

## Stunted

The woman was so small—the height and size of a three-year-old—that the clerk behind the Starbucks counter in the Cincinnati Airport didn't see her. When the clerk asked for my order, I, along with a hand gesture, said, "I believe she was first." Was I trying to pretend it was normal for a grown person to be 30 inches tall? The clerk—bless her heart—then leaned over the counter. To be fair, it was a wide counter, though I don't think higher than standard.

"Oh," the clerk said. "What would you like?"

"A small latté," the dwarf said.

The clerk, taller than I, was a thin black girl with straightened hair. She was kind and probably some years younger than the white dwarf below her.

When the clerk set the latté on the counter to reach for the money, she inadvertently set the cup beyond the dwarf's reach. The clerk handed over the change, then asked for my order. I pointed at the cup.

What was I feeling? Shame? Fear? Pride? Generosity? What I knew for sure was that whatever the feeling was, it was anchored in an awkward self-centeredness. What did this woman's growth have to do with me?

The clerk saw she had to push the latté closer, and she did. I ordered a small latté. I didn't want to give the impression that my body could absorb more liquid than the dwarf's. Besides, how to say Starbucks's word for small: *tall*?

The woman had to reach as high as she could to remove the plastic lid from her cup to add sugar. She'd moved down the counter, sliding the capped cup toward the stirrers, the honey and sugars. I was worried she'd pull the hot cup over onto her head—her uplifted face—and had to resist helping. Craning, she managed to add raw cane sugar, stir the coffee, and replace the lid. When she headed off in her little beige London Fog, navy slacks, and kid's clogs, I noticed her hands were the size of a woman's, strong and dexterous enough to hold her latté and to maneuver her rolling luggage. If her clothes were doll-size, her pull luggage wasn't.

For her height and size her head was, as seems the case for dwarves, disproportionate. Too large, of course, but in this case—her case—only slightly. And her features were fine, not distorted. Her long hair was tended and highlighted professionally with streaks of blond.

I boarded my plane. Late that night, I told my wife about the little woman and her latté.

"She had glorious hair—really—I have to say," I say to Ellen. "A little kid's voice but a grown-up's hair. Luxurious. And she was neat and urbane in her kid's clothes, her little purse."

"You don't have to feel bad for her," my wife says. "Why do you feel bad? You feel bad, don't you? You do."

"Well, God," I say, "I think of Marnie racing her bike in that mountain thing in Moab." Marnie is one of our daughters. As the local joke goes, you can tell she's from Boulder, Colorado: She owns a \$500 car, but pedals a \$3,000 bicycle made from space-age metals.

"When I saw the little woman walking away," I say, "pulling that suitcase her size, I thought about Marnie talking about her bike's composite frame, the composite shifters, titanium gears, step-in pedals."

I say: "Her feet lock into her pedals like ski boots. That little woman will never ride a mountain bike. They don't make good bikes that small. She'd have to buy a tricycle for Christ's sake—a Goddamn Big Wheel or something. You know?"

"Why is this personal?" Ellen asks. "Is this personal?"

"I don't know."

"Dwarves attend conferences. I've read about this," Ellen says. "They have dwarf stores for clothes and furniture. Car stuff. A lot of dwarves drive cars." Then: "Dwarfism is treated as a disability. There are lobbies for this. 'Little People' lobbies. And: conferences. She was probably on her way to a conference. They meet at these places, fall in love, marry, have babies."

"What kind of babies? Regular or small?"

"Regular," she says.

"Why would they be regular? A bald guy's son is usually bald. Big noses run in families. A son of an alcoholic is an alcoholic risk. A fat woman's mother is generally large, right? You think I didn't check out your mother?"

My wife is a slender woman who smokes cigarettes. She walks four miles a day. Power walks. To stay fit, is what she says, and to keep on smoking. My wife buys cheap filtered menthols she stubs out when half puffed. It stunts your growth, she says. I call her E sometimes instead of Ellen.

"You should quit, E," I say.

"You like tiny women," she says, lighting up. She raises a kitchen window and sticks her head close. She is a polite smoker insofar as she keeps smoke out of people's faces and houses, even her own.

"Why wouldn't dwarves bear dwarves?" I ask. And when Ellen doesn't answer: "What would a dwarf do with a four-year-old who could knock her over?"

Ellen blows smoke out the window then swivels her head. "What makes you think all dwarves are actors or circus freaks?"

"I think that?"

"Do you?"

I say that every few years you read in the paper about dwarf tossing or such. "You don't remember Cuomo signing legislation banning dwarf tossing and dwarf bowling in New York bars?" We'd lived in New York for a few years.

"Dwarf bowling?" E says.

"Yes."

"Bowling?"

"They strap them on skateboards and fire them down the lane." Then: "As I understand it, they do wear helmets and the pins are plastic."

I clamp shut because I suddenly remember seeing on TV some little folks wrapped in Velcro clothes. They were hung like pictures on Velcro walls. I don't recall whether they were tossed at the walls, but, in any event, I don't bring it up.

"Bars and bowling alleys," E says. "I take it they throw dwarves in bars."

"Liquor's involved," I say. "It would have to be, right?"

"You tell me," E says.

“Some dwarves have sued for the right to be tossed and bowled.” I nod my head to enforce the point.

“Claiming what—the right to make a living?”

“So, maybe there should be a right? I mean, who stops 300-pound blubber boys from squashing skinnier backs and wide-outs? Why isn’t that illegal? Pitchers fire balls at batters’ heads. We’re not talking hockey or Tyson eating Holyfield’s ear. Consenting dwarves,” I say, “wear sturdy little helmets and padding, and when they’re tossed, they land on mattresses—no, usually a pile of them.”

“Consenting? Did you say *consenting*?”

“I did.” Then: “I say if a man wants to juggle hatchets, let him do it.”

“Where would you draw the line,” E asks, “chainsaws, grenades, white phosphorus? White phosphorus,” she says, “reacts rapidly with oxygen, catching fire at 10 to 15 degrees above room temperature. Dangerous enough, Ace?”

My wife takes a drag on her cigarette. She blows smoke into the room then shoots me a look. It’s the look I imagined on the writer Annie Dillard’s face a few years back.

I’ve never met Ms. Dillard, but have taken pleasure in her work and had just finished her book, *For The Time Being*. It’s hardly a book in an obvious sense of unity and purpose. It is a loose yet rich federation about human abnormalities, sand, clouds, numbers, China, Israel, God, evil, archaeology, and life-size Chinese clay soldiers and their horses—thousands of them sculpted for, then buried with the Emperor Qin to honor and protect him for the past two thousand years. The clay soldiers and their mounts were a whole new idea. It had been the practice to bury an emperor’s living army with him when he passed.

In the book, Dillard not only covers a variety of human abnormalities—noting, in particular, mentally deficient bird-headed dwarves—but a variety of human cruelties as well, such stunted acts as the flaying of the 85-year-old Rabbi Akiva for teaching Torah. The Romans, more than 100 years before Christ, stripped the Rabbi’s living flesh to its bones with horse currycombs, all the while the Rabbi singing Shema, *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One*.

When I talk about the look on the writer’s face, I’m thinking of a look that must have accompanied a one-sentence paragraph three-quarters of the way into the book. Dillard, a smoker notes: *Do you think I don’t know cigarettes are fatal?*

In her book, for every heartening note such as 17th-century Jews who so respected books that when books wore out, they were buried like a person, there is a person like Joseph Stalin who took the long view: “One death is a tragedy; a million deaths are a statistic.” Or Mao who told Nehru that the atomic bomb was nothing to be afraid of. Or a Ted Bundy who, with an invested sense of chilled proportion, is able to explain his serial killings: “I mean, there are so many people.”

When I finally get into bed, Ellen is asleep. I lie on my back, eyes wide. What I see is my dwarf careening down a boulder trail in Utah. It’s a full-size bike. There are metal extenders strapped to her feet and locked into her pedals. At times, as she flies down the trail, she’s airborne. In this picture I’m painting, my dwarf is unhelmeted, her streaked locks like some nation’s flag. But, as my eyes adjust to the bedroom’s dark, my picture dissolves. I’m past 60 and I lie on my back thinking about college some 40 years before and the fraternity I joined. It was a

group known for drinking and reliable and current exam files. The president of the fraternity didn't live in the house on Greek Row. He bought one of his own, a three-story deal where he lived with eight roommates who covered his mortgage each month. I was one of the renters. "Grog" Greer was, during his junior and senior year, the Bareback Bronco Riding Champion in collegiate rodeo. He was better known, though, for the annual Frat Bash, which featured competitive dwarf tossing.

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