

Putting Life on a Pedestal

Matthew H. Nagel

It was the summertime, and my mom was outside mingling with the neighbors. I was inside on the toilet. At whatever age this may have been, somewhere in the lower half of the single digits, my responsibilities were minimal, and the things I had my mom do for me were at their peak. I was still at an age where she had to wipe me after I did my business. I knew no other way to finish being in the bathroom than to yell “Mom!” at the top of my lungs until she came and cleaned me up. It was the last step in the process, and I had completed the previous steps with all the grace and precision attributed to those in my age bracket. I remember screaming that day, and becoming distraught by the fact that she could not hear me, with her being outside with other old people—like that’s an excuse. I was helpless, condemned to sit on this cold piece of ceramic in this cold room until she would come.

Why the hell can't she hear me? Doesn't she know that I'm doing this right now, and the only way I can get up is if she gets in here? She should know these things, she's a mom, and I'm a kid, and that's what moms do. She's not supposed to just leave and not answer when I need her in crucial times. I'm getting tired and sore from yelling. My legs are hurting from being here so long—they can't even reach the ground. If she doesn't come, do I get sick from getting up and not being clean? She has to come at some point. We haven't had dinner yet.

When she eventually came in the door, I put on my best face of indifference. She didn't know what I just went through, and I wouldn't let her. She would just coddle me, and say sorry, and what would that do? It can't reverse what happened. In spite of my fury with her, it was all I could do to keep back the tears of overwhelming relief and solace.

Later on down the line of my life, my helpless, dependant attitude toward the bathroom was replaced with the feeling of work. To have to stop playing with fireworks, or fighting with sticks to go into a small room, just because I ate some food earlier in the day, felt like the biggest chore in the world. At sleepovers and birthday parties it was the worst. All of my friends would be building forts, gambling for candy, or pausing a movie at a scene where the gorgeous female shows a breast or two—laughing and being involved, and there I was, with my poor timing, sitting there on the john. I can remember a specific feeling of extreme giddiness, my stomach churning with the excitement of finally wiping my ass, and exiting through that world-

dividing portal of a bathroom door. On one side I was segregated, antsy, and left out, and on the other side I could run around and be a goddamn kid.

Moving onto high school. The seed of hate for the lavatory blossomed into a full fledged loathing. School was eight hours long, with a forty minute lunch break, seven minutes between each class, and absolutely no chance of me using the public stalls. Not an option. It was a reverse hell from my previous bathroom blunders. Now, instead of having to go when I didn't want to, I couldn't go. I simply refused to use the facilities I would frequently go out of my way to vandalize. I could be on the other end of my wet-toilet paper-throwing stick if I were to shit in school. Or even worse, I could get busted in on.

I would walk through school with a beast in my stomach, growling every time I changed positions, angry with me for keeping him caged up in my intestines. Eternally uncomfortable after lunch, I counted minutes on the clock until he could be released, and the stress of holding such a wild animal would be alleviated. There were brief moments - during the seven minutes between classes—when I would take a lap around the halls, and release my pressure valve, leaving a trail of noxious fumes in my wake—the rancid breath of my prisoner, bellowing from the depths for liberation. It was all I could do to make room, and lessen the stress inside my stomach. After school, I would drop my friends off, and hurry inside, angry at the world for making me wait so long in discomfort with my inner fiend. Goddamn world with its goddamn eternal alienation of the man who needs to go.

In college, my whole world view in general was flipped upside down. The word personal, the word privacy, the word seclusion, they no longer existed. All was communal, everything was laid out on the proverbial table for all to see. Dorm life was at its core a team effort. We slept in the same rooms, at the same times—the group would disperse to go to sleep, and all would sleep. When we woke up, we would all have a cigarette at the same time, then go into the communal shower stalls, and shower at the same time. After that, we would all head off to class, and meet up at the dining hall to eat at the same time. We did everything in unison.

It was inevitable that this new herd mentality would bleed into our lavatory life. Since we were eating at the same time, the pack was regularly on the same bowel cycle. The days of seclusion in the restroom were no more. No more a chore, but a constructive activity done with friends. It can be likened to a group of ladies having tea or coffee together every afternoon, and discussing their marriages, jobs, etc. We would discuss the everyday, as

well as debate the finer points of dorm bathroom usage. Using Lysol spray on the seat before use, our school work, buying your own toilet paper to avoid chafing, girl troubles or successes, and most of all, the psychology of stall selection. There were five stalls, all with doors, but one had a wooden door. Does the wooden-door stall get picked for use more or less because it's a loner? Do the far left, and far right stalls get singled out for being on the extremities? If you shut the door after use, does it defer others, or attract? The objective was to find the least defiled. The main difference between us and the tea-goers is that instead of a swank café with sweet drinks and treats, we were in a row of toilet stalls in a ratty bathroom, talking through paneling drinking beer and eating ramen. But the foremost idea still holds true. It was an inversion of my excremental disposition. A nullifying of public jitters, a forced immersion into the depths of the interpersonal shit.

Presently, I am thankful for having gone through these stages. As I sit here now, on the pot once again, and reflect, I realize how much my views have changed. I live in a house now, and once again am able to go in private. I have become attached to the alone time. What once was an example of my helplessness, an annoyance in my daily life, and a lesson in the grittier side of friendship, has now become a completely new type of experience. Now, pending on my mood or workload, I can be seen strolling into the restroom with a number of different items. If I have nothing, I'll be doing some thinking, whether deep or general, I have something on my mind. If I have a good sum of homework, I will usually have my book, a highlighter, and a pencil with me. If it's going to be just a relaxation time, I can have anything from a sudoku or word scrimmage from the newspaper to a gameboy, and all the way to my guitar or my computer if I damn well please, whatever be the impulse.

The long, meditative session taken after a significant event always entails philosophizing of the greatest degree. I can remember coming back from jail one morning, and taking a stance like "The Thinker" sculpture on my pedestal of pondering. Forwardly hunched, hand on chin, eyes to the floor, motionlessly questioning myself.

How much does a lawyer cost? Was it unlawful entry? Do I even know what determines an unlawful entry? How much does court cost? Can I get a court-appointed lawyer, and if so, does that cost anything? Does school get involved, and if so, will they screw me or help me? Do I need to tell my parents? Shit, I will, if I can't come up with the money. At least it's my first offense. What if I get in trouble again? It's only halfway through the school year.

It is a time of asking questions. The necessary ones, with answers

and objectives, that can be researched and completed when you finish. Upon return to society. What better place to do your hardest internalized reasoning than a bathroom, a pale-colored blank slate of an environment, with the white noise of the fan to drown out the world?

On days like this, when I am looking for meaning around each corner, I think about the immediate action I am performing. Sitting on the toilet, looking around at different things in the bathroom. I close my eyes, and open them to see myself in twenty years, in the exact same position. I see myself hating the toilet again. I am near it all the time to pee, I can't hold my piss like I used to be able to. I have a colonoscopy the next day to check out my hemorrhoids and figure out if there's any further colon problems going on up there. What a chore the john has become.

I open my eyes again and see myself delirious and elderly. My bowels feel like an old gardening hose—worn out, dilapidated from constant abuse. I am on my throne again, my favorite chair in the nursing home. I've done the beginning steps of my process with the grace and precision attributed to those in my age bracket, and I am ready to be wiped. I yell out "Nurse!" at the top of my lungs, but she's off somewhere else, unaware of my situation. I reflect as I do most of the time when I've forgotten reading materials. I've come into this world the same way I will be leaving it—shitting, dependent.

Matthew H. Nagel grew up in Arden Hills, Minnesota--about 5 minutes north of the cities--with a dad, a mom, and a brother. And four cats. He came to Iowa State for architecture. He dropped that after a brief break from studies--a semester at rest--which was the catalyst for his current writing and reading interests.