

You Are Not That Different After All
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You Are Not That Different After All
By
Mohammed Ben-Aharon

Empathy is that arm on your shoulder when you have just lost your arm.

Today.

2am. "Go on inside babies. Go on inside. Go on inside and fuck them all. You know what you do best. Just do them. Kill everything around. Fuck em' all."

I pet them and sent them in. You should have simply seen the way those small 8-inch ones scurried their way inside under the iron shutter - even God would have built desires on being so little and going totally ribald. Always I had wondered what it would be like to be so little and get into places and be not reprimanded.

Their thermoregulatory tails postdated their handful torsos as their blunt chatterry fangs dove out of the restless edge of their mouths to caucus some heavy duty chaos inside the dry cleaning store.

Last Night

10:30pm.

"This is outrageous . . . we'd agreed upon 1500!" I outcried amid the rag picker's nurture of his stale half foot long beard with his jagged fingertips. His ankle pointer bones on both sides begged to catch hold of his skimping trouser cuff.

Coolly, with niggardly interest in wanting to maid a bargain, he showed me his eye - which may have been a mistress' cousin to what recalled the infamous Dwayne Johnson's WWF one raised eyebrow 'really?' look. "Kaye, A'chually 3000."

"What?" My ears and jaw both were dropped, together, in stupendous awe.

He had just quoted 2000. Now he suddenly sat on the nest for 3000.

"Cages. Who gona pay for it?"

He ought to have told me that before, right?

"What is the total amount?" I asked him. If there is one thing I cannot do for sure and do another thing for cocksure is - not talk for what really is on my mind, and resent afterward for not having talked then, in that moment of encumbrance.

X

3000 only felt appropriate for 100 rats and 3 solid metallic cages, apparently which were also light in weight. Now I don't know if these cages were worth 1500, either way, there is pretty much nothing I can do about it.

97 days ago

7am. The time I woke up, everyday. To go to work. Or much rather, to catch my slot in the bathroom. Else my little sister would steam it. Having one bathroom in a two bedroom apartment is a problem. Believe you, me. And when her friends turn up for a stayover, it cannot get worse.

8:30am, all set and my shoe laces flapped as sloppy outlined butterfly wings. My sister takes the bathroom. I got out the door, pulled the door after me and inserted the key into the hole.

Damn. How could I forget! I pounded the air in front of the door.

I pushed the door in, and drift-walked on the outer ridge of my shoes on the floor, as if I was carrying shit between my legs. Mother hated it when we walked around in the house with outdoor footwear (she'd visit the house every morning at 11, with the maid after sister left for college). She lived at the end of the street with dad. They bought this apartment a few months ago, and didn't want to rent it out, so you know . . . my sister and me live here. It is . . . in a way, good - since the old house only had two bedrooms, and my sister and me had to share that bedroom, which was turning out to be a little improper . . . as she was growing up quickly and I quite simply had to have my own room.

"There you are", I exclaimed. To the pants. My only well-fitting corduroy pants.

In a polythene bag, I put the pants and carried it with me.

X

"What is wrong with you? Homos wear this colour." My ex' had bit, without eating up on any word she had meant to convey in brevity about my corduroy pants. After we broke up (I don't think it was because of the pants), a decision was made to re'dye the pants. Preferably in to a colour more acceptable. Black.

In a while . . .

After the bike revved with the fourth or fifth kick, I sat on the bike and put my hands together looking at the Sun. He was diffident in the sky. I closed my eyes and prayed that he stay with me through the day; stand by my mother, father and sister in protection, and murmured a sacred chant, mother had asked me to recite every morning after bath. She said that it would bring me success.

Passing by the lanes from my residence, the inquisition of whether or not to give my pants away for a dye drew me to sheer exhaustion. One last turn on the right and I am connected to the main road, after which, there are no stores to give the pants to, even if I wanted.

X

"One shirt and one pant?" Recessioned from enthusiasm, the store owner asked me - whilst I was checking out the tissues of the store. I had been used to seeing this store on my way home. Roughly about a minute before I got back home, I would see this store - with tube lights in full swing, both outside and inside. There'd also be a three-legged stool by the entrance table-box, right at the onset of the store, and standing in that spot near that stool, I answered. "Of course." The shirt was already in my office bag. Only the pants I'd seemed to have missed from carrying with me, while I was leaving for work. A few months ago, mom had put this light blue shirt along with a few red things in wash, and there you can imagine what might have happened of the 'light blue' shirt. After the wash mishap, the racially slurred shirt looked like it had committed murder and tried really hard to remove all traces of its dark act, but in vain. "So, I come collect it this evening?"

"Today?" Owner said it back in mock as if me having asked that simple question must mean that I have certain disassociations with reality. Indulging in a snigger and a herd of pride he adds, "Sir, it is 'DYEING'. Dyeing minimum takes one week!" The look on his face was dear. As though he were God, and had just then disclosed to Noah, the architecture to building the arc that could save all major forms of life the curious mind might dwell on for later generations. Two workmen inside were pressing clothes. Both were topless. One wore a lungi and the other a panche. If you ask me what the difference is between a lungi and panche, I'd have to say that a lungi is one for casual wear. It is one that is colourful and something playful. Panche, on the other hemisphere is usually white in colour, and is *mostly* used for formal occasions. So this workman in lungi shares a pie in giggle of the boss' pride on me.

My follow up question, "So there is no way this can be done today" now made little sense as the owner had already begun to mark the receipt for my requirement.

From a rack in the first compartment in the glass table-box that separated the customer from the people inside, he had picked out a vertically rectangular pocket-sized receipt book - which looked like it had been passed through centuries from a Wiccan legacy. Dead silverfish fell on the glass top, which the owner dusted with his hand.

His head nodded a 'no' to my "dumb" question and his writing thumb and index did the best of scribbling on the receipt notepad.

Maybe he'd never had new customers like me? Who'd propel the demand for revamping the state of a basic receipt book. Maybe, all he consistently ever had - were customers who had built a sense of loyalty by coming to him again and again.

Of course, regular customers need no receipts for their items. At least that is the way it worked here, in this city. My mother at times gives nearly 10 - 15 kilos of all sorts of clothing (belonging to all of us) to this home pick-up dry cleaning guy, and for the last 6 years (once or twice a week). I have so far seen no receipt coming from him, and it appears . . . no item was rumoured or reported to have been missing. So it is only fair to say that dry

cleaners in the city, are trust worthy. But whether do I personally trust them? I don't know. I am always extremely wary of departing with my things. Especially my pants. And particularly *these* pants. This whole process of dyeing to me was like someone taking my baby, putting it inside their womb and bringing it back, the same baby . . . but just in a different colour. I know it is crazy to think your pants as a baby, but when you love something so much, it somehow becomes 'your' baby.

Since it was important to know the womb my baby was going in to I had been bird watching the store for a good deal of time before today, and as I stood there trying to understand my due date better, the owner goes on to give me a date on the receipt, what appeared to be a week's date from now. I pronounced the date to him in a question, to confirm if that is what he had indeed written. It was officially concluded that it was not just doctors who wrote like piss. There were others as well. But the others will go on to earn no spotlight in hell for bad writing, as theirs would give no complications to a body that is breathing and eventually end life.

Owner nodded. To a 'yes'. He didn't seem specifically interested in giving me verbal answers anymore. Maybe I became too dumb for him - as I was the lad who popped the pill, 'Daddy, Dye Me In A Day'.

X

"Is it ready?" A woman shouted from the street at the owner. She set her right foot on the first slab of 5 stairs that was laid from the street to the store perched above. Most stores had this kind of access. In low lying areas, they had their stores perched up on four feet high concrete, and for access they built stairs from the street directly on to the entrance. It was somewhat illegal to do it, because having a direct stairway from the street? C'mon. But am sure the municipal corporation in the city didn't mind. They were busy making their black lettuce anyway. They are always busy making that. Always.

Bescrawling his signature at the bottom end of the receipt, he looked up at the call from the woman, squirmed his face with disgust and said the most heinous word a man could tell a woman. "Come back tomorrow cunt."

The woman, who looked like a maid from her appearance, humiliated, skimmed a glance at me and turned away as she winked rapidly to call off her oozing tears.

In no seconds, she was out of the sight.

X

"That is no way to talk to a lady. Go and apologise to her. Are you a man at all?" I demanded of the owner. Well, in my mind.

I couldn't tell him that. I was scared of what he might have to say after I said what felt right. As I had confessed earlier . . . I am a pussy with a penis.

However, sincerely I could not figure out a good way of telling him anything. I mean what would I tell him? "Be gentle with a lady and don't mess my pants?"

90 Days Ago

8pm. Usual day at work. Couldn't wait to get my pants back from this other womb.

Parked my bike across the store and went right up to the customer-standing area of the store. The owner had a friend inside, and the same two working men. One pressed a red Kanchipuram saree and the other a shirt. Even today, there were topless. I didn't care even accidentally what they wore below. Owner and his friend were deep in to the TV. It was the first match of this season's Indian Premier League.

Gently, very gently I slam the receipt on the glass layer of the dividing area table. Owner, with his face still in sync with the TV, shows a hand to his friend to ask me what I wanted. As his friend turned to me, I tapped on the receipt.

His friend tried to peer for recognition through my bandana - which started from the bridge of my nose all the way down to the collarbone. The traffic makes me live half life. So I have got to do what is necessary to protect me from fumes and dust, as much as possible. Having a big bandana around my face is my way.

I pull the bandana down, to my chin. My helmet sits compact on me. I favoured open face helmets. They gave me the idea that I was not in space. "Ready?" I point to the items mentioned on the receipt. His friend takes the piece of paper in his hand and observes cryptically, after a few seconds asks one of the workmen (the same one who giggled at me the last time), "Dyeing, black pant and brown shirt . . . has it come?" The other workman who did not giggle at me replied first. And the answer was a 'no'. The friend hands the receipt back to me. Tells me, "Come tomorrow."

With a resistance to reckon, "Just check with him, please." I said and motioned toward the owner.

By then the owner is disturbed of his cricket time and catches sight of me. "Sir, as you have been told, come tomorrow."

"How the fuck. How the fuck! You said it would be done today! You filthy bastard!" This, never came out aloud.

"Please. I want this today. I have an interview on Saturday."

"I know, Sir. . . but it has not come." The owner stood on his feet now, at me. "We don't dye the fabric here. We outsource it. There is this guy who comes here every Wednesday, collects the material to be dyed and then brings it back the following Wednesday with the dyed output."

"But I gave it you." I pleaded to the owner in accusation.

"I know, sir . . . you gave it to me. Now, no harm has been done. Tomorrow. . . come tomorrow. 100%." He gave me the *okay* hand sign - that whole thumb and forefinger alliance in circle as the rest of the fingers stand as witnesses sign.

89 Days ago

8pm. I prayed that I get my pants today. I had some bad feeling about this.

In the same way, I presented the receipt at the table. The helmet sat on me as the bandana was pulled down to my collarbone.

The owner did not have his friend today. He was watching a regional television show. Other two workmen, bent their heads down to their respective tables and glided the chunky charcoal conceived iron on washed clothes. "Sir," The owner stood up. Picked up the receipt laid on the table. "Sorry, sir . . . that guy did not turn up today." He declared coldly and turned back to his TV.

"This is really not fair. Last week, when I gave the items you clearly 'promised' me that the delivery will be 'for sure' this Wednesday, which was yesterday. You gave me that guarantee. Yesterday . . . you tell me 'come tomorrow' . . . 'today will be sure' . . . now. . . I am here today . . . and you tell me that your guy hasn't come!" I nagged like a helpless whore.

"Sir . . . why tension?" Owner shrugs his shoulder.

"I gave that pant and shirt to you for dyeing . . . it is your responsibility . . . ain't it? Why are you telling me about this other guy now . . . whom I have never met!"

Owner got defensive when I quoted the 'responsibility' statute. "Of course Sir . . . we are not eating your items! It will come. What can I do if the guy who has taken the clothes for dyeing hasn't come!"

"Why don't you call him and have him come?" I suggested, as if this was an option he had never concurred.

"Sir . . . nothing tension, sir . . . tomorrow . . . 100%. Just you come. . . we will have it ready."

"Can't you call him?"

"We don't have his number. Thing is . . . this guy has been coming to us every Wednesday . . . takes whatever material there is to be for dyeing and comes back with the dyed material the following Wednesday. That is how we have been working."

60 Days ago

Sunday.

The store never poured tar on any of the yellow brick roads it had drafted so far. However, last night the owner promised me (he swore on his dead mother's grave) that he would hand over my dyed items today - one way or the other.

11am. I called his mobile. After several attempts, he finally receives the call in an unfriendly tone. By now, he knew my number by heart. He had to. Every time he missed a date, I kept calling him to check the next due date.

"Sir . . . it is you, no? Alright, listen . . . sir, the guy who took the clothes for dyeing has met with a terrible accident. That is why he was not able to get the clothes back in time. It seems the clothes are not dyed yet . . . it

might take another 10 - 15 days sir. I will do one thing . . . after I receive the items, I will call you myself." He spoke and spoke and hung up, not receiving my call after that. Ever.

12 days ago

I get my jeans and shirt back, in their dyed avatar.

6 days ago

You know what I hated the most? The fact that I could not attend that interview with those pants. I did not have any spare money to buy a new pair of black trousers for that interview, and guess what? I showed up to that interview in jeans. Some dirt-washed jeans.

Today

1pm. I am in the office, checking my work mails. I had a request sent in by a member in the team. She wanted an attestation from the company stating her office address, designation, and start date of work in the company. She had wanted the document to open a bank account in the city. Now as a manager on probation for the branch in this firm, I still had not been bestowed with the power to issue such a document to anyone in the team, and therefore . . . all I could do was to forward her request for availing such a document to the Human Resources in UK (where the company's head office is registered), to which later I was told that the document will take about 15 days - as the HR Director in concern was on *personal* leave.

I tell the same to the lady in my team. She tells me on office registered *Skype*, "I am sorry . . . but when I asked you *when* I would get this document, you told me that I would get this document by EOD. You are responsible for this document. You are the manager for this office. It is your responsibility to give this document on time, as you had mentioned. Now you are quoting Human Resources. My request was sent to you. Not HR!"

My mind pounded on a stern opetide. I pulled my hand back from the desk, and sat back further deep in to the office recliner.

"You know what a rat can do? In fact, I will tell you what 'RATS' can do . . . rats can make civilisation take a U-turn." The rag picker had said as he handed to me the 3 metal cages.

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