

CHAPTER 1

**PADDED BRAS, KING KONG
AND A WHOLE LOAD OF
OTHER SHIZ**

*Eli Smyth
Laura Secord High
Grade 10
Family Studies*

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IF LOST, PLEASE DO NOT RETURN TO OWNER

MY MOTHER

My mother is a french fry. Seriously. No shiz. She found her calling after applying for a part-time job at Burgers 'n' Frize one day and came home dressed as a gigantic carton of french fries. The fries were five feet high and made out of foam rubber. Out of the center fry poked my mother's round face, all proud and pumped as hell. I'm allowed to use the word "hell," by the way, because according to my mother it's

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a “soft” word. Yep, long before I was old enough to know what a consonant was, she sat me down and said, “Eli, honey,” (Eli, you should know, rhymes with french fry; she named me after my way wacko grandfather. Peachy, right?) “it’s perfectly fine to swear as long as you remember not to use any hard consonants. Just replace the bullet at the end of every swear word with a nice cozy ‘z’ and you’ll see how lovely and gentle it sounds.” Something tells me she’s entirely missing the point about four-letter words. Fuzz. I’m fifteen and I can’t even manage to swear properly. And my mother’s a french fry. Is it any wonder I’m so fuzzed up?

So, like I said, she came home dressed as a french fry one day with a handful of Burgers ‘n’ Frize leaflets, excited as hell. Not embarrassed in the least. That is the single hardest thing to accept about my mother — her lack of mortification. It’s embarrassing how unembarrassable she is. Anyway, turns out she was the best fry ever hired at Burgers ‘n’ Frize — brought in more business to that greasy spoon than the tiny joint could handle. After six months, they had to build an addition (too bad they hired old Slow-Joe Kensington to do the work — the add-on looks like a Cracker Jacks box stapled to a Kraft Dinner carton).

It’s my mother’s ability to talk to anyone, and I mean anyone, that makes her so good at being a fry. It’s made her realize she has special talents, and she’s since broadened her field of work to include Mr. Peanut as well as Michelin Man appearances (she gets a big charge out of the rubber tire costume — says it’s given her Pillsbury Doughboy aspirations).

Yeah, she’s in high demand. She even poses as the mystery voice behind the mechanical skeleton at Loco Casino.

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If you've never been there, you're missing a real treat. No shiz. (Not.) There's a pirate display near the entrance, and sitting on a treasure chest full of loot is this creepy looking bag o' bones that waves its creaky arms at people as they enter and engages them in conversation via hidden microphone. Most people have the good sense not to talk to an obnoxious skeleton and shyly move away, but some idiots go for the bait. My mother jokes around with them till they're half paralyzed with laughter. It works a treat on the alcoholically impaired, let me tell you. (Either that or it sends them straight back to the bar, and I have a sneaking suspicion that's a-okay with the manager at Loco Casino.)

My mother's free spirit and her tendency to talk to anyone and everyone (in other words, her lack of a decent dose of healthy inhibition) is her own business. Cool. Let's all be what we wanna be. The unfortunate part is that her life does sometimes spill over into mine, and then it becomes nothing but my business. Take, for example, the fact that I can never come home after a hard day at school without wondering who will be sitting in my kitchen waiting to greet me. Last week it was the "Awake" ladies with their religious pamphlets. Normally people have a hard time keeping these old gals on the other side of the threshold, but my mother, bless her heart, invites them in every time. She likes to bargain with them. Once she promised to read all their pamphlets from cover to cover if they agreed to join her in a small glass of wine (my mother could talk the Pope into becoming a cha-cha girl if she took the notion). She had those old dames chilling so cozily that by the time they left (their cheeks only slightly flushed) my mother had just about won them over to her own weird brand of spirituality, whatever the heck that is. I refuse to know about it.

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Yesterday I came home to two Japanese girls who had the good fortune to be walking down the sidewalk at three p.m., which happens to be my mother's time of day to sip a cup of tea on our front steps and watch the world go by. They were chatting away to each other in what my mother describes as "a delightfully musical and robust language" and, of course, she just had to invite them in. By the time I got home, the three of them were having an apparently side-splitting game of charades. Neither girl could speak a word of English, and both were laughing so hard at my mother's attempts to say "tea cup" in Japanese they just about pizzed their pants. Who knows, maybe they even did. I didn't stick around long enough to find out. I just walked on through with a pasted-on smile that dropped from my face like a lead balloon the instant I got to my bedroom. The upshot of it is that my mother now waters her plants with a "jōro" and says "dewa sono uchi ni" every time I leave the house.

Speaking of leaving the house, here's a story about my mother that'll make you — hang on, back up — can I just say something about my dad here for half a sec? He's kind of a nutball and likes to fuzzi up popular songs by making up his own sick words. There's this old radio song he likes to massacre:

Did you ever know you're my hero sandwich?
I love you right down to your bacon bits.
Yes, I can fly higher than a Frisbee,
Cuz you are the wind beneath my pits.

So here's something pathetic if you can stand to hear it: One day, when my mother was rushing out the door dressed as a giant french fry, I called out to her, "Hey,

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Mom!” *She looked over her shoulder at me and I belted out the song for her — “Did you ever know you’re my hero ...” Yeah, so guess what? When I got to the “you are the wind beneath my pits” part, the french fry started looking all choked up, and I swear I could see a tear welling in her eye. I think she thought I was serious. Now, if that ain’t fuzzed, I don’t know what is.*

I stop writing my assignment and look over at our lovely teacher, Ms. Schmalza. Ever watch *Peanuts* when you were a kid — you know, Charlie Brown, Snoopy, the whole enchilada? If so, you might remember Charlie’s monotone, megaphone-mouth teacher (Charles Schultz was clearly inspired when he came up with *that* character — the guy obviously had the misfortune of being a student once himself). Anyway, everything that spilled out of that old bat’s mouth sounded the same, sort of like “*Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Wa-Wa-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-waw.*” That’s pretty much the way most teachers sound (in particular, Ms. Schmalza) once you’ve acquired the fine art of successfully tuning them out. It’s simple enough, really — you just let the drone morph into a harmless white noise in the background and turn your attention to thoughts of more useful and immediate importance, such as how the kid in the fourth row gets his Mohawk to stand up so high — wallpaper glue or what? And if I used the same product on my cat’s head, would she be able to lick it off? Can a cat lick it’s own head?? *Jayzus,*

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would she die of glue poisoning — like on *Seinfeld* when George Costanza’s fiancée drops dead due to licking the cheap envelope glue from one too many wedding invitations? “*Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw.*”

Every now and then you tune back in for a second or two to see if by some strange miracle Mega-mouth might actually be saying something interesting “*Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw*” — nope, not a hot chance, of course. So you let your mind wander back to thoughts even more profound than Chester Molester’s Mohawk, like if you had the guts to walk into Zellers and suffer the humiliation of searching through the *endless* boxes of padded Wonderbras for the smallest cup size, then endure the even greater indignity of standing in the check-out line trying unsuccessfully to hide the stupid, lumpy thing in a teen magazine and when you’re finally at the front of the line you realize, too late, that Zellers has hired a new check-out guy — the very same jock who sits in front of you in Pre Cal — and that Joe Pre Calculus is going to have to finger the brassiere you’re purchasing in order to scan the price and while he’s at it he’ll notice the 32 AA tag ... yeah, so if you could drum up the guts to actually do *that* and you finally got the darn thing home and put it on underneath your favorite T-shirt (the one your mother accidentally shrank last week), like, is there any chance your chest would look even remotely similar to Tina’s (whose mother obviously shares the same talent for shirt-shrinking from the looks of Tina’s

mega-tight scoop neck which reads INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY).

Oh, sure, sometimes some of the crap filters in, like it or not: “*Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw* ... This next segment of your Family Studies course may well contain the most important information you’re ever likely to blah, blah, blah.” She said the same thing two weeks ago when she introduced the course with a section on homelessness and substance abuse. Believe me, it was more like *student* abuse — you might have read about it in the headlines:

FAMILY STUDIES TEACHER
BORES TWENTY-FOUR WINNIPEG
STUDENTS TO DEATH

Funeral Details Pending

Investigation Into Lethal Course Outline Begins Today
(Schmalza Could Hang)

Turns out she didn’t swing by the neck. She’s still here in the flesh committing her heinous crime: “*Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw* resolving conflicts *Waaw* becoming responsible parents and managing money *Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Wwaaw Waw-Waw* stressing the value of strong, enduring relationships and reinforcing the importance of families as the basic unit of *Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw* ...”

Suddenly Grace Walker-Stokes’s hand flies up.

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“Um, excuse me, Ms. Schmalza?” (You can tell by the look on Grace’s face she has an ax the size of Halifax to grind.)

“Yes, Grace?”

“Ms. Schmalza, when you refer to ‘family’ as the basic unit of society, are you by any chance referring to what most people think of as the *traditional* family structure — a mother, a father, their children, etcetera?” Here, she nudges her wire-rim glasses a little higher on the bridge of her nose with an oh-so-expressive middle finger (smooth, Grace). “Because, if so, you may be overlooking *other* types of families, such as those headed by a single parent or —”

Ms. Schmalza quickly interrupts Grace before she can get too graphic. “Grace —”

But no way. Grace is on a roll, and when Grace is on a roll, God help the teacher who tries to silence her.

“Are you aware, for example,” steamrolls Grace, “that in the animal kingdom there are many documented cases of same-sexed partnering —”

“Grace —” (Schmalza looking apprehensive.)

“*The New York Times*, for example, recently reported a pair of male penguins in the Central Park Zoo who were partnered, and when given an egg that needed incubation, they successfully hatched it.”

Good old Grace. I remember the first day I met her. “Name’s Grace,” she announced to me in the schoolyard at recess, “and I was adopted as a baby by a couple of guys; thus I have two fathers, and if you have a problem with that, you might as well say so right now so that I can tell you to bugger off before

you waste any more of my —”

Oh, Grace, I love you.

Schmalza is acquiring this fast-creeping look of terror in her eyes. “Grace,” she says, “you make, of course, an excellent point. Families come in many forms. Which might be a good place to start.” She nervously stuffs her course outline notes back into the top drawer of her desk. “*People*,” she says (you may have noticed teachers address students as “people” — this is, no doubt, to remind us that we are, in spite of certain indications to the contrary, part of the human race and, as such, have certain responsibilities), “people, please open your scribblers and write a thousand-word essay describing your own family unit ... *Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw-Wwaaw Waw-Waw-Waaw*.”

Hence, here I sit, writing a bunch of crap about my family. Or I *should* be; instead I find myself looking over at Schmalza, which is dangerous — too much of that could make an otherwise happy student suddenly grab her protractor and puncture one of her main arteries just to avoid the possibility of waking up one day in her thirties and finding a Schmalza staring back from her bathroom mirror. Better to keep focused on my equally boring but less hazardous essay. Where’s my fuzzin’ protractor — I mean pen?

MY FATHER

My father is mercifully boring. He doesn’t talk to strangers, he doesn’t try to talk to me about personal things, he has no imagination and dresses in such a way that you couldn’t easily pick him out of a line-up of

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average Joes with poor to no taste in clothes. He doesn't pester me to go to weird avant-garde movies with him, and if I do happen to accompany him to a bad B movie just because we feel like it, he doesn't laugh or cry at inappropriate moments like someone else I know (while others are honking into their snot-rags and mopping up tears, my mother's likely to be laughing like she's having an LSD flashback or something).

By profession, my father is a home care worker. He's the only guy I know who would chuck in a perfectly good healthcare admin job and take a paycut so he could get back out into the "field" and work with people "hands on" — and I mean that literally; often he has to bathe his elderly clients (ick!) and feed them and tidy up their places. I dunno, I guess he gets a kick out of helping people, and good on him — sure, like I don't mind living in a cracker box of a house in a rundown neighborhood and going without designer fashions just so's he can get his fill of bathing wrinkly seniors ...

Okay already — just kidding! (Sometimes I can't help it.) The truth? I'm actually very proud that my dad is a one-in-a-million kind of guy. And besides, designer fashions just tend to make me look like an alien trying to pass herself off as an authentic teenager who gives a rat's azz.

Yep, I love my dad. And that's pretty much all you need to know. Other than that, in a belching or farting contest, he always wins.

MY CAT

My father wanted me to name my cat Scarf 'n' barf or, even better, Mr. Scarf 'n' barfer (although he knows

perfectly well that my cat is a “she”). He suggested the name due to the fact that she has a tendency to scarf down her food as if her esophagus is actually a vacuum cleaner hose and her tail is plugged into a nearby outlet. As you can imagine, eating that fast can make a kitty prone to vigorous barf eruptions — usually on the bedroom carpet in the exact spot where my dad’s bare feet land every morning. But no way was I gonna call a feline-sister of mine Mr. Scarf ’n’ barfer. Get a life.

I ended up naming her Little Fuzzer. My mother innocently thinks it’s because the cat looks like a manicacal fuzz-ball. Or maybe she’s just chosen to conveniently forget my penchant for “z” words (such as “son-of-a-biz,” “bullshiz” and “what-the-fuzz-you-lookin’-at?”). Anyway, Little Fuzzer is well named. You say “Good morning, Little Fuzzer,” and she’ll look at you with half-closed eyes as if to say “Fuzz you, man.” Or you’ll say “Come here, Little Fuzzer, give me a cuddle,” and you’ll get the “fuzz you” look with an added “I’ll come and sit on you when I’m good and ready.” Usually she’s only good and ready at 12:33 a.m. when you’re at that critical wake-me-now-and-I’ll-never-get-back-to-sleep stage — you know, that phase just before REM and shortly after you’ve mentally gone through the list of everyone who pizzes you off for one reason or another?

There are times I’m tempted to take Little Fuzzer to school with me and hold her up in the face of every dizzhead I know, because no one can give a better “fuzz you” look than Little Fuzzer.

I love my cat. I respect my cat. If I come back in another life, I want to be a cat just like Little Fuzzer. No shiz.

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MY CRUDDY SISTER

My sister's name is Elizabeth. Notice that she was given the same name as me, except she got a bunch of pretty letters strung like pearls to the end of hers. Elizabeth. Compare it to Eli. Guess which sister's the pretty one? And guess which sister bears a striking resemblance to her wacko grandfather in both name and looks? Fair? I don't think so. If I could give my grandfather's nose back, I would. Believe me.

Needless to say, Elizabeth is pretty much everything I'm not. Gorgeous. Confident. Suffers no menstrual cramps. Experiences no scaly patches of psoriasis behind her knees and on her elbows. Probably has two boobs that are exactly the same size so she doesn't have to boost one of her A cups with stuffing pulled from her teddybear's azz. She never required braces and thus has never had the pleasure of staring into the morning mirror at a piece of last night's spinach stuck between her railroad tracks. Her face doesn't stand up and riot every time she eats too many super-sized Oh Henry! bars or Double Stuf Oreos and, if it did, the zit cream in the bathroom would undoubtedly live up to all its promises. She can play a musical instrument other than her butt. She has a boyfriend. She's not a seething pit of anger. She admires my mother's funk all to hell and would like to be just like her when she grows up. My mother is clearly the wind beneath her pits ...

Yeah, so how good are you at detecting bullcrap (or bullshiz, if you prefer)? If you're aces at it, like I am, you'll have guessed by now that this stuff about my sister's a bunch of hooey. I don't actually have a sister. But if I did, I can guarantee you that that's exactly what she'd be like. Easy to

hate. Come to think of it, if I had a sibling I'd have a much more appropriate target for my hostility. I could have pasted my sister's picture to my dartboard instead of my mother's.

That's not fair. I know it's not fair. I actually do ... well, did have a sister. Her name was Elizabeth, and she died in her sleep one night. Sometimes babies do that. It's called crib death. May 20, 1998, to be exact. I was six. She was six months. And all that other stuff I just wrote down is unforgivable. If I had a sister, I'd love her. I do love Elizabeth. Weird as it is, I still do.

ME

What's there to say?

GRACE

Whatever, so she's not technically part of my family, but she is my one and only close friend, so I figure she counts for something. Put it this way: Grace would make a perfect Goth Girl if she dyed her hair black. Her skin is so pale that when she's sitting motionless you could almost mistake her for dead. Fact is, though, Grace wouldn't be caught dead (even if looking dead was a much-sought-after quality) being a member of any faction with a recognizable name. She prefers to be a social entity unto herself. That's why I love her.

MY MOTHER YET AGAIN

So, not only is my mother a french fry, she's also a garbage picker. If she went to garage sales, that would be one thing. I could even almost accept it if she started mooching around

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the Sally Ann. But the truth is she prefers to just take stuff from back lanes. She's a back lane junk junkie. Yes, sir, she knows that one man's junk is another's funk. And trust me, my mother has "funkitude" in spades.

You'd just have to take a look at our living room to know that. In fact, come on, I'll take you on a tour. This is our couch. It used to be Mr. Slobodski's couch, but it ended up in the back lane, and now it's ours. Notice how it's been re-upholstered in an off-white hemp fabric which was once an old tent from the Winnipeg Children's Festival. Now I'm not saying the couch is an eyesore or anything, but it's definitely funk, and funk can tend to get on a person's nerves after a while.

Back to the tour: over here in front of the couch is an old wooden cottage door torn from Mrs. Olson's house the year she renovated. As you can see, it has some fine old detailing in the wood, and my mother, thank God, had the vision to turn it into a funky coffee table that she painted with her very own hands. You won't find another coffee table like it on the planet. Yeah, so when I'm watching Crime Stoppers while sitting on an arts and crafts tent, I can set a TV dinner on Mrs. Olson's door-cum-coffee-table and try not to spill Salisbury steak sauce on the painted zebras and dancing tribesmen (my mother chose an African motif for this piece — earthy tones, simple primitive figures, the door's keyhole serving as the tip of a medicine man's voodoo spear — very tasteful).

And over there by the stereo you'll see a wooden IKEA dish rack. My mother claims the warped rack "called out to her" from Mrs. Jujitsu's trash can one day. As you can see, it's lucky for us that my mother hears the voices of inanimate objects (no doubt the same way dogs tend to hear

whistles that no human ear can detect). If this dish rack hadn't spoken to her, our family might have been forced to buy a real CD stand, God forbid. And what would be the fun of that?

On the bathroom door, just over here, there's a cracked, turn-of-the-century (turn-of-the-stomach, more like) porcelain knob and from it hangs a string of jade rosary beads. My mom loves jade. And just to dispel any idea that she might be Catholic or something, I should mention that she also has a picture of Guru Paramhansa Yogananda (that Hindu dude with the long black wavy hair who looks more like a chick if you ask me) hanging inside the bathroom, a Tibetan prayer wheel sticking out of the wooden spoon container on the kitchen counter and a huge round statue of Buddha sitting in the middle of the cracked, concrete birdbath in our backyard. She also occasionally burns sweet grass in the Native tradition. Something tells me my mother likes to keep all the bases covered. No wonder I'm so schizoid when it comes to religion — to whom is a person supposed to pray for divine fuzzin' help when they're growing up in a family like mine?

Buddha, Yeshua, Krishna and all other gods whose names end with "a," give me strength. Amen.

Anyway, none of this really matters very much except to say that Ange Anderson down the street had to go and have a blinkin' baby, and my mother plans to hold a shower for her. Here. In this living room. Why must my mother be so fuzzin' kind? Doesn't she know that just about every neighbor who comes in here on Sunday night will recognize something they threw in the garbage last week? Kindness

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can be as overrated and irritating as funkitude. One thing's for sure: if my mother thinks I'm gonna hang around and help serve crustless cream-cheese-and-maraschino-cherry sandwiches and make fake cooing sounds at some ugly runt of a newborn on Sunday, she's more fuzzed up than I thought.

I wonder if the Barnum and Bailey traveling circus would accept me before the end of the week. If I didn't shave my legs and armpit hair for a couple of days I'd make a great sideshow attraction: "Step right up, Ladies and Gentlemen, and for just fifty cents, take a peek at King Kong's only living relative!"

One way or another I'll find a way out of this mess. You wait.