

A fool's awakening

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [February 19, 2014](#) issue



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Very rarely are we able to reach back into the past and mark a moment when our innermost tides began to flow in another direction; but I think I see one, a moment when I realized with a first hint of cold honesty I was being a selfish buffoon—and possibly the moment when I began to grow up.

It is beside the point that it took me another ten years at least to get there, or that I am not quite there yet, even in my fifties.

I was sitting at the dining-room table. My dad and my mom and my sister were sitting there also. I believe it was lunch. My brothers were elsewhere committing misdemeanor. I believe it was summertime. The room was lined with books from floor to ceiling. I believe the meal was finished, and my mother and sister were having tea and cigarettes. My father mentioned casually that our cousins were coming for dinner next Sunday or something like that. I believe these were the Connecticut cousins and not the New York cousins.

I shoved my chair back and whined and snarled and complained. I believe this had something to do with some vague plans of my own that I had of course not shared with anyone else as yet, probably because they were half-hatched or mostly imaginary.

My father said something calm and reasonable, as still is his wont. I said something rude. My mother remonstrated quietly but sharply, as still is her wont. I said

something breathtakingly selfish. My sister said something gently and kind, as still is her wont. I said something cutting and sneering and angry. My mother slowly put down her tea. Odd that I would remember that detail, her cigarette in her left hand and her teacup in her right and the cup descending slowly to the table. The table had a blue cloth, and just outside the window the yew hedge was the most brilliant vibrant green.

As I remember it was just as my mother was putting her teacup on the table, just as the smoke from the cigarettes was rising thin and blue and unbroken like twin towers, just as my father put his big hands on the table and prepared to stand up and say something calm and blunt to me and cut the moment before it spun out of control, that I realized I was being a fool.

It wasn't an epiphany or a trumpet blast or anything epic. It was an almost infinitesimal wriggle of something for which I don't have good words even now. It wasn't that I was embarrassed, though I *was* embarrassed, later. It was more like for a second I saw who I actually *was* rather than who I thought I was, or wanted to be, or wanted other people to think I was. I understood, dimly, for an instant—I believe for the first time in my life—that I was being a fool.

I kept right on being a fool, of course. You cannot escape yourself that quickly, not as a teenager, or later either, it turns out. Often you keep playing a bad hand even when you know it's a terrible hand and you should laugh and throw down your cards and say something self-deprecating and apologize and tiptoe into the next moment. Often you stay inside the prison of your confidence and ostensible dignity even as you peer through the bars, mortified.

As I remember I stormed off and the world spun on relentlessly through the stars and the cousins came over and we all grew much older and eventually the house was sold and God alone knows where that dining-room table is. It might still be in the house, and it might still be covered with a blue cloth, and there might even now, even this very moment, be a seething teenager sitting at it, facing the yew hedge, seeing a hint of who he might grow up to be, if he can stop being a fool. With all my heart, I wish him well.