

## **Guts**

by Chuck Palahniuk

Inhale.

Take in as much air as you can. This story should last about as long as you can hold your breath, and then just a little bit longer. So listen as fast as you can.

A friend of mine, when he was 13 years old he heard about "pegging." This is when a guy gets banged up the butt with a dildo. Stimulate the prostate gland hard enough, and the rumor is you can have explosive hands-free orgasms. At that age, this friend's a little sex maniac. He's always jonesing for a better way to get his rocks off. He goes out to buy a carrot and some petroleum jelly. To conduct a little private research. Then he pictures how it's going to look at the supermarket checkout counter, the lonely carrot and petroleum jelly rolling down the conveyer belt toward the grocery store cashier. All the shoppers waiting in line, watching. Everyone seeing the big evening he has planned.

So my friend, he buys milk and eggs and sugar and a carrot, all the ingredients for a carrot cake. And Vaseline.

Like he's going home to stick a carrot cake up his butt.

At home, he whittles the carrot into a blunt tool. He slathers it with grease and grinds his ass down on it. Then, nothing. No orgasm. Nothing happens except it hurts.

Then, this kid, his mom yells it's supper time. She says to come down, right now.

He works the carrot out and stashes the slippery, filthy thing in the dirty clothes under his bed.

After dinner, he goes to find the carrot, and it's gone. All his dirty clothes, while he ate dinner, his mom grabbed them all to do laundry. No way could she not find the carrot, carefully shaped with a paring knife from her kitchen, still shiny with lube and stinky.

This friend of mine, he waits months under a black cloud, waiting for his folks to confront him. And they never do. Ever. Even now that he's grown up, that invisible carrot hangs over every Christmas dinner, every birthday party. Every Easter egg hunt with his kids, his parents' grandkids, that ghost carrot is hovering over all of them. That something too awful to name.

People in France have a phrase: "staircase wit." In French: esprit de l'escalier. It means that moment when you find the answer, but it's too late. Say you're at a party and someone insults you. You have to say something. So under pressure, with everybody watching, you say something lame. But the moment you leave the party....

As you start down the stairway, then-magic. You come up with the perfect thing you should've said. The perfect crippling put-down.

That's the spirit of the stairway.

The trouble is, even the French don't have a phrase for the stupid things you actually do say under pressure. Those stupid, desperate things you actually think or do.

Some deeds are too low to even get a name. Too low to even get talked about.

Looking back, kid-psych experts, school counselors now say that most of the last peak in teen suicide was kids trying to choke while they beat off. Their folks would find them, a towel twisted around their kid's neck, the towel tied to the rod in their bedroom closet, the kid dead. Dead sperm everywhere. Of course the folks cleaned up. They put some pants on their kid. They made it look ... better. Intentional at least. The regular kind of sad teen suicide.

Another friend of mine, a kid from school, his older brother in the Navy said how guys in the Middle East jack off different than we do here. This brother was stationed in some camel country where the

public market sells what could be fancy letter openers. Each fancy tool is just a thin rod of polished brass or silver, maybe as long as your hand, with a big tip at one end, either a big metal ball or the kind of fancy carved handle you'd see on a sword. This Navy brother says how Arab guys get their dick hard and then insert this metal rod inside the whole length of their boner. They jack off with the rod inside, and it makes getting off so much better. More intense.

It's this big brother who travels around the world, sending back French phrases. Russian phrases. Helpful jack-off tips.

After this, the little brother, one day he doesn't show up at school. That night, he calls to ask if I'll pick up his homework for the next couple weeks. Because he's in the hospital.

He's got to share a room with old people getting their guts worked on. He says how they all have to share the same television. All he's got for privacy is a curtain. His folks don't come and visit. On the phone, he says how right now his folks could just kill his big brother in the Navy.

On the phone, the kid says how-the day before-he was just a little stoned. At home in his bedroom, he was flopped on the bed. He was lighting a candle and flipping through some old porno magazines, getting ready to beat off. This is after he's heard from his Navy brother. That helpful hint about how Arabs beat off. The kid looks around for something that might do the job. A ballpoint pen's too big. A pencil's too big and rough. But dripped down the side of the candle, there's a thin, smooth ridge of wax that just might work. With just the tip of one finger, this kid snaps the long ridge of wax off the candle. He rolls it smooth between the palms of his hands. Long and smooth and thin.

Stoned and horny, he slips it down inside, deeper and deeper into the piss slit of his boner. With a good hank of the wax still poking out the top, he gets to work.

Even now, he says those Arab guys are pretty damn smart. They've totally reinvented jacking off. Flat on his back in bed, things are getting so good, this kid can't keep track of the wax. He's one good squeeze from shooting his wad when the wax isn't sticking out anymore.

The thin wax rod, it's slipped inside. All the way inside. So deep inside he can't even feel the lump of it inside his piss tube.

From downstairs, his mom shouts it's supper time. She says to come down, right now. This wax kid and the carrot kid are different people, but we all live pretty much the same life.

It's after dinner when the kid's guts start to hurt. It's wax, so he figured it would just melt inside him and he'd pee it out. Now his back hurts. His kid-neys. He can't stand straight.

This kid talking on the phone from his hospital bed, in the background you can hear bells ding, people screaming. Game shows.

The X-rays show the truth, something long and thin, bent double inside his bladder. This long, thin V inside him, it's collecting all the minerals in his piss. It's getting bigger and rougher, coated with crystals of calcium, it's bumping around, ripping up the soft lining of his bladder, blocking his piss from getting out. His kidneys are backed up. What little that leaks out his dick is red with blood.

This kid and his folks, his whole family, them looking at the black X-ray with the doctor and the nurses standing there, the big V of wax glowing white for everybody to see, he has to tell the truth. The way Arabs get off. What his big brother wrote him from the Navy.

On the phone, right now, he starts to cry.

They paid for the bladder operation with his college fund. One stupid mistake, and now he'll never be a lawyer.

Sticking stuff inside yourself. Sticking yourself inside stuff. A candle in your dick or your head in a noose, we knew it was going to be big trouble.

What got me in trouble, I called it Pearl Diving. This meant whacking off underwater, sitting on the bottom at the deep end of my parents' swimming pool. With one deep breath, I'd kick my way to the bottom and slip off my swim trunks. I'd sit down there for two, three, four minutes.

Just from jacking off I had huge lung capacity. If I had the house to myself, I'd do this all afternoon. After I'd finally pump out my stuff, my sperm, it would hang there in big, fat, milky gobs.

After that was more diving, to catch it all. To collect it and wipe each hand-ful in a towel. That's why it was called Pearl Diving. Even with chlorine, there was my sister to worry about. Or, Christ almighty, my mom.

That used to be my worst fear in the world: my teenage virgin sister, think-ing she's just getting fat, then giving birth to a two-headed, retard baby. Both heads looking just like me. Me, the father and the uncle. In the end, it's never what you worry about that gets you.

The best part of Pearl Diving was the inlet port for the swimming pool filter and the circulation pump. The best part was getting naked and sit-ting on it.

As the French would say, Who doesn't like getting their butt sucked? Still, one minute you're just a kid getting off, and the next minute you'll never be a lawyer.

One minute I'm settling on the pool bottom and the sky is wavy, light blue through eight feet of water above my head. The world is silent except for the heartbeat in my ears. My yellow-striped swim trunks are looped around my neck for safe keeping, just in case a friend, a neighbor, anybody shows up to ask why I skipped foot-ball practice. The steady suck of the pool inlet hole is lapping at me and I'm grinding my skinny white ass around on that feeling.

One minute I've got enough air and my dick's in my hand. My folks are gone at their work and my sister's got ballet. Nobody's supposed to be home for hours.

My hand brings me right to getting off, and I stop. I swim up to catch an-oth-er big breath. I dive down and settle on the bottom.

I do this again and again.

This must be why girls want to sit on your face. The suction is like taking a dump that never ends. My dick hard and getting my butt eaten out, I do not need air. My heartbeat in my ears, I stay under until bright stars of light start worming around in my eyes. My legs straight out, the back of each knee rubbed raw against the concrete bot-tom. My toes are turning blue, my toes and fingers wrinkled from being so long in the water.

And then I let it happen. The big white gobs start spouting. The pearls. It's then I need some air. But when I go to kick off against the bottom, I can't. I can't get my feet under me. My ass is stuck.

Emergency paramedics will tell you that every year about 150 people get stuck this way, sucked by a circulation pump. Get your long hair caught, or your ass, and you're going to drown. Every year, tons of people do. Most of them in Florida.

People just don't talk about it. Not even French people talk about everything. Getting one knee up, getting one foot tucked under me, I get to half standing when I feel the tug against my butt. Get-ting my other foot under me, I kick off against the bottom. I'm kicking free, not touching the concrete, but not getting to the air, either.

Still kicking water, thrashing with both arms, I'm maybe halfway to the surface but not going higher. The heartbeat in-side my head getting loud and fast.

The bright sparks of light crossing and crisscrossing my eyes, I turn and look back ... but it doesn't make sense. This thick rope, some kind of snake, blue-white and braided with veins, has come up out of the pool drain and it's holding on to my butt. Some of the veins are leaking blood, red blood that looks black underwater and drifts away from little rips in the pale skin of the snake. The blood trails

away, disappearing in the water, and inside the snake's thin, blue-white skin you can see lumps of some half-digested meal.

That's the only way this makes sense. Some horrible sea monster, a sea serpent, something that's never seen the light of day, it's been hiding in the dark bottom of the pool drain, waiting to eat me.

So ...I kick at it, at the slippery, rubbery knotted skin and veins of it, and more of it seems to pull out of the pool drain. It's maybe as long as my leg now, but still holding tight around my butt-hole. With another kick, I'm an inch closer to getting another breath. Still feeling the snake tug at my ass, I'm an inch closer to my escape.

Knotted inside the snake, you can see corn and peanuts. You can see a long bright-orange ball. It's the kind of horse-pill vitamin my dad makes me take, to help put on weight. To get a football scholarship. With extra iron and omega-three fatty acids.

It's seeing that vitamin pill that saves my life.

It's not a snake. It's my large intestine, my colon pulled out of me. What doctors call prolapsed. It's my guts sucked into the drain.

Paramedics will tell you a swimming pool pump pulls 80 gallons of water every minute. That's about 400 pounds of pressure. The big problem is we're all connected together inside. Your ass is just the far end of your mouth. If I let go, the pump keeps working-unraveling my insides-until it's got my tongue. Imagine taking a 400-pound shit and you can see how this might turn you inside out.

What I can tell you is your guts don't feel much pain. Not the way your skin feels pain. The stuff you're digesting, doctors call it fecal matter. Higher up is chyme, pockets of a thin, runny mess studded with corn and peanuts and round green peas.

That's all this soup of blood and corn, shit and sperm and peanuts floating around me. Even with my guts unraveling out my ass, me holding on to what's left, even then my first want is to somehow get my swimsuit back on.

God forbid my folks see my dick.

My one hand holding a fist around my ass, my other hand snags my yellow-striped swim trunks and pulls them from around my neck. Still, getting into them is impossible.

You want to feel your intestines, go buy a pack of those lambskin condoms. Take one out and unroll it. Pack it with peanut butter. Smear it with petroleum jelly and hold it under water. Then try to tear it. Try to pull it in half. It's too tough and rubbery. It's so slimy you can't hold on.

A lambskin condom, that's just plain old intestine.

You can see what I'm up against.

You let go for a second and you're gutted.

You swim for the surface, for a breath, and you're gutted.

You don't swim and you drown.

It's a choice between being dead right now or a minute from right now.

What my folks will find after work is a big naked fetus, curled in on itself. Floating in the cloudy water of their backyard pool. Tethered to the bottom by a thick rope of veins and twisted guts. The opposite of a kid hanging himself to death while he jacks off. This is the baby they brought home from the hospital 13 years ago. Here's the kid they hoped would snag a football scholarship and get an MBA. Who'd care for them in their old age. Here's all their hopes and dreams. Floating here, naked and dead. All around him, big milky pearls of wasted sperm.

Either that or my folks will find me wrapped in a bloody towel, collapsed halfway from the pool to the kitchen telephone, the ragged, torn scrap of my guts still hanging out the leg of my yellow-striped swim trunks.

What even the French won't talk about.

That big brother in the Navy, he taught us one other good phrase. A Russian phrase. The way we say, "I need that like I need a hole in my head...", Russian people say, "I need that like I need teeth in my asshole....."

Mne eto nado kak zuby v zadnitse.

Those stories about how animals caught in a trap will chew off their leg, well, any coyote would tell you a couple bites beats the hell out of being dead.

Hell ... even if you're Russian, someday you just might want those teeth.

Otherwise, what you have to do is—you have to twist around. You hook one elbow behind your knee and pull that leg up into your face. You bite and snap at your own ass. You run out of air and you will chew through anything to get that next breath.

It's not something you want to tell a girl on the first date. Not if you expect a kiss good night. If I told you how it tasted, you would never, ever again eat calamari.

It's hard to say what my parents were more disgusted by: how I'd got in trouble or how I'd saved myself. After the hospital, my mom said, "You didn't know what you were doing, honey. You were in shock." And she learned how to cook poached eggs.

All those people grossed out or feeling sorry for me....

I need that like I need teeth in my asshole.

Nowadays, people always tell me I look too skinny. People at dinner parties get all quiet and pissed off when I don't eat the pot roast they cooked. Pot roast kills me. Baked ham. Anything that hangs around inside my guts for longer than a couple of hours, it comes out still food. Home-cooked lima beans or chunk light tuna fish, I'll stand up and find it still sitting there in the toilet.

After you have a radical bowel resectioning, you don't digest meat so great. Most people, you have five feet of large intestine. I'm lucky to have my six inches. So I never got a football scholarship. Never got an MBA. Both my friends, the wax kid and the carrot kid, they grew up, got big, but I've never weighed a pound more than I did that day when I was 13.

Another big problem was my folks paid a lot of good money for that swimming pool. In the end my dad just told the pool guy it was a dog. The family dog fell in and drowned. The dead body got pulled into the pump. Even when the pool guy cracked open the filter casing and fished out a rubbery tube, a watery hank of intestine with a big orange vitamin pill still inside, even then my dad just said, "That dog was fucking nuts."

Even from my upstairs bedroom window, you could hear my dad say, "We couldn't trust that dog alone for a second...."

Then my sister missed her period.

Even after they changed the pool water, after they sold the house and we moved to another state, after my sister's abortion, even then my folks never mentioned it again.

Ever.

That is our invisible carrot.

You. Now you can take a good, deep breath.

I still have not.