

"Joßche"

A Reflection on the Pressure of Happiness

For Julie

I

The Killjoy Genie

The first thing that needs to be addressed is the spelling: similar, yet different. Identical pronunciation, but a weird, idiosyncratic spelling and orthography. Note the "ß", the German character for a double-s. So alien; so pleasing; so pleasingly alien; so alienly pleasing. It seems to go along perfectly with what I call my "Voluntary Tourette's Syndrome". This is a habit I have developed - cultivated, really, based on an apparently irresistible urge - of uttering phatic, monosyllabic sounds out loud to myself, for no discernible reason other than that they have helped, since Diane's death, to fill the silence in the house. It seems necessary also that these words, though meaningless, sometimes be homophones of actual words. Thus "bote", "gote", "poap". Sometimes, though, the eruptive sounds are just free-floating nonsense, unattached to any homophonic words at all, as in my favorite trio - a descending trio, I think of it as: "peet, pote, and poot". These nonsense words have a vaguely celebratory or at least

affirmative force; though exactly what they are celebrating or affirming is far from clear, since they are the product of 11 years of widowerhood. Perhaps they are merely affirming that status. Or perhaps they represent a stance against loneliness - even though, as I say, they are also a product of loneliness. They seem to serve as signs, these sounds, signals of the eruption of a certain high-spiritedness in spite of myself. They are often emitted as I emerge from my morning shower, or after I have completed an irksome task, usually school- or housekeeping-related. The discharging of some duty is marked by a phatic utterance -- homophonic or not, as the case may be: "gunt"; "hoat"; "boutte"; "toucque". In this way I become a source of amusement to myself. Which has been necessary, these past years; for if I didn't amuse myself, who would? (The amusement also helps to offset the tendency to self-pity, which may already be discernible here.)

Such is the phonological background of "Joßche". But it isn't just a word; it is also a name. The name of my shadow. My likeness. My Other. My Baudelairean brother. (The brother I never had. I am an only child, in case that isn't already obvious.) My nemesis? Perhaps. Yet whatever power Joßche possesses is only what I allow him - though I may pretend otherwise. Pretending otherwise is

part of the fun. Part of the game. The game that has become more than a game. It may even have become a problem. Joßche may now be a problem. But if he is, he is one I have deliberately brought upon myself.

Why? To what end have I done this? Complication, perhaps. Complication, and self-bafflement - bafflement in the sense of an attempted check or prevention. Prevention of what? Of happiness, perhaps. After 11 years of widowerhood - now, happiness. Or at least the prospect of such. And Joßche may be here to baffle my happiness.

For the invocation of Joßche, you see, was not entirely phatic -- or fortuitous, either. Joßche did not appear as the other sounds appeared - out of the blue, the lonely blue. He did not appear as an artifact of bereavement. Quite the opposite. He appeared, or rather was invoked, as a product - a by-product, really -- of love. Love for my fiancée, Julie.

Though "by-product" is a rather cold, clinical term, and not quite specific enough. The summoning of Joßche - his "discovery", as I like to call it, for Julie's amusement -- was more like a gesture of resistance. Resistance to what? Again, to happiness - the prospect of happiness with Julie, after years of sadness and loneliness. And not only the prospect but the actual

emergence of happiness, which I was and still am not fully willing or prepared to admit to myself.

But again, why? To what end?

II

La Nostalgie de la Boue

The resistance to happiness is not an unfamiliar thing; it has been with me since childhood. My awareness, as a child, that I was happy was sometimes accompanied by a kind of self-conscious embarrassment - an inhibition of instinctual feeling. A sense - no, more than a sense: a sensation; a physical damper; a veil of disruption -- that came over me, interposing itself between me and the pleasure I was experiencing. It was as though there were some kind of killjoy genie, some imp of the perverse, that came unbottled in order to interfere with my unmediated high spirits. Indeed, it is possible that this genie was an early precursor to the phatic utterances that were to appear much later, in the period after Diane's death. Except - and this is a big "except" -- the phatic utterances reflected and supported the high spirits, whereas the killjoy genie challenged them, and tried to baffle them. Yet both utterances and genie were creatures

of my own fabrication that only seemed, in their sudden and gratuitous eruption, to come from outside of me.

I say "creatures of my own fabrication", yet I insist to Julie that I only "discovered" (rather than invented) Joßche, because it sounds funnier that way. It seems funnier to pretend that Joßche was pre-existing, and I was only the one who revealed him; and really, this is not so far from the truth. For Joßche also represents a principle: the hair-shirt principle. He is the impulse, the perverse and twisted impulse, to nipplepleasure in the bud. He is planning to send black tulips to our wedding. I will immediately throw them in the garbage, but I doubt that will deter him. Joßche will not be assisting in person at the celebration, but he will make his presence known. He would not miss the opportunity.

For Joßche, you see, is jealous of me.

But this does not tell it all, either. Because not only is he jealous of me -- his jealousy is ambivalent. It is mixed with nostalgia - a kind of "nostalgie de la boue", as the French say. Joßche is nostalgic for his widowerhood. I mean, my widowerhood. Our widowerhood. He kind of misses the mournful, ascetic sadness and loneliness of our widowerhood, and he resents the intrusion of my recent happiness upon his stoicism.

For it was not entirely unpleasant for him, this period. The 11-year period of loneliness, and sadness, and mourning, was not unwelcome to him. It was not without its own small pleasures and attachments, its quietudes, its dark distances, consolations, and solaces. "Il y en avait quelque chose qui ne nous déplaisait pas," La Rochefoucauld might have said. "There was something about it that did not displease us."

You may be wondering, given his penchant for sadness, and self-punishment, and general bittersweetness in complexity, whether Joßche is Jewish - or even half-Jewish, like me. Not a bit of it. He is a German Catholic - yet another thing, perhaps, to hold against him. (Though I am a half-Catholic myself, on my mother's side; but of the Irish variety. The German in me - for there is German in me; Joßche does not get his Germanitude "from the wind", as my Irish grandmother used to say - is actually German-Jewish, on my father's mother's side.) Yes, a thoroughly rebarbative character in many respects, this Joßche. An Anti-Semite? No, I don't think so. (That, at least, is one thing he has going for him.) If he is not exactly, as my mother might have said, "the very best kind of German" (whatever that is), neither is he the worst kind. He would have had, I think - and here he is redolent of his

compatriot Nietzsche - no truck with the Nazis. (Some people think that given the Nazis' later appropriation of him, Nietzsche would have been sympathetic to their cause. Not a bit of that, either. He hated German nationalism, and would have hated the Nazis as well. I'm not saying Nietzsche was exactly a Jew-lover; far from it. But he would have hated the Nazis.) Though in Joßche's case, rejection of the Nazis comes more out of a sense of aristocratic Junker superiority than anything else. (Joßche is not just a German, but a Prussian - again, like Nietzsche.) Neither a Jew-lover nor a Jew-hater, he; but with the Nazis' brand of Jew-hating he would have had no truck, I am quite sure of that. Mind you, Joßche has been known to tell Jewish jokes; but these, when he tells them, are related with an insider's knowing irony - not unlike my father's, alav ha shalom. (My father may even have sort of liked Joßche, if he had known him.)

Most people don't, though, and I can't say I blame them. There's really not all that much to like. Jealous, envious, depressive, resentful, German, neutral on the Jews - quite an unpleasant character all around, this Joßche. Not without a sense of humor, true - but this of the dry variety, bordering even unto desiccation. Leaves a bad taste in your mouth, redolent of sauerbraten, washed down

with Jägermeister. No thanks, Fritz. A heaviness about the bowels, too. That is one way to describe the "Joßche Effect": an acridness of aftertaste, leading to a heaviness in the bowels. One tends to dread his arrival upon the scene. I know that Julie does, and I cannot blame her for this, either. I do my best to put him off; but Joßche is not one to be put off. He has a certain German... unremittingness. A blitzkrieg of ontological insistence, worthy of Heidegger at his worst. (Or best - take your pick.) Julie has been quite tolerant of him thus far; but I foresee a time in the not-so-distant future when her patience will wear thin. Right now I just want to avoid direct confrontation between them.

III

His Jealousy

I mentioned before that Joßche is jealous of me. Is this primarily because of Julie? That may be part of it - though I doubt the whole of it, knowing his complications and inscrutabilities. (Besides, Joßche is basically asexual; more on that in a moment.) I know it irks him that Julie and I sleep together -- though not, I think, for

reasons of sexual jealousy. I suspect his reasons are more sentimental than sexual.

Before Julie, you see, Joßche had become accustomed to The Widower's Bed. More than accustomed, actually; he had grown to like it, and even to count on its inviolability. Joßche is not a creature of exigent appetites. He is rather abstemious than otherwise. The Widower's Bed suited him just fine, and he remembers it with fondness.

So what exactly is he jealous of, then? I think he is jealous that now I am happy, and he still isn't; but since love and sex are not exactly high on his list of priorities, it is not the love and sex he is jealous of. It's the attention. And the cathexis, to use a Freudian term. (Joßche is big on Freud; another thing, in this era of Freud-bashing, to be said for him.) He senses that my energy is being directed outward again, after 11 years of inward-turning, and he is not happy about that, either. (He is a bit of a Gloomy Gus.)

Then there is the matter of my loss of stoicism. I know I said before that it is Joßche who is the stoic, not me, and that's mostly true. But it is also true that I am, or was, not entirely devoid of stoicism myself. And during the Minor Period - which is what I call the 11-year period of mourning for Diane -- I was, on the whole, quite

stoical, and Joßche liked that. But he was also jealous of my stoicism -- in another sense of "jealous", meaning he was possessive of it, and guarded it closely, and wanted to keep it for himself, and didn't want to give it up. That is, didn't want me to give it up. For he recognized instinctually that if I gave it up, he would have to, too - either that, or go it alone.

Now you would have thought that since he is a loner, he wouldn't have minded going it alone - wouldn't have minded continuing the tradition of stoicism, and The Widower's Bed, that were so integral to the Minor Period. And that is quite true: he wouldn't have minded going it alone, if that had been a possibility. But it wasn't. It wasn't ever a possibility for him, despite how jealously he guarded his stoical mourning. He was bound to lose that one. And he knew it, and that made him bitter and resentful. (Hence the black tulips.)

Maybe, now that I think of it, "resentful" is a better word to describe his attitude than "jealous". Resentment. Ressentiment. A nice Nietzschean word. Ressentiment of me, of Julie, of our love, and our happiness, is what he feels. And he feels it with that conviction of superiority redounding to the severe moralist that he is; for he knows it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the

house of mirth. He knows this in every fibre of his sad, mournful yet stoical Germanic being. And I wish I could say I know he is wrong.

Julie does, though. And that's one of the reasons she will have none of him. As I say, she has been patient about my involvement with him; but I can tell she is just humoring me. The time will come when she will call it quits with the unpleasant Joßche. And then what? Will I call it quits with him too?

IV

The Pressure-Valve

As I have already indicated, we go way back, Joßche and I. By that I mean the idea of Joßche - what I might call the "hair-shirt principle" -- goes way back in my life, long before I ever had a name for him and what he represents: back to childhood, and the killjoy genie, and the imp of the perverse. (Before I had read that Poe story, either.) Yes, I have known Joßche, and his principle, for a long time. You might even say he has been a kind of servus publicus, my "public slave" - the designated state functionary who would ride next to the victor in ancient Roman triumphal processions, whispering in his ear, as a

corrective to the adulation of the crowds, "Remember you are only a man." ("Respice post te, hominem memento.") To be sure, as a child it was never a question of triumph or adulation that I had to be recalled from, but only happiness. Happiness was my triumph - though of course I never thought of it in those terms at the time. But I knew, even back then, that happiness made me a little uneasy. Why? Because I sensed it was only temporary? Because I felt it wasn't deserved? Or because it felt, my happiness, somehow external to me, something gratuitous and out of place? Did I feel unworthy of it? Or was it something else? Was it perhaps that the reality of other people, in whose presence, and because of whose praise, recognition, affection, love, I was feeling the happiness - parents, friends, classmates, the other boys at the Tocaloma Boys' Club, where I spent two afternoons a week after school, playing kickball, and softball, and flag football, and capture-the-flag, and basketball, from third through sixth grade - was it that the reality of other people pressed so closely upon me that my happiness was constrained by my palpable awareness of their expectations? Was that it?

Maybe it was just that my happiness, even as a child, was never unmixed, because of an almost oppressive sense of

the other people in whose presence I was feeling that happiness. Those other people, whoever they were, always made me feel self-conscious. And that self-consciousness (perhaps my greatest curse, now that I think about it), which was counterbalanced by instinctual, unmediated happiness, served as a counterweight to that happiness; served as its servus publicus, if you will, and prevented it from ever soaring -- prevented the happiness from ever truly soaring. My self-consciousness, by definition, was nothing more (and nothing less) than my sense, my inhibitory sense of myself: who I was, who I had been yesterday, how I was perceived, who - other than my parents - genuinely liked me, and who I genuinely cared about. These irreducible particularities of my being weighed on me; I felt their specific gravity, as it were, which seemed like a check - a bafflement - to my euphoria. Matter and spirit, you might say - the matter of other people, the spirit of joy -- were in conflict. I knew the weight of others, their perceptions and expectations, pressing down upon me.

Joßche, c'est les autres. But also: Joßche, c'est moi.

Sartre and Flaubert. Masters of consciousness. (And nice companions!) And those two sentences are perhaps

their most famous statements. Triumphal declarations, you might even say. But my servus publicus says No. Too facile. Too clever. Too glib. Joßche is not to be encapsulated so easily. He remains a problem unsusceptible to formulation. The problem of Joßche. The Joßche question. Die Joßchefrage. If I were a philosopher, I would propose a phenomenology of Joßche. Die Joßchephänomenologie. It would be compendious. Definitive. Magisterial. (How I love those adjectives! How I yearn for my work to be worthy of them!) A study of truly Germanic heft and plenitude. But alas, I have it not within me. I am only an essayist, not a philosopher. I cannot handle systems of thought. I deal only in impressions, fancies, conceits, whimsies of mood. My insights are ephemeral. I catch them on the wing, hold them for a golden moment, and then let them go.

Ah yes. I rather like that one. But pretty as it is, this figure is misleading. For Joßche is not a bird of thought, but rather something much heavier, and more earthbound. Joßche is a machine. A pressure-valve. The pressure-valve of my happiness, for when it gets too much. For when it gets unbearable. Because, sad to say, it doesn't take much for my happiness to get unbearable. The killjoy genie makes sure of that. After the 11-year-old

drought of the Minor Period, even a little happiness is hard to bear.

What exactly do I mean by "hard to bear"? I mean that, just like my sense of other people, my happiness presses down on me, weighs on me, and the weight, the pressure, must be relieved. That is what the pressure-valve is for. That is what Joßche is for: to relieve the pressure engendered by happiness. In this case, to relieve the pressure engendered by the happiness offered by Julie. Joßche reminds me of what the killjoy genie, the servus publicus, have always reminded me of: that I could blow it at any moment -- that I could blow my happiness at any moment. That I could scare her off, repulse her, offend her, by saying or doing something stupid.

Do I really believe this? After all, Julie and I have been together now for a year, and it feels good. It feels right. There is no churning feeling in the pit of my stomach when I'm with her, as there was with the woman I went out with before I met Julie. There is only a relaxed feeling, a feeling of relaxing into comfort; no other shoe waiting to fall. I feel accepted for who I am - Joßche and all. I feel at ease. I feel at home. And that's just it. This good feeling, this better than good feeling, this happy feeling, this more than happy feeling, is

unaccustomed, and hard to bear. It's too rich; it needs to be diluted, titrated with some other antagonistic agent. Cut with something that will inhibit its action.

(Something that smacks of a combination of sauerbraten and Jägermeister, perhaps.) Some of the steam of happiness needs to be let off. I know I'm mixing my metaphors here, and it's sort of a jumble. Kind of chaotic. Well, Nietzsche wrote, "One must still have chaos within oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star." And Julie is my dancing star. I feel the chaos of her beauty keenly. And that beauty, inner and outer, is almost painful to feel, and makes me uncomfortable and self-conscious in my happiness.

But I am no Nietzsche -- and thank God for that. How he suffered, even before he kissed the horse and collapsed on the street in Turin and was taken in by his horrible fascist, anti-Semitic sister, and robed in white, and apotheosized. How he suffered, with his eyes and his stomach. And how his suffering shows in his writing. Which is why I can't read him -- can't read much of him, anyway -- without getting depressed. The loneliness of those Alpine heights and lacustrine depths of thought depresses me. Nietzsche soon becomes unbearable, and I must stop reading him. Poor man. How lonely he was, and

how he suffered. No doubt he knew also the ecstasies of the mind; he knew them well -- all-too-well, as he might have said. His writing must have given him deep pleasures, lonely but deep pleasures. I certainly hope it did; but one senses it did. I can feel his pleasure in his thoughts, in the white-hot heat of his mind. But I invariably must leave off reading him; I just cannot enter his cold, bright, Alpine world (the Upper Engadine, where I have never been, and shall never go) for very long. Maybe it's a German thing; maybe I feel about Nietzsche the way I feel about Joßche: a little goes a long way. I keep sounding those depths and heights, in the hope that some of them will rub off on me; but they never do.

Someday, perhaps, I will be able to bear the pressure of happiness on my own, without having to resort anymore to Joßche; I will be able to give in, fully and frankly, to the sweet weight of happiness. I hope, at least for Julie's sake, if not my own, that this day will come soon. I hope I don't blow it with her - or that Joßche doesn't blow it for me. I hope I don't let him blow it for me. I hope I don't make him blow it for me. Fortunately, though, Joßche has a mind of his own, and it is not easy to make him do anything. I hope that we can work together on this. It would be better, of course, if Joßche went away

permanently - if I made him go away permanently; but that is not likely to happen anytime soon. I think he is here for a good while yet. And if that is the case, I hope that we - all three of us: Joßche, Julie and I - can reach an amicable agreement, if only for the sake of preserving the "family romance" that is so dear to him. I don't put much credence in the "family romance" myself - as I say, Joßche is much more of a Freudian than I am. But I do believe in good old family harmony. As another (rather different) wise man well acquainted with suffering once said, "Can't we all just get along?"