

Road (an excerpt)

Here is the showerhead, and here is Barni, having what those in the biz call a Personal Existential Crisis (PEC, which, when said aloud, is pronounced like “peck” by the initiated speaker). I mean, the water’s not even running and underneath it is this big flunky slice of a man with his watershed eyes and asymmetric balance. And the man thinks he’s just seen God, and he’s got nowhere to go, and it cost him nothing to get into this shower, sure, but then it cost a couple of bucks to get the water going hot, and Barni wasn’t about to take a cold shower, not in winter, okay, so he’s just been sitting out on the street begging for spare change for a while, a scary man, smelly, covered in his own dried excrement, it took hours, you’d be surprised, but anyway, here’s Barni, in the middle of his PEC about to put some dollars in the meter and turn the water on to hot.

When Barni was a kid, his parents had a shower enclosed in its own little vacuum. You’d shut the doors behind you and then it was just you and white walls, glistening with little specks of black mould. Okay, so it wasn’t ideal, but it was somewhere to be alone, and somewhere that Barni came to do his thinking. He’d stood in that shower without water running plenty of times, most notably when Jenny told him age twelve that no, she wouldn’t go out with him, actually, leave me alone, creep, and then threw the drawing he’d done for her in the green rubbish bin at the edge of the tennis court they had both been standing on. Barni hadn’t played tennis too much after that, which had made him a little sad years later when he read the first section or two of *Infinite Jest*, actually, the tennis had been the reason he’d stopped, and he’d spent some time sitting in the shower after quitting that book, too, feeling like a failure once again.

The opening of a small wormhole, then. Barni, age twelve, rejected by Jenny. Barni, age nineteen, rejecting David Foster Wallace for the first time. Barni now, thirty, full-on PEC underway, about to scrub away something that literally came from inside himself.

Time travel is real in memory, and Barni is doing it.

He puts one toe into each hole in the drain grille and turns on the water. When Barni was a kid, it’s hard to remember what age now, he’d read some instruction manual (obviously

a joke) for a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) swimming pool. Plug the grille, water on, let it rise, water off, swim around, unplug grille, water drain, back to an empty shower and nobody knows you broke the rules. Barni never asked why the book didn't just suggest taking a bath. But, whatever, it didn't work anyway, Barni's toes didn't plug enough and there was too much empty space around the sides.

Well, really, it's worth knowing, probably, that if you were to see Barni walking along the street, you'd be much more likely to notice the empty space around him than Barni himself. Sure, you'd know a man was there, but you wouldn't look at him. The world around him would take on a slightly brighter hue. You might notice a misspelled corporate logo that you hadn't before. You might finally appreciate the color hot pink for the first time. Barni has this effect and he has this effect without even realising it.

(Those units that kicked Barni out after the microwave incident have receded into dullness themselves without Barni around).

So: the water's running and Barni's feet are over the grille. Of course, he's not going to succeed at creating a homemade swimming pool, and even if he did, it wouldn't be homemade, it'd be Made In Public (MIP), a DIY MIP swimming pool, but anyway, the DIY MIP dream is exactly that, a dream. Instead, the only effect Barni's feet over the grille have is that his own dried diarrhoea doesn't come off, it just dampens and bits of it start floating around in the bottom of the water. It's probably not good for Barni's foot fungus, but then, what is, and actually, it takes Barni a surprisingly long time to recognize how disgusting the situation is, in fact, by then the water's running cold and Barni's quest for spare change wasn't worth anything after all.

A few dollars spent on a few minutes of hot water.

A worthwhile spending decision, wasted.

The showerhead's spitting cold water angrily at Barni's head and he just has to get on with the cleansing job underway, so, fine, he does it with his bare hands and then rinses his hands off too. There's no real shower soap around, but what do you expect, it's a public

shower, although in the next room over (concrete, of course) there's a public toilet with hand-soap, which will have to do. Barni leaves the shower running and makes a mad dash for the hand-soap, well and truly in the nude, which luckily nobody sees. Spilling half of the soap he's collected on the way back to the shower is a crying shame, but Barni has no desire to extend this ordeal any longer, so he makes do with what he has, gets back under the water, gives himself a quick rinse, this time with a fragrance resembling something nice in the palm of his hand, and then stands there in the nude for an hour or so to drip dry. He doesn't have a towel, of course.

While he's in there drying, he thinks about a few things and notices a few others. He thinks about:

my mother saying "I want you to drink your milk, I want you to drink your milk."

losing my virginity to Maya Richter in the women's bathroom at high school.

Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*.

the way Gillian Anderson looks so beautiful and so afraid in *The X Files*.

the couch in my father's living room was so uncomfortable because the cushions jutted out too far.

the elderly woman at my father's funeral who complimented the sandwiches at the reception.

how terrible it would be to die drowning.

the fact that maybe I should try to get some sleep soon, good sleep.

the fact that there's no good reason for me to actually try to find this Marjorie anyway.

the fact that there's no good reason for me not to.

my mother saying “I want you to drink your milk. I want you to drink your milk.”

He notices:

the mould on the roof is a funny constellation and looks a little bit like a rabbit trying to chase a zebra, but then he looks at it for a little too long and the zebra transforms into a man with three legs limping along trying to get away from an alligator, and the alligator is much bigger than the man so he’s definitely going to be eaten soon, but in this glorious pre-death moment he’s still fighting, this man with three legs, he’s still fighting, and it’s there cemented on the ceiling in a patch of mould, a crystalline moment of terror in a public shower, it would stay there forever if only the mould would stop growing. If only the mould wasn’t alive. A living organism creating an accidental portrait of death.

above the towel rail (of which, of course, there’s no towel) on the windowsill is a key. God knows what it could be used for – there aren’t any locks around – but Barni takes it anyway. He isn’t taking any chances.