



I've tried to explain that it's his duty as a man and a father to teach me the finer points of lovemaking, but he just says things like "I'm not sure" and "Put down your mother's bra."

Today at school I told my best friend, Roger, that our grade 7 teacher, Mr. Unger, must have some sort of bizarre sensory input disorder, because although I've consistently demonstrated a complete lack of interest in his teaching style, he persists in trying to entice me with his crazy antics.

"What's more," I said, "when he wears that green cowboy hat of his, he looks exactly like Mr. Potato Head on a stick!"

Unfortunately, I failed to notice that Mr. Potato Head was standing right behind me until after I'd regaled Roger with my impersonation of a large, misshapen tuber on a stick trying to teach me geometry. I told Mr. Unger his feelings wouldn't get hurt so often if he stopped listening in on my private conversations. He hauled me to my feet and hustled me to the office. The secretary sent me to the principal, who passed me on to the guidance counselor. After taking two aspirins, the guidance counselor suggested that I start keeping a diary as a way to express opinions I absolutely cannot keep to myself.

"Diaries are for girls," I replied. "And did you forget about my genetically weak wrists?" I pointed out that I'd never be able to grip a pen for long enough to put my many opinions to paper. Then I laid my head on the table and sighed, "The ugly truth is that Mr. Unger discriminates against me because of my disability. Why else would he demonstrate such intolerance when my wrists give out during class and I succumb to the temptation of disruptive horseplay?"

Unfortunately, the guidance counselor refused to file a formal discrimination complaint on my behalf. Instead, she called my mother, who descended upon me the minute I got home from school.

"Here," she said, thrusting a tape recorder at me. "Try speaking your mind to this instead of to the various adult authority figures in your life." It sounded suspiciously like keeping a diary, but before I could protest, she added, "Many learned men keep journals. Think of it as a journal for the weak wristed." I was flattered that she thought of me as a learned man and promised to give her suggestion serious consideration, just as soon as I'd finished watching all my television programs. In response, she frog-marched me up to my room and ordered me not to come out until I'd recorded some learned thoughts.

I wonder if this is how Einstein started.

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This evening before dinner I informed my mother that although I'd found her initial approach in the matter of the tape recorder pushy and rude, I'd decided to embrace the idea of my own free will. I pointed out that as the sole heir to my late grandfather's great Canadian plumbing fortune, I owe it to the world to someday write my memoirs.

"These tapes will provide insight into the sad life of a boy who should have grown up in luxury, but instead grew up in a rented duplex — all because his mother chose a penniless nobody over the family millions." I said her refusal to dump my father even after my grandmother cut them off without a cent was *Movie of the Week* material and added, "Spending my formative years watching you two eke out our miserable existence has given me a connection with the common man that most people of privilege never have. In a way, it would be almost selfish of me not to record my unique perspective."

Shockingly, my mother didn't offer a single word of encouragement even though the tape recorder had been her idea in the first place. Flinging another Salisbury steak into the deep fryer, she said I had as much connection with the common man as I did with the man in the moon, and that if I thought we had a miserable existence, I obviously didn't know the first thing about real poverty.

I waited in silence for a few moments, hoping she might apologize for her outburst. When she didn't, I quietly reminded her that I prefer my Salisbury steak barbecued, and left the room.

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Today after school, while we were supposed to be studying for our math final, I showed Roger my tape recorder and let him listen to some of my musings. He waited until I went to the kitchen for more chocolate Ding Dongs, then recorded the sound of himself belching over top of a particularly insightful passage. I was very distressed when I discovered what he'd done and said, "You'd better shape up if you want any hope of being portrayed in a favorable light in my memoirs, buster!" In response, he belched again and asked if I wanted to see him stuff three chocolate Ding Dongs into his mouth at once.

I don't think I'll share my musings with Roger again. I get the feeling he doesn't completely grasp their significance.

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My rich grandmother called from Florida this evening. She wanted to speak with my mother instead of listening to me go on and on about my memoirs. I could hardly

believe it! Usually, she treats my mother like almost as much of a shunned outcast as my aunt Maud, who my grandmother believes purposely became a lesbian as a way to lash out at her. I once asked my aunt Maud about this and she said, "People don't choose to be homosexuals any more than they choose to have brown eyes. I was born a lesbian; aggravating your grandmother has just been a bonus."

More mysterious than the fact that my grandmother wanted to speak with my mother is the fact that my mother wanted to speak with her. They talked for almost an hour in the privacy of the den, and though I did my best to listen in, my mother can be surprisingly soft-spoken when she wants to be and I couldn't hear a thing.

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My parents have been having many closed-door discussions these days. I'm sure it has something to do with the chain of plumbing retail outlets my grandfather founded, the House of Toilets, because I heard them talking about it again this morning while they were making breakfast. Intrigued, I tiptoed down the hall, burst into the kitchen and demanded clarification. My father was so startled that he knocked over the orange juice, but my mother just looked flustered and changed the subject.

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This afternoon, while Roger and I were spying on my parents having another private discussion, they suddenly started necking. I was so horrified that it took me a minute to notice that Roger was enjoying the show. When I whispered, "What kind of a friend are

you?" he just told me to shush and made me go get my Polaroid camera.

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Tonight before bed I asked my mother flat out what she and my father have been talking about and she told me, "None of your business."

How rude.

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I secretly called my grandmother and asked if *she* knew what my parents were hiding from me. She said, "I certainly do!" and proceeded to spill the beans.

Apparently, the management structure at the House of Toilets flagship store in Winnipeg is collapsing down around my grandmother's ears. The poor performance of this one store is dragging down the whole chain, and since my grandmother has no interest in returning to Winnipeg to run the business, her only hope of keeping my grandfather's legacy in the family is to get a family member to do it for her.

My aunt Maud has already refused to give up her thriving surgical practice for the privilege of taking over the House of Toilets and my grandmother says that aunt Maud's lesbian partner, Ruth, will run the business over her dead body. So that just leaves my parents and me.

I was stunned by the revelation. True, my personal fortune is in jeopardy, but after years of hardship, we are finally being called back to take our rightful place at the helm of the family empire. Hooray!

My mother came running when she heard me cheering. As soon as she figured out what I'd learned

— and from whom — she was pretty ticked off. After watching me leap for joy until I landed wrong and twisted my ankle, she urged me not to get too worked up.

"Your father and I didn't want to mention anything until we'd made a decision," she explained. "There are a lot of things to consider — my job, his job, the prospect of living under your grandmother's tyrannical thumb."

Massaging my wounded ankle, I suggested that they try thinking of someone other than themselves for a change — someone such as me, for example.

"We are thinking of you, honey. Money and power aren't everything, you know," she replied. "Your father and I have given you the greatest gift of all: a loving home where your spirit has the freedom to blossom." She said other things as well, but it was hard to hear them over the sound of my fake retching noises.

Freedom to blossom. Yech.

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I told Roger the big news. He was stunned.

"You'll have to move," he said. "And go to a new school where you don't know anyone. What if they wear weird clothes or listen to freaky music?"

I replied that nearly every shirt I own is velour, so I wasn't worried about fitting in on the fashion front, and that I only listen to talk radio, so music wasn't really an issue, either. As for not knowing anyone, I said I was just going to be thankful to get away from Carmine Dinino, who that very afternoon had chased me into the girls' washroom after I reported him for writing unkind things about my manhood on the locker room wall.

After that, Roger could see the upside of moving, but he remained glum until I offered to fetch him another pack of Ding Dongs.

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This morning over breakfast, I advised my mother that I was looking forward to being more than a figurehead at the House of Toilets.

"As the future owner of the company," I explained, "I want every little cog in my great organization to know that I am a man of action!"

After she stopped laughing, my mother confessed that I wasn't even being considered for a management position.

"If we do this at all," she said, "it'll be your father or me running the show."

When I pointed out that it was her job as a wife to stand by her man, not to trample all over him in search of personal glory, she started singing, "These Boots Were Made for Walkin'" and high-stepped it out of the room.

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I told Roger about my mother's plan to squeeze me out of the House of Toilets. He pointed out that I was on the brink of failing grade 7 math, while my mother was at least a university graduate.

"What are you implying?" I demanded.

He shrugged and said he was implying that she probably knows more than I do about running a business. When I told him I'd never been so insulted in my entire life, he asked, "Not even when Carmine Dinino said that you sucked buffalo farts?"

"Not even then!" I replied.
I guess I showed him exactly how insulted I was.

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For days I've been pestering my parents about whether or not we're going to take over the House of Toilets. My mother has pretty well decided that her work as a public health nurse is too important to give up, but my father is warming up to the idea. He's been studying business at night school and feels that after eleven years as the produce manager at FoodBarn, he's just about exhausted opportunities for personal growth and development.

"This could be the challenge I've been waiting for," he said last night at dinner. "More importantly, saving the House of Toilets could be the first step on the road to mending fences with your grandmother."

After asking me to get my elbows out of my mashed potatoes, my mother added that a lot would depend on just how badly the store is performing.

"We're driving to Winnipeg next week to go over the books and meet with your grandmother, who is flying in from Florida," she said. "We'll know more after that."

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This afternoon, when I told my mother that as a man of thirteen I felt perfectly comfortable looking after myself in their absence, she said that she'd already arranged for me to stay over at Roger's house. Given that Roger is my best friend, you'd think I'd be thrilled by the idea, but nothing could be further from the truth. Roger's bedroom hasn't seen the business end of a vacuum

cleaner since the time his mother accidentally sucked up his tarantula, which had been nesting in a pile of dirty underwear and candy wrappers. He's not allowed to keep his pets in his room anymore, but I hardly think that's the point. The place is a public health hazard and I've never been comfortable wallowing in other people's filth. Perhaps I'll ask Mrs. Dodger to make up the guest bedroom for me.

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So far, life at Roger's has been every bit as harrowing as I had anticipated. Mrs. Dodger thought I was joking when I asked her to make up the guest bedroom for me, so I spent last night huddled in my sleeping bag, waiting for Roger's jockstrap to drop from the light fixture and hit me in the face. Then, today after school, I snuck what I thought was a chocolate pudding cup out of Roger's fridge and nearly had a heart attack when I discovered it was crammed full of dead mice.

"It's Cup o' Mice," explained Roger, helping me up off the floor. "Dinner for George."

"Who is George?" I asked in a near-hysterical voice.

"My corn snake," whispered Roger, who hesitated before confiding, "He's been missing since Monday."

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When my parents called this evening to say good-night to me, they let it slip that the House of Toilets is in much worse shape than my grandmother realized. It seems the neighborhood in which the store is located has really deteriorated over the last couple of years and this has driven off a lot of customers. The decrease in sales has required the manager to cut salaries, which has resulted



in the loss of experienced staff and left the place in a shambles. My father thinks he could do great things with the store, but after reviewing the financials, my mother is not at all keen to take the risk.

"After all," she pointed out, "we both have good jobs in Regina, and a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

Before hanging up, I told them about George and the jockstrap and asked them to...

AHHHH! ROGER! ROGER! I SEE GEORGE! HE'S IN THE BATHROOM — HE'S COMING FOR ME, ROGER AND ... OH, NO — WAIT A MINUTE — IT'S JUST THE BELT OF YOUR FATHER'S BATHROBE ... WHAT? ... I CAN'T HEAR YOU, MRS. DODGER — SPEAK UP. WHY ARE YOU WHISPERING? ... OH! Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I CAN stop screaming before I wake up the whole house.

... hurry home before I am scarred for life.



My parents got back from Winnipeg, and I'm sad to say that they're still at odds regarding the House of Toilets opportunity. My father is more eager than ever to prove himself to my grandmother, who collapsed in a heap complaining of chest pains when he floated the idea that he take over the store. However, my mother doesn't want to see him get into a no-win situation, particularly when inventory mismanagement and poor accounts collection have left the business in such a tenuous position relative to cash flow. Personally, I think she's just jealous that my father can be so decisive while she continues to waffle.