

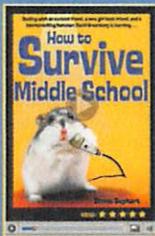
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FUNTASTIC FACTS YOU SHOULD KNOW*

- 1) It takes about 384 trees to produce the toilet paper one person uses in a lifetime.
- 2) The first public toilet appeared at London's Crystal Palace in 1851. People paid a penny to use it.
- 3) Most toilets flush in the key of E-flat.
- 4) There are 35 bathrooms in the White House (also 132 rooms, 8 staircases, 3 elevators, and a bowling alley).
- 5) In offices, on average, desktops harbor 400 times more bacteria than toilet seats.

* Much more inside!

- ALSO BY DONNA GEPHART -



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THE FIRST LETTER . . .

Dear Royal-T Toilet Paper Company,

You guys make the best toilet paper on the planet. I realize that's a weird thing for a seventh grader to say, but it's true. I didn't know enough to appreciate having Royal-T in our bathroom until the day it was gone—replaced by the world's worst recycled, scratchy (sand)paper.

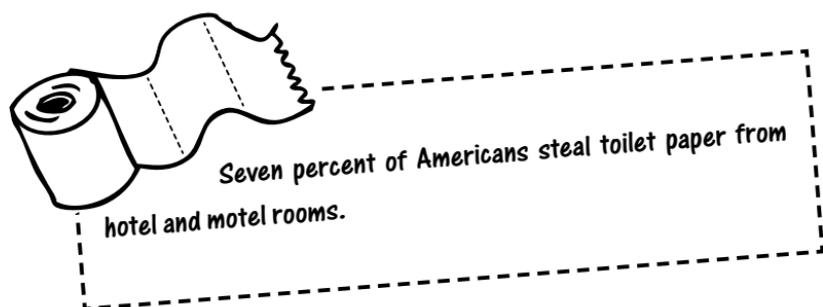
Good toilet paper was the first thing to go; then cable got turned off, and it's gotten worse from there. Much worse.

But I don't feel like talking about that now.

I just want to tell you Royal-T is the best, and I wish we could go back to using it.

Your friend,

Benjamin Epstein



Inside my best friend's kitchen, blood spatters cover every surface—the kitchen table, including the pepper mill, the wall behind the table and much of the tile floor. Even their cat, Psycho, has a blood spatter across her white fur.

My eyes, open wide with horror, take in each gruesome detail.

Lying on the blood-spattered floor with a cleaver buried in his chest is my best friend's dad, Mr. Taylor. He's wearing his chef's apron from Chez Gourmet, but the apron is more red than white.

A trickle of blood leaks from the side of his mouth and drips into his beard, then onto the sticky floor. Mr. Taylor's right eyelid springs open.

He looks at me.

I step back, but his thick, hairy arm shoots out. He grabs my ankle, and his fingers squeeze with surprising strength. “Help . . .,” he gurgles. “Help me.”

My voice explodes eight octaves too high, and I scream like a girl.

Toothpick lowers his video camera. “Cut! Great scream, Ben! Thanks, Dad.” He does an awkward dance step that makes him look like an ostrich whose feet are on fire. “This is going to be my scariest film yet!”

Mr. Taylor (aka the corpse) leaps off the kitchen floor, removes the fake cleaver from his chest and pulls the bloody apron over his head. “You’d better get my apron clean before I leave for my shift at the restaurant tonight,” he tells Toothpick, “or you’re going to end up in there.” Mr. Taylor points to a pot on the stove, where tomato sauce and severed fingers are bubbling.

Toothpick pulls the fake fingers out with tongs and tosses them into the sink. “Don’t worry, Dad,” he says. “Most of the fake blood is actually salsa. Looks great on film, and super easy to clean up.”

“Tastes good, too,” Mr. Taylor says, swiping his finger across the “blood” on the kitchen table and putting it in his mouth. “Needs a little cilantro, though.”

Toothpick cracks up, and I get a pang in my chest, because I know my dad would have done something dumb like that, too. He was always doing silly things and cracking jokes, like “How do you get a baby astronaut to sleep? You

rocket.” When Mom and I didn’t laugh, he’d say, “Rocket, rock it. Get it? Funny, right?”

I never imagined I’d miss my dad’s dumb jokes.

“Now, get this salsa cleaned up,” Mr. Taylor says, patting Toothpick’s shoulder, “or I’m going to have to buy a truck-load of nacho chips to go with it.”

“No problemo,” Toothpick says, slinging his skinny arm across my shoulders. He’s more than a head taller than me, even though we’re both twelve.

“Ben’s going to help me clean everything,” Toothpick says. “Right, buddy?”

“You know it,” I say.

I don’t mind helping Toothpick, because he pays me in the only currency a serious sweepstakes guy needs—stamps and, occasionally, postcards, envelopes and index cards—for all the good contests you can’t enter online. And he lets me use his computer for the online sweeps. I don’t like spending a stamp for each entry I mail in, but as serious sweepers on the message boards say, you’ve got to pay to play.

Helping Toothpick create his horror films is fun, especially when he lets me write the scripts. Not that there’s much dialogue, other than a couple well-timed screams.

Guess Who We’re Having for Dinner is the third, and I think the best, horror film he’s made. The others were *The Terror Train Rides Again*, which we shot at 30th Street Station, and *Evil Penguins Take Over Philadelphia*. That one

was hard to shoot, because we needed footage from the Philadelphia Zoo and the security guard kept yelling at us to quit leaning into the penguin enclosure. But it was the only way we were going to get the shot. When Toothpick almost fell in and I had to hoist him up by the back of his pants—which wasn't easy, especially with him screaming that his camera was going to fall in and get wet—we were escorted out of the zoo for “horsing around” and “making a ruckus.”

Toothpick didn't mind, because his camera didn't fall in and he got the shot he wanted.

I minded, because it was embarrassing to be forced out of the zoo by the security guard. It reminded me of Dad, who used to work as a security guard at the *Inquirer* newspaper. Somehow, I felt like I'd disappointed him.

“Hey, Ben,” Mr. Taylor says, wiping “blood” out of his beard with a paper towel. “There's an extra pan of lasagna in the fridge. Make sure you take it when you go. We're not going to eat it.”

If Toothpick's mom still lived with them, she'd probably offer me some banana bread, too. She was always baking something delicious, and their house smelled so good when I visited.

“But, Dad,” Toothpick whines, “I thought you said the lasagna—”

Mr. Taylor shoots a hard look at Toothpick, which silences him and tells me two things: That's not an *extra* pan

of lasagna in their fridge. And no matter how hungry I am, that lasagna is staying right where it is. “Thanks, Mr. Taylor. We appreciate it.”

“Anything for you and your mom,” he says. “Hey, I’m going to take a snooze before work, so keep it down, all right?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Psycho!” Toothpick screams, and he awkwardly lunges for his salsa-spattered cat so he can clean her fur. She leaps easily out of his grip and yowls.

“So much for quiet,” Mr. Taylor says, shaking his head and walking upstairs.

Since Toothpick is chasing the cat with a wet paper towel and I don’t feel like cleaning the entire kitchen by myself, I duck into their downstairs bathroom. Sitting on the toilet seat lid with my head in my hands, I wish Mr. Taylor hadn’t offered me that lasagna. I’m sure it would taste great—everything he cooks does—but we don’t need a handout. It makes me think of last week when our neighbor from across the hall, Mrs. Schnecke, stopped over with a bag of groceries from the market. She said she accidentally bought too much. No one *accidentally* buys too many groceries.

Things will get better, I tell myself, because I will make them better.

I promised.

Toothpick bangs on the bathroom door, which makes

my heart speed up. “Hey,” he shouts. “You in there? You promised you’d help.”

For a second, I think he’s talking about helping my mom, and I feel a weight settle onto my heart like a stone. “Be right out,” I manage. Then I count to six and flush so it sounds like I was really using the toilet the whole time.

My eyes are leaking a little, so I grab a few sheets of toilet paper to wipe them. The toilet paper is soft and fluffy, unlike the recycled junk Mom buys now. That stuff’s so rough, I’d be better off wiping my butt with tree bark.

Before I realize what I’m doing, I pull off a long stretch, fold it and stuff it into the pocket of my jeans.

Back in the slightly less “bloody” kitchen, I feel like Toothpick has X-ray vision and can see the toilet paper inside my pocket.

Hoping to divert his attention, I ask, “What should I clean?”

“Psycho.” Toothpick slaps a wet paper towel into my palm. “She’s hiding behind the bookshelf in my room—getting salsa on everything—and I can’t reach her.”

“How am I going to?”

Toothpick puts a broom in my other hand.

“Funtastic,” I say, making a mental note that “FUN-tastic” may be a good word combination for a future contest entry.

I hope that when I get Psycho out to clean her fur, she

doesn't use my arm as a scratching post, like she did once before. Then again, I've faced harder things.

Grasping my tools of terror—a broom handle and a wet paper towel—I charge into Toothpick's bedroom and issue a battle cry: “Yee-haaaaah!”

“Quiet!” Toothpick's dad bellows from his bedroom.

“Sorry, Mr. Taylor.”

Downstairs, Toothpick laughs like a maniac.

FUNtastic!

That's how I spend my Saturday afternoon: doing fierce battle with a skittish, salsa-spattered cat, cleaning up after a bloody murder scene and taking toilet paper from my best friend's bathroom.

And *not* taking the lasagna from the Taylors' fridge.

Even though just thinking about it makes my mouth water like Niagara Falls.