

The Night I Became a Sigh

The usual supper – any effort made to bring some kind of elegance to proceedings falls on deaf ears. It's no surprise really; the decibel-levels attained by my family's open-mouthed chewing and wilful, phlegmy, bull-like breathing, drown out all civilised communication. I stew in my minority-of-one steam, my unique sensitivity, regarding, storm-browed, the evening's rape of restraint and decorum.

Have you tried feeding yourself and simultaneously blocking your ears? Impossible, unless you eat at a trough. But I refuse – perversely, I admit – to wear earphones at the supper table; it sends the wrong message. Far better they nightly bear the sodden stress of my muffled rage. You see, it is not wise to separate oneself from the communal meal one insists upon as head of the household. And I am head of the household. Actually, I'm not. In some important way, I am too little for that mantle. This littleness consumes me, which is what all this is about...

After some time, perhaps twenty minutes or so, the meal draws to its bedraggled close, and its participants drift aimlessly off, skipping, cartwheeling, or on all fours. I retire to my study and peruse the world's offerings at various blogspots and news sites, hoping to find clear evidence of global catastrophe. Somehow, despite my wish it were otherwise, civilisation clings on to the edge of its cliff with a tenacity I find annoying.

Later I become aware of the children soaping, splashing and bickering their way to something approaching cleanliness. From here my evening entails mopping up their mess, a soak in their slippery water, their bedtime, then the blessed peace and quiet their slumber brings. Sleeping children are delightful; their little noses, fingers, lips, still and sweet, untroubled and un-troubling, their littleness less than mine for a moment.

In the bathroom, after my scummy, lukewarm drenching, I polish with my favoured old face towel the fixtures and fittings, dab up any loose spots of water (Berlin's is almost gritty with calcium!) and generally return everything to the virginal state that so calms me. Only, it doesn't calm me. The internal humming, the tight vibration of that inner system that can do such a thing as vibrate, is still busily buzzing away.

I blame my littleness, which is as glue in my heart, as pins in my secret delusions of grandeur. It tapes my fingers together, muddles my thoughts, clutters me up as I unclutter and neaten my surroundings. But I want contact with no one. I shall battle this beast alone.

Naked under our white duvet at last, I lie face down, my left cheek nuzzling my pillow, and study the neatness of the cotton's weave. Tonight, the threads' tight togetherness, their polite precision and machined harmony, are wondrous to me. I marvel that such elegant softness can stem from such technical wizardry. As if unbidden, the fingernail of my right index finger joins my face, settling on the pillow somewhere between lip and nose. It begins, like a curious insect, to trace the magical weave's tiny, zigzagging pathways up and down, and seems happy to be doing so. With only a little pressure it manages an unexpected purchase, opening a gap, a bloodless wound. It stops, proud of its accomplishment, seemingly awaiting my approval.

I am gripped, gripped that I am gripped. What in heaven's name is so compelling about this? My mind wants in. I want in. Suddenly I picture an ocean of the cleanest white just there, mere millimetres from my attention, just on the other side of that tiny opening. It winks at me. My fingernail prods deeper. Does the pillow shudder? Was that a shudder? I can hardly tell. Maybe it was me.

Something heaves a sigh and arches its back towards my probing, but surely I am imagining things. No! The gap widens, takes my finger as a virgin kiss shyly takes its first tongue. Oh God, this is amazing! I push deeper, astonished, aware of my heartbeat hot in my neck, as my finger sinks down to the top knuckle. The tight wound spreads wider, loosens up and entices with a charisma – you'll think me insane I know, but there it is – with a charisma that flushes all reason from me. With a primitive thrust, a mighty, urging push, I pump myself in a directed flood of desire forwards into that hole. All of me; arms, head, shoulders, chest, hips, legs, flows in an arc of lust forwards, then downwards, then I am in.

In! Where am I in? In my pillow of course, but what is it like? Allow me a moment's wriggling and I will report.

So, in what sort of an environment have I landed? Well, it's like nothing I have ever consciously experienced. It is a total, soft-white cuddle, unobtrusive and fine. It is a noiseless and clean eternity of dispassionate compassion. I feel cared for, but this surrounding care is not in the least cloying. True, movement is somewhat restricted, but my state of mind, that is, the total absence of stress and concern, render this limitation moot. As a side note, I cannot imagine anyone making a mess here; there is nothing to mess up. Is this bliss?

It suddenly occurs to me that I must have become minuscule, for I was a few moments ago many times larger than the pillow which now so effortlessly houses me. Around me, for as far as I can see, there is only endless, dimly lit white. I would try to make sense of things, only I don't want to. I will risk nothing that might negatively impinge on this strangely obtained state of contentment.

So, here I am then. It's certainly very comfortable, very nice. No neck ache, no aches at all actually. I have not been this comfortable for years, since I was a young child, in fact.

Ah. I suppose my family might miss me! From their point of view I have simply disappeared. The last thing my wife knew, I was brushing my teeth before going to bed and then – *poof* – no more husband. What will she think? How will she make sense of it? What will she tell the children? There, you see, it only lasted a few bloody seconds! I'm worried again. I've got to take care of this, get out of here the way I came in. Maybe I can use this procedure to de-stress at night, get a perfect sleep. Better than nothing, I suppose.

Then I notice the snag – there's always a snag. As I try to twist/swim around to head back towards the opening, I notice my right leg is caught, at the big toe in fact, by something or other. I yank my leg towards me, struggling to get it free, but to no avail. By bending my right knee, and thereby pulling myself towards my toe, I manage to get close enough to inspect the problem.

To my horror I discover that bulbous appendage didn't make it through with the rest of me! It must be protruding from the pillow cover like an ugly nose, as if amputated and abandoned, a gruesome warning left by merciless kidnappers. I hope to God my wife does not discover it. Her screaming would wake the children for sure, and then another fractious, bad-mooded morning would follow. Getting out of here has just become a matter of the utmost urgency.

But the urgency does not impress my toe, nor the pillow case, nor does it empower me to break free. No amount of yanking, no violence of thrashing, no profanity nor volume of cursing has any effect. Nor can my trusty index finger find any purchase, nor any other finger it seems, to prise open the hole and let my toe in. I am reminded again – cruelly, I feel – of the impotence that started out this sorry episode. Am I now to take a lesson in powerlessness from a pillow! As if one's children were not belittling enough, as if this sore point were not rubbed into the open wound of my awareness on a daily basis, as if I didn't already know. So what use all this!?

I give up. What else is there to do? I'm stuck in my pillow, caught at the big toe, dangling minutely from it, suspended in fluffy stuffing, naked as the day I was born, powerless and pointless. I wait, resigned to whatever is to become of me.

Time passes.

More time passes and then a dreamless sleep takes me, from which I am frightened awake by a mighty up-rushing, a whooshing upwards, as if I were tied to a rocket blasting into space. My wife, as huge as the Empire State Building, has me in the gentle pincer of her finger and thumb, by the big toe. Her face shows no shock, her mouth utters no sound. I feel the cow-warm pulses of her breath all over me. She blinks slowly, with a god-like ponderance, as a sad smile stretches her mouth. Then her lips part, her body inflates slightly, and I can tell – despite being the size of a gnat – she is about to sigh. A half-second later the tsunami of her sleepy disappointment floods through me, magically restoring me to my former size. As I grow she releases my toe, and I float in a leaf-like arc back to bed.

“Sorry about that,” I mutter, rolling over.

She climbs into bed beside me, but does not respond. Moments later we are both fast asleep.