

THE MATHEMATICS OF SIN

BY PAUL KERSHAW

Think about what you did last night. Did you watch a movie? Did you have a pleasant meal at home? Was it something you cooked, or did it come out of a box? Maybe you went out, maybe dancing or to see a show. Or was your favorite sit-com on? Did you sit by the fire and read a book? Did you call up a friend? Did you have sex with your lover, or by yourself?

As a result of whatever you did last night, how is your life different? Days slip by, one after the other, and most of them are meaningless. We get up. We shower and eat. We go to work or school, or we sit around the house wishing we had work or school to go to. The next morning, when we get up, it's the same day again: Small changes, imperceptible ones, that pile slowly on top of each other, footprints in the snow until you look back and notice that you've gone a long way without hardly moving at all.

But then there are those days that are flashes. Days on which everything changes. You get your first job. You pass an exam that has been preying on your mind. You get married. Your grandfather dies. You win the lottery, or your house burns down. You wake up expecting the same droning routine, and by the time you manage to find your way to bed, you're in shock from the sheer magnitude of whatever it is that's happened.

I'm writing to you now from the other side of a flash. You will no doubt judge me for what I'm about to tell you, but the flash is not me. The flash was a moment, a day, a flicker of existence... a trifle, compared to who I really am.

The difference between me and you is not in the potential, it's in the actualization. Perhaps you have the potential, perhaps you don't. Before that night, I was more of a threat than I am now. Nobody feared me then, though. Nobody feared me, because I hadn't flashed. I hadn't gone through the night and come out the other side.

That's not true: I was feared, because all men are feared. But I wasn't feared as an individual, in a concrete way. Nobody thought, "You, John Morgan, are a special sort of evil." I was feared for my manhood, in an abstract way. I was not a monster, not me myself. I was part of a club of monsters, not individually identified but grouped together.

I am, and ever shall be, an individual.

This is the story of how I proved that, in a flash of a day that can never be taken back, never be altered, never be remedied. It's done, and it's there as a black mark. The world is binary: Those who are monsters and those who are not. There is no stepping back over the line. There is never forgiveness.

I was raised, like most of you, in a fairly normal house on a fairly normal street in a fairly normal town in America. My father loved my mother even though they argued a lot, and my mother tried not to cry too loudly when my sister and I were in bed, pretending to be asleep.

My sister was three years older than me, but when we were little she'd play with me from time to time. Her friends liked me. For a while, I was the baby in their lesbian three-mommy household (even though they didn't know what lesbians were, and one of them was pretending to be a daddy and another was pretending to be, well, I don't really know).

After I became too old to be the baby, she decided that she was too mature to hang around with me. That was fine, I guess, because by then we were in school and I started making friends of my own. I was taught, in those innocent days, how to be a boy, and how one day I'd be a man. If I cried, my peers mocked me, because boys don't cry. I played touch football, even though I wanted to jump rope. Girls were ucky, they had cooties and other fatal diseases.

Mom stayed home and took care of us, because that's what moms did. Going to school had been a shock, to learn that other kids' mothers went to work. When I was in elementary school, I'd go home while the other kids went to an after school program; when I was older, I'd go home with them to watch TV in a house free of adults.

This is where you might normally expect me to insert some great trauma that befell me: I should recount, you'd expect, how my father beat my mother, or how he impressed upon me the general worthlessness of the female species, or how my sister molested me, or maybe it was a babysitter.

After all, I don't think that anyone is born evil. I think that people are born morally neutral. At the nursery where Mother Theresa was born, there were other babies that had just as much of a chance as becoming her. Had the babies been switched in the hospital, then some other person would have been Mother Theresa, and she would have been a waitress. Or a mass-murderer. Or a member of the police. Or an atheist anarchist, spending their life with the mission of undermining the Catholic Church.

People are the products of their enculturation, and so monsters have to have been made through monstrous events: Pedophilia. Rape. Violence. Emotional neglect.

But my mother loved us, and my father was good to us, and my sister was about as good a sister as one could expect. I was living in a veritable suburban paradise. There was nothing wrong with my life, except that it was the same life enjoyed by thousands of kids, marching in time to some invisible tune of normalcy.

I despised normal, and that's precisely what I was.

I despised typical.

And that's precisely what I was.

I graduated from high school with honors, only two years after my sister. Leaving my high school sweetheart and my cozy family behind, I went away to school, attending a university that was a four hour drive from home. Close enough to go back home in an emergency, far enough to claim independence, in the same way that half my peer group were claiming independence. Individuality: It was an adult attribute we were all celebrating together.

"You have so much potential," my mother had cried the day she and Dad drove me to campus. "Express it. Express yourself."

Untapped potential, I'd always been taught, was one of the worst things in the world. People with potential should always live it out. Even in physics, we learned: Potential energy is just balled up within objects, waiting to be released. It is the kinetic energy that is the true expression.

Even in physics, we learned: Objects in motion tend to stay in motion. Inertia. Inertia is amoral. It merely is. When a series of events leads to a set of motions, then inertia will carry that to its natural conclusion, in the absence of an obstacle.

Keep this in mind. It won't be my excuse, because I offer no excuses. I had a flash of a day. It was not me, I feel it was an inevitability of a lifetime of environmental forces exploding in one swoop. And I think that the difference between me and most of you is that you simply haven't let that flash happen. Yet.

But we're all potential monsters. Even you.

Inertia will be part of my explanation.

I was at school for less than a month when I saw a sign for an event that, if you've ever attended an American university, you've no doubt seen a sign for. "Take Back the Night."

One in three women will be sexually assaulted during their lifetime.

At least three-fourths of domestic violence recipients are female.

The porn industry exploits women by identifying them as sexual objects rather than as thinking, loving individuals.

Men think about sex every three seconds.

Every man is a potential stalker, a potential rapist, a potential abuser.

Every man.

Once a year, on college campuses around the country, women get together to celebrate their strength in numbers, because alone, they're all at risk.

These are the messages I received over the next few weeks, leading up to the event. Men were animals. Men were sex-crazed. Men had no control over their own violent impulses.

In some cultures, women have their clitorises removed without anesthesia. The purpose of this is to minimize sexual pleasure, because women are not supposed to have sexual pleasure. They are supposed to be the willing receptacles of their husbands' lusts.

In some cultures, women are covered from head to foot with fabric whenever they leave the house, because they are possessions and only their husbands may enjoy looking upon them.

In some cultures, men are allowed to marry as many women as they please, and use them for sexual pleasure at their leisure.

As recently as the Jazz Age, in our own culture, no woman, no matter how intelligent or socially bred, was allowed to voice her opinion about her political representation in the form of a vote.

Even more recently, in our own culture, no woman had the legal right to remove a fetus from her womb even if she felt it was an unwanted parasite.

The major cults of the world taught that a Male God gave privilege to the male humans, dominion over their women and their children, which were less than chattel.

The facts were facts. The opinions were opinions. The effect was... the effect.

Potential. I was potential. I was feared because there were men who were monsters who raped and killed and beat their wives. I could have been one of those monsters. I was a suspect. I was suspect.

Play with a docile puppy sometime. Play violently with it, and at first it will resist. It's a docile puppy. It's not in its character to fight. But treat it as a violent threat long enough, and it will become one. Every puppy has the potential to be an attack dog. Even me. Even you.

I sat in my dorm, trying to study, trying not to think about the girl in my calculus class and her beautiful, full breasts. Or about my English professor, and how even amidst her railing against the patriarchal model reinforced by Hemingway and Faulkner, all I could see were her eyes, deep blue and erotic. There was an eroticism in her rage. I tried not to think about that Irish lass who had brushed against me in the cafeteria, pushing just enough of her body against me to let me know she was there but not enough to be truly part of me: Tease. Teasing.

Everywhere I went, there were women taunting me with their inaccessibility. Passive-aggressively reminding me that I was little more than hormones with a brain. To them, I was sexuality, and sexuality denied. I was a rapist because they were the raped, the powerless, the meek.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

I had realized that I'd read the same page four times, sitting in my dorm trying not to think of my patriarchal cock inside my English professor's wet shiela-na-gig.

I tossed my highlighter across my desk, watching it skitter off and onto the floor, a bright yellow flash.

Gaze long enough into the abyss, and you become the abyss. To misquote Nietzsche.

Have you ever thought about it? Admit it, you have. Waiting in an elevator with an old woman reeking of perfume, you've wanted to lodge your elbow in between her shoulders and crush her against the wall. The neighbor's dog, yapping and hyper: You've thought about poisoning it, or (more satisfyingly) smashing its head open with a baseball bat. Aluminum, rubber grip. Or taking a sharpened pencil and lodging it in the boss's eye. The satisfying crack of an annoying customer's leg bone as you hold your weight against it. The refreshing release of the breaking glass of the video store which closed five minutes before you brought the tape back.

I can't be the only one to have this bloodlust. This... potential. I can't be. I can feel it in my soul, and I'm not evil. I'm not any more evil than you are.

Admit it.

Don't judge me. Not until you understand me.

This sounds like a confessional. It's not one. I feel no remorse. What's the point of remorse, when there's no forgiveness? Once a monster, always a monster.

I took a walk. I had to get away from my studying. It was history. I hated history. I hate history.

It was a beautiful night. The moon was out, the stars were sparkling as much as they could in the light polluted campus. There were a few clouds floating listlessly across the sky. The air was crisp and cool with the midwest September.

I was strolling, taking my time. Enjoying the nighttime, wishing that that moment could have lasted forever. There is no God, there is not any Jesus: This is the point of the world, in that moment of inexplicable beauty and fragility. This was my night, my sky, my air bracing my skin. I was at peace. I was not a sex-crazed oppressive troglodyte, I was not an overwhelmed freshman, I was nothing but the moment. No future, no past. Alone and everything beneath the full moon goddess, Selene my lover, Nyx my wife.

Perhaps I'm overstating it, but maybe I'm not.

That's when I saw her. Mindy, I'd learn later. Mindy Turner. Junior, majoring in French. A good student, but not an excellent one. Beloved by her friends. Never caused anyone any grief, except maybe for the Chemical Engineering student she'd been dating for three years, but with whom she'd recently broken up.

I didn't know her name, only that she'd descended from heaven to walk by on the sidewalk right then, right when I'd found my own peace behind the library.

Flashes are kismet. They're fate. They're destiny. They're the immutable result of inevitabilities piled on top of each other. Those moments: I've judged them in others, before I had my own. You can't understand. You won't understand, because it's important for you not to.

I saw Mindy before she saw me, and I was instantly captured by her naive beauty, a simple burgundy bob framing a gentle face. Nose, puglike. Eyes brown, rich chocolate. Lips naturally pink, although a little darkened from the chill in the air. Her jacket muted her breasts, but I could still see the curve of them, leading my eyes down her body.

She stopped midstride, and I could feel her staring at me. My eyes met hers, locked into hers. She was a doe, trapped in the headlights. And if she was the doe, I was the stag, ready to attack. Ready to pounce.

I could even smell her fear, riding the breeze and mixed in with her hint of roses.

We stood there for what seemed like minutes, eyes locked together. Her fear became absolutely pungent. My nostrils flared to take it in.

Then she did what she'd been programmed her entire life to do: She ran.

Then I did what I'd been programmed my entire life to do: I chased her.

A pair of inevitabilities. At the end of the day, we are animals, driven by hormones and programming.

The sidewalk curved sharply to the right to follow the contour of the library, and to avoid a hill that rolled down towards the river that cut across campus. She feigned right, and then dodged left. Perhaps her plan was to run down the hill and hide among the bridge supports, or maybe she just got confused.

Either way, Mindy Turner, Junior, lost her footing and tumbled down the hill, rolling out of control until she landed at the base.

I heard a crack. I thought it must have been her skull at first, but I could see her moving. Slowly, painfully, but she was moving.

I stood at the crest of the hill, looking down on my prey, my skin alive with bloodlust. I'd seen it in her eyes, the accusation behind the fear. We could not be friends, because I was lurking among the shadows. I was the emissary for the men that night, the males who scrape their knuckles against the ground and cut off women's clitorises and make them wear burqas.

Everything we do, we do to oppress and manipulate and control. It's what we are.

That's who was in her eyes, staring at her. She hadn't seen me, she'd seen the abyss.

I am the abyss.

I walked confidently down the hill, watching her turn to me, otherwise immobile on the ground.

I crouched next to her, noticing now that her legs were splayed at an odd angle. She reached out her arms, trying to crawl away like Christina in that Andrew Wyeth painting.

My father had had a print of that painting in his home office. “Christina’s World.”

And here was my own Christina, pulling herself along by her arms, her useless legs dangling behind her.

I put a consoling hand on Mindy’s shoulder. “Why did you run?” I asked, unnecessarily.

She looked back at me, and then opened her mouth to scream. I was surprised it had taken her this long to think of it, but I was ready. I grabbed her throat and held it tightly in my grip, my thumb and fingers squeezing against her windpipe.

“Don’t,” I said. “Not if you want to live.”

The words came rolling out, liberated from months of oppression. Years. There was a power in those words, and a power in that grip.

Before that moment, I’d thought that maybe I really was a good person at heart. That I wasn’t the unrepentant, irredeemable reprobate that Mindy had seen when she’d seen me.

But now we were at the moment of truth, laid bare. I was the beast she’d thought I was.

Inertia and potential combine to make energy. This energy was hatred, and power, and an overwhelming need to be feared for me, myself, alone.

“If I let you go, you won’t scream. Right?”

Mindy nodded slowly, her face red and her eyes tearing up and distending from the pressure of my hand on her throat.

So I let her go, and she fell back on the ground, choking and coughing. “Please...” she said softly. “I need help. Please get help.”

I sat on the grass and licked my lips thoughtfully. Inside me, there were two people: There was the one who I’d thought I was, the one that I’d been raised to be. And there was the one who had always been there, behind all of the noise. And he was hungry. Like a shark, he’d tasted blood.

“You can’t move your legs.”

Mindy shook her head. “I think, my back, I think I hurt....” And then she started crying, as if the magnitude of her situation had hit her square between the eyes. “Please....”

“You can’t move your legs,” I said flatly. I wasn’t there anyway, I was inside my mind, fighting between who I’d thought I was and who I now realized I was by virtue of a lifetime of being a male.

“I can’t feel...” She was trying not to cry, and then I could see in her eyes that she was thinking about screaming. I leaned over her, my hand at the ready for her throat, but she shook her head again. She pressed her lips together, the Universal Sign for muteness.

“Do you think I’m going to rape you?” I asked her. It was a test, the single question. The tragedy of that question was, she was predicting the future no matter how she answered it, and she didn’t know it. Here we were, me a creature of power and oppression, her a meek victim of circumstance, and she didn’t know that she was the one with the power.

This situation had been her creation, as much as it had been mine. We were individuals locked in our programming, but she’d been the one to set off the programming.

No, this isn’t something so trite as “she was asking for it.” That cliché masks a depth of enculturation. If you don’t get it, you won’t get it. You just won’t. You just don’t understand what it’s like. What’s behind it.

It’s always there, just under the surface: The potential. The expectation. The fear. Everything we do, rooted in that fear.

Don’t judge me until you’ve been there, seeing the senseless, irrational fear in the eyes of your prey. The eyes become your prey because of the fear.

Even so, at the base of that hill, the river gently lapping at its edge, I still hadn’t crossed the line. I could have gone back. I had a red pill and a blue pill, and I could have taken either one.

But I’d given the choice to Mindy, whose name I would not learn until afterwards.

“Do you think I’m going to rape you?” I asked her again.

Slowly, resignedly, she nodded.

“Why?” I asked her. Inside, I was reeling, feeling my soul crumbling away. No longer was the fear directed towards me a generic abstract. She feared me. She feared me, John Morgan, emissary of all things male, all things evil.

She just whimpered softly, looking up at the hill, then over at the bridge, looking for someone to save her.

“I’m a good person,” I said, too quiet for her to hear. Then, louder: “You can’t feel your legs?”

Mindy shook her head.

“And what about your...” I put my hand on her mound. “Can you feel that?”

Through a veil of tears, she shook her head again.

“I don’t want to rape you,” I said. “You have to understand that. I didn’t want to. I was just enjoying the night. You ran for no reason. Do you understand?”

She nodded, but I could tell from her eyes that she didn’t want to understand it.

“We are here because we’re supposed to be. It’s the way things have to be. Do you understand?”

She whimpered and bit her lip. “Please....”

“You won’t feel it. Don’t you see how this is the way things have to be?”

“Please.” She’d summoned up her last bit of courage. I felt bad for her, truly bad. But couldn’t she see, I had no more choice than she did? She’d called my ogre up from the depths of my psyche. I was feared: To be truly actualized, I must be feared for who I truly am, not some biased stereotype.

Why didn’t she understand?

Gently, lovingly, like a virgin lover discovering sex for the first time, I slid her pants off of her. Her mound was naturally furry, a soft pillow. I stroked it, distractedly aware that she didn’t respond because she couldn’t feel. Her eyes were closed, her prone body resigned to whatever I was going to do.

“My China doll,” I said. “Don’t cry. This is what you wanted.”

You’re judging me. I can tell. You’ve thought about turning away, but you’re still reading. Why? If I’m a monster, if you’re better than I am, why are you still reading on in rapt attention? To feel superior, or to satisfy your baser nature without the guilt of having done what I’ve done? I’m actualized, you’re potential, and yet you judge me?

I am who I am. I am the sum of all that has been put into me, just as Mindy Turner was the sum of all that had been put into her. We’re all individuals, unique and special and powerful in our own ways. And we’re all automatons, victims of fate and inertia.

A body in motion will tend to remain in motion, and events once set in play will resolve according to natural rules.

Please understand that. I’m no more a monster than anyone else. I had a flash, a night which changed me, a night where I was someone else, when I discovered who I have inside. If I could take that night back, would I?

Should I?

I made love to Mindy there, under the full moon. It was the most beautiful sex I’d ever had, because it was so liberating. I was no longer bound by the rules of proper society, and I was free to express myself however I truly wanted to.

I expressed myself with a tenderness befitting the most classical of lovers. Mindy was a gift that I celebrated there, drinking in her skin and kissing her innocent cheek. She lay still, crying softly, as I slowly, gently consummated our destiny.

By the end, as I came inside of her, I was crying from joy. I was full now, I was complete. I knew the nature of my beast. I had looked deep, deep into my abyss, dragged down forcibly by the irrational fear in my beautiful doe's eyes, and I had seen who I truly could have been, in another world, a world of anarchy.

I held her there, in my arms, and fell asleep, falling into the deepest, calmest sleep I'd had in as long as I could recall.

There are those who say now that I lost my mind that night. I'd been unhinged, they said. I'd been slipping before, but in that flash of a moment, when I smelled the fear on Mindy's skin, I'd broken down. That's what my doctor says.

My doctor is in denial. He controls his dark side, he tells me. He's happy that way, he says.

But, I tell him, he's never been liberated, he's never been actualized. The ball in the hand, full of potential energy, doesn't know what it's like to fall: For if it did, it wouldn't want to be held.

Mindy passed on to a better world that night, sometime in her sleep. The official cause of death was a heart attack, brought on by the stress of the events. I know that the true cause of death was perfection: She'd become whole, having had all of her fears about the world confirmed in one fell swoop. I was an animal because she'd thought I was, and that was the release she'd needed to let herself go from the world.

It's ironic, how that moment of liberation affected us in different ways: She's free now, flying with the other angels up in heaven, and I'm caged, surrounded by concrete and fences and unbreakable glass for the rest of my mortal days.

I am no more a monster than you are. I just had a day of enlightenment, a blinding flash of liberation.

I am now complete.

I am at peace.

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