way people looked at her and grinned as soon as she came into the terminus. When they saw her, they immediately looked round for him. Once or twice he wasn’t there and she wondered if his germs had finally got to him. If he never bathed and ate only from the garbage, how could he continue living? Her father said he had probably developed immunity to every germ. Jeri’s father was worried about her but she told him the madman would never hurt her, he would just turn her into a nervous wreck.

‘I don’t know what to do, you know,’ she said to Anne-Marie at school. ‘I feel sorry for him but the whole t’ing getting on mi nerves. I can’t even study any more. Dis man goin’ to make me fail mi exams.’

But Anne-Marie, ever calm, told Jeri not to worry. ‘Cho, mad people all over the place now. You see the two woman-dem who set up shack outside the school gate? Yesterday, Sister Theresa go out to tell them to move and she have to pick up her fat foot and make tracks when they start fling all kinda things after her. One old Dutch-pot just miss her head. Heh-heh. I laugh till I nearly dead.’

Jeri’s madman was just one of dozens roaming the city. All the call-in programmes on the radio nowadays were about the high number of madpeople in the country. The discussions mostly centered on the causes of the problem and on just what to call the mad people. ‘They
are mentally ill, mentally ill, not mad,' some priest kept on saying on every talk show.

But callers to the programme didn't care about such distinctions because many of the madpeople were dangerous. They threw rocks at cars, they sometimes walked around stark naked, they pissed and shat wherever they pleased, and quite a few of them had machetes and knives. One day, one of them threw a rock at the prime minister's car, and that provided a week of very good radio shows.

'Don't trouble them and they won't trouble you,' the priest insisted, and the government tried to ban him from the air but that caused such an uproar among callers that he was finally left alone. The priest brought in a famous psychiatrist to appeal to people to stop using ganja. A lot of sensible doctors thought ganja was the cause of the growing madness.

It was true that more and more people were smoking the herb or brewing it to make tea. Mothers and fathers who had warned their children never even to look at ganja were now growing it in their backyards. When the price of saltfish jumped fivefold, the family all sat down and had a smoke. When the national currency plummeted from five-for-one-U.S. to 32-for-one, people mixed a little ganja into their dumpling batter and found they didn't give a damn. Lots of families discovered that a big cup of good strong ganja tea in the morning made the day bearable: you could listen to the politicians on the radio without going off your rocker.

But things were now getting out of hand. Madpeople hung out in front of supermarkets, with their hands outstretched, calling sane shoppers 'John-crow' and 'dutty dawg' if the shoppers gave them nothing. Sometimes they walked into a church, pushed aside the pastor and took over the service until a few bold souls physically threw them out. One Tuesday, about five of them got into Gordon House, the parliament building, and threw rotten oranges and soursops at the leader of the opposition, who for the first time ever agreed with the prime minister: something had to be done.

The politicians summoned the radio-priest and had a long talk with him. The next day the priest launched a help-the-mentally-ill campaign, and all the Church-goers in the country joined in with gusto, including the students and teachers at Jeri's school. They rounded up tens of madpeople, coaxed them into vans, washed them, cut their hair, gave them new clothes, and put them into Bella Vista Hospital for the Mentally Insane. Nearly all of them escaped within a month.

Jeri's madman was among those the Catholics tried to help. They scrubbed him with Carbolic soap, shaved his head, dressed him in a donated blue polyester suit and got him admitted to Bella Vista.

Jeri told her mother and father about the clean-up operation and her father said, 'Mmm, I bet you he goin' get sick from all that cleanliness.' But he didn't get ill. He walked out of Bella Vista in all his finery and came to find Jeri at the terminus. Nobody else recognized him as the
garbage-scrounger of before. He looked like Tony Parnell, the Indian TV announcer whom all the women were in love with.

‘You like mi jacket?’ he asked Jeri.

‘Yes,’ she said shyly. ‘It’s nice.’

‘So, mi dear, what you doing Sat-day night,’ he asked next, watching her stiffen. ‘Come go out with me, no?’

‘Sorry, I have to study,’ Jeri said quickly and ran off to push into a bus that had just arrived. He stared after her.

‘You know, is too bad him mad,’ Jeri told Anne-Marie. ‘He look so damn good now.’

She didn’t see him for three weeks. Then, there he was one morning, searching through the garbage. Jeri was shocked at how soiled the clothes the priests had given him were. He was like her dog Tarzan: bathe him and he ran to roll in the dirt.

She kept her eyes on the police wall when he came up to her that morning. He stopped a few feet away but she could still smell him.

‘You don’t like me no more,’ he said. She slowly turned her head and they stared at each other.

‘You want some bread?’ he asked, coming closer and stretching out his arm. She pushed his hand away, touching him for the first time.

‘No, I had breakfast already.’ He walked off and she was left to fight her way unaided into the bus.

Two days later he was back with his machete but he ignored her, concentrating on the garbage bins.

‘I shoulda gone out with him. Just one time,’ she told Anne-Marie.

‘You must be damn mad,’ Anne-Marie said.

She and Anne-Marie graduated at the end of that semester and after the summer holidays both started university. Jeri hardly travelled by bus now because she lived on campus and when she came home for the weekend, her father drove her back to the university. So she never saw the madman any more.

One day, about a year after she’d started university, she read in The Star that the police had shot and killed an ‘apparently mentally ill man’, after he had attacked a bus conductor with a machete at the King George Bus Terminus. He had ‘severed’ the conductor’s arm and the man was still in hospital, ‘suffering from shock’. It was the fifth ‘mentally ill’ person killed by police that week.

Although there was no picture, Jeri knew it was her madman who had chopped the bus conductor. And as she lay on her bed in the dormitory, with The Star beside her, the smells of the terminus flooded into the little room. The rich head-filling smell of pastry and meat from Mother’s Patty Shop, the acrid taste of the black fumes from the buses, the sweet aroma of burning ganja – incense for a different God.

‘I shoulda asked him his name,’ Jeri whispered to herself. She curled up on her bed and sucked in the smoke that was slowly filling her dorm room.