

KIDDING AROUND

BY LEWIS SHINER

MOM PULLED OUT the fake vomit again yesterday. It's been almost a year and I thought maybe she was over all that. Guess not, huh?

We were in the doctor's office. I'd just had a checkup so I could stay on the Pill. I'm not on it because of *that*, it's because my periods are messed up. Like there's somebody whose periods are normal? Could I see a show of hands, please? Mom is paying the bill. She waits until the nurse looks away for something and plop, drops it right there on the linoleum. Then she goes into her act. "Oh, Miss?" holding a handkerchief to her nose. "Miss? Don't you think you should do something about this? I mean, this is a doctor's office, and how healthy can it be," and on and on. I have to admit it's a little hard not to crack up when I see the nurse's face. The nurse has her hands up and fluttering around and runs out front, turning green like she's going to lose it herself. Mom gets That Look and says, "Well, if you won't do anything about it, I guess I'll have to take care of it myself," and sweeps it up with her handkerchief. She says, "Come along dear," and we're out the door.

This is pretty typical. It can go on for weeks. One time last year she drove me and my little brother Ricky to Houston for a speech tournament. Everybody was there, my best friend Gail, even this guy Ryan who I'm not really interested in, but is as close to cute as they get in Tomball, Texas. So my mom dresses up in a clown costume. I'm *not* kidding. Purple wig, red ball nose, big net collar, the works. And in case there isn't anybody in the entire city who hasn't already noticed that I came with her, she pulls out this three-foot bicycle horn and honks goodbye to me with it.

My Dad's not any better. He doesn't carry around itching powder and Chinese finger traps, but he's never serious either. What kills me is he won't ever admit to anything. He'll like leave a *Playboy* centerfold around and there'll be something really gross written to him on it, like it was from the girl in the picture. Mom yells at him and he just shrugs and says, "Well, *somebody* did it."

Gail has been my best friend since I was three years old. She lives on the other side of the highway from me. We're totally different people. I'm kind of big-boned but I have a pretty okay face, just wear a little eye shadow and lipstick. Gail is short and blond and dresses to the max every day. All she really wants out of life is to marry some cute guy in Houston with a lot of money and a fast car. But that's okay. She'll be my best friend until I die. How can I make new friends when I don't dare bring them home? Gail is at least used to whoopie cushions and plastic ice cubes in her drink with flies or cockroaches inside.

When I sat down to eat with Gail today I found a note in my lunch that said, "I fixed your favorite, peanut butter and maggots. Love, Mom." I peel my banana and it falls apart in sections. Gail's seen it a hundred times but it still makes her laugh.

"Your mom is so weird," she says.

“No kidding.”

“At least you’ve got your hearing left.” Gail’s mom plays this sixties music at unbelievable volume all day and night. Gail’s absolutely most shameful secret is that she was originally named Magic Mountain. I’m *not* kidding. Her first day at school she told everybody she was named Gail. Only she didn’t know how to spell it, and wrote it G - A - L . I had to take her aside and explain. Anyway, she kept on her mom about it until her mom finally made it legal. Nobody else remembers all that, but I do.

Everybody’s parents seem to think the sixties were this unbelievably wonderful time. They even have T V shows and everything about it now. What I can’t understand is, if it was so wonderful, why did they stop? Why don’t they still wear long hair and bell-bottoms and madras or whatever it was? I don’t think it was the sixties. I think they just liked being young.

Which is more than I can say. “Mom’s into the plastic vomit again,” I tell Gail.

“Oh God. Geez, you know, I can’t come over this afternoon after all. I just remembered this really important stuff I have to do.”

“Thanks, Gail. Thanks a lot. That means I’ll be stuck at home alone with her.”

“What about Ricky?”

“He’ll spend the night at the Jamesons’. At the first sight of novelty items he’s out the door, and Dad with him.”

“I saw him this morning, did I tell you?”

“Ricky?”

“Your dad.”

“No. Where was this?”

She looked sorry she brought it up. “Oh, it wasn’t anything. I just saw him when Mom drove me to school.”

I wanted to say, if it wasn’t anything, then why did you bring it up, dork-brain? But she looked embarrassed and a little scared so I let it drop.

When I got home Mom was already in the kitchen. You can imagine my nervousness. Among the delights she’s cooked when she’s in a mood like this are: lemon meringue enchiladas, steak a la mode, chili con cookies, and banana pizza. The pizza was actually not too bad, but you understand what I’m saying.

We all sit down at the table. Mom brings out this big aluminum tray with a cover over it, like in the movies. She takes the cover off with a big flourish and goes, “Ta da!”

It’s a casserole dish with what looks like overcooked brownies inside. We all stare at it.

“Eat,” Mom says. “Come on, eat!”

No one wants to go first. Finally Ricky breaks down and pokes at it with a fork. It makes this nasty grinding sound. “Oh gross,” he says. He looks more tired than really disgusted. Not like the time Mom walked around with the plastic dog mess on a Pamper, eating a piece of fudge. I lean over for a look myself.

“Mom,” I say, “this is a mud pie.” I sniff at it. It really *is* mud. Dried, baked mud now. “This is like not funny.”

“If you don’t eat every bite, you don’t get dessert.”

“You’re slipping, Mom,” Ricky says. “You’re losing it. This is not even remotely funny. I’m going to the Jamesons’. If I hurry, maybe I’ll be in time for supper.”

Dad is just staring off into the corner, holding onto his chin. It’s like he’s not really there at all.

I went into the den and put on M T V . If there was a God it would have been A L T V , but it wasn’t. I think Weird Al Yankovic is the greatest thing in the world. He plays the accordion and does goofed-up versions of songs, in case you’ve never heard of him. I saw him in concert in Houston and broke through his bodyguards so I could hug him.

I watched T V for a while and then Mom came in dressed in a maid’s costume and started dusting. She has this huge feather duster, a joke feather duster, so big she can hardly move it around without knocking things over. Dad comes in and says, “Let’s go for a burger.”

I was glad to get away. That mud pie business was just *too* weird. We got in his pickup and headed for the Wendy’s just down the highway. Outside the pickup is Tomball, Texas in all its glory. Flat, except for the gullies, brown except for the trash. In a little over a year I go to college and I won’t ever look back.

“Gail said she saw you this morning,” I tell him.

“She could have, I suppose.”

“She was real weird about it. She acted like she shouldn’t have told me. Do you know why that is?”

He rolls his window down with one hand, and makes a big deal out of scratching his head, real casual, you know, with the other. He’s pretending not to pay any attention to the road, only he’s really steering with his knee.

“Were you doing something you weren’t supposed to do, Dad? Were you *with* somebody? Is that why Mom’s acting weird? Because it’s really hard to be in this family, you know? I mean, at any minute it could hit me. I could get this irresistible craving for an exploding cigar. It could be like diabetes. One minute I’m fine, the next I’m filling up my pockets with plastic ants. So I want you to tell me. Did you do something?”

He cranes his head out the window and drives for a while that way, then settles back into his seat. He shrugs. “*Somebody* did.”