



## Shower

### An Experience Essay

I have just woken up. I stretch and rub my eyes. It is a bright Sunday morning in early autumn. The curtains throw waves of sunlight and shadows at me. My wife has already risen. I smell freshly brewed coffee and the smoky scents of toast in the oven. I also hear, faintly, the sounds of eggs dancing in boiling water. All this makes me want to get up, except that under the blanket it is warm whereas the air in the room is chillingly crisp. My nose testifies to that: it feels cold, and I sniffle.

How to cross the frozen gulf that lies between the attraction of the cosy bed and the lure of a hearty breakfast? Thank heavens for the shower. It achieves the near impossible: it tantalisingly fills the off-putting void between the former and the latter. In fact, morning showers have almost miraculous healing powers: they are able to repair even the severest damage done to my awakening by a hideous alarm clock or that other scourge of a good night's sleep, an unwanted overseas phone call.

Showers are indeed magic. The white steam rising from the floor, the gushing sound filling the foggy space, the pulsating water caressing my skin and warming my muscles, they all ease the passage from awakening to being awake, they smooth the otherwise crude transition from the confused land of the night's reveries to the open spaces of my day dreams. Showers are dream-like in another way as well. Everything in them happens subconsciously: the turning on of the water, the closing of the curtain, the reaching for the soap, the circular scrubbing motions of my hands. So dream-like is the experience that I sometimes end up washing parts of my body twice because I cannot remember – no matter how much I try to recall – whether I've washed them before. Showers are, in other words, beautiful inventions that have the power to make every day worth beginning.

Except for when I am on holiday. If it is a typical holiday, my wife and I will have arrived at a quaint inn the evening before, after a day's worth of driving. We will have walked for at least half an hour on cobblestone streets discovering the town in our search of a must-go-to restaurant my wife has diligently researched using our collection of food-lover's guides. We will have eaten too much of a delicious meal and drunk one bottle of red rather than the half-bottle that would have been sensible. We will have been exhausted, crashed into bed and disappeared into sleep within seconds.

When on holiday, I tend to wake up before my wife. After contemplating how much I'd miss of a precious vacation day if I turned around to continue sleeping, I drag myself out of bed and move in the direction of the shower. At this moment, a lot is wrong with the world, however. First, I can't see where I am going because I'm not wearing my contact lenses. (If I did still wear them from the night before I'd see even less because my eyes would be glued shut. I speak from experience.) In addition, the light that filters through the half-drawn curtains is weak. I could turn on the light, but that would disturb my wife's continuing slumber. So I don't. Also, as at home, I am cold, except that I'm even colder because the floor is covered with tiles: romantic and rustic, but freezing. All of this means that I am not confidently and quickly striding toward the shower, but that I, on tip-toe, stumble,



trip and quiver. In this state of confusion and discomfort all my life's desires compress themselves into one simple craving: an instant-on, hot, steady, smooth flow of water upon my tired body.

As I enter the bathroom, I see a half-length curtain that encircles a bath tub that doubles as a shower. But that's not what I really see. I see what I want to see: a shower that will make everything better. Imagine yourself in a state of utter arousal in response to a dimly perceived, but supremely seductive figure and gradually coming to realise that this apparition, which promises to quench your every craving, is, in fact, the plumbing equivalent of a transvestite: looking the part, more or less, but having all its parts in the wrong places.

The discovery of the true nature of the apparition begins with the shower posing one of life's greatest questions: how do you turn me on without getting yourself doused in cold water? This is no theoretical question since most showers in quaint inns have their controls mounted right under an immovable showerhead. Since the water left in the pipes is cold, the water first to emerge from the shower head is cold as well and aimed at – guess where? – the shower controls. What this contraption silently says: all attempts of evasion are futile.

The situation is made worse by another conundrum: if I wanted the water to get hot quickly, I'd have to turn up the water high. But that would mean that the initial dousing would be all the more gruelling. If, on the other hand, I'd let the water trickle, then it would be running cold for a long time. I used to ponder this trade-off for several minutes; now I opt without much hesitation for the low-gruel, long-trickle choice and brace myself for a good minute of suffering. By the way, it's not only me that dislikes cold water in the morning; my jimmy too curls up and vanishes to the point of being undetectable. Will it come back to life, one day? It seems unlikely.

As I reread my account of the first moments of entering a typical quaint inn shower, I find I have missed out one fatal complication. Since I am not wearing my contact lenses and the labelling of the controls is invariably poor, I am never certain whether I am turning the right knob in the right direction. More likely than not, I confuse the flow control with the temperature control and wind up cranking up the cold water to the max. As a result, god's healthy pain becomes the devil's unbearable agony.

And what causes all this misery? Perhaps quaint inns and good showers don't go together any more than gravity and water flowing uphill. Hogwash! Poor showers in quaint inns don't violate any natural law. No, they are simply the result of shower and quaint inn designers' blatant disregard for functionality in their pursuit of cheap aesthetics. What's worse, there seems to be a masochistic, inverse relationship between the price I pay for the room and the pleasure I receive from the room's shower. Why? Because the more expensive the room, the more form seems to dominate function. At moments like these – when I know I will be paying a lot for the room and I am suffering the indignity of my curled-up jimmy – I cannot imagine a more fitting punishment for these cruel men (or women) than to condemn them for the rest of their lives to taking showers in the bathrooms that they themselves designed.

After what is an eternity, the water temperature warms up. In all likelihood, it then overshoots to scalding hot, and I spend the next five minutes balancing the temperature between freezing and



scorching because the temperature and flow control knobs are in reality not variable knobs, gradually adjusting their respective quantities in smooth steps, but blunt off-on switches. With luck, I will manage to find a balanced position before I am finished with cleaning myself. More often than not, I end up jumping in and out of the shower's spray as if I were dancing on a red-hot bed of coals. If I only I was.

Assuming that I do find a balanced position, I will on occasion be tempted to adjust the size and shape of the spray. I don't enjoy a single, focused, even painful beam of water; nor do I like thick, pulsating droplets. No, I like the in-between position: an even, rounded set of medium-strength, watery filaments. Now, adjusting the flow of the spray means turning the nozzle of the showerhead in one direction or another. If I am lucky, this will have the desired effect. If I am unlucky, I end up exposing myself to the full force of water disgorging from the pipe because I have wrested the entire nozzle from the assembly. The drama that follows – that is, the circus act of me trying to reattach the nozzle while the water gushes forth in full force – defies description.

Because of experiences like this, I tend to leave the showerhead nozzle alone, no matter the shape, direction and intensity of the spray. I just get on with scrubbing myself. If the water's temperature has kept steady until then, it will change before long because my wife will have turned on the water in the sink. Cause and effect. How rarely are we able to make sense of their relationship! I don't know about you, but I never understood why the plumbing in many bathrooms is arranged such that the shower and the sink draw water from the same source. Is it so difficult to see that if the two are connected water flowing to one means less (or none) of it flowing to the other? Why need it be either or? Enten eller? Kirkegaard may have the answer, but never mind the question. The fact is, it is either or, and so I spend the next five minutes wordlessly working the controls to counterbalance the effect of my wife drawing water into the sink. The fact that she is doing an equal amount of counterbalancing doesn't help my shower or our relationship.

That's already two times five minutes working the controls. This may not seem like a long time, but it is, especially when you're squatting. Squatting? Yes, in more quaint inn showers than I care to remember I am squatting because their shower heads are mounted at a height that would make one assume that all other guests are pygmies. And short ones at that.

With luck I will have by now – that is, in between working the controls – managed to wash my body. Next I want to wash my hair. For that I need shampoo. And where is the shampoo? It is, obviously, near the sink. More to the point: it is out of reach from the shower. I negotiate with my wife to pass it to me. (I have to negotiate with her since I asked her to suspend her toiletries which meant that, in turn, she crawled back into bed.)

After rinsing my hair I want to proceed to the final step, that is washing my face with soap. But where is the soap? Somewhere on the shower floor, of course, because – would it be too much to ask? – the shower stall lacks a little tray where to put the necessary shower accessories. I crouch down and sweep the shower floor with my hands in search of the missing bar of soap. Since I can't see a thing, I tend to sweep up all the hair-studded suds long before I find the soap. There's nothing like wallowing in your own muck. Meanwhile, my eyes start burning because the shampoo remaining



in my hair is gradually flowing in the direction of my head, that is, forward and downward. I am in tears.

At last I enter the final phase of the procedure and begin to dry myself with the towel. (The location and size of the towel are another story, but let me not go into that, lest you think I'm complaining.) As is my paranoid habit, I dry myself completely before stepping out of the shower since I don't like to leave behind a trail of water on the bathroom floor. Is there anything wrong with liking wet things wet and dry things dry? I didn't think so. Keeping wet things wet and dry things dry means that the last step of drying my body is to balance myself on one leg, lift up the foot that is the first to step onto the bathroom floor, and wipe it thoroughly dry with my towel. Only to step into a soaking floor towel that has been drenched from all the shower's spillage – because, don't forget, I'm too blind at this point to see that the floor towel is soaked. How could I have forgotten that the half-length shower curtain would be rather ineffective? As I straddle across the tub's wall, one foot still-wet on the inside, one wet-again on the outside, I have reached the low point of my day. As if to reaffirm the desperation of my position, my jimmy has disappeared completely. I emerge from the shower permanently disabled.

Later in the day I decide to found a society for shower victims such as myself. I will call it FOSILS, the Friends Of Shower-Impaired LimbS. And I will declare myself to be the society's director, president and chairman for life.