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## The Manner of Your Scramble

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# The Manner of Your Scramble

## **Cover Page Footnote**

N/A

## The Manner of Your Scramble

*Henry D. Goldkamp*

A bearded man, probably a neighbor, muttered “asshole” when you did not hold the door open for him in your building this past weekend. You did not see him behind you. After not doing much of anything except reading, eating, and watching television, you’ve decided to make an effort to become a better person because of this.

Now it’s Monday, August 6th, 2007, it’s after work, and here you are in your dilapidated apartment on the seventh floor of your lurid tan building. Inside the countertops, and cabinets, and laminate, and everything, are tinged with a yellowness that comes with affordable rent for the poor, though you aren’t exactly proletarian—you just don’t mind its shoddiness. Outdated kitchen appliances are aching with different gravities, creaking with gossip, and you can hear it in the sounds of their settling. They are quite fond of their inability to shut up, you think.

Your walls also squeak with different lives surrounding you—mice, tenants, other things. Their denizen they talk incessantly about has remained the same for thirteen years—which is Mr. Boothe, which is you, who plays pretend. You get a kick out of being the apartment celebrity, everyone wondering what you’re up to in there. You have a good imagination to distract yourself from your loneliness, which you are aware of, but do not mind much. Why let a thing such as that, such as anything really, detract from you living your life outwardly, albeit inside the same apartment, quietly with your expert-level crosswords, game shows, and instant coffee?

If your fantasy paparazzi of microwaves and egg timers were to finagle their way in, they would see that right now you are inside the bathroom closing the door. This poses some difficulty for you, a man of sixty-three years old, as the door is too big for its threshold, perhaps not unlike a woman who gains weight with age. You think of Cynthia, your ex-wife, and catch yourself sighing. You have to strain yourself to shut it tight, all the way until the knob clicks. The fact you live alone makes this bathroom door the closest thing you have to a relationship with a woman, and so, too, with privacy being a non-issue, the situation grows increasingly strange. So you are an aging man espoused with an aging apartment afraid of being walked in on in an embarrassing

state. A handful of people might call this a match made in heaven, but it is most certainly not that. You are mildly satisfied with your life, but understand that life's ceiling is much higher than that, and therefore want more out of the finite amount of time you call a life.

You are sitting on the toilet seat, which you've always enjoyed, though not in any sort of weird way—it is a relieving experience to rid yourself of anything unnecessary, whether bodily waste, facial hair, or outdated telephone books (you'd throw out old Christmas cards, too, if you had any). This is a crucial part of your self-betterment. You try to remain focused on this, disregarding the olfactory pleasures from odors of your own effluvia, for you don't know if anyone else feels the same way. Trying not to think about (or breathe) this too much, you move on, consider how your toilet is the same material as expensive decorative dolls and collectible angel figurines, sold in shops whose billboards deem them as inspirational gifts—you smile at the silliness of it. This is short-lived, however, for you remember the feeling you are going to catch ill soon, most likely the next day or the day after that. With this in mind once again, you set off on a mental stroll through a tidy collection of absurdities. They are an evening dream of the most trifling productivities, one with the microscopic desire to ease the time between now and your cold, much like a lullaby. You soothe yourself by keeping a gnawing reality at safe distances.

So you certainly would set out the coffee packet for tomorrow morning. You would pick and lay out your clothes for work, pleated khakis, shirt, tie that matches the sepia toned rooms you breathe in. You might even take a shower, though you took one last night, and do not need one. You nod your head in approval of these ideas, gazing into the flecking paint of the opposite wall, as if it were the wall itself that thought of them in the first place. You wipe your rear end, then suddenly your brow furrows into vexation.

This act of touching your anus through bargain toilet paper reminds you of something very inappropriate that Eric, your office manager, had said at work today- that some people do not get over the anal stage of psychosexual development for their entire lives. "The fascination comes from the fact most people have never actually seen... it... and so they become obsessed by this and can't get over it." These words do not belong in the workplace, and although he said this in a low tone, not meant to be heard by anyone else but the intended audience (Bonnie, a very nice lady in the records department), it was close enough to your cubicle for you to make out. As you wondered how they got on this topic, Bonnie didn't seem to mind: "You know I saw a sale for those full-body mirrors at Bed Bath and Beyond the other weekend."

They both laughed. You pictured Bonnie grabbing her ankles, peering upside down between her legs, trying to explore unseen reaches. And beyond.

Your dyspepsia finally subsides and you place Eric's comment beside your own surroundings—the stuffy air of tobacco smoke (though you don't smoke and have no idea where it comes from), the grout's detritus in the corner, which could easily be crumbled away if touched, where a little pile lay below. Perhaps Bonnie would think of that as disgusting. This is you trying to equalize yourself, not judge your fat office manager, but as you finish your business, thoughts of Eric prattle on inside your little room behind your eyeballs.

You wouldn't consider yourself a killjoy by any means, but Eric's glib remarks have attached themselves to you over the course of his two years at your company (well, not yours, exactly—the one you work for, you mean), and his confidence makes you uneasy. You guess most folks at the office would consider him funny, but to you he is more of an irritant, like an open bottle of bleach, his words scour like Comet powder, his personality fills the room like soft chopped onions, unprovoked and pungent. You've never seen such impropriety except on bad TV shows.

In your opinion, Eric holds a slightly better-than attitude and takes night classes downtown for, as he claims, bettering himself. Subjects like printmaking, world religions, even culinary workshops. You understand that this feeling is one of jealousy, that you wish to bring yourself out of the dusty comforts of your home to learn new skills, but you also know you would not envy this at all if Eric didn't make a verbal parade of his extracurricular activities. You've collected this information gradually, as he says things in passing your shriveled desk, wrinkled with data catalogs and smelling like stale tea (you don't drink tea, and also have no idea where this smell comes from). Eric shaves away a bit of your faith in the future of youth and country, though not too much. Actually—maybe this is another one of those unnecessary things that are good to get rid of. As you know, you are mildly satisfied, and as much time as you've spent on the toilet, thinking things not meant to be uttered out loud, that is not to call all matters of your life feculent. In walking to the pantry retrieving a good-sized can of beef stew, you are content, a human cup.

With a full stomach gurgling its thanks, you turn on Wheel of Fortune to meditate before bed. And so they come: the dings, the alphabet, the applause, like dirty waves lapping upon saddened factories of rust, naturally and without cessation, shaping something larger than a letter or a single clap. The category is Before and After. You grumble

the answer well before the contestants—Change Your Mind Over Matter—then thumb the rubber OFF button and go to bed.

You begin Tuesday morning thinking that humankind shouldn't know so much, particularly matters of the body. There is no need to research why aspirin makes your bum knee hurt less, save the concise description printed on the back of the bottle. There is no need to know what vitamin C is or why it occurs naturally in orange juice. There is no need to question or complain about taxes or death, as they are forever going to grasp ineffable truths man cannot alter. And for you, there is certainly no need to pray. You and God have had a lengthy understanding of looking up or down at one another here and there, and like an adolescent bickering with her mother before a large family function: "We'll talk about this later." Usually you two just catch up at funerals, and it is enough.

You are at your desk. Eric, that young nudnik, is walking towards you in one of his fancy, overpriced shirts barely holding his corpulence. He often lewdly references his obesity while grasping the belt beneath his full paunch; a certain self-loathing not humorous to you, for it encompasses too much indignity to engender your laughter. He has running jokes about swimming laps with Sam, or getting kicked out of a bounce house at RJ's niece's birthday party. You picture Eric in a rainbow ball pit, like he wants you to. Maybe you are a killjoy, because you are holding back a smirk. You stare at your bulletin board, which is mainly thumbtacks without paper, feeling like a jerk, a cork unable to absorb anything but sharp metal objects.

You notice the tan space where a photograph of Cynthia used to hang. It was of her blowing out candles on her fiftieth birthday, in a big denim dress, well before you knew her. You'd asked if you could keep it anyhow, and she said of course you could, you're my husband, you can have anything. She must have forgotten it after you divorced, or just didn't care all that much about it. Maybe she wanted you to have it.

"Good morning, Mr. Boothe! How are we doing today?" Eric's daily congenialities have shaken back this thought. He is genuinely smiling.

You decide to smile back. "Oh fine, just fine. Another day in paradise." You chuckle, wondering if this really is paradise. It's not so bad if it was, you think. There's air conditioning and free coffee, and people to talk to if you want. He continues to make his rounds. At least Eric calls you Mr. Boothe like you've requested, while everyone else goes with the trend of calling people by their first names. You never

thought about this as a form of respect until now, not that you didn't deserve it after twenty-one years as the company accountant.

You enjoy your job, especially the security that comes with it. As an accountant, you firstly are accountable for something so organic to a business that your job is far-removed from jeopardy—the numbers accumulate themselves, you sort them out, you show them the remainder, and if need be, you show your work. The equations wait patiently for you into the next working day, just like a pet shop employee and his small aquariums, a car salesman and his automobiles, a pastry chef and his jellies and frostings and dough. It reminds you of when you first got into crossword puzzles. You'd buy them not knowing many answers, then just fill it all in from the answer keys in the back. Although you didn't know any of the answers off the top of your head, it felt like an accomplishment anyway.

The higher-ups have even let you keep your preferential methods, and though a computer is essential for your work, they agreed that you only need three programs and approved your request to remove any internet browsers on yours. You made this suggestion as a matter of distraction versus productivity, but really you just don't know how to use it very well. Because of this, your coworkers call you "old school" on occasion, but they say this in a kind, complimentary way. You feel better than usual as you leave today, and no longer feel that cold coming on.

Driving home, you think of simplicity and beauty as sisters with a good, healthy relationship, calling often to invite each other to lunch. Upon entering your yellow apartment, you can smell its emptiness—the phantom scent of smoke, its lack of a pet, your window unit not running because you have not turned it on. This place was not always so lonely. Years ago you had a woman love you in this very apartment, all smelling of Chanel No. 5 (her one and only luxury), with the same coffee-ringed tablecloth you have now. You again think of Cynthia, the attractive gap between her front teeth, her long, telluric hair like straw or dirt that you think was very pretty. She is a good woman. Your marriage was your peak flourish, your own ruthless jolie laide who lived by your side, who smiled on fair occasions, who would help you in her presence, pray for the both of you to a cross, who really liked you and thought about you, always impressed by the timely manner you could finish your difficult crosswords in.

The look of surprise on your face when she asked nicely for a divorce seemed to hurt her. She explained that you were distant, that she felt disconnected and it stung her daily. But she did not say "cold and distant," which opens up the chance that you may have been warm

and distant, which is some consolation. Either way, you thought this accusation to be nonsense, as you were always around her, early evening until morning at least, and also the times you went with her to the bingo hall where she worked, the same place you met her on that wild weekend years ago.

Several months before your divorce, you had celebrated your fifth anniversary by purchasing a computer, though it was more of a final attempt at staying current than anything. Anxious to leave with her belongings, she'd left the computer behind with a bit of hope you'd become more in touch with the times. You did not understand exactly how it worked (it was much different than your office computer) and thought the world wide web's words were often dishonest. Your last attempt to win her back was a complete failure—you had tried to Mapquest your way back into her heart, plugging in both your names on the "Get Directions" page. Later you learned that Mapquest is not a search engine, like Google is, and felt foolish. The series of misunderstandings that composed the life of you, Mr. Boothe, are infinite, almost magical. You have a bit of trouble falling asleep tonight, the Price is Right, muted, flickering over your pockmarked face. The final thought before drifting off is that you are now the thumbtack.

You wake up to find yourself staring at her pillow you have not washed since she left last year. Her peachy stains of makeup still linger, adding an odd tinge of color for the seeming theme. You wonder if your coworkers even know that you were married, and if it is your fault that they don't. You feel strange and your chest feels light. You wonder why you married so late in life, and you start to feel lucky, though this luck is of the past. This morning, you brush your teeth harder than usual.

You find Eric has left you a new calculator atop your keyboard. Last week, you had mentioned the numbers had started to fade on the screen, that it might be time to upgrade if it was in the supply budget. Apparently he had listened, and the new one has oversized buttons, which gives you more joy than perhaps it should have, but you revel in it. You are grateful, resentful—why couldn't he remain compartmentalized in your mind, sputtering more claptrap in such a blithe way that the other workers could not see him for what he was? You decide to avoid him for the rest of the day, and then see him coming after you.

"Hey Mr. Boothe, you got a minute?"

"Eric, yes, sure. I'm not too busy." He steps foot inside your cubicle and crouches—you almost forgot, "oh, and thank you for the calculator."

"That's no problem, sorry it took so long. The deliveries don't come in until Tuesday afternoons, and I didn't have time to dish



everything out yesterday, so I apologize.” You are shaking your head and shoulders like it’s no problem. “Anyways, I just wanted to remind you that tomorrow is RJ’s birthday—I know you don’t have Facebook or anything like that—so just wanted to remind you that we’re going to have a get-together at lunch in the break room. No presents or anything, just singing and cake and whatnot.”

“Great. I’ll be there.” You’re doing pretty good, if you don’t say so yourself.

When you get home, you immediately start up your computer and go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) on Internet Explorer. You search for “anal stage of development” and refuse to be scared of catching up to the times, that knowledge (even strange knowledge about bodily functions) is just another thing in a world of things, and that it shouldn’t be any different than the pile of white dust in your bathroom corner.

At first the computer suffices as an acceptable means for passing some time—you learned that Sigmund Freud fancied cocaine, that the first five years of life are crucial for adult development, and that dreaming of thumbtacks may mean you are about to solve a problem at work or at home. However, in time, the websites you haply parse through lead you out of a forest of advertisements and into the cloudless, empty desert of perverted nudity. You are dumbfounded by what you discover.

Without pleasure, you watch a hodge-podge of sex slipping across the screen, nightmarish fetishes, an unimaginable world spreading its legs before your very eyes. Most disturbing, besides their foul-mouthed exchanges of words (you have quickly unplugged your speakers), is that nearly all of the clips end the same: The woman, or women, or men, “T-girls” (folks with both lady-parts and man-parts), even human-sized stuffed bears (you catch yourself saying “jeeppers,” out loud—what else could you say?), cease coitus or oral sex or what-have-you, and then ejaculate upon a face, at times even spreading this ejaculate further with the penis (or other phalli) itself. It seems the more area covered, the more cause for excitement or disgust. The question of “why?” implants itself in your mind. Why would they possibly do that? Why would they let it happen if they don’t want it to? Why is everyone indulging in this bizarre activity? Why is this a sexual stimulus for anyone? In shock, you leave the monitor to wash a plate and fork you used for dinner. The soapy dish bubbles are no longer themselves, but something else, and you must finish them some other time.

Thursday morning is here. You haven’t really slept—you’re eyes burned through the night as you peeled back the nubby foreskin of some demonic underbelly of this world, writhing underneath your feet this entire life, all yours to disrupt the degradation, these horny

This Thursday has been exhausting, to say the least. From the tweed couch, you listen to the hum and rattle of your window unit, filling the living room with the slight dankness of a motel, which you've always rather liked. It reminds you that all things are temporary—something helpful to remember, especially today.

What to do now? There is no ignoring what you've seen. For the rest of your life, must you pick up your steps in the street; shift your eyes downward for danger of witnessing runlets of semen dripping from the jowls of these oversexed creatures? How strange they are! These bathetic “facials”, as they are called (among other things), have infiltrated your perception of the human race—but to what degree? Is this the manifestation of humanity's *esprit de corps*?

You list the barrage of obloquies being put upon these men and women within the surfeits of such prurient activities. You've found your Gordian knot, insoluble of itself, your mordant electric brain waves now inextricable at last, a middle-aged prison, accidentally claspng shut on itself. The aftermath—like some impossible crossword, a clue in each glistening papillae, every gooey whisker, any blood-shot eye—has rubbed itself everywhere. There is no answer key to flip back to, to clean the empty boxes with ink and letters. You are at risk of an orgy of the skull.

Yet, still laden with the question, the meretricious nature of pornography still rings an alarm. You remember how nice it felt to draw Eric in a room full of balls—you thrived in this moment of non-judgment. After all, “selling your body” is something everyone does—these folks simply do it naked (and usually loudly). After all, haven't you sold your body to an uncomfortable office chair, for most of your waking day?

But perhaps it is not enough to simply keep on living like this. Your couch is comfortable, but you are looking into the empty seat beside you. You are distant, but you can change that. You decide to strike up a conversation with Eric tomorrow and really put yourself out there. As for tonight—there's not much left to do but shower and have a meal.

You undress as the hot water is running, warming up. Your belly sags in the mirror; many things sag in the mirror. Suddenly, a new question stares back—a blend of horror and fascination interdigitate a strange sense of duty. You open the mirrored cabinet, reach for a couple alka-seltzer, your usual anodyne, to fend off what may become of your back and neck after this affair. You've been losing sleep over the ordeal for goodness' sake.

imps carousing in sin. Your heart thumps as you pull into your parking space, but even this thumping invites last night's images to foray your mind—a clash and clang of the thwaps, the squishes, the smacks, the palsy of the hand masturbating, red-blooded philanderers abound. There is Eric, smoking a cigarette outside talking on his phone. He hawks a loogie into the bushes. But is it a loogie? You are thoroughly tormented and jog upstairs immediately into the bathroom to think.

Here in the musty echoes of the stall, you can think more clearly. Surely not everyone is doing this, and those that do must have some sort of reason for it. You decide to fade these images away, to continue your work, to keep your head down. You will look rattled, but no one in the office talks to you much anyway. The bathroom door swings open into mid-conversation: “I can't believe RJ is 40, she doesn't look it at all.”—“I think she's been doing pilates or something pretty hardcore for a long time now.” Your stall cannot protect you from the party in the breakroom happening in less than an hour. In the midst of your mental situation, you'd forgotten. Rats.

Back at your desk, you are determined to stick to the plan you'd concocted yesterday afternoon—to travel outside your usual pathway, to participate kindly in turn. You take a piece of computer paper and start to sketch Eric falling into a ball pit. This is actually coming easily to you (after you've pushed out any ideas about what kind of balls they might be), draw kids laughing at him in the corners. You add a few details—his woven brown belt, his five o'clock shadow, not at all hyperbolizing his body to the point of cruelty. It just looks like Eric falling in a ball pit. It's funny.

You sing along, get a slice of cake. After things settle down, you approach RJ—she looks pleasantly surprised. “Oh my gosh, Eric look—it's you trapped in a ball pit!” She's laughing, probably not faking. She reads it out loud upon opening: “Have a fun birthday—we won't pull out... we won't pull out? we won't pull... you?.. out... until you're ready..! From Mr. Boothe—PS you look much younger than 40.” She trails off at the end. Oh my God, you think. You peer over into the card to confirm your fear: In your excitement you'd skipped over the word “you,” pull you out. Stiff with embarrassment, you can't find words to correct yourself. “Well thanks Mr. Boothe, this is so nice of you!” She gives you an awkward hug, basically a stranger, and you stifle a crying sensation that blindsides you. People commend you on the illustration. Eric laughs, pats you on the back, tells you to check your fly. You do and you see your fly has been unzipped this entire time. On the drive home you feel like a fool, but you admit to yourself that you tried.

You pull back the shower curtain to examine the stage, put out a hand to test the water. Gingerly, you sit inside the tub; its metal shell is still chilly in places so you plug the drain to let it fill with a bit of warmth. Your legs extend their full length and you look at the opposite tiled wall below the showerhead. You feel now that this will certainly do. You slide down into a supine position with your feet gripping the wall. You notice that there are cobwebs on the ceiling around the yellow lamp. Slowly, you baby-step towards the ceiling, letting gravity press upon your unkempt nape. Your body slumps upside down and somewhat erect; your bedraggled penis looks like a cockeyed dog, confused as to what you are really after.

You are in the uncomfortable balance of the inherent narcissism of masturbation: your coppice of pubic hair, your dendroid member being treated to a rough hand, following the singular movement like some sort of simple-minded dervish, trying to abandon yourself to the iterated motion. Though it has been some time, it feels surprisingly natural. You briefly think of Cynthia, her beauty, but stop yourself—you are not sure if it is right without her permission.

Instead you focus solely on the pleasure, your head only filling up with motley purples, blues, pinks, a white fluttering into harsh vermilion, at last, in this wet chamber—a morass of healing colors stacking themselves higher and higher, golden coins trickling towards the “money shot,” as it’s also called. Quickly, you correct the aim as your murky offal drops upon your poorly shaven face—a quiet splat.

Not that you’re surprised, but this peculiar taste is far from toothsome. You ease yourself down, readjust. Still soaking in your nescience of what you’ve just done, you’re left with a natant tip, swaying about, a little buoy without a purpose. You consider your animal contortions, your anserine sounds rushing from your yellow teeth. The spraying water sounds like television static, a scrambled channel that you wish to watch deciphered.

If it were only a month ago, there would be no epiphany. There would be no ignominy. The “why” would remain graveless and impalpable, an eternal lacuna between the eye and when the happenings on the screen really happened. You would still be drooping somewhere in that apartment, still fretting over coworkers’ shaggy dog stories, still brooding upon brainchildren, destined for abortions. And what’d be left in Mr. Boothe’s life—your life—would be nothing more than haircuts the first Tuesday of each month and brown sugar in your oatmeal—smaller things you could hold onto, exactly how it is supposed to be, without question.

But this all occurs at a special time, a week where you promised yourself to be a better person. And Cynthia has left you over a year ago, but you have found the unlikely overture of pornography, and in turn the bravery to mark yourself, to let shame and elation pool together at your drain in their opaqueness. You are now just as confused and debased as the rest of the world, and you feel a part of something like you never have before, like you've traveled several decades ahead in a very short while. You are current. You find yourself on the long walk down the concrete stairwell, heading outside to the trash bins. There they are—still stacked exactly how you've left them.

Now with your readers on, flipping through tissue-thin pages full of mattress ads and carpet cleaning services, you find the number to her bingo hall. Cynthia may not love you anymore, may not answer, may not ever call back, but the phone is ringing because you have made it ring. You are calling her to see how things are, to invite her maybe to a cup of instant coffee with powdered creamer if she'd like to, and you are more than satisfied. You hear the floorboards, and junk drawer, and toaster, and everything, cheering you on from all sides.