THE STAFF PHILOSOPHER

A Streetcar Named Desire

"Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence."

-Tennessee Williams, "The Timeless World of a Play"

"Sometimes — there's God — so quickly."

-Blanche DuBois, "A Streetcar Named Desire"

A good life, argues philosopher Martha Nussbaum, is necessarily a fragile life. For we cannot fully experience the joys of human existence without exposing ourselves to the threats of devastating loss and grief. Nussbaum's ideas emerged in the early years of a revolution in moral philosophy, begun in 1982 when Carol Gilligan burst onto the scene. Men who think about moral questions, Gilligan demonstrated, are inclined to formulate rational principles, while women focus on human connections, with a special emphasis on kindness. So, we find that there is a reason why reason has almost always ruled over passion in the work of history's philosophers: they were all men. One outcome has been a surge of interest, especially among feminist philosophers, in locating an "ethics of caring" at the heart of morality.

Tennessee Williams did not live to see this revolution—he died in 1983, only a few months after Gilligan's In a Different Voice first appeared. Yet his work exemplifies it. It should be no surprise that there has never been a playwright who wrote better roles for women. Desire is the ride we find ourselves on, and we do not get off until the stop called Cemetery. His New Orleans RTA offers no transfers to a streetcar named Reason. What we can hope for are human connections, moments of transcendence, without guarantees. Stella finds this in "the things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem unimportant." Blanche glimpses it when Mitch almost proposes—"Sometimes—there's God—so quickly," and when the newsboy is, to her, "a little bit of eternity dropped in your hands." Survival in the face of such fragility, however, depends on an ethics of caring. It depends on the kindness of strangers. "Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable," Blanche, in vain, tells a sneering Stanley before he rapes her.

Desire may be trending, but reason holds its own. In the West, the heirs of the Stoics are those who minimize emotional risk by minimizing emotion. In the East, it is the Buddhists—and

Blanche explicitly takes them on. When Stella seems unduly serene after Stanley smashes the radio in a drunken rage, Blanche asks, “Is this a Chinese philosophy you’ve cultivated?”

Blanche would find no fault with the Buddha’s First Noble Truth. Familiarly, it is, “All is suffering;” more accurately, it is, “We are constantly disappointed by the mismatch between the way the world is and the way we desire it to be.” But the next three truths she would find less than noble, given their prescription for detachment from desire. Life is to be lived. “I feel things more than I tell you,” she declares. Maybe one of the reasons the Stoics and the Buddhists welcome death with such calm is that, for them, it is not so different from life.

“I don’t want realism,” Blanche says, “I want magic. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth.” She does make an exception, in the play’s second scene: “I know I fib a good deal…but when a thing is important I tell the truth.”

And in this play, there are two important things that are both true and ought to be true, Two Noble Truths. First, yes, our desires are often disappointed, placing us in a state of constant fragility. And second, there is a solution, if imperfect, to the suffering—and it is kindness. “There is so much confusion in the world,” she tells Mitch, “Thank you for being so kind. I need kindness now.”

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