

Mocking from above is redundant. How does it feel to be mocked from below? Is shyness a mockery? Is timidity teasing? What about “being a tease”? Timidity is a terrible disease. At one time I really was so ill that I did resemble an idiot, but what kind of idiot am I now, when I myself am aware of the fact that people consider me an idiot? How many times did I have to fall flat in public before I started worrying about falling? Once? Twice? How cold does it have to get for me to go looking for my gloves? Once? Twice? It’s impossible to remember the feeling of cold, only “COLD” “SO COLD”. Pain has flavors but cold is just SO. When I said “glove” did you hear “love”? Would you call a fear of heights “timidity” or would you call that “learning”?

Most dating shows feature at least one Fear Challenge. The man and woman, often still strangers, have to jump off a tall building, scale a tall building, walk a bridge from one tall building to another, or take a helicopter that lands on a tall building. They wear helmets with cameras strapped to the front so we can get a view of the terrifying vistas. Often the woman gets very scared! When the two of them inevitably suppress the shame of timidity and accomplish the goal, they compare the feat to falling in love. They say, “we were able to trust each other in a tough time.” This is how they simultaneously exacerbate and exorcise their mortal fear of banality.

Call this a lame metaphor, but let me tell you, the one time I collapsed when climbing a tall building was the one time I was with somebody who I really should not have been with. We were climbing the steps of the cathedral in January and it was SO COLD that I couldn’t tell if it was the numbness or the height causing my vertigo. We made it all the way up the spiral staircase in the tower and onto the first landing, and all of a sudden on the freestanding icy metal stairs my legs buckled. How humiliating! The shame of not being able to climb further was unbearable. That was the first time in my life that shame couldn’t overcome the body. The best part is, when I balked, he went up without me!

This is how it is with people sometimes: sudden, unbearable memories, usually those connected with shame, make them stop for a moment where they are. I remember the first time I heard the term “Courtesy Flush”. It was mentioned in a way that made it clear I should have already know what it meant, which I didn’t, but I could easily deduce its meaning upon hearing it. The person asking had prodded me, “you know what a Courtesy Flush is, right?” But I couldn’t answer yes or no, because even though I understood, it wasn’t strictly true that I had heard it before. What was this question really asking? I stayed silent and ended up looking like I was either too stupid to know or too timid to pretend that I knew. Timidity is much worse than stupidity. I’m aware that dealing with a timid person is like sitting on a warm toilet seat. Smell is understandable, but warmth in the bathroom is truly unnerving. Especially when you don’t know who’s used the toilet before you. You’re left with a warm toilet from some unknown ass. Why does sitting on a warm toilet seat make one feel so ashamed? Is it shame for yourself or for the person who sat down before you?

I told her over the phone, “you should see my face right now, seriously, my face is just like when I’m watching *The Bachelorette*. I’m in sympathetic ecstasy for you. Look at that ring! The picture hardly does it justice. It’s strange that women seldom faint at these very last seconds! On the contrary, the brain is horribly alive and must work fiercely, fiercely, like an engine in motion; I imagine various thoughts chattering, all unfinished, and perhaps ridiculous ones, too, irrelevant ones: ‘Look at that man staring – he has a wart on his forehead, look at the executioner, one of his lower buttons is rusty’...”

I’m too scared to have fun. I sit in this cubicle all day, water leaking in under the felted walls, the sound of the printer and the xerox machine constantly humming outside; it’s terrifying even in the cubicle without any sight-lines. By the same token, I associate physical shock with fun; I go to theme parks with my shy friend and we ride the most extreme rides together. The whole time I’m imagining gruesome accidents, like one woman I read about whose ponytail got caught in the gears of a roller coaster and most of her face was ripped off. She moved to a barn in the backwoods of Alabama and became an outsider artist, making tiny malformed figurines out of wire. I imagine my scalp separating from my skull, and I chastise myself for these perverse fantasies; the theme park is supposed to be the one place where fear is wholesome! The point of the roller coaster is to scrape the perversity from my mind through animal terror. White teeth, yawning cavern, heart-stopping catharsis. I only go on summer days; who would think of going to a theme park in winter?

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By Elvia Wilk. Some sentences courtesy of Dostoyevsky.