

Preface

*“What’s All This Blood, Dad?
I Don’t Understand!”*

IT MAY SEEM ODD—counterintuitive, even—to preface a book about father-son bonding with a story about discovering my mother’s menstrual blood. My editor, in fact, initially advised against it. But sometimes insights come in the most unlooked-for places. So, here goes:

I am seven years old and living in a tiny walk-up apartment with my parents in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I see in the toilet one morning what seems, to me, to be a bucket of blood. I panic.

My father left for work an hour ago, but my mother has been in the bathroom most recently, so I run out into the kitchen, where I think she is making breakfast, screaming, “Ma! Ma!” The radio is on, with one of her favorite programs, “Don McNeil’s Breakfast Club,” but she’s not there. So that increases my panic level to full-blast. She said she would be in the kitchen. And at this time of day she is always in the kitchen, and so I expect her to be in the kitchen, and she is not in the kitchen. So now she is missing. And I am thinking, “Is my mother lying somewhere a bloody mess? Is she dead?”

She’s not in her bedroom, nor in my bedroom, nor in our little living room. No blood spots anywhere I look, either. I check the closets. I peek under the beds. I look in the drawers and the cupboards, just to be thorough. No Ma. No blood.

So I run downstairs and out onto the porch. And thank God, there’s Ma, talking to Mrs. Doris Lindenbaum, her best friend, at the time. My

mother's best friends come and go in cycles. They are in and out—and in—as is Doris Lindenbaum now, the best friend of the moment.

And of all of the women I remember as friends of my Ma, Doris Lindenbaum is my favorite because she has a kaleidoscope of blue lines on her legs, which are called, says my mother, “varicose.” When my mother has poker games at our house, usually the first Thursday of the month, I sneak into the kitchen and, when no one is looking, crawl down under the table, cluttered with chips and cards and coffee and Coke, and I study the lines of varicose that Doris owns.

My mother's other best friends have varicose, too, but Doris beats out everybody. Doris is tops. There's a map of the world on Doris' legs—snaking every which way—from ankle to knee, to that place way up under the tunnel of her dress where those dark, alluring mysteries lurk. At some point a few years later, I will learn from an older boy to refer to this secret under-the-dress spot as “Joy City.” But even when I am only seven, I know deep in my heart that there is something warm and wonderful going on up there, under that dress, that will someday yield unforgettable pleasure.

So I see Doris Lindenbaum on the porch that day. It is early. But I don't have the patience to wait to say to Mrs. Lindenbaum, “Excuse me,” or “How are you doing, Mrs. Lindenbaum? How is good old Marc?” Marc is her son who is in my grade at school. An odd sickly kid; gets beaten up all the time. Or, “What are you doing here so early in the morning, Mrs. Lindenbaum? Will you join us for breakfast?”

And neither do I have the patience or the good sense to say to my Ma, “Can I talk with you privately, Ma?” or “Ma, can you spare a moment? I'm a little upset and I need to ask you about a few matters pertaining to a bucket of blood I found this morning in the toilet.” You know, something preliminary.

All I know is that my mother may be bleeding, losing all that blood, and if she's bleeding, she may be dying, and if she's dying, I am going to be a boy without a mom, which is going to make me upset and change my life.

I have a dad. But I don't want to be with my dad if my Ma isn't there to protect me, because my dad, he's alright sometimes, but he tends to get violent when things don't go well, and even when things do go well, I am, in addition to being the only child, his designated family punching bag, whenever he gets those urges. And my dad, he gets a lot of urges. Upsets real easy.

Unless, of course—and this is something that occurs to me as I momentarily hesitate on the porch where my Ma and Mrs. Lindenbaum are talking very quietly—women pee blood. I have never seen a

woman pee before, I suddenly realize. I have never seen a woman's penis before, either. I haven't the slightest idea if women own penises, and if they do, if those penises are like my penis or Marc Lindenbaum's penis or gigantic like my father's penis, which, compared to my little weenie, is thick as a tree trunk. Or what if they poop blood, those women? An additional possibility.

I know that women are different than men. Men pee yellow. I pee yellow. My father pees yellow. Everybody I have ever known, all the boys and men, pee yellow—yellow or whitish-yellow. The bus driver who takes me to synagogue Sunday school tells his favorite joke about the book he is reading, "Yellow Streams" by the famous author I. P. Daily. I assume that I. P. Daily is a man. And I get the joke, which is kind of funny the first few times you hear it. But then there's this blood in the toilet. What's with that? Yet my mother looks perfectly healthy right now. Do women pee red, I wonder, as I stand out there on the porch with Mrs. Lindenbaum, and I am yelling, "Ma! Ma?"

Then this next thing runs through my head, out of the blue: Women have those big soft balls on their chests that we boys in school call bazoongies. When I have seen them, my mother's bazoongies are usually covered in elastic, and they've got points that make them look like torpedoes. They are very interesting, those torpo-zoongies. "Why don't men have bazoongies?" I ask my father.

My father sells orthopedic shoes for a living, so he is considerably more comfortable discussing bunions and metatarsals than torpo-zoongies. I am the only kid in school who knows more about longitudinal arches and ingrown toenails than Christopher Columbus discovering the world is round and the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock. I am intimate with the workings of the fluoroscope, which provides an x-ray of your foot to make certain your new shoes fit. In my closet, I have Buster Brown scuff toes for school, Poll Parrot wing tips for dress-up, U.S. Keds for softball, rubbers for rain, and four-buckle arctic boots for snow. "It is not respectful to use that word," my father says.

"Bazoongies?" I say, after a while. "Torpo-zoongies?"

My father is very uncomfortable with anything, he says, is not "on the straight and narrow." His definition of the "straight and narrow" is rigid—to the point of abolishing all curves—maybe especially on women. And he is not known for his sense of humor. Fathers must maintain a position of maturity and dignity, he insists. "You mean 'breasts,'" he says.

"Why do women have breasts and men not?"

"Men do have breasts—small breasts," my father says. "And nipples."

"Nipples?"

"Nipples are at the very tip of the breasts, like a little button."

"But what's these big breasts? Those pointed pillows?"

"Breasts," my father says—and here he pauses for dramatic emphasis. There seem to be stars in his eyes. "Breasts are beautiful things."

This is exactly what my father says when he tells me about the word "fuck." This is three or four years later, and I ask him what the word, "Fuck" means.

"Fuck," he says, pausing and looking away from me, "Fuck is a beautiful thing."

"Fuck is beautiful? Then why I am put in detention because I and my friends have 'fuck'-yelling contests to see who yells the word 'fuck' the loudest in public? Why do people get mad when you call them a 'fucker'?"

"That's a different story," my father says.

"'Fuck' is different than 'fucker'?"

"Someday you will understand," he says.

This stays with me my whole life. Something I never forget, like the anticipation of visiting Joy City. *Fuck* is a beautiful thing. *Fuck* is different than *fucker*. *The act itself is good and the perpetrator of the act is bad*. Fatherly wisdom at its finest—sort of. And in retrospect, as I look back on my life, I consider this the ultimate gem of enlightenment from my dad—a rare magic moment of connection and legacy. Nothing my father ever told me resonates more clearly in my memory.

My shrink, Dr. Mason, asked me once, after my first marriage collapsed, and I came to him, desperate, lonely, and helplessly impotent, who and what do I think about after having a satisfying sexual experience? "I don't have satisfying sexual experiences any longer. Why do you think I am paying you these big bucks?"

"Well, when you did have satisfying sexual experiences, what went through your mind? Or who?"

"My father," I say, thinking back to my enlightenment when I learned the truth about the yin and yang of the "F" world.

"Your father?" Dr. Mason writes that gem of evidence and ammunition down in his spiral notebook and shakes his head vigorously, encouraging me to continue. His eyes light up. This will be worth another year of weekly sessions, at the least. I can hear the cash register in his brain ding. All in all, that guy will suck me in for nine years.

"Then what do you think when you think about your mother?" he then asks.

"Blood."

“Blood?” he says, taking another note. I imagine he is drawing stars and exclamation points and dollar signs in his spiral notebook around this note. This is why ordinarily nice people, good citizens, become shrinks. All the dirt they learn from their clients. They eat it up, write it down, read it aloud in the middle of the night, it turns them on so much. Much better than being priests because, ethically, the shrink can still fuck, which, as I mentioned, is a beautiful thing. “You want to kill your mother?” Dr. Mason asks.

“Blood and my English teacher,” I tell him.

“You want to kill your English teacher, too?” Another note. I think I see his hands are shaking.

Now I tell him about the bucket of blood in the toilet. I tell him how I ran downstairs and burst out onto the porch and blurted out my panicked question: “Ma there’s blood in the toilet. Are you dying?”

I remember how my mother looked at me in shock that morning, how her eyeballs got big and round. “What are you talking about?”

“Please don’t die,” I said. “I don’t want to become an orphan.”

It just so happens that my mother and Mrs. Lindenbaum had been talking about death at that very moment. Perfect timing. Mrs. Lindenbaum’s son Marc was dying. He had leukemia. There was no cure. I didn’t know Marc was dying at the time I burst out onto the porch; I found out later. But this is why Mrs. Lindenbaum, Doris, was at our house so early, to talk with her best friend. She couldn’t sleep at night. She felt alienated. She craved comfort and support.

I wish I could have given Doris Dr. Mason’s phone number, for she needed him more than I did. A son’s leukemia is considerably more traumatic than a horny guy who can’t get to Joy City, even when the doors are wide open.

“And your English teacher? Why your English teacher?” Dr. Mason said.

“Because my mother told me that what I had seen was a period. Her period. Although at the time she said, ‘a period.’”

Thinking back, she had evidently not flushed the toilet so thoroughly—or maybe not at all—I figured. Mrs. Lindenbaum was suddenly at the door, knocking, a surprise visit, so my mother rushed to answer. Soon thereafter I stumbled into the bathroom, and, well, now you know what happened next: panic and confusion.

“You went to your English teacher and asked about a period?” Dr. Mason smiled and wrote some more notes.

“Yes,” I said, “I needed to know the truth about this blood.”

“How did your English teacher explain period?”

"She said it was a punctuation mark."

"When did you learn the truth?"

"You mean that's not the truth?" I said.

"Why didn't you ask your father?" Dr. Mason asked after a while.

"I couldn't rely on my father. He would have told me, 'A period is a beautiful thing.' I needed hard facts."

Dr. Mason took down another note, and nodded, as he tends to do as an encouragement for me to speak. But I didn't say another word. We stared at each other until the session ended. It turned into a long, quiet afternoon.



THAT EVENT—my accidental discovery of my mother's period and the absolute panic it precipitated—happened long ago. But I can still remember how foolish I felt years later when I finally understood what had occurred that morning in the bathroom—where the mysterious blood had come from—and why.

I only wish I had been given a reasonable explanation back then. My mother told me that I was mistaken; that there was no blood. "You are imagining things!" I knew that wasn't true—and I wasn't imagining Marc Lindenbaum's death, either—but I could have just as well imagined it, for his death was barely noted in my house or anywhere else. Marc left the world and our school without collecting his final grades or emptying his locker. All that was left of Marc, all I could get from my parents later when they were leaving the house one afternoon in dress-up clothes, were four words: *Sitting shiva for Marc*. Figuring out what *shiva* was took a couple of years.

When I was growing up, parents were less open and communicative with children, tending to shield them from the realities of life. As to "sexual" matters—intercourse et al (and the "F" word)—parents mostly thought that there'd be plenty of time for kids to learn about "Joy City" when they were mature enough to handle it which, in the 1950s and early 1960s, was supposedly in their mid- or late teen years—or, alas, in some cases, in their early twenties. This was wrong, I think. Kids of any era need to know when they need to know. They won't follow a timetable established by parents or society—curiosity invariably wins out and often with harmful effects.

Today, cable TV and the Worldwide Web have made shielding children from life's lessons and realities impossible, and I don't think I benefitted from my ignorance back then. Growing up, I devoted a great deal of time and effort to trying to understand what the adult world was all about. Why do we fear communists? ("Because they're bad.")

Why do we keep our distance from black (colored) people? (“Because they will steal from you.”) Why are the Jews persecuted—and why do I have to be a Jew anyway? (“Because we are the Chosen People.”) And, of course, if “fuck” is so beautiful, then why is saying the word so bad? And, by the way, what’s with all that blood in the toilet?

Parents don’t have to tell their kids everything—but they ought to be trusted and reliable sounding boards, always accessible and always willing to tell their children the truth. Hiding information or providing misinformation even with the best of intentions is usually unhelpful or detrimental. This trusting, bonding relationship is in many ways more important and more fragile between fathers and sons than mothers and daughters. Men are more rigid, generally, less forgiving and understanding.

In past times, bonding between men was more natural; fathers often taught sons skills with their hands on the family farm or through repairs around the house. They talked as they worked. Breakfast and dinner—holidays, weekends—were shared. Now it takes a lot of planning to connect the lives of different generations. Passion for computers and games like *Sim City* and *Civilization* frequently replace a shared love for baseball or other all-American pastimes. Family outings are rare. And these days, fathers must think a lot more carefully about what it means to be a man. Today, we embrace individuality. Flexing muscles no longer trump the flexing mind. What kind of man—what kind of person—do I want (do I want my son) to be?

I think it was the disappointment I felt with my father and my general disillusionment with family life that led to my initial decision to not become a parent. Both my first and second wives were on the same page; they had their own family issues. But I changed my mind—later in life—at 47. That’s one major theme of this book—becoming an “old new dad”—and the advantages and difficulties this role presents.

“Old new dad” is a term I first learned from Mark J. Penn. In his book, *Microtrends: Small Forces Behind Tomorrow’s Big Changes*, Penn devotes a chapter to “Old New Dads.” Whether children come from birth or through adoption, “old new dads” are part of a growing worldwide movement, he says. In the United States a quarter century ago, men over fifty were responsible for one in every twenty-three births. In 2002, the figure climbed to one of each eighteen births. Birth rates from fathers between ages of forty and forty-four increased nearly one third, and for fathers forty-five to fifty, the group where I fit, birth rates increased twenty per cent. Recent studies in the U.S. and Europe show that more than one in ten of all children are born to fathers forty and older, one fifth of whom are over fifty. Being part of this movement—an old new dad, as I am—requires considerable emotional and physical

adjustment. Old new dads need to learn to minimize our obvious insecurities: We are older than most of our kids' friends' parents and might not so easily fit in; our cultural references are generations behind our children's; and we have more ghosts from our past to deal with. Old new dads must learn to maximize our special advantages, namely, our more secure financial and professional positions and the wisdom we've gained through experience, fighting battles and dealing with demons that younger men have yet to confront.

I won't say that my past came back to haunt or motivate me when Sam was born because long before Sam I was thinking about the positive impact my father could have made in my life if he had been more active and communicative. His distance created a void and a resentment I carry with me even now. I know I am not alone. So many men were and are denied the intellectual and emotional substance needed to shape their personality and to deal with the challenges of growing comfortably into male maturity because their fathers were too preoccupied with their work or too rigid in their beliefs about hanging tough, not revealing emotions and feelings to their sons for fear of showing weakness and vulnerability.

As you will see, "truckin'" became a metaphor for the father-and-son bonding experience, a way of communicating and coming together to teach, to share, to grow—and have fun. In addition, in an odd way, truckin' also became somewhat of a religion to Sam and me, as we shared the irreplaceable awesomeness of the Grand Canyon, the elation of the crystal blue ice field atop Exit Glacier, the haunting ghosts of Auschwitz and Theresienstadt, the anger of Hebron on the West Bank, the eerie exotic weirdness of being trapped—foreigners in Tibet—during the rumble of revolution, and then, finally, a month before he was to enter college, after truckin' together faithfully off and on for six years, the ultimate test we both confronted—a culmination of all I had tried to communicate to him in ideas and attitude and all I had learned about being a father and setting a fitting example through trial and error as an old new dad—in East Africa, in Tanzania of all places.

But whether you are traveling, as Sam and I so often did, or sitting in the backyard, togetherness—or truckin', as it is defined here—is the message of this book. It is an imperative of fatherhood. Nothing can or should interfere with establishing a connective tissue between father and son, expanding it, growing it, following it, holding on to it until the proper time to let go. Literally or spiritually—and preferably both—all fathers, everywhere, of every age, must go truckin' with their sons.