

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

I live in the place between wakefulness and oblivion, where a minute can pass in an hour, a night in a blink. It's been a decade since my last restful sleep. I'd say it's been a decade since I'd last slept at all, but that would be a lie. I'm not an insomniac. There is a cacophony of voices in my head keeping me from sleep like neighbours fighting loudly all night long every night. I think the voices will drive me crazy, but they're waiting for the most opportune moment to initiate my total meltdown. The voices are seldom quiet, and most active at night. They're incessant, replaying the same tired monologue, but it's no repeated loop of unwavering cadence, and the banter varies in diction, in delivery, in detail. This night is aggravated, rather, I am aggravated in the night by the unassailable need to piss. It's not the aging, grumpy prostate urge with its remarkable pain and effort for a picolitre of waste. My stream thunders into the late night bowl. I don't even care if the neighbours hear any more. Let it wake them. Let them be as sleepless and disarrayed as I. If you can't hear my voices, hear my pee. I am Misery, won't you join me for a cup of tea?

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

#

Once a night would hardly be worthy of mention. I, however, need to void often and with each passing, there is enough water to fuel a hydroelectric generator. In the timeless night seconds and minutes are null and void, so I don't know when, or how often. Well, I could count each one, mark the bathroom wall with ticks like a prisoner recording sunsets. It would give me something to do while I pour into the toilet. But all that will tell me is that I've pissed a lot. If it mattered I could colour code the ticks: red for Sunday, yellow for Monday, blue for Tuesday--for some reason Tuesday always makes me sad--and Friday should be orange. I'm certain I could entertain myself for weeks dreaming up ways to chart these data. I could put the charts on Google Drive and share them with my Facebook friends, start A Comprehensive Analysis of Joe's Nighttime Urination circle on Google+ and spend my days in the associated Hangout discussing the probable causes with my myriad Internet friends. My family doctor had no answers after he learnt I had almost no diuretic substances in my diet, nor are there any in the pills I take to stay somewhat normal and healthy. The urologist had a good long look, and found nothing remarkable. The only thing I remember clearly is the way he held my balls. It was the closest I've come to a homoerotic experience. If ever I find a woman who can hold my scrotum like that, and fry eggs properly, I'll marry her and be true to her forever.

I am afraid all this piss is the product of reverse leaching. Soon I will be a shrivelled mass of illuvium, a statue of mostly salt. When that happens, put me in the backyard, safe from the wind, and let the cliff swallows build their burrows in what's left of me. That is probably my life's purpose.

I refuse to have a clock in my room. Looming dawn is my wake up call, regardless of how long the voices have kept me awake. It's been this way for as long as I can remember. I've

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

learned that my memory is flawed, a compressed mass of analog tape exchanging bits of data, remixing memories, destroying details and fabricating new ones from the lost bits of others. My voices rely on these fractured memories, so the voices lie. Even though I know they're lying to me, I believe them because I've heard them so often.

Once, when the voices were exceptionally belligerent, I saw a shrink to talk about them. I was afraid the neighbour's chihuahua would start telling me to shoot anyone who looked like they might have found true love. We talked twice, an hour each time. The shrink spent the last twenty minutes of our second session explaining the differences between real auditory hallucinations, and what I was experiencing: the typical inner dialogue experienced by profound introversion. He ended the session by slamming his desk with both hands, and heaving the most sincere I'm-so-disappointed-in-you sigh I'd ever been victimized by, and said, "You're not psychotic. You're neurotic. There's nothing I can do for you." I had managed to let the shrink down. My voices added my failure to achieve diagnosable psychosis to their repertoire.

I couldn't even rent a friend at \$125 an hour. For that kind of money I could hire prostitutes, and I've thought long and hard about it, but I wouldn't call a prostitute because I don't want to become part of the rationale for the need of the sex trade. On the plus side, however, I would have someone to talk to for a while, someone who might pretend to listen while she was on the clock. I couldn't see how anyone, no matter how professional, might be passionate--I suppose prostitution is the only profession you can be truly passionate about--for a man with drug-induced normalcy. Actual sexual intercourse was out of the question because I've been taking Prozac and Xanax for so long that achieving an erection requires an act of God. The voices feed on this, and laugh when I watch free Internet porn, chafing my flaccid penis while trying too hard to be turned on by some woman--wearing hideously fake breasts and so much make-up she

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

looks like a parody of a transvestite--spitting on a semi-erect penis, and yanking on it like she's priming a rusty old pump. So, it seems I am part of the rationale for the sex trade after all.

It's been so long since I've desired anyone sexually that keeping a Viagra with me seems as useless as the condoms in most teenagers' wallets. Until a few nights ago; I prayed for an erection, a desperate prayer during a failed one night stand with a forty-year old former model with spectacular breasts. We got a room at the Super 8. She had a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps and an infectious lust. She tried things that would make Vatsayana blush, and I tried to please her in every way I could. In the end, she said it must have been the booze. I'd agreed. She'd given me her number, printed it neatly on the back of her business card. She'd mentioned twice that it was her personal number. She'd mentioned three times that I could call her anytime. I'd nodded and said I sure would. With a calligrapher's patience, I had copied her telephone number onto a sticky and pressed it into my address book as carefully as if it were a dried rose. For her I would willingly get the Viagra, but I've failed to tell her so. The voices tell me she would never love me. The voices tell me she would never fry my eggs right. They have convinced me the phone number she'd given is fake, an empty gesture to disguise her disgust at my failure, and to help her feel better about expunging our wasted night from her memory.

#

In the right amount, tequila lights an insatiable fire in your loins. Tequila is the devil's rose-coloured glasses. Tequila was the Extacy before there was Extacy. A tray of Prairie Fires was often the start of a beautiful friendship. Cecilia's was one of the most beautiful. Her friendship with me was too short, and survived sober days and nights. Physically, Cecilia was average, but her eyes and mouth were striking. And she was smart, sassy, and had a sly sense of humour. I

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

didn't understand how such an exquisite person could have drifted into my life. Cecilia was entirely happy in her skin, and didn't seem to be slumming, or cruising for a soul to save.

For my part, I sought a break from the voices. I went to loud bars seeking quiet oblivion. I was content to drink alone and go home alone, unless some poor woman wanted to waste her one-nighter on me. I would go with her graciously--or, as some women have claimed, I was just a sad little opportunist-- usually quite surprised that anyone could possibly be interested in me, but as the voices have told me, "We're all desirable at closing time."

Cecilia ducked any questions about why she partied. She revealed next to nothing about her family, or personal life. She asked next to nothing about mine. She preferred going back to her place. So did I. My apartment was one complaint away from being condemned. It was small, dark, and littered with tall stacks of books, magazines, and journals. No matter how much Febreze and fresh air I pumped into it, my apartment smelled like a ripe jockstrap.

Cecilia's apartment was spare. Nothing hung from the walls. Her furniture consisted of a dinette set with two chairs, and in the living room two small bookshelves, stuffed with old books. One was topped with an old radio tuned to the CBC. She had no TV and no stereo. She professed to love music, but was satisfied with whatever the radio served up. There was a La-Z-Boy reclining love seat and a reading lamp. Except for a rag rug near the La-Z-Boy, her floors were plain laminate. Her bedroom had a ceiling fan, queen sleigh bed with a matching four-drawer dresser. The set was old and made from red oak. Her side had a small nightstand topped with a banker's lamp and a stack of three novels.

She too was a reader and we had similar taste in writers and books. An evening talking with Cecilia quieted the voices in a way alcohol never had. She was content to read library books and return them. She didn't feel the need to read any book a second time.

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

“You’re a good reader, Joe,” she said. We were at her place and she’d made vegetarian penne and baked focaccia bread. Three nights a week we ate together, and talked. We had comfortable sex. I brought her groceries once a week. I brought her select books from my hoard, usually by a writer or title I’d mentioned, or one she’d heard discussed on the CBC. We didn’t drink when we were together, not even a glass of wine with dinner. It wasn’t a rule we’d put in place. It wasn’t there and neither of us noticed.

One Wednesday night after apricot stuffed pork tenderloin, with red beans and rice, and aloo gobi, we’d started talking about Raymond Carver. I’d read his work when I was younger. I’d started by saying I’d loved his short stories, but didn’t care much for his poetry. She’d said, “Why?” Instead of answering, I crawled under the table, reached up under her skirt, and pulled her bottom to the edge of the chair.

“Dessert,” I mumbled into her thighs.

Afterwards, she was a little dishevelled, a little flushed, and she looked at me, her head a little cocked.

“Do you always avoid answering the tough questions in this manner?” She smiled and patted my hand.

“If you’d like me to, I would consider it.”

And then I helped clean up the dinner dishes and went home.

I only slept over on Friday or Saturday nights. We both had day jobs. We both rose early. I looked forward to waking up with Cecelia, but I tried to leave before she suggested breakfast. She was great at following recipes, but she couldn’t fry an egg. The quality of the cooked eggs always revealed the quality of the cook. Anyone could follow a recipe, but it took a bona fide artist to properly fry an egg. Cecelia was no chef. She always used canola. She cooked them in

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

the same pan in which she'd burned the bacon--the same pan that had fried fish, and who knows what else. She always used too much heat. She always cooked them hard. The voices accused her of trying to poison me. And I began to believe them. I'd swallow without chewing the breakfasts she'd made for me, on plates she'd flourish with orange slices and fresh parsley. As much as I liked being around Cecelia, I couldn't wait to get away in the morning.

#

We'd just cleaned up after dinner, and were sipping iced tea on the balcony. Aside from two faded deck chairs and a scattering of empty planters, Cecelia's deck was as desolate as the rest of her home.

"Do you think we see enough of each other?" Cecelia said.

She looked out over the city. She sipped her tea. I looked at my feet. We sat in silence for some time. The voices shouted vitriol. They told me I would spend forever eating her rubbery, gold encrusted eggs every morning. Cecelia put her hand on my shoulder. Her touch was gentle, warm, and welcome. Her touch had healing powers. But the voices were stronger.

"Joe? Are you all right?" She said. Her voice was distant and overwhelmed by my own little voices.

After more time passed, I looked into her eyes, and shook free of her hand.

"Don't," I said. "Please, Cecelia. Don't."

"Don't what?" Her voice was weak-kneed and trembling. The voices exclaimed Cecelia was trying to control me, manipulate me into surrendering to her tears. She put her beautiful hands on my cheeks, and caressed them with her gentle thumbs. I grabbed her by the wrists and pried myself away from her. I stood. The voices insisted I teach Cecelia a lesson, that I show her who was boss. My hands had balled into fists. I pulled the left one back. The voices urged me to hit

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

her. Hard. Pulverize her because she deserved it. I knew Cecilia didn't deserve to be hit, or threatened. I forced my left to a neutral corner. A tsunami of apologies surged up inside me. I swallowed them.

"You can't even fry an egg, Cecilia." I walked past her, through her apartment and out the door. I didn't look back.

That was the last time I left Cecilia's. I left behind both my copy of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, and my libido. I could get another copy of the book from eBay or Amazon. The one I'd left behind was just a trade paperback, and not the first copy I'd lost. But my libido refused to leave Cecilia. She called twice about a week after I'd walked out on her. I deleted the messages without listening to them. No amount of alcohol made me feel better. After two weeks without Cecilia in my life, I realized she was a vital part of it. The voices began telling me I'd blown the best thing I had ever known. They said I'd found real love and destroyed it. They told me I'd never find a woman as good as Cecilia again.

Three months later I realized that I was in love with Cecilia and that I would do anything to make it right. It took days of practice, and hundreds of imagined dialogues, each exploring a different outcome. The voices jeered, and convinced me I was too late. It was a futile waste of time and energy, and that I should get used to being alone; that it was my destiny. I called her. It wasn't easy. She was polite. She listened to what I had to say. She said she was sorry my life was miserable without her. She didn't say her life was miserable without me. She didn't want to talk about it in person. She said we'd had a nice time together, and we should remember it like that and move on with our lives.

The Fine Art of Frying Eggs

“O, by the way, I’ve learnt the fine art of frying eggs,” she said. “Once I knew what they were supposed to look like, it was easy. I even have a dedicated egg pan. It’s the perfect size for two large eggs.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said. The voices took over the conversation, telling me how little she’d cared for me, that if she’d cared at all, she’d have fried my eggs properly all along.

Our sex wasn’t routine. It wasn’t the stuff of fantasy, either. Our pillow talk was safe. We didn’t talk about the state of our relationship. We hadn’t talked about commitment. I’d assumed Cecilia was my partner. I’d assumed she was content, too, because she hadn’t asked the questions I’d become adept at ducking: Should we live together? What am I to you? Are you going to ask me to marry you? You never say, ‘I love you.’ Don’t you love me?

#

I know the telephone number on the sticky stuck to my address book forward and backward. I know the numbers add up to thirty-eight, and can be reduced to Numerological eleven, the same as her name. I have no idea what that means, or if it’s the least bit significant. But it feels important to me, and I cling to these tidbits like Job clung to his faith. The voices can’t pollute my memory of her. I haven’t been interested in any woman, or the idea of any woman since Cecelia. The voices scream I’m thinking with my dick again. They scream she can’t fry eggs. For the first time, the voices sound desperate, and I see light behind their lies. If she can’t fry eggs the way I like them, I can show her. If she’s not a cook, I will cook for her. The voices scream, and try to stop my hand from reaching the telephone. I caress the numbers on the sticky like they are her nape, pick up the handset, and start to dial.