

A Memoir

Anonymous, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

“You have always been a thinker.”

That’s what my mother told me when I was about twelve years old.

“Yes, you have!” I didn’t agree because I didn’t want her to be right. But when you are at that age, you know somehow that your mom is right. “You have always tried to figure out how people think; you are an empathetic person.”

I often ask myself why I have been thinking, and what about.

I have a vivid memory from when I was a child; I would guess I was around 8-9 years old. This was some time after my family had moved back to Sweden after living in Norway for some time. My father was still working in Norway after we moved back. I think he stayed for two more years after we moved back home to Sweden. On most weekends he would return home to us. My mother and I would drive to pick him up at the airport. I was always very excited to see him. And my mother was always cold as ice. I’m sure she had her reasons, but why did she have to destroy that moment for me? I can still remember how my father was constantly trying to read my mother’s mind by looking at her. He was forever asking these questions trying to find out what might work on her, to get her loosened up. My father perhaps didn’t seem to realize that she understood what he was doing. A bit tragicomically, he never managed to persuade her to smile.

In the backseat I was sitting and watching these scenes play out in front of me. I guess there must have been something that I enjoyed in those moments, because I kept returning to the same backseat. The environment quickly became very frosty and uncomfortable, so then I would start to talk. I don’t remember getting sad back then, but thinking about it now it tears my heart. I think my mother wanted the family to stick together, but my father wasn’t doing his part. These situations kept on repeating themselves for over two years and somehow they managed to keep it together. He was happy with spending the weekends with the family. If it was an economical thing, I would get it. If the funds weren’t enough I would understand. But that wasn’t the case. I remember my mother told me that she threatened him that if he didn’t stay the next time he came back home, he didn’t need to come back at all. That seemed to work, because he stayed.

Recently, I have become a lonelier person. Three years ago I had a girlfriend. We loved each other very much. I was working at a warehouse collecting golf equipment and shipping it away to different parts of the world. I was living in a small town, and every day was pretty much the same. I wasn’t very happy. Thinking back, I remember the best part of the day was when I was holding my girlfriend while falling asleep. We were lying there and I kept talking and evaluating everything around me. She kept listening and acknowledging what I said, and I can still remember the feeling of absolute calmness in my body. She was like my therapist. And the feeling of “I don’t want to be anywhere else” was in me. It’s a bit of a cliché, but I think that when you have experienced one of these clichés, it doesn’t seem that awkward to speak in them. They

seem real. I think she really appreciated being there for me as well. I think she liked it to a certain point. I tried not to criticize too much of our surroundings, because I knew it would make her feel like she wasn't enough. I think I did that somehow anyways. She was a lot calmer than me. Not a thinker maybe. She used to say, "when I don't want to think, I don't!" That made me look up to her. We kept telling each other how we really loved lying there and that we didn't want to get up the next day. I miss these moments more than anything.

During the days, I would be walking around and around with my shopping cart in this chilly warehouse collecting the things I had on my list. Garments such as "2-piece Acronym Gore-tex jackets" or "Elton Windproof semi-jackets" were some of the things we collected. This was a rather small place, and there were around five to seven workers depending on the season. I would listen to Ryan Adams' song "La Cienega Just Smiled" and wonder what the road "La Cienega" looked like, and if she really smiled, like he said. These working days were filled with dreaming of a better place, a better life or adventures. My co-workers weren't like me. They would tell me "all you ever do is hang out with your girlfriend and play guitar." They were right. I didn't see the point of going out drinking at the same place, with the same people every weekend. I felt the people in town on a Saturday were all copies of each other. I could see their lives in front of me. Go to university, get married, have 1.8 kids, get a house, then summerhouse, travel to Thailand once or twice per year, have some grandchildren, get fat, have a heart-attack and then die. I was very cynical towards everything, very judgemental. I wasn't depressed, but I felt life perhaps wasn't as glorious as they said. "I remember when I was young, I had the time of my life"- that's what people told me. I was waiting for my time to kick in. Many of my friends were travelling down to Asia to do some backpacking. But I was never really interested in that. They were all going to these touristy places that make you feel like it's very authentic, when it actually isn't. I felt like I was being fooled by going to those places, so I decided not to. I think my girlfriend had to struggle a lot with me, always listening to me dreaming away to different parts of the world. I had in some way created an inner world, and faded away somewhere else. You could call it the extreme opposite of "carpe diem".

My days were absolutely filled with music. No more than an hour would pass without music reaching my ears. I believe my body reacted in a calm way from hearing the music. I was at such unease that the sound of music was like therapy to me. It still is, actually; maybe that is the beauty of it. Since we weren't allowed to have earphones we had to get along with sharing the music system. I got a lot of shit from my co-workers with my autistic way of listening to music. For some reason, I started getting into country music, not the "agricultural kind", but more the Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen or Bob Dylan kind. My co-workers hated me for it - they preferred "whatever was playing on the radio", in other words, all of that modern "populist music" that I called it. I liked using words they didn't understand. It made me feel better than them. Only when someone older from the office came out I would get some appreciation. "You like this music, don't you? I used to dance to this at clubs when I was your age," they said. I don't know how many times I sneaked up to the music system and changed the music.

I remember how I always was trying to discuss very grown-up topics with the actual grown-ups during the coffee breaks at my job. I was probably looking for new topics to learn from. I was tired of discussing the weekend's soccer scores over and over again, or the new applications for the phone that they would talk about at the "younger" tables.

I would rather listen to stories someone told about their kids and troubles of raising children, or comparing Italian to French cuisine or maybe their troubles with their mother-in-law. I was quite insecure during this time. I had to push myself to place myself with the grown-ups. To do this, I had to create the sentences in my head a few times before I uttered them. Sometimes I would create them the day before, and even write them down so I'd remember them. I tried to include myself into the conversation but sometimes that would be hard, simply because I didn't share the experiences. It made me uncomfortable to sit there quietly, so I tried my best to join in. My friend once told me I was putting too much pressure on myself. He was probably right, but I still wanted to. I enjoyed it. It was like delight mingling with terror. One time I got carried away, and somebody basically told me that I didn't know what I was talking about. He was right. I still remember the shame. After that I returned to the table with the younger people again. It brings me joy thinking about it now. How I was thinking about that dining area so obsessively, and how I'd approach it. Sometimes I feel the same feelings of awkwardness wash over me. I don't know what it was. It was something about those damn grown-up tables. For me they were the biggest challenge at the time. Whenever I reached the kitchen I felt like I entered a field of landmines; I had to be very careful. I felt very threatened. I don't know where this pressure came from. I think that I sometimes tried to behave as my father would. My father is full of charisma, and I've probably never seen anyone so natural in his or her social behaviour. When my father enters a room, he basically repaints the whole room. Respectfully but dominantly, he takes over conversations and leads them in his direction. I guess, for me sitting there during coffee breaks, I wanted to copy my father's behaviour, but I wasn't able to. He was always telling stories, and I could see the glow in people's eyes while he told them. How they listened, how they opened their mouths and nodded along with the story, as someone would do when they are enchanted by someone's stories. When my stories were told, I didn't get the same nods as he did, so I kept on trying. Failing at first, but eventually I would get a nod, a smile or some other kind of acknowledgement. It made me happy, felt like I had something to offer.

During this time, my parents were again fighting a lot. My parents were in the critical moment when all the kids were moving out, and they were about to live by themselves once more. The project of raising kids for the last 25 years had come to an end; the birds were leaving their nests. For my mother this was a tragedy; my father saw it as something positive, not because we were leaving, but because we had to create our own lives. They made a good team my parents, but I don't have any memory of them laughing together. Maybe that is normal after many years of marriage, I don't know - that is an experience I lack. After many months of tears, screams and constant arguing they decided to move away from each other. I ended up being the envoy between the two with furniture, messages etc. Since my father somewhat lacks the ability to show affection, I sometimes had small guidance sessions with him. I remember the day they moved away from each other, I made it my job to make sure it would go as smoothly as possible. I gave my father a lot of guidance that day.

My mother grew up in a somewhat dysfunctional family. Her parents were, as I've understood, mostly interested in themselves. My mother's biological mother died when she was very young. And the new wife that my grandfather got wasn't very interested in the children she suddenly got. Maybe they reminded her of the lady my grandfather used to have, I don't know. I know these experiences enhance the love she feels for the family she has now. My grandparents on my mother's side are both alcoholics today,

and not a part of the family. If you go further down the family line on my mother's side, you will understand why they are alcoholics, but that is another story. I'm afraid my mother's upbringing made her quite vulnerable, and at the same time hard-boiled, and maybe over-protective. My mother takes shit from no one, and is very straightforward, a somewhat unusual feature for a Swedish person. On the other hand, she is incapable of taking any kind of criticism; she is never wrong, and won't rest until she gets her way. A somewhat hard feature to handle, and I know my father has experienced it. So have I.

I remember how my girlfriend came to me that night my parents were moving away from each other. I can think back now how much she really meant to me. And how much I meant to her. Imagine that someone makes all that effort to make someone else happy, how beautiful that actually is. I had managed to hold back the tears all day, and when she came there was no holding back. It was like when you were a child. You hurt yourself, but you don't actually cry until you see your mother.

It's funny how it all goes around. My parents' restlessness and moving back and forth everywhere has clearly affected me. After working a lot at that golf place, I had saved up money for a deposit to buy an apartment in Malmö, Sweden. I bought the place when I started to study there, and got a job at a dairy farm. I worked almost every day during the summer to make up funds to support half a year's time in Hong Kong. But I wasn't there; in my mind I was in Hong Kong. And now that I am in Hong Kong, my head is in Sweden. In Sweden I'd gotten a new girlfriend. She was mad at me for working that much, since I was also going away to Hong Kong in two months' time. She kept telling me how I was selfish and not prioritising her. It wasn't that I didn't care for her; I just chose to prioritize something else. Now here I am, with another person disappearing from my life. Now, realizing how much she meant to me. In some way I had become my own father. Maybe this is just a common denominator that we men have in common. We prioritise work and bringing in the funds. Historically it's been that way, and maybe we have just passed it down all father-son bloodlines.

More years down the line I once again realize that my mother was right, about how people sometimes ask me "how are you?" when I have faded away thinking. Now, ten years later, it still happens to me. I have also realized that I have an angry thinking face. People sometimes ask me if I'm pissed off, or "do you have a problem?" "I guess I do have a problem, but it's not with you," - that would be a funny answer. Unfortunately you always come up with the great answers afterwards.

As I'm getting older I keep thinking more and more about my father. I really look up to him, but sometimes I wish he'd given me more attention; I guess what goes around comes back around. When he grew up his mother was mostly interested in herself. I remember visiting my grandmother, and she would pour herself the last cup of coffee while having other guests. She didn't even ask if someone wanted a refill, she simply explained; "I'm feeling very tired today" to justify her behaviour. My mother and I would try not to look at each other for fear of starting to laugh. My grandfather wouldn't say anything. He had probably seen it too many times before. My grandfather grew up an orphan, and was sold by the Swedish government to the family who demanded the least money from them. That's how it worked before we had developed social services in Sweden. Since he grew up with limited resources he was very proud of what he made

for himself in life. He always kept saying how proud he was of his grandchildren. I miss him. We always seem to miss the people that acknowledge us. That girlfriend, your grandfather or that teacher who gave you some extra attention.

I guess things happen for a reason, and I believe I have somewhat managed to see why each domino has fallen in the last five years. I have realized something, that what is really important in life is relationships, so be it with your father, girlfriend or friends. To make sure that they are being seen, make sure that we appreciate them; and I realize that you aren't better off by yourself. I've become lonelier. I have shut people out, and disregarded their feelings towards me. I haven't been able to deal with them. It has changed me. But it has also made me aware of what it leads to. The day you realize you miss someone, they might not be there for you anymore. And why would they - you weren't there for them. This might be the so-far biggest tragedy of my life, and I'm afraid it will forever be. My biggest joy became my biggest tragedy. When someone really crawls under your skin, they will stay there forever.