

The Varieties of Gratification

2. The Average Day

Wake Up
Breakfast
Commute
Getting Going
Coffee
Mid-Morning
Lunch
Afternoon
Tea
Wrapping Up
Commute
Dinner
Winding Down
Go to Sleep

3. Since he didn't get home until almost 8:00 PM, Carl's dinner was the result of an effort to solve a culinary equation involving minimal prep time and maximal nutrition, flavor, and freshness. For the time being, the answer to this equation involved: a microwaved sweet potato; a boiled vegetable, like broccoli or green beans; reheated black beans or baked beans; crackers and cheese; and a glass of water, or occasionally a Coca-Cola. For dessert, Carl would eat two or three storebought cookies and drink a small glass of milk, or if he didn't have any cookies, graham crackers and honey.

5. Carl's roommate was an older woman who also worked in television news, as a correspondent for a national network. She disapproved of Carl having any marijuana at their apartment, and also found it unappealing that Carl smoked cigarettes from time to time. Nevertheless, the two got along well. They enjoyed complaining about their jobs in television news, as well as discussing the social life in Washington, and films and books. Prior to working in television, Carl's roommate completed a Ph.D. in English.

6. Carl was writing to a female co-worker, a girl who seemed to have a crush on him. He found her intriguing - she was sharp, she read books and had good taste, and she was from the Midwest, like him. Physically, she wasn't quite his type. She was fair-skinned, blue-eyed, and wore a pair pretentiously awkward glasses. Carl preferred women with dark hair and dark eyes - Latinas, East Asians, Arabs. This girl reminded him of an old friend of his, a boy who also had exquisite taste in books and films, but was spineless and ineffectual. This girl also seemed too submissive, too willing to abase herself before paternal authority. It was like this girl was a female version of that friend of his, that she was that same friend but with a vagina and breasts. That vision was repugnant and discomforting, but yet he wrote her a flirtatious email that was literate, witty, and enthusiastic.

8. Carl had not attended Andrew's wedding out of a vague feeling that his friend was making a terrible mistake marrying a mediocre and suspicious woman, and because Carl was cheap, reclusive, and elitist, not wanting to pay for a weekend of trite debauchery and tawdry sentiment in Las Vegas. Carl looked through some of the photos of Andrew and his wife at the hospital, as well as photos of the shriveled, larval-looking baby. He and Andrew hadn't spoken since just before the wedding but thanks to this social network, Carl could browse through these intimate photos. The images of something as serious, momentous, and permanent as having a child caused little conscious reaction in him, neither a smile nor a sneer but, perhaps, wonder at the young man, his friend, in these photos who was suddenly posing in such an adult scene, who looked happy and excited to have desperate, fresh life making a claim to him. But to Carl, it seemed unwise and baffling to give birth to an infant who would be making an incessant demand for its parents' love and care, for, indirectly, its' parents money and free time. What's the rush? he thought. Why squander the opportunities your parents gave you to become a professionally respectable participant of society? How could one ever put in all the work that's necessary to rise through the bureaucracy, to hone your intelligence and creativity, to get noticed and become someone, how could one do that while having to give up almost all of one's free time for a child? And why impregnate someone who seems good for a short fling, but not much more, someone so much less self-serious and self-aware than you are? Carl couldn't help but think that his friend Andrew, despite being a very well-read, studious, and contemplative person, was now living as if on auto-pilot, following a rather banal and pathetic script written for him by his parents, a program with a sequence of a young pregnancy, a hasty marriage, and an even hastier divorce, with a lifetime of suburban drudgery, of resent and regret to follow? Or was he wrong? And was his friend going to be terrifically satisfied, to stay married, maybe even have another child, and enjoy a suburban domesticity of peace and joy?

It was a Wednesday evening, in February. Carl was just getting home from the studio¹. It had been a gloomy, average day².

His roommate was out. He made himself his usual dinner³ and ate it while listening to classical music on the radio.

After cleaning up, he went out to the back patio and smoked marijuana⁴, and then a cigarette, hoping to finish before his roommate returned⁵.

He went up to his bedroom and shut the door. He turned on his computer in order to write an email⁶, listen to music and, if he had the energy, watch a movie.

He felt like masturbating. He locked his bedroom door. He took two tissues from the tissue box on his desk, returned to his bed, and undid his zipper⁷. Before going to the website that he subscribes to for pornography, he logged onto a social networking website.

He saw that a dear childhood friend of his, Andrew, had just had his first baby with his wife. Andrew had only gotten married a few months prior⁸. Carl looked through the photos from the maternity ward, then switched to the pornography website⁹.

Carl finished with the pornography and cleaned up. His roommate came home, stopped outside his door and said hello¹⁰.

Carl put on one of his favorite films¹¹ but couldn't stay awake. He turned off his computer, washed up, set his alarm clock, and went to sleep.

Tim Peters

1. Carl works at a national news program in Washington, D.C, where he is near the bottom of the company hierarchy¹. The studios are in an office in the suburbs of Arlington, Virginia. Carl has to ride on two different subway trains and a bus to get to work. When the subway train is passing over the Potomac River, towards the Pentagon, jet planes fly just overhead as they land at the airport. In the distance are other bridges, busy with auto traffic and passenger and freight trains. He has visions of his own subway train plunging into the river. The view is somewhat scenic - the monuments, the national cemetery, the forests and the hills - but the tableau as a whole makes Carl feel like he is a very small, delicate, gelatinous organism clinging for his life while being thrust about within some enormous, throbbing labyrinth, a dark place of hard, abrasive surfaces, an infernal place that is choked with steam and eruptions of electricity and fire. He feels that, if there were to be an accident or, God forbid, a terrorist attack, it would be embarrassing and awful to have to suffer and die amongst strangers like these.

4. While Carl found smoking marijuana after work to be very relaxing, he also felt it just put him into a stupor little different from the stupor he found himself in at the office on a daily basis. While this evening stupor was more pleasant and peaceful than the daytime one, they were both just two species of a category of mental state he detested - the state of having nothing to say, of being intellectually constipated.

7. Carl gratified his sexual appetite with the same tidy efficiency with which he consumed his milk and cookies after dinner. Which is to say, he pleased himself without making a mess, without getting indulgent (with neither the magnitude of pleasure nor the amount of money he spent on such pleasure) and, more than anything, without a single crumb of guilt.

9. Carl most liked watching hidden camera videos of young women pleasing themselves while also alone, on beds, sofas, and in bath tubs. Even if some of the scenes were artificially staged, it seemed to Carl that the orgasms these women experienced were the most genuine and drawn out compared to the other kinds of pornography he had seen, the majority of which struck him as disgustingly crass, aggressive, and false. He almost felt like an anthropologist, peering in anonymity from a forest while a member of a society he did not belong to performed an extremely private and vivid ritual, and did so as if no one were watching them, as if they were truly alone. The women of these videos, writhing in pleasure, moaning in ecstasy, seemed...authentic...to Carl. He was aware that the tableau of him, locked in his bedroom, pleasing himself to the recorded images of another human being pleasing herself in her own locked (though secretly violated) chamber was perhaps a pathetic - however distinctly modern - sight. But he enjoyed it, and it was both easier and more thrilling than conjuring up memories of previous sexual experiences (which he occasionally did when a computer was unavailable or for the sake of nostalgia).

10. He feared she would try to open the door to slip her head in and chat, and in doing so would learn the knob was locked. At that moment, the room was like an oven reeking of the stale coffee from an unrinse mug, the fresh jizzum soaked into a wad of tissues, and the lingering trails of flatulence. His room stunk of loneliness, and he knew it. It stunk of solitude. It stunk of what a person becomes when he has a room of his own, a lock on his door, and the education and wealth with which to try and burrow into the infinite bureaucracy of civilization. It was a stench opposite of, but equal to, the smell of a person in the daytime, when one cannot put a locked door between himself and others, the smell of manufactured perfumes, of antibacterial lotions, of scented soaps. Was one set of odors more true, more authentic, than the other? Is our stench of the day any more honest, proper, or right than our stench of the night?

11. It was an independent film about life in a liberal university town in Texas. It was about young men and women who have quit the race for conventional success, who are on the placid outer banks of society, who are poets and philosophers, vagrants and dropouts, freethinkers and mystics. One line from the film Carl especially likes. It goes, "Withdrawing in the disgust is not the same thing as apathy." The film made Carl long for his days as a student, when he could have long conversations with friends in cafes, when he could walk or ride his bicycle to wherever he needed to be, when he had the peace and the quiet with which to think. Sometimes, since beginning work at this news program, he's gotten the feeling of warnings flashing across his consciousness, as if an ominous black wave were being waved by the lifeguards on his inner shores, as if something hideously violent, something madly consumptive, was billowing up within him.