

last time I was there, I had seen Billy consuming it in vast quantities. I don't care for lemonade so I had abstained, but a number of boys had thoroughly enjoyed it (prompting edicts against it from doctors and parents). I sat down and took a handful of clean, white snow and took a fair-sized bite.

One of my classmates across from me, Joe Corrigan, raised a soggy head and regarded me serenely.

"What do you want for Chrississ?" he asked inquis-

I remember the Christmas I learned how to make babies. My sister showed me.

I am the youngest in a large family. When I was six, my elder sister Alice was engaged to a singularly charming man, Jonathan. With all due respect, Jonathan was perhaps not the prince that my parents had envisioned, and conversation between the two parties, my parents and Jonathan, was always somewhat tepid.

With Christmas approaching and my sister's fiancé occupying the same house as my parents, things had become undeniably frigid. Jonathan, being an unfortunately slow but resourceful chap, had managed to botch his last two attempts to gain favor in the eyes of my parents. My mother, being paranoid, had found his gift of expensive deodorant to be a veiled insult, and my father had not been amused by the ceramic talking frog that burped "hello" when one walked through the front door, doing little to soothe already frayed nerves. It was when Jonathan received the full brunt of my parents' wrath after engaging the family in a rousing game of slapjack during my father's nap time, days before Christmas, that it dawned on him that some very special gifts might be in order.

On the day before Christmas, I set out at a determined pace for the playground behind my school. I paused briefly to hurl a few missiles of snow at Mrs. Pratchett's windows and stopped for a second or two to press my nose against the glass of the Ben Franklin Store. They were still there, all right! The glorious family of bright-eyed baby hamsters in their metal cages.

When I arrived at the playground, a dozen or so of my first-grade buddies were seated placidly on the ground, chewing contentedly on the new-fallen snow. I warned Billy Wright to steer clear of the lemonade snow, to which he was getting dangerously close. The

itively.

"A hamsta," I replied, snow rolling down my chin.

"What's a hamsta?" Joe asked again.

"It's a animul."

"That's stupid," said Joe.

"But I like it," I responded, unruffled.

"That's dumb," he said.

The chap was really beginning to vex me. I regarded him for a moment.

"You're dumb," I concluded.

He ceased chewing.

"Yeah?"

The gauntlet had been thrown down. A deathly pall of silence fell over the crowd. Billy's mouth opened wide, lemonade snow dripping out.

I took a deep breath.

"Yeah."

I returned home soaked to the skin—to the immense pleasure of my parents. My second-eldest sister, Ellen, a formidable gymnast, had just roused herself from bed and was engaged in typical seventeen-year-old activities, like doing flips off the doghouse into the snow—to the general amusement of all five other siblings. I have little doubt that if lunch had not been called, Ellen would have handsprung from the top of the doghouse to the top of our house! As it was, my mother came outside to call us in to lunch, hysteria ensued, and my father herded us inside—with some indelicate words for Ellen and disgusted looks at my snowsuit.

It was approximately ten minutes into our lunchtime discussion when Mother introduced the subject of Christmas presents. When her line of questioning crossed



my path, I looked calmly at her and replied, "A hamsta."

A very ruffled Mother looked over the tops of her glasses. An animal was unusual.

"Well . . ." she replied after a moment of contemplation. I sensed that she was extremely tentative.

My father broke in.

"I'm not sure a hamster is the best idea."

I was confused.

My mother had found her gift of expensive deodorant to be a veiled insult, and my father had not been amused by his ceramic talking frog that burped "hello."

"Why?"

My father shot me a patronizing glare.

"They make messes and have babies."

Ellen, the science prodigy of our family, looked up from her plate of spaghetti to unleash a deep secret of biology.

"Not males," she proclaimed triumphantly.

A clump of spaghetti halted midway between my father's plate and mouth.

He slowly set it down and fixed my sister with a disdainful stare.

"I do not want animals in this house." The spaghetti resumed its journey.

Quite unfortunately, Jonathan had missed this last portion of the conversation and had proceeded to the bathroom, midcourse, having just learned that a hamster would be the ideal gift for me.

Christmas Day arrived and the entire family had packed into the living room for the traditional ripping open of presents. My father was relatively pleased with the gifts, and his demeanor remained jocular until the last present.

As he reached behind the tree for the red-and-white striped box, his face suddenly turned ashen. Stillness fell upon the group as he quietly rose with the rather large present in both hands, his eyes murderous.

About a dozen small air holes had been pricked in the wrapping paper.

"Who gave this present?" he asked calmly, but with a restrained rage.

Jonathan stood up, raising his hand and smiling demurely. He didn't seem to have noticed the deathly still.

Alice covered her face with her hands.

"Oh," my father said, smiling back like an adder. "Oh, *you* did."

"Yep," responded Jonathan.

Again came the teeth-clenched smile. I could have sworn that my father gave the box a rapid shake as he handed it to me.

Needless to say it was a hamster, and though it elicited a great deal of adoration from my sisters, my father was unamused.

In fact, after I had opened my present on that particularly sober Christmas Day, I seem to remember my father, pipe in hand, admonishing my sister's intended by saying, "If it is a female and has babies . . ." The sentence was left curiously unfinished as my father threw a meaningful glance at the iron poker lying against the fireplace grate . . .

Jonathan replied that it was indeed male and that my father could reassure himself at his leisure.

I took this moment to inform the fiancé that I was rather troubled by the lack of potential offspring. Assuming an authoritative pose, I asked him what first step *he* would take in creating babies. He turned a delightful and rather curious shade of scarlet-purple. Ellen instantly picked up on my statement.

"Well, if you really want him to have babies . . ." she prompted with a devilish gleam in her eye.

"Yeah, yeah!" I replied, captivated by my sister's suggestion.

I warned Billy Wright to steer clear of the lemonade snow. Last week, Billy had been seen consuming it in vast quantities.

My father and mother both flashed warning signs that are often accompanied by "grounded for two weeks" or "no allowance for the rest of the year" in neon blinking lights, which Ellen either did not notice or, more likely, ignored.



“Well,” she said, reaching her hand into the cage of my hamster, newly christened Fatty, “you have to shake them up really hard.”

This amazing information was accompanied by an action that would have sent ASPCA workers scampering in the general direction of the Beaver Dam Police Department and might even have prompted paradrop by an army of Greenpeace activists. The effect was no less

My mother looked up as if in a trance. “How many?” “Eighteen,” I chirped.

A glass of orange juice plummeted to the floor as my father rocketed from his chair, coming to rest inches from my face.

“Eighteen!”

Jonathan slumped miserably in his chair.

“Yep!” was my triumphant response.

The entire family charged upstairs to behold the awesome sight.

Inside the cage were eighteen baby hamsters, just as I knew there would be. I shouted joyously to my sister, “Now I know how to get babies!”

My father shook his head at me, glared at my sister’s fiancé, and stomped out of the room muttering something about a “messed-up kid when he gets older.”

I asked my sister’s fiancé what first step *he* would fake in creating babies. He turned a delightful shade of scarlet-purple.

spectacular than if she had placed the animal in a paint shaker.

Fatty was just as surprised as the rest of the family. His tongue hung loose from the corner of his mouth, his eyes bulging cross-eyed out of his head, his feet and paws running at triple speed, trying to escape the grip of my sister. After ten seconds of this torture, Ellen smiled sweetly at my parents, ceased the shaking, and returned a dazed and exhausted Fatty back to his cage.

While my parents were apparently overcome by a wave of revulsion by my sister’s act, my siblings seemed to have found the performance wildly amusing. I too was impressed by the show and carried Fatty out of the living room.

Fatty remained imprisoned in my room that night, and when I awoke my thoughts flew to him. Flinging aside my bedcovers, I rushed to his cage. My wish had come true! The shaking had worked! For there was Fatty, joyously nursing approximately eighteen blind and hairless babies. I was so excited that I ran downstairs to proclaim the good news to my family.

I skidded to a halt in the doorway and cried out, “Fatty’s had babies!”

Ellen squinted up sleepily. “Really funny.”

My father looked as if he had just imbibed a particularly sour glass of lemonade.

“Sure he did. Now sit down and have breakfast.” He must have been thinking that a “birds and the bees” talk was long overdue.

“No, I’m serious. Fatty really had kids!”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Ellen replied. “You see—”

My father obviously wished the discussion to be brief.

“Ah, thank you, Ellen.”

I was unaware of another freak of nature that is absolutely true: Mother hamsters have cannibalistic tendencies.

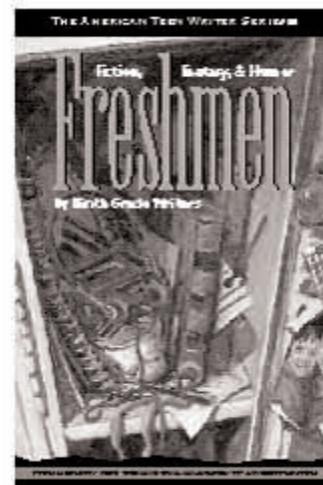
My father was overjoyed. ★



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