

Stalled

R.W. Perkins (1991)

I negotiated the narrow metal steps down from the passenger car while balancing my suitcases and had miraculously avoided killing myself or someone else in the process. The train platform was all rough metal and concrete, weather-beaten and very foreign. I stopped a moment and looked around. So much was different.

I had been fascinated by languages in my younger years, and had pursued an education in linguistics. Consequently, I had made plans to complete my senior year in Scandinavia, specializing in the Nordic tongues spoken there. My goal was to master one of the languages (Swedish or Norwegian most likely, since learning one of them got you the other for practically nothing), and perhaps take a side trip through the wonderful linguistic curiosity that is the Finnish language.

The preparations were made over the summer and I was now making the final train connections to the University at Uppsala, Sweden from which I would base my work. Staring out the window while the miles passed was like watching an old movie, and with each passing stop the foreign feel of my new environment crept in around me. It came like fog on old two lane highways in the middle of nowhere. One moment you're cruising just fine, the next moment you realize you've got only ten feet of visible road in front of you. "Curioser and curioser," our good pal Alice said,

and if you ask me, she was a master of understatement.

They say our thoughts are superfast electrical impulses, that thousands of little connections are being made every minute. Not even close. The sad truth is that the human mind can't even keep up with a 747 jumbo jet and a United States passport. Such an airplane had launched me after 15 short hours into a world I couldn't begin to understand. At first I couldn't identify the source of my unease. Then I realized that hundreds of small things my mind relied on to keep itself together each moment were nowhere to be found. I had an hour to kill before my connecting train arrived, so I left the station for a stroll. I needed some air and some time to wade through the fog in my head that threatened to cancel all rail service indefinitely.

So here I was, in a town whose name I couldn't pronounce, trying to identify where I had begun to lose my grip on what was happening. As I walked away from the station into a nearby park, I was hit with one of those inevitable calls of nature that visit frequent travelers at every stop, usually whether they need it or not. "Thank God," I thought, "at least something works the same."

Finding the restroom was easy. I just looked for the figure on the doors nearby whose body wasn't shaped like a skirt. Holmes would have been proud. I went inside, entered the nearest stall, took care of business, and got everything reassembled. It was at this point, ladies and gentlemen, that I experienced a moment of rare insight, an intuitive leap, as it were. At this moment I

found myself able to pin down what culture shock really is. It's not strange road signs. It's not funny accents. It isn't fake-looking money or a different song sung when a foreign flag is raised. Culture shock, my friends and neighbors, is what happens when you are standing in a restroom stall in a public park. It's what happens when you look at the toilet in that stall for a full minute and slowly come to the realization that, despite your college education, you have absolutely no idea whatsoever how to flush it.

There was a knob on the top of what appeared to be the tank. Everything else looked normal. Fear, impotence, frustration, all settled in the pit of my stomach in a swirling, heavy, acidic mixture. I mean, of all the difficulties that arise during this biological and social necessity, the last thing you need to worry about is the flushing. It's like saying "Bless you" when someone sneezes. We all do it without really needing to think about it. I reached out and gave the knob a very sensible push downward. Nothing happened. I pushed again. Still no go. I could feel panic fluttering its wings overhead, ready to descend.

I looked around for some other mechanism. Nothing. I turned the knob clockwise, then counter-clockwise with the same lack of results. I could feel the sweat starting on my forehead as my nerves kicked into high gear. I knew it was impossible, but at the same time I knew, was certain, that every television in the country was tuned in on me. Everyone was being treated to a view

of the pathetic American who was losing a battle of wits with a public toilet, all courtesy of some twisted version of "Candid Camera."

The door to the restroom opened and I froze. I knew, just knew, that in two seconds the stall door would fly open and I would turn, blinded by stage lights, to face the camera crew and a hundred laughing figures, figures clutching their sides and howling. The restroom door closed and I saw two small feet in white sneakers pad into the next stall over. A wave of relief began to pass over me, then fizzled away as I realized this could possibly be even worse. It was. Less than two minutes later, those same two feet padded out again, this time accompanied by the musical tones of flowing water coming from the stall next door. I was torn in two, half of me wanting to throttle the little brat for making me look like a complete idiot on national television. The other half of me wanted to run after him and ask, no, plead with him to reveal the secret he possessed which had so eluded me.

I did neither of those things. It finally came down to a choice of either trying one last time or being found sobbing uncontrollably by the police. I took a deep breath, turned to face my enemy and began to think. "If I were the obvious psychotic who had designed this with the intent of increasing the suicide rate among the tourist population, how would I have put this thing together?" Slowly an idea began to form in my mind. At first I almost rejected it. Why, you ask? It was just too

easy. Yet even that thought suggested my idea might be correct. Slowly, I reached both hands back toward the knob, grasped it, paused. I took another breath, uttered a prayer to any of the gods that might be listening and, like Arthur drawing the sword from the stone, I closed my eyes and lifted.

The sound of water filled the room, filled the whole world till I thought I must surely drown. My eyes widened and a cry escaped my lips. "A-ha!" I cried, then immediately closed my mouth. I could not however suppress the feeling of triumph that welled up within me. I left the bathroom hurriedly, catching a strange glance in the mirror from a man stooped over the sink. As I walked back through the park, I noticed a family playing on the grass, the remains of a picnic lunch nearby. The father was playing catch with a boy and girl while the mother watched from the shade. I waved at the boy as I walked past and he looked at me carefully for a moment. Then he waved and dared a shy smile, new grass stains on his little white sneakers.