

The moths

In the hot summer nights in the countryside, at the small city I lived as a kid, I was always annoyed by the amount of small moths that appeared at night. They spent all their time flying endlessly through the room, circulating persistently the room's artificial lighting.

Now, close to my thirties, I had this sort of philosophy: I believed that in life most of the people that you meet are just like those small annoying moths, orbiting around fruitless things and goals. Those people pursue always the same: a diploma, a job in a good company, a house, a car and finally a couple of kids to repeat the cycle all over again.

Particularly, I always judged myself beyond those artificial society rules about how to live your own life. I hated this life standard that people accept and follow, and I tried my best to live my life in the most inverse way possible, even in the simplest things.

First I had sex, and then I fell in love. First I worked, and then I decided to study. I tried to challenge the social order of doing things, investing myself in something different every day of my life. No chains, no commitments and no expectation.

However, like when psychologists say that we always find ourselves more beautiful in the mirror that we really are, in life sometimes we end up thinking too much about ourselves without noticing, and no one is safe of that.

In the day in question, I had just returned from Bangladesh, after twelve days of enlightenment meditation in a camp outside the Darasbari Mosque. There, naked of names or nationalities, we all discussed ways to find ourselves in the middle of this chaotic world. After I left the camp, I had this sensation that I had just reached a higher level, and I could almost feel an aura of wisdom coming from me, lurking in my interactions with people.

My grandfather had just been released after ten days on a hospital after he had a tendon rupture on his shoulder. Since he was very old, they accepted his discharge with the condition that someone should stay with him for the next days, and that's why he called me.

We weren't exactly close. As a kid, I had some memories about visiting his house, but I left home when I was fifteen, and after that, the exotic postcards that I sent to him sporadically was our only form of contact. However, those postcards didn't really have any deep meaning, and I kept sending them just because I thought it was nice to show an old countryside man some of the different amazing things that exist in the world, things that he could never see looking through his window.

We were sitting on his living room. Outside it was already night, a dark warm night of february, and through the window a small number of moths were starting to enter, annoyingly hitting the lamp in the center of the room.

We had been talking for more or less two hours about his life there, about his neighborhoods and friends, and I was trying my best to sound positive and supportive. However, inside of me, I had this feeling of restlessness, I knew that even my grandfather being way older than I, he would never really grasp the wisdom that I had found in myself.

In a certain moment, I reclined my chair and looked to the roof, noticing the moths. That's when I suddenly decided to try and share my philosophy. I told him everything. I explained about the analogy with the moths, about challenging the order of things, about people following empty lives and goals, about living outside the expectation of others, et cetera. When I finished, I couldn't help but feel wise. After all those years, I was proud of myself.

He listened to everything in silence, sometimes passing his fingers on his fat white beard, in a reflexive manner. After I finished talking, we stayed in silence for a couple of minutes, in which I could almost feel him silently digesting what I had just said. Finally he spoke, gently cutting the silence of the room.

“And son, this philosophy of yours...” He seemed to choose each word carefully, his tone giving away his discontent, even if a respectful one. “Does it make you happy?”

The question wasn’t new for me. People seem to worry way more with your happiness when you’re not doing what they expect you to, and as I started to answer, I felt like I was repeating the same speech for the tenth time.

“You see, people usually interpret happiness as a physical thing, something they can conquer or achieve. Then, what people do to achieve this so called happiness is to orbit around what they believe to be their goal, their magic achievement that will make life meaningful. That’s what I question: what people don’t see. I question the act of orbiting around something at all.”

The silence fell into the room once more. I focused on the gentle summer breeze that was entering the room. As I looked through the window, I couldn’t really see a thing. However, I could clearly hear the moths hitting the lamp close to me, and for some inexplicable reason, I felt the urge of not looking at them again.

“Can you do me a favor, son?” He asked, his voice was calm and gentle. I nodded in agreement. “Do you see that chair there, hm, it’s below the lamp, right?” He pointed to an old chair close to me. “Can you please put a bucket of water there for me?”

“A bucket of water?” I asked, unsure if I had heard it right.

“Yes, son. Please.” He kindly answered, his eyes on the moths that were flying around the lamp.

I did not question it further and went to search for a bucket, and when I found it, I filled it with water and returned to the room. I put the bucket on the chair that he had pointed before, and then I turned to him, wanting to know the reason behind his request. However, before I could articulate any sound, he already had the palm of his hand open, as a signal for me to stay silent.

“Give it a minute, Son.” He said, smiling at me. “You see, you talked about your philosophy. About people trapped, people following rules, people pursuing things, people doing meaningless efforts, but you see...” He pointed to the bucket, and my eyes intuitively followed his lead, moving to the bucket that was just by my side.

And then I saw it, I saw the moths. They were all dead, floating in the water. I had to take one or two seconds to fully understand what exactly happened: the water reflected the light from the lamp, and the moths, following this reflection, ended up killing themselves. Behind me, I heard my grandfather voice.

“Now, considering that those moths were the people that you talk about... If you stop looking to what they do or do not... Can you answer me, son?” His voice was still gentle and calm, but for the first time at that night, I realized just how wise it also sounded.

I was feeling confused, and I couldn’t even explain why. It was just like someone had violently pulled the rug which I was standing. I felt silly, yet I couldn’t stop looking at the dead moths, as they felt more of an analogy of my pursuit than of what I wanted to avoid. *I have been way too busy worrying about how others live their own lives, don’t I?*

Inexplicably I felt my cheeks getting warmer as I replied my grandfather. “Answer what?”

“You, son, are you happy?” asked again the wiser man in the room.