

Thinker on the Toilet

Years later, he remembered an epiphany that had come to him during his college years.

He asked me: “Did you have any moments where you would, like, think of something and it would seem like really important?” And then he shared with me that while he was sitting on the toilet at my house my junior year, the downstairs toilet, the shitty one, though not taking a shit, just thinking, he began thinking about his family tree, how he was the first and only of his bloodline ever to be sitting on this exact toilet thinking about how he was the only one in his family ever to be thinking about how he was the first in his family.

He was laughing. Fondly remembering foolishness, the best stories sculpted from foolishness, hardened over time. I laughed, too, coughing, banging the table. “Wait,” I said when I could. “Hold up. Was the seat up or down, then?” Because he said he hadn’t been shitting.

He didn’t remember. All he remembered was his epiphany. Years ago, clear as a crystal, as mirrors before hot showers, as any crystal in the mind, any iceberg plucked from the neurological slime. Now, mysterious as... as... as a single footprint on a riverbank... a sentence out of context... an old stone eroding in the rapids, protruding through the surface, whose face is a statue’s face, rusting with time, within reach only to the birds and (maybe) fish...

“It just made so much sense at the time,” he said. “It’s funny.” He laughed again. English was his second language. “It’s funny how it could make so much sense then, at the time, but now it makes no sense, I don’t even know what I was thinking.”

I nodded. I understood. It happened to me a lot in college. It’s happened to me since. It happens regularly... epiphanies I forget and won’t remember until later...

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean. I can see why you would’ve thought it made

sense.” I paused to let him consider this. Let him wipe the steam off the mirror. Let him lean and reach for the submerged while I’ve got a hold of him. “Because you’re the first of your kind, of your family, to ever be doing anything, really. You’re the first of your kind to be sitting right here, right now, doing what you’re doing.”

“Wow, yeah, you’re right.” More laughing. English his second language, “wow” learned in third grade from a textbook. “I guess.”

“Every moment you live is unique, not just from your family but unique from everyone, from anything.”

“Yeah, but it’s just so stupid,” he said. “I hadn’t even eaten breakfast yet and I was just sitting there, not even taking a shit, high as balls, I probably just went in there to wash my hands or face or something.”

“Or piss,” I speculated. “Maybe you went in to take a piss but the seat was down and then you just forgot what you were doing in there or you realized you didn’t really have to go anyway, you just thought you did, and so you just sat down. And then as soon as you sat down, you tried to remember what it was you were doing there, and then you thought, why you? Why you and not your father, or your grandfather, or anybody else in your family? And then you thought that what you were questioning was less why it was you in that bathroom, less whether you went in there to shit or wash your hands or grab a paper towel or look in the mirror or whatever, less why it was you out of everyone in your family, ever, in my bathroom, and more so a question about time and place, not “*why you?*” but “*why only you?*”, and you thought about how what you were doing was unprecedented and not able to be repeated, the first and last of its kind, and, as you continued thinking, shitting or not, head probably in your hands, fist holding up your chin, about how the kind of thing happening to you happens to everyone all the time, your father, your grandfather, everyone you’ve ever seen or thought about, the same kind of thing but at different times in different places, each moment unprecedented and unable to be repeated, for everyone, for all time. And in that moment, that unprecedented instant in particular during which you continued to think and think through a thought you’d never before thought so thoroughly through, you had the much deeper thought that you weren’t just a shitter on a toilet only, but a shitter on that particular toilet, in that place and time that you yourself held, a place that no one in your family has held or ever

would ever hold, a place maybe others have held, but in a space of time occupied by you alone... Truth be told, it's not so rare a thought, not so unique an epiphany. But what made you think this thought was an epiphany, what made it an epiphany to you, was that you continued thinking about it, you got a hold of it, found it wouldn't budge but pulled some more and budged it, and by the time you pulled it out, you found, to your pleasant surprise, something you recognized, something you hadn't totally forgotten. Like the thought you had was the tip of an... was the top of a statue in a river of statues... whose tops you watch erode when you relax, whose faces and bodies you saw once, before you lost them to the river... and then...

I'd lost him. He was eating, nodding. I'd had him to the end, and then I'd lost him.

"Nevermind," I said. "It made sense to me as I was thinking it. I had it at one point." I pulled up the stone statue with my fingertips, by its head. It was like The Thinker, only The Thinker was seated on a toilet, and his face was my own or my father's or my friend's. He'd slipped, cannonballed into the depths. And I imagined it being taken by the rapids, moving at rapids' speed, as if it could float, the statue, even partially, or as if it were a human head, empty, or full of water, and round, The Thinker in the shape of a human head, with the chemical qualities of a human head.

At the station, an old man in a nice suit sat at the top of the stairs. His friends, also in nice suits, appeared to be alternating between trying to help him up and trying to convince him to get up on his own. Or maybe trying to convince him to let them help him up. At least I knew from being in this country long enough that he was okay, that the old man was okay, just drunk, really drunk, a really drunk Thinker, like all the well-dressed old men here, and okay.

The train was full of more old drunk guys just like them. Just like how the river, clouded with the spoils of decomposing memory, reveals only the old stone tops of the statues it conceals. But silent, old, drunk guys. Statue-tops that don't ask for anything. Statues whose bodies you imagine to be the same as when you let them go.

As I began climbing the escalator out of the station, passing more old, drunk guys, I stopped to just stand there on the escalator, and let it carry me up. I thought about how I was the first of my family, as far as I

knew, but also almost surely, ever to be here, in this country. I stopped climbing halfway up the escalator. Not my father, nor either grandfather, nobody.

And escalating, escalating. And coming up for air. First I saw the stars and heard: engines, wind, footsteps. Then the buildings. The usual. They sounded the same, the engines, wind, footsteps, etc. Like a hum, as everything always does when you're not really listening. And then finally the sidewalk. I stepped off, past an old, drunk Thinker sitting on the top step. Past another on the curb, watching the cars, enjoying a smoke, and then past another, Thinking on a convenience store stoop, wearing a very nice, very well-pressed suit, enjoying cheap alcohol. For the rest of that minute, I remembered all of them, making the connection in my building's elevator that one was posed like The Thinker, that maybe they all were, all posed like variations of the Thinker, Thinkers eroding differently in rapids of different minds. Then I let them go. I must have. I can't remember thinking about them – the Thinkers, the related memories – until I sat on the toilet and started thinking about my friend's epiphany again just a moment ago.