



GREAT EQUALIZER

My gastroenterologist thinks parasites are a long shot. "But you can get them around here, especially if you go camping," he says, "you know, if you're around fresh water." Me, camping? I still consider Chapel Hill a rural area. Yet I'm not surprised to hear that nature is bad for you. I already knew those pretty trees that arch and kiss each other across a two-lane road might fall on your head during a thunderstorm. Now I know that a cool lake on a humid August afternoon might make you sick.

I decide to keep quiet and take the parasite test. Parasites would be a happy ending to a history of gut problems; one round of antibiotics and I'm cured.

"Ginny will give you a kit to take home," Dr. Drossman says.

A kit. As if I'm going to learn macramé or how to build a shed, like using a child's chemistry set, without the excitement of thinking you might blow up the basement.

Ginny leads me to a three by five passageway where we squeeze by another nurse who's taking a woman's blood pressure. Ginny opens a cupboard and takes out two vials, each about three inches long with a bit of clear liquid in it.

"You'll need to fill each one to the red line." She doesn't say with what, but my grimace tells her I know. Then she takes out something else. It looks like a wide-brimmed hat, made of gray plastic. "You'll use this to collect the stool. I'll give you the instruction sheet." I imagine a manual by Dr. Seuss: "Shat in the Hat." "Do you want to bring it over or mail it?" Neither, I want to say. "Mail it," I answer.

"Here's the container. It's easy, really." She smiles as she puts everything into a brown paper bag.

When I get home I show Michael the paraphernalia.

"Does the hat go above the seat or under it?" he asks. We try it in both positions. The thing slips out of Michael's hands, drops into the bowl, and starts to fill. We laugh, Michael with reserve, me with hysteric gasps.

I doubt I could have played out this scene with Michael a few years ago. Lovers don't focus on each other's shit. Yet slowly I have come to talk to him about my stomach pains, my nausea. Even my diarrhea.

Like the time he came home mid-afternoon and I barely said hello. "What's the matter?" "Bad gut day," I murmured.

He put his arm around me and nuzzled my neck. "Did you have the shitzkies?" That word always makes me laugh. Better yet, it makes both of us laugh.

On Saturday I read the instructions, highlighter in hand. On Sunday I rehearse, rereading the instructions, placing the hat on the seat to see if it moves. If I get it wrong I'll have to do it over. Worse, I'll have to admit to someone that I messed up. If I do it right, I still have to get it past the postal clerk.

The cylindrical mailing tube screams at me in big red letters: Etiological Agent. Biomedical Material. In Case of Damage Notify Director, Center for Disease Control, Atlanta GA, 404-633-5315. I imagine Bob at the post office calling the CDC hotline about a leaking package. It's Monday, 6 a.m., and Michael is still asleep. I tiptoe downstairs to the bathroom that's farthest from our bedroom. As I peek into the bag, I'm convinced I'll get a case of instant constipation, the one symptom I've never had. "Just be yourself," I tell my guts.

I place the hat on the seat and my bowels comply. After a minute I remove the hat and finish up in the usual way, grateful for that very large bowl I used to take for granted.

I want to get this procedure over with, yet I find myself sitting on the cold tile, transfixed by what's in the hat. I'm not disgusted, I'm strangely calm, humbled. This is a part of who we are. I don't need to judge it. It just is.

The things that comfort me in this room - the plush towels, the leaning pile of New Yorkers - now look like signs of a shit-denying culture, meant to distract me from my animal need to squat in one corner.

If I face it, shit tells me that writing the perfect sentence won't keep me from decomposing a little each day. It reminds me that I'll return to the earth, like the tailless squirrel that romps through our yard. And while I'm alive, does my condition make me that different from others? The clichés tumble out: "He thinks his shit don't smell." "She thinks she's hot shit." "Next time you're scared of him, imagine him on the toilet." That's how we bring the powerful down to size. Shit is the great equalizer.

Can I hold on to this idea tomorrow as I make my way to class after lunch, wondering if I'll need to bolt in to the bathroom in the building where I teach, finding one of my students about to enter the adjoining stall? Even on a good day I remind myself of the location of the bathrooms as I pass each building on campus, monitoring every gurgle to see if it's friend or foe.

For years I went from doctor to doctor, test to test, always with the same result: "Nothing is wrong." No one had to say, "It's all in your head," for me to know that a body without disease left only one culprit: me.

Then I found Drossman. For him, the condition was a physiological reality, and so were the emotions and thoughts tied up with it. With his help I started to believe that each of us has a vulnerable point in the body, the place where just a small amount of stress can trigger an attack. Drossman's theories freed me from the stigma of psychosomatic illness. Yet I still hesitate to call him when I have a new symptom.

"It's probably just a new version of the usual," I say, as Drossman enters the examining room.
"Sherryl, stop apologizing. This is what I do, remember?"

Drossman is too good to be true. He even lets me call him at home.
But between visits I lapse into the dialogue of self-blame, probing my psyche for the causes of the latest bout.

You dread telling Marsha that you don't want to support her through another bad relationship.
No, it's that speech you're supposed to give next week, the one you should have said no to eight months ago.

It's both, the double whammy.

If you didn't make such a big deal out of every little thing you wouldn't be sick.

Stop it! If you keep this up you're going to make yourself sicker.

I'm still not crazy about the term "irritable bowel," as if my gut is at tetchy child that neither TLC nor Ritalin can tame. Like an embarrassed parent, I claim clean headaches instead of diarrhea when I cancel dinner with a friend, or consider using a pen name for this piece.

Yet as I stare into the hat, I experience a pleasant sensation, softness in the belly. This is the compassion you'd feel for someone else who has this condition. You wouldn't blame her, you'd cradle her. Time to treat yourself as kindly as the caretaker who gently wipes a baby's bottom.

I open the vial, and just as the instruction sheet said, a tiny spoon is built into the cap. I put little scoops into the vial until the liquid fills to the red line. Then I screw the cap tight and shake the vial. I do the same with the other one. I write my name, hospital number, date, and the time of day on the label of each vial, and put them in the mailer.

What am I supposed to do with the leftovers? There are no instructions for this part. I find a tongue depressor in the paper bag and use it to move the mound into the toilet. I wipe the hat with tissues, rinse it with soapy water, and then dry it with more tissues. I want to put it in a garbage bag and carry it out to the trash right now, but it's cold and dark and I'm afraid of running into something alive in all that nature out there. I put the hat in the paper bag and let it sit.

I make my way to the nap room upstairs, where one side of the bed is filled with books and magazines, a Walkman, and relaxation tapes. As I crawl under the comforter I smile to myself, as proud as the two-year-old who has just learned to go potty.