

CONFESSIONS

OF A SLIGHTLY BASHFUL FOOT FLUSHER

I had never seen a germ until I fell in love with my girlfriend.

That may sound unromantic, but it's true.

Growing up, my parents denied that germs existed. They taught me that people get colds or flus when they're "run down," and that sickness is brought upon by deviating from healthful routines. They insisted that people only catch colds when they were already going to get sick in the first place. "Drink your orange juice and eat your leafy kale," they'd encourage, "you don't want to come down with something."

To this day, when my mother gets a cold she walks around feeling guilty for eating the junk food that caused it. And to this day, when my dad gets a cold he walks around snivelling and wheezing and coughing and sneezing, and saying, "It's not a cold, I'm just a bit run down."

Needless to say, when I fell in love with a biologist I was utterly shocked to discover that she had *actually seen* a germ under a microscope.

I learned that germs are tiny living organisms that can cause diseases, and that they are so small and sneaky that they can creep into our bodies without being noticed. She patiently explained me the differences between bacteria, viruses, fungi, and protozoa, and then calmly informed me that humans are susceptible to all four!

And when I asked her where they live, she said this, which slightly unnerved me: Everywhere.



She even showed me a picture of strep throat bacteria (*Streptococcus spp.*). The little freaks are hideous.

What strikes me as odd (disturbing?) is that my girlfriend doesn't seem the least bit concerned by the fact that we are literally surrounded by trillions of malevolent, virile, disease-causing monsters. Somehow, she's able to detach herself from the reality that almost everything we touch in public has someone else's flu on it. And somehow, I can't seem to forget it.

Lately, I picture germs everywhere I go—on toilet seats, and doorknobs, and elevator buttons, and mailbox

handles, and payphone receivers. And then I ask myself this question: Can I afford to get sick this week?

Usually I have errands to run and deadlines to keep, so the answer is almost invariably, No.

Lately, and against my better judgement, I've become a foot flusher.

I'm not sure who to be angry at: my parents for hiding me from the truth, or my girlfriend for exposing me to it. Or germs, for being evil little buggers.

I decided to do a little research, for this column but also in hopes of purging myself of this burgeoning neurotic

by Sacha Vais

tendency, so I hopped on the web and googled "germs."

The news is not good.

One of the first sites to pop up was for Purell Instant Hand Sanitizer. Their slogan is: "Sometimes you can't get to soap and water." The website explains that Purell kills 99.99% of common germs that may cause illness (what about the other 0.01%?), and goes on to encourage people to "sanitize your hands anytime, anyplace! In the kitchen or bathroom for extra care, at work, school, and day care, after changing diapers or handling money, before drive-thru meals or when camping, any time or place you can't wash!"

How can one *not* become "germaphobic" after reading a statement like that!

One of the next sites to appear was for Medline Plus, which is a vast medical database co-sponsored by the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. Their section on "Germs and Hygiene" has dozens of science-based articles, with titles like *Bacteria Hone in on Shopping Carts*, and *Stopping Germs at Home, Work and School*, and *Hand Washing: A Simple Way to Prevent Infection*, and *Questions and Answers for Swimmers*, and *Using Alcohol-Based Hand Gels Could Help Families Avoid Respiratory Illnesses*.

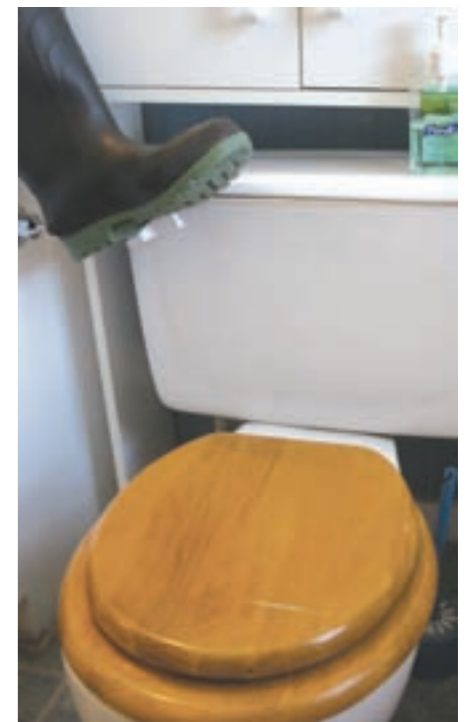
Oh, good. Nothing to worry about there.

And then there's the website for the product known euphemistically as "The Clean Shopper," which boasts

of being "The fast, easy way to keep shopping-cart germs away!" A shopping cart/high chair cover for babies and toddlers, it "protects the entire shopping cart seating area—sides, back, handlebars and front—to offer maximum protection against disease-causing bacteria." (From the promotional material: "Protect your baby from bacteria-ridden shopping carts and grimy restaurant high chairs with the original, patented and award-winning Clean Shopper® and Clean Diner®.")

Since I've started paying attention to issues of contagion, I am finding references everywhere I look. There is a hilarious show on TV called "Monk," about an obsessive-compulsive, germaphobic detective. And just the other day I came across an article about Kurt Godel, the influential mathematician who developed the Incompleteness Theorem of logic that challenged the view that logic would allow a complete understanding of the universe, and later died of starvation when his paranoid fear of germs grew uncontrollable. And Howie Mandel, the famous stand up comedian, refuses to shake anybody's hand.

I think I'm straddling two equally self-destructive worldviews right now. On the one hand, I still feel guilty and ashamed when I get sick, as I did when I was a child, wondering what I could have done better, wondering which fruit or vegetable I should have eaten more of. On the other hand, now when I get sick I also feel responsible for my illness because germs are tangible things that I could have avoided.



Neither of these ideologies is healthy, and neither of them is right.

The truth is, although it is important to live as healthily as you can at any given moment, it is equally (if not tenfold more) important to accept that sickness is not our fault. Bodies get unwell sometimes, and it's not our fault, and it's not shameful, and it's not something to hide.

I tend to agree with the comedian Steven Wright, who said something like "I wouldn't be so paranoid if everyone wasn't out to get me."

And if you need proof, I'll have my girlfriend show you her microscope. 🦠

Sacha Vais is a freelance editor, writer, ghostwriter, and photographer, as well as managing editor of *IrkedMagazine.com*. He lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia.