

You wake up without an alarm, every morning at 8AM, and today is one of those days. You lie in bed for a few minutes, like you usually do. Being a freelancer means that you are free, free to be jelly. You get up, using your freelancing discipline. People who appear undisciplined are sometimes the most disciplined.

You think about this a little bit in the shower, and a little bit as you brush your teeth. You brush your teeth every morning without effort, but it always takes some effort to get out of bed.

You go to your kitchen and make oatmeal. It cooks quickly and you eat it. The oatmeal is heavy and cheap. You eat a banana. It's Saturday.

You decide that this Saturday will be a Saturday you take off. You can catch up tonight if you want, or tomorrow if you have to. You decide that it's time for...

A LAZY MORNING AT MITZI'S CAFE

(waiting for margot episode three starring YOU as YOU (Beth), YOU as JULIA, YOU as BRIAN, YOU as..., You as..., you as..., you..., ...,)

ALICIA: Welcome to Mitzi's, how's it going?

YOU: It's morning time. It's time to exist.

ALICIA: I know. We're always existing.

YOU: I'd like some green tea.

ALICIA: You want to be awake?

YOU: Yeah. Today I do.

You pay and she measures the loose leaves into a little bag, puts them in a mug, pours in hot water, hands you the mug.

ALICIA: There you go. Have a nice morning!

YOU: Thanks.

You sit down and read from your library book. You put your phone where you can see it. You're reading a novel, but sometimes you look around the cafe absentmindedly, avoiding eye contact while still looking at people.

Then you get a text message. It's from Robert.

(Robert)
Hey Beth

(You)
Whats up?

(Robert)
I feel like talking to someone

(Robert)
Are you available?

(You)

Yeah, Im here at Mitzis doing nothing much

(Robert)

Cool

(Robert)

Mind if I join you there?

(You)

Ill be here

Robert is someone you've known from before, from the past. You met him on an online dating site, back when you were more into that. He's the only person you remember from that time in your life.

You wait and read and then he walks in the door, comes and greets you. You give him a greeting-hug and both of you sit at your table.

ROBERT: Hey, I think I'll get something to drink first. I need some coffee.

YOU: Okay.

He gets up and orders coffee. Alicia pours him some house coffee. He goes over and puts some half-and-half in it, comes back and sits down.

ROBERT: Okay. (He settles.) Okay. How are you doing?

YOU: I'm doing okay.

ROBERT: Is that really true?

YOU: I'm 41 years old, so, yeah, I'm doing okay.

Robert laughs.

ROBERT: Of course.

YOU: What do you need to talk about?

ROBERT: How's the terror of death treating you?

YOU: It's not too bad recently. I think I've been believing in God.

ROBERT: Really?

YOU: Yeah, I'm not really sure, but I think that might be happening.

ROBERT: Good for you. Yeah, I should probably believe in God myself.

YOU: You don't have to if you don't want to.

ROBERT: That's the thing. I know it would be good for me, but I don't feel like it's the truth. But it's weird, because if there is no God, why would I care about the truth? Why not just believe what's good for me?

YOU: It's good to care about the truth, though. If there is a God, I think he would want people to not believe in him because they didn't think he really existed.

ROBERT: Yeah, you might be right. I used to think that I didn't have any choice as to whether or not to believe in God. I thought that there were the things that existed, and the things that were unproven. And God was unproven. But then I got

to thinking. When my mind is healthiest, like, not in the terror of death, or paranoid, or whatever, it really feels like everything's going to work out in the end, somehow. And I think that could just be contact with God.

YOU: Why would you think that? Maybe it's just a way you have to feel to survive.

ROBERT: I know! So that's the thing. Belief is a choice, and unbelief is a choice. And I don't want it to be a choice. I want it to be clear.

YOU: I know that unbelief is a choice for me. It's like an aesthetic thing. I don't want to be the kind of person I see believers being.

ROBERT: I know, right? It's not like I think about it a lot, I just get a twinge when I see them feeling purpose in their life, or being confident. It's like they're children. You hear of neoteny?

YOU: The thing where immaturity is prolonged?

ROBERT: Yeah, like it takes human beings 35 years to become adults. Believers are people who never grow up.

YOU: Sometimes it makes them better at actually being adults.

ROBERT: I know, and I want that for myself. But I want to be mature. I want to be a real human being.

YOU: You want to be God...

ROBERT: ...But not in an egotistical way. In a responsible way. I want to be responsible for the

whole world, like he is.

YOU: And people will tell you you can't do that. But you have to try. Because in your heart, you want to have the heart of God.

ROBERT: And part of what makes God have the heart he would have if he existed is that there's no God above God. In that respect, God's an atheist.

YOU: Absolutely.

ROBERT: Do you still believe in the world?

YOU: Some days I do. A lot of the time I don't. I live in my bubble, getting work done, and hanging out.

ROBERT: I wonder what God would do if there was no one to save. What would he get out of existing? What would get him out of bed in the morning?

YOU: I don't know. What does love do when there's no one to save?

ROBERT: I think about that a lot. God aside, what if we make a society where people no longer have problems? We'll lose part of what is best about humanity if no one can take responsibility for the world.

YOU: It's like some aspect of love would be gone...

ROBERT: So, love is the thing that gets us to solve problems, and then love is going to kill off part of itself.

YOU: I don't know if it's always love that gets us to

solve problems, or rather perfectionism. We hate problems, so we destroy them.

ROBERT: "Whatever can be destroyed by the truth should be..."

YOU: Yeah. And the truth obviously is opposed to our problems.

ROBERT: Right! It's not necessarily.

YOU: Did you ever meet Brian?

ROBERT: I think so, once or twice.

YOU: He comes here. He likes to talk about skepticism. Like, how is it that we really know that the external world is real, and that we're not living in a dream.

ROBERT: Okay, easy, there's this Stoic philosopher who said to his master, if you're a skeptic, deny this, and then cut off his master's tongue while he was shaving him. Tell me this isn't reality, -- while killing him.

YOU: So then the truth is beliefs that we should, or just do, trust.

ROBERT: Yeah, it kind of sounds like that. Or it could be natural selection. If there was someone who evolved false beliefs and then walked off a cliff based on them, then they wouldn't exist to pass on their genes or culture.

YOU: Right. But it seems like that's still, the truth is what humans find trustworthy. It's all based on human survival, like we're the center of the universe.

ROBERT: But we still have this concept that there are things outside ourselves, like the truth idea is *really* compelling.

YOU: It's certainly trustworthy. But it's not always trustworthy.

ROBERT: The idea that we aren't the center of the universe is pretty trustworthy.

YOU: A lot of times it feels like I can't even wake up enough to trust things. The most trustworthy thing in the world could walk past me and I wouldn't trust it. Wouldn't even look at it.

ROBERT: Is that some subtext?

YOU: No way Robert, I would never use subtext on you.

ROBERT: Okay, good.

YOU: Not deliberately, at least.

ROBERT: Can I ever trust you to just be saying what you're saying, once the door to subtext is open?

YOU: I find one of the most difficult things to sort out is other people's minds.

ROBERT: It's probably the biggest epistemological challenge, day-to-day.

YOU: If you don't want there to be subtext in what you're saying, you have to stay on top of what everyone has been saying in the conversation and then say the right thing. As I've gotten older, I've gotten a little better at that being in control of a

conversation thing, but it's hard.

ROBERT: I know. If you can't stay in control of a conversation, the relationship takes over, and the people involved get lost in the relationship.

You both laugh at what are probably the same memories.

YOU: Are you seeing anyone these days?

ROBERT: No. Not anymore. But there was someone I met at an acting group.

YOU: An actor?

ROBERT: Just an amateur.

YOU: What kind of acting group?

ROBERT: We just get together and read plays. I'm not even really an actor.

YOU: One of the newer regulars here is an actor. Actually, I'm not sure what she is. She says her pasts change.

ROBERT: Her pasts change?

YOU: Like she really was a ballerina once, and then her whole past changed and she really was a professional actor, and then her whole past changed and she really was an English teacher. Like, her pasts change.

ROBERT: Wow, that's pretty weird, but things like that do happen.

YOU: Really? I wanted to give her the benefit of

the doubt, but I wondered if she was just telling a story.

ROBERT: No, there have been documented cases of this. It's pretty rare though.

YOU: How did they prove it to be true?

ROBERT: Basically, they just had them demonstrate their skills when they were in a given past. Also they measured their muscles. Ballerina muscles don't come and go overnight, normally.

YOU: Okay. Interesting. So this is something we can test.

ROBERT: Isn't that reassuring?

YOU: Yeah. When I said "this is something we can test", I could feel myself getting into the unbelieving mindset. As though the only things I was interested in were known things.

ROBERT: I guess that's one way out of the terror of death. You just say that death is something that you can't ever know, it's "the unknown". So you don't ever think about it because you've trained yourself only to be interested in what you can verify.

YOU: The other day someone came in and tried to commit suicide but it didn't work.

ROBERT: Oh? It was probably one of those things that happen. We can't say anything about it so let's not think about it.

YOU: Right? But I've been having this feeling that this cafe is a place where no one ever dies.

ROBERT: That's nice. So that's your solution to the terror of death. Never leave this place.

YOU: But I like this idea of only concerning myself with the verifiable.

ROBERT: It's a nice idea. It feels really mature, you know? You're being careful and modest, and we like those values.

YOU: Yeah, if we were a warrior society, we wouldn't think it was so great.

ROBERT: Warrior? Oh right, bragging.

YOU: Yeah, but here I am, programmed the way that I am, in this culture, so, I'll take whatever makes me feel good, right?

ROBERT: Yeah, I mean the terror of death doesn't do you much good, does it?

YOU: No, not really, it doesn't get me to actually avoid death. But it does give me a kind of energy.

ROBERT: Yeah? Maybe you shouldn't try to get rid of it, then. You're really productive?

YOU: Yeah, I've been writing.

ROBERT: Good for you.

YOU: But no one is going to read my writing.

ROBERT: Yeah, you're probably right.

YOU: So what's the point of the terror of death? I like this verifiability thing.

ROBERT: But you were into God, weren't you?

YOU: Yeah. Weren't you thinking you should believe in God?

ROBERT: Yeah, I don't know.

YOU: We don't know anything.

ROBERT: Except that we're here.

YOU: Isn't it reassuring to say that? To find someone to agree with on something?

ROBERT: Absolutely.

YOU: So, if you're seeking the truth, there's no reason to believe in God, because the best truth doesn't show that God exists. We can't verify him.

ROBERT: But, it turns out that truth reduces to trustworthiness.

YOU: But belief in God isn't any better than verification, at least in dealing with the terror of death.

ROBERT: But what if trustworthiness isn't just about living your life in a smooth way? What if it's trustworthy to seek the ultimate?

YOU: Yeah. That feels right.

ROBERT: Yeah, so we're just too confused to even figure out that since we're confused we don't have to look beyond our lived lives.

YOU: So confused. We are so confused. How about we do something from the old days?

ROBERT: You want to start something?

YOU: Nothing permanent. I'm not ready to bring back any of those ghosts.

ROBERT: Those fragrances, you mean...

YOU: Those immaterial beings...

ROBERT: What do you have in mind?

YOU: Do you still have your jetskis?

ROBERT: No, but I know where to rent them. Over at Anderson Reservoir.

YOU: Any plans for the rest of the day?

ROBERT: No, not today.

YOU: Okay. Let's go.

ROBERT: You're feeling spontaneous?

YOU: I'm feeling the ultimate.

The plan is to go to your place for you to get your bathing suit, and then to go to his place to get his bathing suit, and then to go to Anderson Reservoir. You sit in his warm car, a snug feeling (which you get when you buckle up in any car, you carless person), and he turns the AC on and you talk of a few things, work through your plan, park at Anderson Reservoir, get out of the car, shut the doors, he locks them, you both walk over to the rental spot, split the cost, get your steed, get on the water.

ROBERT: You know, Beth, you could die out here. You're not at Mitzi's.

YOU: That's true.

Robert drives first and you sit behind him, with your arms around him. Why? Why is life like this? What are you doing out on this reservoir? The jetski is loud and exciting and all you can do is think about the ultimate. Maybe you're really here for a thrill. Maybe it's just the machinery of the human mind. Maybe you just want to conquer your fear of death by doing something risky, as a break from your riskless days, when you can do nothing but think of Death the Inevitable. Death the Risk is preferable to Death the Inevitable. Everything you do is an escape from death. There's nothing else to life but to escape death, every morning run away from it. Unless... you hear God's voice all the time, you see God's speech rushing toward you and breaking into a wake behind you. You and God, you and your Beloved (not Robert), but God doesn't exist and THE JETSKI TIPS YOU OFF and you laugh in the water, glad you can swim, there is no death today, you two get back on and you say "I better drive" and his arms are around you, and God's speech flies in your face and you see the brown hills around the reservoir, and you curve around the people you need to avoid and after a few hours it's all over, you return your rental on time because you're adults, and you dry off in the shade under the shelter, and you're hungry so

when you're dry you get in the car and drive to a burger joint.

YOU: Oh, I forgot to mention, I'm a vegetarian now.

ROBERT: Again?

YOU: Yeah.

ROBERT: Fish OK?

YOU: Yeah, sometimes I eat fish. So actually I'm a pescetarian.

ROBERT: I don't think they have fish here. Do you like veggie burgers?

YOU: Yeah, usually.

ROBERT: Let's see if they have any veggie burgers. If not, somewhere else.

YOU: (offering) I'll pay.

ROBERT: No, we're splitting.

YOU: (with relief) Thank you.

You get into Caruso's Italian Burger Joint and see on the menu that there's a Pesto Olive Mushroom Burger. Luxury. Robert orders the Meatball Marinara Burger, and you go and sit at a table.

YOU: There are people starving right now.

ROBERT: While we're hungry, people are starving, yeah.

YOU: Should we pray for them?

ROBERT: Would it do them any good?

YOU: I don't know.

ROBERT: Do you want to pray, or should I pray?

YOU: Which one of us wants to believe in God more?

ROBERT: I'll pray.

God... If you exist... there are people who don't get enough food... if there's some way... we can help... show us... the world is a place... where people starve... but... you can help them... somehow...

YOU: Amen.

You feel a kind of thrill, to have agreed with him.

The burgers arrive, unblessed by any prayer, and neither of you are afraid at all of them not being nourishment to your body. Nothing about this burger joint indicates that it's a place where you will get food poisoning. You satisfy your hungers for food, without talking to each other, and sit digesting.

ROBERT: Well, that was a nice afternoon. It's still a nice afternoon. Is this late lunch?

YOU: I think so.

ROBERT: When you don't have a 9 to 5, you can have lunch anytime you want.

YOU: Yeah, I can eat whenever I want. But I try to keep a routine.

ROBERT: You don't want to start waking up at noon.

YOU: Right.

ROBERT: Waking up at noon isn't all bad.

YOU: I don't want to get lost in time. Do you ever wish you didn't have a routine?

ROBERT: No. The other side of the fence is unverifiable, so I don't concern myself with it.

He smiles at, you laugh at, his little joke.

ROBERT: Yeah, of course I wish I didn't have a routine sometimes.

And with that, you get up and push your chairs in. You go the women's restroom and he goes to the men's, you meet up outside the joint and get into his car and he takes you back to your apartment, and he goes home.

And all you can do for two hours is to walk back and forth, looking at the ornamental plums in blossom, walking past them outside on the street, going from place to place, trying to get your bearings, trying to process all that was said and done today. You wonder, why is life like this? Why is life so heart-breaking in its beauty? You walk and think of Robert, and wonder if the layers of age should be pulled back, for you to

know him in the way he knew you when you were younger. You can still be deliberate. Is this the meaning of life? Is it to have a man? Or is it to meet God? Or is it to experience experiences? Just as your mind gravitates toward what is heaviest, your spirit levitates toward what is faintest. And what does your heart love? You are here in your experiences, in yourself, resting from what came from outside you.

You go inside your apartment. Now what? The camera keeps rolling, to spoil every moment by somehow changing its past and future into something totally new. You know that you will forget today -- or will you? You get out a diary and describe what you can remember of it. Will you have time to read your diary later? You will have time to read an entry or two. But you feel like you will not. No, nothing epoch-making happened today. Time comes to claim you. You call a friend on the phone and tell her of your day, hang up the phone, make dinner, and eat it and sit around all evening, trying to shake the thought that today will be gone forever, not even so late as when you die, but in a week or two. And then you open up your laptop and decide, why not get ahead on your work?

Your work done for the day, you dress for bed, and sit on the edge of it, and you try to pray your own prayer.

YOU: Oh God, what is life? What is this thing that you have given us?

You hear no answer, and finish getting ready for bed, turn out the light, get under the covers, and wait for sleep -- for death.

[Slow fade to black, silence, you breathe.]

[Closing theme.]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 3 "Robert"
Written 12 February 2019
Released 12 February 2023

COMMENTS

1. That confusing part is pretty confusing, huh? Maybe the reader gains extra empathy by experiencing the same thing at the same time as the characters do.

© 2023 by James Banks, licensed CC BY-NC 4.0
(see creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)