

## **Stone pegs**

I think it was when I noticed that my teeth no longer seemed to fit in my mouth quite the way I remembered them doing so over the previous forty-five years that I perhaps began to suspect that something might be amiss.

Now this was not the usual wear and tear that all teeth accrue over the course of many decades of use, slowly wearing away atom by atom in the way footfalls on stone steps erode depressions into them. The misalignment I was feeling was more profound and pronounced than this, coming on over the period of only a few days, and therefore all the more noticeable for it.

The issue manifested itself as an inability on my part to close my jaws so that my teeth sat together in the pattern I knew and was familiar with. It was as if several individual teeth had shifted somehow in the immovable socket they sat in, yet had not. However the overall effect was sufficient for me to seek a professional dental opinion, after a period of time where it had not resolved itself, and appeared would not.

The dentist I visited (somewhat ashamedly my first appointment for over two decades) could find nothing amiss with my teeth, aside from a small amount of gum receding, which she told me was to be expected after such a long period between check-ups. Otherwise, my oral health was good, surprisingly so perhaps for my relative lack of care and attention to my teeth over the duration of my adulthood. Given the gap in time from my previous visits to a dentist, my records were of little value in offering a comparison for my teeth's current alignment, and what I was experiencing could easily be the result of simple wear and tear and aging. Her advice was, aside from embarking on a regimen of flossing, to seek a medical opinion, as she could do little for me

Initially the doctor had diagnosed inflammation of the mandible muscles between my upper and lower jaw as the cause of the slight misalignment (and attendant discomfort when biting down in a particular fashion), and prescribed a course of a powerful anti-inflammatories to reduce the swelling and thereby restore the position of my jaws relative to each other and ensure everything returned to their correct (and familiar) places.

Dutifully I followed the course of medication prescribed, and for a time it appeared as if that had the intended (and desired) effect. The pain abated almost immediately, and within a few days my teeth, in particular my molars, were re-situated where I had remembered them being for the course of my lifetime up to that point. Indeed, so successful was the treatment that I neglected to follow through with the check up the doctor had advised at the time of prescribing my treatment.

So, merrily I went back about my business, such that my business was, quite forgetful of the incident as it receded further into the past. And that would have been, should have been the end of the matter, until one morning I awoke and once more my teeth had rebelled. Once more they caught one another in new configurations as I clenched them together, their crevices and outcroppings seeming to snag and snare their upper or lower counterpart.

A return visit to my physician (somewhat humbled by his mild admonishment at my previously missed follow up) yielded no further insight. His previous diagnosis was not repeated, and no medicines to alleviate my condition were forthcoming. 'Perhaps a consequence of the original inflammation has caused a slight shift in alignment,' was his considered opinion. 'And remember, within the confines of your mouth the smallest difference feels magnified a hundred, a thousand times. Does not the smallest particle of food caught at the gumline or in between teeth feel as significant and obtrusive as a golf ball?'

I noted the reference to the links as perhaps an unconscious yearning on his part to see the back of me, now an apparent hypochondriac, and to fit in the back nine while the evening

yielded him sufficient daylight for an hour's play. Gathering myself I left, manipulating my jaw back and forth in an effort to locate (unsuccessfully I might add) a new comfortable resting position.

Over the coming days and weeks I slowly grew accustomed to my teeth's new arrangement, and while not quite coming to terms with it, at least entered into a stand-off with my molars over it. I re-learned how to masticate particular foodstuffs, and after many a bitten cheek (with the attendant exclamation, I am a little ashamed to admit to) myself and my mouth eventually began to work as single being once more.

This minor aberration with my molars should have faded in my memories, lost in the ongoing forward narrative of my existence. After all, all of us change and grow over time, the largest alterations to our forms perhaps being our maturation from children to adults, where our forms and thoughts shift, sometimes radically. Also, many of us during childhood experience a less pleasant trip to the dentist than I had recently undertaken, and return with either additional materials deposited in our mouths, or new gaps to slowly grow accustomed to. Additionally, surgery is not uncommon, particularly to fix or repair, and as a result new marks not of our making are inscribed upon our flesh, telling the story of our time under the knife. Yet, we shrug our shoulders, accept the new configuration of our forms and move forward, the only reminders when we are naked in front of a mirror, or the weather is particularly cold and the scar tissue aches just a little underneath our heavy clothing.

Then, later in life after many years of incremental subtle changes we may find ourselves looking back at a face we barely recognise from the memories of our youth. A gain of weight, greying or thinning of hair (or more alarmingly hair where previously there was none) and the sagging of our previously tight and smooth features, until one day we finally notice the almost imperceptible accretion of change to our bodies, and our reflection seems to glare at

us, confronting us with the reality that our youth is long gone, and the person we were is no longer in the world, replaced by an unfamiliar stranger.

Lastly, we choose to alter our appearances, sometimes with the significant effects of an extreme diet or exercise regime, sometimes less radically with hair dyes, or the adornment of jewellery; tattoos and piercings perhaps a more permanent version of these.

It should be noted also that there is the (fallacious, I should add) notion that our cells regenerate a 'new' us every seven years, that we are replaced in our entirety three times every score. Of course this is mistaken, as while some (most) of our cells are constantly being replaced according to the patterns described deep in our genetic makeup, some of the components of our bodies are permanent features, fixed and locked at their time of formation, existing for as long as we do, succumbing only to the pressure of time as the means to alter them.

All in all we are a highly mutable species, with the ability to both mould and alter ourselves and to remedy issues, all of which leave their trace upon us, none of us ever exactly the person we had previously been. So, it should have been of little consequence and with even less thought that I should have accepted and internalised the new arrangement of my teeth.

But I did not.

I could not relinquish, at the very recesses of my mind, the notion that this alteration, this reconfiguration which had occurred within my mouth had not merely been part of the natural order of things, that this was not aging, or wear and tear, but that something else, something more insidious, more subtle was at play.

I resolved to undertake an audit of myself, checking what was present, and in what form, against what I remembered, and make note of any differences and discrepancies I located.

What I would then do with this data I had not yet fathomed, but holding the maxim that knowledge is power uppermost, I began my inspections.

The next question was where to start? Arbitrarily, as there seemed little substantive difference in a top-down or bottom-up approach, I opted for the latter.

Disrobing in the privacy of my chambers, the illumination in the room at its maximum giving my errant flesh no hiding place if it had been promiscuous without my knowledge, I stood before my full-length mirror and stared hard for a long moment at the image of myself staring equally hard back at me from the silvered glass, daring the reflected me to blink before I did, or twitch or fidget without my initiation of the movement. But there was nothing. The visage in the mirror stood as implacable as I, the pair of us immobile in our Mexican stand-off as the minutes ticked by, the sound of the second hand echoing loudly in the otherwise silent room.

From my position in my chambers I was able to spy the clock hanging on the wall through my peripheral vision without therefore needing to avert my gaze from the simulacrum who stood before me. As I observed him and the reverse sweep of the minute hand I was struck by a curious revelation. While my perception of the direction of the unstoppable march of forward time was now reversed (at least from my point of view), the hands appearing to move around the face of the timepiece in an anti-clockwise direction, and therefore obviously reversed, the image of the unyielding individual whose gaze bore down on me equally as hard as mine pressed on him, was in fact exactly how I believed I appeared.

This picture of myself was the one I most commonly encountered, both during my time alone at home, or abroad in the outside world where reflective surfaces (some of questionable fidelity) abounded. Our mirror selves who appear as if on command as we present ourselves at the portals to their world (where right is in fact left, although up is not perhaps counter-intuitively down, but let us leave the question of why mirrors only reflect light on a single

axis to the physicists) is the image of ourselves we see the most. Only the vainest narcissist would have a greater number of photographs of themselves adorning the walls of their dwelling than the far more functionally useful mirrors, and as such the ‘mirror image’ version of ourselves is the one we internalise.

Shrugging at my foolishness for even contemplating that I could bluff with my own reflection, I metaphorically and physically blinked first thereby breaking myself from the fugue state I had fallen into as I contemplated my own body, and began my inspection.

A review of my feet, ankles, shins, knees and thighs was as I expected. My feet remained the same size (as verified by trialling my oldest known pair of shoes as the reference point) and only differed from my younger self’s by the accretion of calloused skin at the heels and ball; hardly a revelation. Similarly the remainder of my lower limbs were as remembered and expected, yielding no surprises.

My groin remained as unremarkable as it had ever been. My reproductive organs continued to be of median dimensions, and yes, for the prurient of you, I did verify my penis’s erect sizing against what I knew from memory. Again, all as I believed it to be.

At this, the halfway point (at least from a height perspective, if not number of body parts to audit) I paused. Were these the actions of a rational man? Or had I inflated what was in actual fact a simple product of my aging self into a plot against my very body? What if there were no conspiracy to alter my flesh without my knowledge, and in actuality in indulging myself in what an outsider could just as easily rank as whimsy or paranoia, was I indeed falling into the latter?

Taking a mental step back, I resolved to apply logic to my situation and actions. In order to console myself that my behaviour remained on the proper side of the (admittedly blurred) line dividing sanity and mania, I asked myself a question.

‘Am I alone in performing this action?’

Were there any others amongst the billions and billions of souls inhabiting the world with me at this very moment engaging in this behaviour? Was there another single individual undertaking the same physical audit of themselves as I? Statistics indicated that the answer to this question was yes, albeit an unverifiable yes, relying on the weight of probability for its result. Cold comfort perhaps, but comfort nonetheless. It seemed mathematically improbable that I was the global singleton engaged in this activity at this moment, given the weight of humanity's numbers. Even narrowing the probabilities to an order of the ninth power would tell me at least six others were joining me in participating in a bodily inspection. Sufficient numbers for a very good dinner party, perhaps. We could exchange notes, and swap anecdotes!

If not emboldened, but at least drawing some small reassurance from my sense of remote camaraderie that I had not yet lost complete control of my faculties, I pressed on with my inspection.

There was little of note at my midriff, save for the paunch I had developed gradually over the preceding fifteen years; a consequence of a slowing metabolism and a penchant for fine claret contributing to my most noticeable difference to my youthful self. My appendectomy scar was present as it had ever been, the surgery taking place in my early childhood so that as far as my conscious memories were concerned it was a feature I had more or less always possessed. So far, so ordinary.

My upper torso yielded no surprises save for the greying of some hair and a slight sagging of muscle tone. Likewise, my hands and arms were as I recalled them always being, the small scars from childhood accidents still present and correct on or around my hands. My sole artificial decoration, a tattoo on my right shoulder remained, a youthful folly one weekend forever and indelibly inked into my flesh, underneath my skin. That too showed the expected

signs of aging, the dyes fading and spreading, the original design still discernible, but as if viewed through a distorting lens, or from a distance without the aid of spectacles.

My sense of foolishness returned. What was I genuinely hoping to achieve with my audit? What if I came to the end and found nothing? Then what? Shrug off my dental anomaly, and return to my life? I was unsure I was capable of that. The alteration to the arrangement and placement of my teeth had sparked a thought in me I could not extinguish. But what if I did discover something else amiss? What deepening of the sensation that something was afoot within my being would that engender in me? Truly I did not know, but resolved to press on to completion whatever may come.

It was now the turn of my face to bear the brunt of my forensic gaze. So long a familiar image in the mirror that I had ceased to pay it any substantive attention beyond the nominal ‘passing glance’, I now took the time to see it anew for the first time in many years.

My chin and mouth passed inspection, with, if not flying colours (the positioning of my teeth a reminder as to my motivation for this slightly absurd endeavour) then at least no further divergence from my updated knowledge. Similarly my nose remained steadfast in its shape and placement at the centre of my face. Hair and eyebrows also passed muster (if by muster it was meant that the former had thinned and receded, the latter grown more bushy and individually lengthy). That left only my eyes. The lights. The titular windows to the soul. If there was to be any change, perhaps this is where it would be evident.

Steeling myself I lowered my gaze from my hairline and peered directly into my own eyes.

Through childhood, when our physical aspects are established, and compared against one’s peers, I was informed (and confirmed for myself) that I had brown eyes (along with the majority of my classmates it turned out) and had left the matter at that. My eye colour was unremarkable, common and now, as far as I was concerned, settled. That personal data point

was, and I assumed would, remain fixed from that moment onwards. Unlike the remainder of my physical form which had significant capacity for growth and change ahead of it, my eyes would grow only incrementally - the belief that we are born with our adult-sized eyes another fallacy almost universally present in the wider population. And more importantly perhaps, they would remain the same colour.

From that moment in early life onwards, I believed I would never need to re-check or re-confirm the colour of my eyes whenever I might be quizzed about it on any form of questionnaire or census. The response would be, and would always be brown.

Colour of eyes: Brown

This one fact about myself was, at least I had assumed, immutable. I looked at myself in the mirror.

God! My eyes were green!

I shut my eyes quickly against the sight of my reflection, my mouth dry and my insides feeling suddenly empty. Panic rose in me and my body began to shake uncontrollably. Perhaps I was mistaken, and a trick of the light, or of the senses had just occurred. My mind scrambled for rationalisation, for an explanation as to what I had just seen.

Recalling that seeing is in fact not believing, but rather mostly the brain filling in what it expects to observe, I tried to convince myself it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that I, in my heightened state of anxiety to any physical alteration to my form had somehow projected what I believed I would see, not what was actual and in front of me.

Yes, that must be it, I thought, getting my twitching body slowly under some semblance of conscious control. I had been affected by a temporary mania, the culmination of weeks of introspection and self-validation on my perceived condition. Weeks seeking only input which validated my cognitive bias which had ultimately manifested itself as a total (and compelling) hallucination. I was in the grip of nothing more than a self-inflicted delusion, and

one I was now confident I would be able to reverse. After all, I had been the cause with my relentless obsession resulting from a simple medical issue many weeks previously, which I had allowed to take hold in my mind and grow, like a weed, instead of pulling the incorrect notion up by the roots.

Well, no more. I was master of my myself, and I would not allow a temporary lapse in my faculties to overwhelm me. My eyes were, and always had been brown. From my early school days, through my adolescence and into adulthood, upon every instance of observing my own self in a mirror, a person with brown eyes had gazed back out at me.

Inhaling deeply to settle my jangled senses, I calmly opened my eyes once more and looked.

Blue. My eyes were blue!

I scrambled to locate my phone amid the pile of clothing I had discarded as I undressed to begin my inspection. I retrieved the device, and enabling its camera feature, I took a photograph of my face, first in the mirror, then as a self-portrait. Fingers trembling, I swiped across the surface of the screen and was presented with my snapshots. Both had my face, its lines and contours well known to me, but with bright blue eyes staring back at me!

How could this be?

Frantically I swiped right and left through the folder entitled 'selfies' (a minor vulgarism the device's designers had not seen fit to allow me to alter despite the phone's seemingly endless other variability options) each pass of my thumb reaching further back into the past as image after image of my face swept past me, my features almost a blur, but each one with piercing blue eyes gazing out of the screen! Faster and faster I scrolled through my repository of photographs, oddly struck, as someone who had never considered themselves a vain man, by the large number I had accumulated over the years. Yet each one bore the image of me with the incorrect eye colour.

I paused again, attempting to compose myself and restore a modicum of control over my actions. Trying to rationalise and explain what I was seeing, I entertained the notion that what if the images were correct? What if I did have blue eyes after all? How could I doubt the proof directly in front of me? The evidence of my own eyes, or that seeing is in actuality believing, the double meaning of these colloquialisms not lost on me. What could have happened to me to believe I had had brown eyes, when it was manifestly apparent they were blue? How long would this delusion have needed to last for it to be my own internal objective reality?

Memories are rewritten when recalled, overwritten, allowing errors to creep in, the data to become corrupted by the imperfect retrieval and storage system of the human brain. Could I have mis-remembered brown eyes just once, and as such altered the record I retained for my eye colour? And how long ago would this false memory have needed to have been created?

A second prior to me seeing the reflection of my face? A minute before then, when I was examining some other area of my anatomy and perhaps had allowed my thoughts to wander ahead to my eyes, when I remembered thinking about my sister's brown eyes, and what if we as siblings, shared that feature? An hour previously, before I had even begun my inspection? Yesterday? The previous week, or fortnight, or month? A year earlier? How far back might my delusion have started? And if I was able to alter my own self-perception to such a degree with a single stray thought, what other damage might I wreak upon myself if I falsely recalled (and then overwrote) other memories? What if I had already done it? What if I was doing it right now? How could I trust my own senses when my mind seemed able to remember a different truth? How could...? what could...? why...?

I looked down at the phone once more. I had reached the penultimate self-portrait, again with blue eyes. I swiped my thumb once more to reveal the final, earliest image of myself I had taken with my phone.

Before I passed out, I am certain I saw myself with brown eyes, which changed to green to blue on the screen in front of me. I was unconscious before I hit the bedroom floor.

\* \* \*

When I came to I found myself fully dressed (minus shoes of course) and reclining atop the covers of my bed. How I had arrived at this state, I had no conscious recall of. My most recent memory was that of the final self-portrait on my phone and after that, only blackness. I searched for the device which had been the cause of my unconsciousness and found it placed neatly on the bedside table, next to the lamp and the book I was currently part way through, as if I had readied myself for sleep, only in reverse.

Instead of undressing, had I recovered from the floor, re-dressed then laid down on my bed only to fall unconscious once more, driven by muscle memory rather than directed will? While fanciful, it seemed the only explanation. I flicked the phone on, and there on the screen was indeed the final image I had viewed, a self-portrait of myself, some years younger but unmistakably myself, only with blue eyes.

I felt the panic rise once more, and calmed myself with a series of long slow deep breaths, until my mind quietened itself and I felt strong enough to get to my feet. Still disbelieving what I had seen, I made my way to my drinks cabinet and secured myself a large scotch, then another. Rattled nerves somewhat soothed by the alcohol warmth of the liquor, I pondered the scenario. There could be no doubt that somehow my eye colour had altered, if only from my own recollection of what it had been. All my photographs (both purely digital renderings, and the more traditional printed versions) showed me with blue eyes, going all the way back to my infant pictures, inherited when my parents had passed away previously.

I mulled over the possibilities of what had happened, and more disturbingly, the how.

That my own remembrance of my eye colour now differed from the reality which presented itself either in the bedroom, bathroom or hallway mirrors, or when I took an

experimental self-portrait with my telephone's camera function, I had no option but to accept. Regardless of what I thought or believed had been the truth only this morning, I was apparently incorrect, and the sooner I internalised that, the more rapid I hoped an explanation as to how I had come to believe an untruth would come to light.

It was this second question that posed more disturbing possibilities. To my mind (if I could continue to place sufficient trust in my faculties to judge situations now somewhat impacted) I saw only two likely explanations for my situation. Either my memories were incorrect (cause unknown) and somehow I had a mental record stretching all the way back to my childhood which was in error, or they were not, and my more recent experiences were the cause of the colour alteration (again, cause unknown).

Neither solution offered any particular comfort.

That I was certain of my previous eye colour I had no doubt, although I supposed that could also be part of my malady. This was the paradox at the heart of the issue, the unsolvable contradiction. If the first scenario was the truth, then somehow a key memory of myself had become altered. This led to obvious questions as to what else I may also have incorrect memories of, but with perhaps less tangible evidence to validate or disprove. If it were the latter scenario, then some agency had effected a rapid and fundamental physical alteration in my being, doing so across a timespan more usually reserved for alterations in appearance such as a haircut, or shave. If this were the answer, then what, or who had been the cause? Again, a question I could not answer.

I was at an impasse.

As I could progress neither possible solution, I would have to gather more evidence. But I also had to be cautious as to my approach and methods. I was still cogent enough to realise that merely asking colleagues and family if they happened to notice anything unusual about my appearance, then perhaps having to direct them to observe my eyes would likely only lead

to questions on their part, and perhaps whispers behind my back as to my state of mind. So, I would go about my business as if my blue eyes had always been thus, and wait for any comments on possible alterations I may have made to my appearance.

As it was a Saturday, and I was fortunate enough in my gainful employment not to be required to ‘work weekends’, I would not likely have any interactions with those who saw me most of my waking hours, namely my work colleagues, for another day at least. I am however not without a circle of family and acquaintances sufficiently proximal to organise an impromptu social arrangement – a simple gathering for a drink for instance.

Telephone calls and simple-messaging-service text messages despatched, the group convened later that day. I was welcomed, and welcomed warmly my compatriots, ensuring I made eye-contact with each of them as discreetly as possible, but to no avail. If they saw anything amiss with the colour of my eyes, none of them remarked upon it, even when, perhaps not wishing to mention anything in the group for fear of my embarrassment, I was alone with one of my friends, either at the bar or in the rest rooms.

Some of them I had known since our school days together, having grown up, moved away or around only to find ourselves drawn back to the town of our mutual births where we eventually came to rest. Surely these people, who had memories of me stretching back almost as far as my own should have noticed such an alteration in my appearance?

But no.

Were they ‘in on it’, as the vernacular goes? Was my group of friends part of some conspiracy to unseat my mind by making me doubt the reality of my own senses and recollections? Or were they too similarly affected by whatever agency had effected the re-writing of my memories?

Flummoxed and vexed and not a little bewildered, I vowed to perform my part within the charade I had unwittingly convened for as long as it played out, taking the role of myself,

myself from yesterday before my eyes, or my memories of my eyes had betrayed me.

Dutifully I joined the order for food, plumping for a light salad with chicken breast making sure to specifically request any tomato be excluded from the dish; one of the few remaining food dislikes I had carried forward from my childhood.

Due to my conflicted mental state my appetite was somewhat suppressed and I felt as light a meal as possible would be all I could ingest comfortably. My stomach churned and roiled so noisily (to my mind at least) that I was unsure how my companions could not hear it. Or perhaps they could, and like my eye colour were consciously, deliberately opting not to make mention of it? How deep did this deception run? No, that was nonsense, I told myself. The public house we were ensconced in was, as are the majority of such venues, loud and bustling, with couples and larger parties such as my own enjoying themselves. Bodily noises sound far far louder to the individual living within the apparatus of flesh and bone, of meat and skeleton which comprises our physical forms, echoing in our own skulls with a greater resonance than that perceived by the outside world.

A short while later our food arrived, and I noted that my companion directly opposite me had ordered the same dish, only complete with tomatoes. Seeing the sliced red fruits sitting atop the rest of the dish, the flesh succulent and full, a deep crimson colour seeming to promise much in the way of flavour, a rogue thought shot across my consciousness, entirely unbidden by myself.

‘You like tomatoes,’ it said to me.

And in that moment, I somehow knew I did.

Those of you reading this account may, by now, have come to feel that I am a man who chooses his words with some care and attention. Perhaps a little over fussily, but then we are gifted with such an expansive language that it seems a genuine pity not to make as much use of what is available to us as possible. Therefore you may also appreciate when I say that this

uncalled for, invader of a thought into my consciousness stunned me as profoundly as I have ever been shocked in my life. That singular rogue thought, that interloper into my waking reality, in that moment seemed to cause within me a profound and entirely bewildering conflict, that could only be, would only be resolved by my consuming a tomato, and proving (or otherwise) the thought wrong.

Still slightly disbelieving of what I was doing, I steeled myself for the forthcoming incredulity and probable ridicule from my dining companions, who to a man or woman were aware of my oft stated dietary preferences when it came to the fruit of the solanum lycopersicum. ‘Uh,’ I started, unsure how to phrase the question of procuring a portion of my neighbour’s dinner. ‘Uh, may I, um, would it be possible to, er, have a piece of-’ I hesitated, barely able to bring myself to complete my request. ‘Tomato, please?’ I asked, almost embarrassed to be making such a request, and awaiting the anticipated looks and calls of disbelief.

‘What? Oh, yes of course, help yourself,’ came the reply. ‘Did you forget to order them again? You always do, despite how much you know you like them.’

Of all the possible responses I had thought may be given, this had most certainly not occurred to me. Yet it only posed more questions to my already long list of unanswered subjects I had accrued regarding my situation. Why would my friend say that? What would lead her to believe I enjoyed tomatoes after a lifetime of declaiming my dislike for them.

‘Here, I’ve not started so let’s swap. I’m happy enough not having any tomatoes with my salad, and it seems cruel to make you not have any when you just forgot to order them.’ And with that she exchanged our plates, replacing my otherwise identical platter with one laden with the red fruits. I hardly knew what I should do. Every memory of ever trying tomatoes, every sandwich where I had had to open the leaves of bread and retrieve the offending mush from within, every salad where I had either picked around or retrieved and removed them

reminded me that I did not like tomatoes. And yet, every fibre of my being was now telling me that I fact I did. And it seemed everyone else believed I did also.

And yet, still. Staring at my food for what must have seemed like far too long as to be normal I felt my palate begin to salivate at the notion of eating, no, enjoying eating these ripe, juicy, acid-sweet fruits, which for so long I had abhorred. Hesitantly I picked a quartered portion up between my fingers, treating it as if I were holding something which yet may detonate in my hands, placed it in my mouth and chewed.

What can I say at this juncture? It is likely apparent to you now that I of course realised that I enjoyed the taste, no, more than that, I relished the flavour bursting from the yielding soft fruit I was so carefully masticating. My chewing became more urgent as my enjoyment of the flavours increased with every bite, the taste signals my mouth and tongue were transmitting to my brain eagerly received and interpreted there as pleasurable, not abominable. And I was greedy for more.

Finishing what I was eating, I retrieved another portion of tomatoes from my salad, seemingly freed from a lifetime of dislike, barely comprehending what I was doing, so lost in flavour and taste and texture was I. Quickly I consumed them, eating in the manner of a starving man who had not seen sustenance for days, falling on the food with an almost exaggerated glee. That I drew sideways glances from my dining companions I barely noticed, so eager and keen was my new hunger for this exotic flavour so long denied by my previous self. I concentrated on only the fruits to the exclusion of all else on my plate, and only as I neared the end of devouring just the tomatoes from my dinner was I struck with the realisation that something fundamental had changed. Only then, staring at a dinner that now resembled the one I had originally had placed before me, but for my own actions, did I comprehend the magnitude of what had occurred. Or what I believed had occurred.

The reality of my situation lay on the table before me, and in that moment became too much to bear. My friends seemed not to ever remember my previous distaste for tomatoes, nor it seemed the colour of my eyes

The memory of my meal remained, a testament to my situation. There again was the nagging doubt, the disbelief that what I was experiencing was not merely a malady, a fever of the brain that was somehow re-ordering my memories, and now it seemed my tastes. How would I be able to discern between truth, objective reality - hard facts - and my shifting, rewriting perceptions? How could I determine which of the two possibilities I had identified was the root cause, the source of my distress? How would an insane man recognise his insanity, if its manifestation were so complete and total that its symptoms caused themselves to insinuate themselves at the very root of his being. But what if they opposite were the reason? What if some external agency were re-ordering me piece-by-piece, altering my being incrementally? And to what end? By what design was my being, my flesh, my memories being rebuilt the way an artisan sculpts and carves?

And what might be next? What change might my psychosis, or the unseen hand, effect in me hence? So far the alterations had been minor, and at worst an inconvenience. But what might come after? What if the next 'update' to my hardware or software were something more fundamental, something I had greater difficulty in reconciling within myself?

And what of the world outside, and how it might react to a more radical alteration? Yes, thus far it seemed that no-one, at least within my circle of friends and acquaintances, had espied or commented unduly on a change in me, neither the physical, though admittedly subtle shift in eye colouration, nor the seemingly more noticeable, and to my mind more outwardly strange, alteration in tastes.

My situation posed too many questions to answer that day, and for fear of disturbing my dining companions I dutifully played along as if nothing had changed within me for the

remaining duration of our gathering, until I was able to return to the sanctuary of my dwelling. Now safely ensconced behind my locked and barred doors and windows, I could tackle the issue that had beset me without fear of appearing to have succumb to a malady of the mind.

The first question I needed to provide an answer to was, perhaps, not one of the first ones that might occur to another individual, those of the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of my situation, but that of ‘want’.

Did I wish to know, if I were able to determine it, the truth of my predicament? If I carried on this path of seeking answers to all the questions that followed, would I want to know the truth, or could, should I, shy away from it for fear of learning something I could then not unknow regardless of the impact it may have on me? This was perhaps the most dangerous question of all. In choosing ‘Yes’ as the answer to it, I risked opening myself up to knowledge which I may not be able to reconcile within myself. If the effects I was experiencing were indeed external, and some force, malign or otherwise were remaking me, to what end, and for what purpose? Malice? Amusement? A test or trial of somekind? (not that I am by anyone’s estimation a religious man). What would I do with the knowledge, if I were able to secure it, of an external agency interfering with me? Likely they were powerful, at least powerful enough to alter memories, so what if I incurred their wrath?

The second half of my question held no more comfort if answered correctly. What if my alterations were actually not, and all I was experiencing was the product of my mind, rewriting and forgetting my misremembered past? Or worse, my memories and thoughts were being newly invented and I merely ‘felt’ as if I had had another or different physical or mental aspect? How would I deal with the surety that I was in fact insane?

However, in choosing to answer my initial question ‘No’ and refusing to engage with whatever was occurring within me, then what risks did that path pose? Could I continue safe

and secure in the knowledge that I did not know why or who might be the cause? Would that bring comfort, or merely continual and perpetual anxiety, the long-term effects of which would likely be extremely deleterious to my wellbeing? That way perhaps lay only ignorance, but not of a blissful nature.

And in any case, what alteration might come next?

This second question gave me the answer to my first. If, and I had to assume that whatever process had begun with my teeth was not yet done with me, regardless of its source, I was likely to endure subsequent alterations to my being, could I learn from it? In choosing to attempt to understand the source, I might understand, and perhaps even prevent (or, and here a flight of significant fancy, reverse) what was to come and had already happened. In opting to discern the agency behind what had and would occur, I would likely, I hoped, discover sufficient knowledge of the process by which the alterations took place, the mechanism or vector or route by which they happened, and ultimately, best them.

Agency or malady, I would play the game which seemed to be taking place within me. I would become an active and willing participant in this. I would play the long game. Take the time to discern my enemy's design and plan. Discover the cause and purpose of these effects to better best them.

Learn. Adopt. Adapt. And in doing so, I would win.

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Good luck with that.