

3 Stories



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You Little Devil

The man on the radio is telling a story in which he is drunk on a beach in Cape Cod, yelling at the approaching storm. This man wants to summon God, to make Him show Himself, and the point of the story is that God cannot. The man mentions that besides being drunk he has also been reading Nietzsche, at which the audience laughs. With unshaken confidence the man assures the audience, "It's not funny," although he has been telling jokes. The one about God speaking German, for example.

You've stopped your car at the nice wine store, not the one with all the miscreants strewn about that's open past 7pm. Your husband's text said he was making salad, would you please stop off? All afternoon you've been loitering around the city trying to avoid your five year old girl. Now time is short. You know the radio story will end before the hour, but you are due at home. You cannot listen to the middle story. Dinner is a well laid plan. You head inside to look for wine wondering about God and His intelligent seekers, men.

Back inside your car, the radio man's father figure, a Nobel Prize winning diviner of consciousness who was part of the man's eventual relinquishment of God, has died. The faith of his youth, the man admits, he misses, like a gauzy space one

can only faintly recall. Like an early childhood home. In the story's final minute or two, the man contemplates the noisy universe, its people, dogs, trees, mountains, and its stars. In observance of these, this striking radio man tries to discern a closest semblance of Godly presence, planets arranged according to a most harmonious scale. He listens now, says the man on the radio, for the eternal music of the spheres.

Immediately you reflect on your friend, a former colleague, who's moved away. The conflict between faith and science, the Nietzsche, the beauty of the radio man's last sentences: any of it could have been muttered between you in hallways where you clutched coffee mugs and feared your passing time was about to end. A bell would ring and you'd advance further down the hall toward your own destinies, like planets caught in the tight embrace of their own periodic oscillations. Even your own husband, you think wildly, is his own planet now. Such rings you make around each other to school, to work, to dinner parties where you will see the light glinting off each other, distantly.

You park outside your house and there is your girl. You sit in your car ignoring. The neighbor boy waves while you press tiny letters on your phone composing an email to the missing colleague. That five year old tries to open the car door, but it is locked. You look up and smile. You look down

and keep typing. "Just stay in!" the five year old yells through the door. She is content. She treats your ignorance like a funny game. The opposite side of the world is always shrouded in darkness. You unlock the door. She gets in and buckles her seatbelt. Your husband arrives with his salad. You say, "Just one second." Everyone sits still until, eventually, you press send.

The dinner is nothing like you imagine it would be if you were dining with the radio man and his father figure. Neither your actual friends nor your husband have won anything lately. You try to bring this up. "Why don't you apply for Young Architect of the Year?" you ask your lady friend. She does not wish to do so even though she is now 40 years old, not really that young. The children play noisily somewhere between the kitchen where you and the lady friend are drinking the wine and the other room where the men friends are drinking the wine. The friend man, you notice, shows your husband something tricky about a large telescope in the living room. When the children ask for nail polish you try to make the men do it, but the men and the children resist. Everyone presses into their assigned roles. Your husband holds the friend's girl upside down over his head, laughing. "I just can't!" he intones while she giggles and your girl is a fury of defense. "You!" she flings out at her father. She loves him utterly.

Spinoza spoke of love for a God that could be called the music or intelligibility of the spheres, which means a God neither conscious nor transcendent, a God "who" cannot love back. The trees, mountains, stars, and almost all of life won't or can't love back. Still, one can try to discern. One can try always to listen in disciplined alertness to the rocks, the clouds, the fish, cars, garbage cans, ants, whatever. A disciplined, and often hopeless, alert love. Bento Spinoza, as a young neighbor boy, or as a five year old with his own parents, met his onlookers' gaze with discernment.

Your gaze has gone to the meat part underneath the mashed potatoes. The crush of ground beef and spice is exactly like the meat in the empanadas your lady friend usually makes. Quite good. With the salad and the wine, everything comes together, meal-like. Adults converse while the children flicker around in strange dresses. You have been thinking about another woman you all know and you try out some sentences about her. You propose that she is being treated differently at work because she is a woman. Everyone is more familiar with her employer than you are, so they are at liberty to agree, which they do. Still, the lady and her man say, your friend could not expect the work to be otherwise. Some roiling inside of you begins like a distant warning. There is the orbit of other conversation you will

forget and you have your wine. Everyone has more wine. Your husband walks to the kitchen followed by the man friend while you watch, an approaching storm behind the both of them.

Hopelessly lesserly alert, you know for certain what an awful handful Bento Spinoza was as a kid. Poking around Amsterdam, thinking so much. Not even yet the prominent star of his shul, he's knocking on windows, opening doors, jumping right into things he doesn't yet understand. Suddenly it's 1656 and he's grown to be a man, capable of monstrous deeds, literal banishment. But he could also relish his wrongdoing, content finally to have an excuse for departing Amsterdam altogether. Depart its houses, their blue walls, their modern furniture meaning nothing, the mashy dinners, the entire universe of people unwilling to think too hard about other options. Something anxious in your lady friend's face asks a question you can't be called upon to interpret. The bundle of your clouded self sets out through the kitchen. Seconds later there's the other door leading out and out. Out to mountains, trees, ants, garbage cans, a motionless car. You begin to run.

It is not always funny to be drunk, but sometimes it is fun. You are running through the suburbs several miles from your home. You are running away from dinner and those little

fingernails, those little friends. You are running happily when you notice a familiar car pull up behind you. Your husband calls out to ask what the hell you are doing as you speed blissfully away. Away enough to know he's behind you, innocent of your wisdom, your superior knowledge, your ability to see beyond the dimly worded phrases of men and women and children on a blustery eve. He's following, you know, at a safe distance. Then he must have turned around.

Running is good for thinking. You've mastered a few pithy remarks you could have delivered at dinner. You're firm and in command of your ship as you steer steadily at a healthy pace, even in ankle boots, gliding past one block and then another, another. You're ready to bleed out into the receiving loveless caverns of the earth. You're a clear-headed, disciplined diviner of consciousness. You think like a rock, like an ant. Now you think how far it really is to your home. You would like to arrive at your victorious end. You expect that your husband may be back with the girl at any moment, but then again, he may not. A strategy is actually hard to conceive even with this running mind, but you remember your husband's mother and her husband. They live quite close-by.

The couple is watching television. They come right away when you knock, looking concerned. You breathe heavily

and ask if one of them can give you a ride home. "Sure," your mother-in-law says, "I'll get my keys." You pass through their kitchen to the back patio without waiting for her. You sit on their large cushioned porch swing and cry.

"What's going on?" The voice of the mother-in-law is firm. Not demanding, not imploring. You are suddenly sober. You realize a car is the right place for further discussion but to get there you must assure the mother-in-law that everything is alright. You laugh and call yourself foolish. Everything is alright. You assure yourself and your mother-in-law that everything is alright. You move toward the car not even stumbling now in the dark.

It turns out you're a teacher. You do not have affixed to your classroom wall an inspirational picture of a polar bear swimming alongside a Nietzsche quote that says, *He who has a why to live can bear almost any how*. You only just looked that up on your little phone before dinner to have something clever to write in your email. You can't get the bear out of your head. Is it a pun? Since your mother-in-law is driving now, you relax about the bear. You focus on the teacher part. You learned the trade in another state thinking it would be a useful and transferrable skill. But here in your current state with its dark streets, with the friends and husbands who do not concern themselves with women and

what they do or don't do at work, you feel vicious. You would like to remove yourself and possibly the five year old, the husband, but all of you seem hopelessly inert. Inarticulate feelings pour into the car and your mother-in-law ushers them into a semblance of order. She listens to the melodic whimper your bobbly head makes. She speaks carefully and kindly as she drives to the street where you live with her son and granddaughter.

Under the dulcet Subaru dome you and your mother-in-law forge ahead into the night. The soft blend of your voices yields a bearable blossom of commiseration, a filament's harmonious vibration. One final turn reveals the unexpected orchestration of your child and your husband from the other direction. Doors fling open and the five year old is upon you. You take her in your arms and speak gently while you smooth her hair, kissing each of her tiny fingernails. *You little devil*, she whispers up at you, *where in the heaven were you?*