

REFLECTIONS AUGUST 1, 2005 ISSUE

## IT'S CATCHING

*Worms, germs, and Christmas.*

**By David Sedaris**

**M**y friend Patsy was telling me a story. “So I’m at the movie theatre,” she said, “and I’ve got my coat all neatly laid out against the back of my seat, when this guy comes along—” And here I stopped her, because I’ve always wondered about this coat business. When I’m in a theatre, I either fold mine in my lap or throw it over my armrest, but Patsy tends to spread hers out, acting as if the seat back were cold, and she couldn’t possibly enjoy herself while it was suffering.

“Why do you do that?” I asked, and she looked at me, saying, “Germs, silly. All kinds of people have had their heads against that seat back. Doesn’t that just give you the creeps?” And I admitted that it had never occurred to me.

“Well, you’d never lie on a hotel bedspread, would you?” she asked, and again: why not? I might not put it in my mouth, but to stretch out and make a few phone calls—I do it all the time.

“But you wash the phone first, right?”

“Umm. No.”

“Well, that is just . . . dangerous,” she said.

In a similar vein, I was at the grocery store with my sister Lisa and noticed her pushing the cart with her forearms.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh,” she said. “You don’t ever want to touch the handle of a grocery cart with your bare hands. These things are crawling with germs.”

Is it just Americans, or does everyone think this way? In Paris once, I went to my neighborhood supermarket and saw a man shopping with his cockatiel, which was the size of a teen-age eagle and stood perched on the handle of his cart.

“See?” Lisa said. “There’s no telling what foot diseases that bird might have.” She had a point, but it’s not like everyone takes a cockatiel to the grocery store. A lifetime of shopping, and this was the first exotic bird I’d ever seen browsing the meat counter.

The only preventive thing I do is wash clothes after buying them in a thrift shop—this after catching crabs from a pair of used pants. I was in my mid-twenties at the time, and probably would have itched myself all the way to the bone had a friend not taken me to a drugstore, where I got a bottle of something called Quell. After applying it, I raked through my pubic hair with a special nit comb, and what I came away with was a real eye-opener: these little monsters who’d been feasting for weeks on my flesh. I guess they’re what Patsy imagines when she looks at a theatre seat, what Lisa sees lurking on the handle of a grocery cart.

They’re minor, though, compared with what Hugh had. He was eight years old and living in the Congo, when he noticed a red spot on his leg; nothing huge—a mosquito bite, he figured. The following day, the spot became more painful, and the day after that he looked down and saw a worm poking out.

A few weeks later, the same thing happened to Maw Hamrick, which is what I call Hugh’s mother, Joan, and though her worm was a bit shorter, I think it’s much worse in terms of trauma or whatnot. If I was a child and saw something creeping out of a hole in my mother’s leg, I would march to the nearest orphanage and put myself up for

adoption. I would burn all pictures of her, destroy anything she had ever given me, and start all over because that is just disgusting. A dad can be crawling with parasites and somehow it's O.K., but on a mom, or any woman, really, it's unforgivable.

"Well, that's sort of chauvinistic of you, don't you think?" Maw Hamrick said. She'd come to Paris for Christmas, as had Lisa and her husband, Bob. The gifts had all been opened, and Maw was collecting the used wrapping paper off the floor and ironing it flat with her hands.

"It was just a guinea worm, people got them all the time." She looked toward the kitchen, where Hugh was doing something to a goose. "Honey, where do you want me to put this paper?"

"Burn it," Hugh said.

"Oh, but it's so pretty. Are you sure you won't want to use it again?"

"Burn it," Hugh repeated.

"What's this about a worm?" Lisa asked. She was lying on the sofa with a blanket over her, still groggy from her nap.

"Joan here had a worm living inside her leg," I said, and Maw Hamrick threw a sheet of wrapping paper into the fire, saying, "Oh, I wouldn't call that *living*."

"But it was *inside* of you?" Lisa said, and I could see her wheels turning: *Have I ever used the toilet after this woman? Have I ever touched her coffee cup, or eaten off her plate? How soon can I get tested? Are the hospitals open on Christmas Day, or will I have to wait until tomorrow?*

"It was a long time ago," Joan said.

"Like, how long?" Lisa asked.

“I don’t know—1968, maybe.”

My sister nodded, the way someone does when they’re doing math in their head. “Right,” she said, and I regretted having brought it up. She was no longer looking *at* Maw Hamrick but *through* her, seeing what an X-ray machine might: the stark puzzle of bones and, teeming within it, the thousands of worms who did not leave home in 1968. I used to see the same thing, but after fifteen years or so I got over it, and now I just see Maw Hamrick. Maw Hamrick ironing, Maw Hamrick doing the dishes, Maw Hamrick taking out the trash. She wants to be a good house guest, and is always looking for something to do.

“Can I maybe . . . ?” she asks, and before she’s finished I answer yes, by all means.

“Did you tell my mother to crawl on her hands and knees across the living-room floor?” Hugh asks, and I say, “Well, no, not exactly. I just suggested that if she was going to dust the baseboards that would be the best way to do it.”

**W**hen Maw Hamrick’s around, I don’t lift a finger. All my chores go automatically to her, and I just sit in a rocker, lifting my feet every now and then so she can pass the vacuum. It’s incredibly relaxing, but it doesn’t look very good, especially if she’s doing something strenuous, carrying furniture to the basement, for instance, which, again, was completely her idea. I just mentioned in passing that we rarely used the dresser, and that one of these days someone should take it downstairs. I didn’t mean her, exactly, though at age seventy-three she’s a lot stronger than Hugh gives her credit for. Coming from Kentucky, she’s used to a hard day’s work. Choppin’, totin’, all those activities with a dropped “g”: the way I figure, these things are in her genes.

It’s only a problem when other people are around, and they see this slight, white-haired woman with sweat running down her forehead. Lisa and Bob, for instance, who were staying in Patsy’s empty apartment. Every night they’d come over for dinner, and Maw Hamrick would hang up their coats before ironing the napkins and setting the table. Then she’d serve drinks and head into the kitchen to help Hugh.

“You really lucked out,” Lisa said, sighing, as Joan rushed to empty my ashtray. Her mother-in-law had recently moved into an assisted-living development, and was having a hard time adjusting. The word “senior” is demeaning to her, so she’s asking to be referred to as a graying tiger, which makes her sound like a retired karate teacher. Lisa lowered her voice. “I’d much rather have a mother-in-law who was eaten by worms.”

“Well, they didn’t technically eat her,” I said.

“Then what were they living on? Are you telling me they brought their own food?”

I guessed she was right, but what do guinea worms eat? Certainly not fat, or they’d never have gone to Joan, who weighs ninety pounds, tops, and can still fit into her prom gown. Not muscle, or she’d never be able to take over my chores. Do they drink blood? Drill holes in bone and sop up the marrow? I meant to ask, but when Maw Hamrick returned to the living room the topic immediately turned to cholesterol, Lisa saying, “I don’t mean to pry, Joan, but what is your level?”

It was one of those conversations I was destined to be left out of. Not only have I never been tested; I’m not sure what cholesterol actually is. I hear the word and imagine a pale gravy, made by hand, with lumps in it.

“Have you tried fish oil?” Lisa asked. “That brought Bob’s level from three-eighty to two-twenty. Before that, he was on Lipitor.” My sister knows the name and corresponding medication for every disease known to man, an impressive feat given that she’s completely self-taught. Congenital ichthyosis, myositis ossificans, spondylolisthesis, calling for Celebrex, Flexeril, oxycodone hydrochloride. I joked that she’d never bought a magazine in her life, that she reads them for free in doctors’ waiting rooms, and she asked what my cholesterol level was. “You better see a doctor, Mister, because you’re not as young as you think you are. And while you’re there you might want to have those moles looked at.”

It was nothing I wanted to think about, especially on Christmas, a fire in the fireplace, the apartment smelling of goose. “Let’s talk about accidents, instead,” I said. “Heard of any good ones?”

“Well, it’s not exactly an accident,” Lisa said, “but did you know that every year five thousand children are startled to death?” It was a difficult concept to grasp, so she threw off her blanket and acted it out. “Say a little girl is running down the hall, playing with her parents, and the dad pops up from behind a corner saying ‘Boo!’ or ‘Gotcha!’ or whatever. Well, it turns out that that child can actually collapse and die.”

“I don’t like that one bit,” Maw Hamrick said.

“Well, no, neither do I,” Lisa said. “I’m just saying that it happens at least five thousand times a year.”

“In America or the world over?” Joan asked, and my sister called to her husband in the other room. “Bob, are five thousand children a year startled to death in the United States or in the entire world put together?” He didn’t answer, so Lisa decided it was just the United States. “And those are just the reported cases,” she said. “A lot of parents probably don’t want to own up to it, so their children’s deaths are attributed to something else.”

“Those poor children,” Maw Hamrick said.

“And the *parents!*” Lisa added. “Can you imagine?”

Both groups are tragic, but I was wondering about the surviving children, or, even worse, the replacements, raised in an atmosphere of preventive sobriety.

“All right, now, Caitlin 2, when we get home a great many people are going to jump out from behind the furniture and yell, ‘Happy birthday!’ I’m telling you now because I don’t want you to get too worked up about it.”

No surprises, no practical jokes, nothing unexpected, but a parent can’t control everything, and there’s still the outside world to contend with, a world of backfiring cars and their human equivalents.

Maybe one day you'll look down and see a worm, waving its blind, wrinkled head from a hatch it has bored in your leg. If that won't stop your heart, I don't know what will, but Hugh and his mother seem to have survived. Thrived, even. The Hamricks are made of stronger stuff than me. That's why I let them cook the goose, move the furniture, launder the hideous creatures from my secondhand clothing. If anything were to startle them to death, it would be my offer to pitch in, and so I settle back on the sofa with my sister and wave my coffee cup in the air, signalling for another refill. ♦

*David Sedaris contributes frequently to The New Yorker.*

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