

Bathroom Secrets

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Sunday 4 September

11:54

I'm splayed out on my bed. The sun's peeking through the curtains. I've been awake for almost an hour, but just too cosy to get up, scrolling through pictures and reels on Instagram: international celebrities posing in luxury bathrooms, classmates sharing cat videos, Jennifer showing off her bedhead – complete with a sultry look in her eyes and silk pyjamas from some expensive brand. Seriously, can anyone look that gorgeous right after waking up? Am I the only one who drools in her sleep?

There's a soft knock at the door. 'Emmie?' It's Dad.

'Come in,' I croak, my voice hoarse after twelve hours without speaking.

Dad bounces in and sits on the edge of my bed. Ick! Is that hair gel? And what's going on with his eyebrows – did he comb them?

'You sleep okay, Em? You remember who's coming for lunch today?'

Of course I remember, Dad. The new one. I sigh. 'Yeah. I remember.'

'Valérie's really keen. You feeling okay about it? Wear something nice, will you? Maybe that blue dress?'

I grin and put my hand on his. 'Look, Dad, I love you. And I want to try. I really do – I'll be polite and nice to her and all that. But I'm going to wear something comfortable, okay? She might as well find out now that on Sundays I don't brush my teeth and I hang around in those worn-out tracksuit bottoms.'

He forces a little smile. 'Of course. You're right. You just be yourself.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

'And, er, Em?'

'Yes?'

'You have exactly five minutes to come down and set the table.'

Then he tussles my hair (I hate when he does that) and walks out, leaving only a faint trace of perfume.

Wait, what? Perfume? YUCK!

13:00

Just as I'm neatly draping the last slices of smoked ham on a plate (so stupid, usually we just plonk the packet on the table), the doorbell rings. Dad jumps up (jeez, Dad, act normal, you're a grown man) and skips – no joke – to the front door. I can't deny it: I'm feeling a bit nervous myself. Fingers crossed it won't be too bad ...

Soon I hear a woman cheerfully greeting my father. I'm standing by the table with no idea what to do with myself. Shit, how do you welcome a brand-new bonus mum you never asked for?

While I try to casually pick at a loose thread on my baggy T-shirt, two beaming adults walk into the living room. I need a second to adjust to the image of my father with another woman. They look ... just right together. The picture works. And suddenly I realise I hadn't even hoped for that.

'Hello,' I deadpan, awkwardly. Gosh, I'm such a weirdo.

'Heya! Wow, this food looks amazing,' Valérie says, pointing at the table laid with all the trimmings. She's tall and slender, wearing a dark-blue blazer over beige skinny jeans. Her brown hair's tied up in a little bun – the kind of bun that looks effortlessly casual but is stupidly hard to make. Show-off, I think, but I manage to squeeze out a smile. Come on, Ems. Try your best.

'Is that a soft-boiled egg?' she asks, and I nod. 'Yay, I love them,' she says.

I smile. 'Me, too.'

14:00

I wonder if Snow White ever bothered to have a soft-boiled egg with her stepmum. That might have cooled things off a bit.

20:54

I put on some music in my room and spin around in my desk chair. Lunch really wasn't that bad. Valérie just left. I've got to admit she's all right. Sure, Dad acts like a giddy teenager when she's around (a 40-year-old man giggling like that – it's horrific), but apart from that, they make a nice couple. Valérie is as neat and tidy as Dad is chaotic. And when Dad starts telling his stupid jokes, she laughs, genuinely laughs. They click, I can tell. They complement one another. I slide my glasses down to the tip of my nose and glance at the little mirror on the wall. Maybe I'll start up as a relationship counsellor after my Hollywood career. I can see myself sitting in a sleek white armchair in a sleek white office, wearing tall leather boots and a formal dress. Something to consider.

Shit. Mum. I promised to let her know how it went. I pick up my phone, unlock it, and start typing.

Went well.

She's nice.

My thumb hovers over the screen. I remember how nervous Mum has been about the whole situation, so I delete both lines.

Went well.

Such a bore.

Aaaand ... send.

Monday 5 September

07:34

I wolf down a bowl of cornflakes. We're exactly one week into the schoolyear, and I can't say it's off to a great start. I mean, we're already drowning in homework, and they still haven't abolished maths. High time I wrote that email to the government.

My mood lifts as soon as I read Nour's message.

Heeeey Emsie, first biology class with Smeekens today, we'll have a laugh 😊

Before you start thinking my best friend and I are total biology nerds, let me burst your bubble. Biology is a science – and science is one of the few things I care even less about than the sports section of the newspaper.

Mr Smeekens is close to retirement (at least he looks it) and blind as a bat. His class is perfect for catching up on sleep if you've been scrolling through random videos a bit too late the night before. You can do whatever you want in there, and that's no exaggeration. Jennifer systematically uses the hour to touch up her make-up (with an actual pocket mirror). I heard Nicky from Year Eleven once even smoked a cigarette. He doesn't see a thing, I'm telling you.

But today I'm sitting in the front row. I want to hear every word that comes out of Mr Smeekens's mouth – because today, we have our first class on sex education.

You bet, Nozza! Leaving asap. Can't be late on this memorable day.

08:31

The entire class is present, every one of us sitting to attention. When our biology teacher walks in, the room goes silent, all heads turning to beam at Mr Smeekens. This is *unprecedented*. I poke Nour in the side.

'Ready?' I whisper.

'Can't wait. I can hardly keep it in just looking at him.'

We snicker.

Mr Smeekens looks a little nervous as he puts his bag on the desk. He finds his textbook and flips to the right page. I can't be sure, but it looks like his hands are shaking a bit. Poor man. This clearly isn't his favourite subject. He clears his throat.

'Open your books to page ...' He stops when he notices nobody's moving. Everyone's had their textbook open on the right page for fifteen minutes. *Human Reproductive Biology*, it says in big print. I've already decorated the letters with a pink marker, adding a few lines to the *olo* in *Biology* for a fitting illustration. Honestly, sometimes I amaze myself with my own creative genius.

Mr Smeekens fiddles with the projector cable until a badly drawn picture of a naked woman appears on the smartboard. Milan – who isn't bad-looking and happens to be the captain of the school football team – whistles. Jennifer Ketels, sitting next to him, smacks him on the back of the head. Mr Smeekens completely misses the incident and begins.

'Once a man and a woman have been united in matrimony ...'

Immediately, protestations erupt across the room, fifteen hands shooting up.

Mr Smeekens sighs. 'There'll be time for questions at the end of class. First, keep quiet and listen!'

The muttering dies down.

‘So, once a man and a woman have been united in matrimony, they reproduce and have children, forming a family.’

I lean towards Nour. ‘Wanna bet he’ll only talk about couples with a man and a woman? Mr Smeekens is clearly stuck in the last century.’

‘Yeah,’ Nour whispers. ‘Just wait till I ask him about families with two mums. He might actually die of embarrassment.’

I giggle. Poor Mr Smeekens is in for an avalanche of interesting questions.

‘First of all, the man’s fallus ...’

‘The *fallus*?’ I whisper. ‘What kind of word is that?’

‘Sounds like a carnivorous plant,’ Nour hisses.

‘... will seek contact with his wife’s genitals ...’

‘Sure,’ I whisper. ‘Because there’s no sex until you’re married ...’

Nour grins. ‘Then Milan should hurry and propose to Jennifer.’

By the way, everyone knows Milan and Jennifer have this sort of on-and-off situationship going on. How far they’ve actually gone is a frequent topic of conversation on the playground. There are stories – lots of stories – but alas, no hard facts. (I would very much like to know.) Sex is probably the only subject Jennifer doesn’t come near on her socials.

‘I think they’re at Stop 7,’ Nour hisses.

I nod in agreement.

This summer, Nour and I made a list of the stages relationships go through. I wrote them in my maths notebook.

The Bus Stops of Love

- Stop 1: You chat every now and then. The bus can still go in any direction: friendship, infatuation, a relationship, marriage with a house, a garden, three kids and a dog called Marcel. Literally anything can happen.
- Stop 2: You’re in love. You giggle nervously when you see each other and exchange messages or likes every day.
- Stop 3: You’re a couple. There’s kissing, on the mouth. (I wonder what that feels like. Do you actually taste the last thing they ate?)
- Stop 4: You’re kissing passionately in the school bike shed. (You wouldn’t believe how many of my classmates have reached this stage. Crazy! Just last week I saw Sofie kissing Yin. It wasn’t romantic. She looked like she was eating him. Yin looked kind of scared, to be honest.)
- Stop 5: There’s fidgeting above the waist. (This stop gives me the jitters.)
- Stop 6: There’s fidgeting below the waist. (This stop gives me the jitters even worse. I can’t imagine ever letting things get that far. I mean, no one needs to know I wear those massive, ridiculously comfy granny knickers – no one.)
- Stop 7: Terminal. You go for it – all the way. You’ll have to picture this one yourself. Personally, I think it’s really inappropriate to start doing this at our age. I might never. I’d probably be too clumsy anyway – he’d end up elbowed in the stomach or kneed in the eye or something. Maybe public transport just isn’t for me.

‘... so that the sperm cells can merge with an available egg cell, resulting in an embryo.’

‘I wish Mr Smeekens spoke our language,’ I say.

‘He couldn’t even begin to imagine the things we’ve seen on the internet,’ Nour replies.

She’s right. All of us have probably seen more nudity than Mr Smeekens has in his entire life.

‘You’ll start to understand how the process works when you’re older.’

All around the room, heads turn in disbelief. Seriously, Mr Smeekens? It's 2025. Teens our age know exactly how reproduction works. We've had mobile internet for years and we look up smutty videos every day out of curiosity. When will adults realise that fourteen-year-olds aren't children anymore?

Mr Smeekens continues. 'Carefully look at the slide and write the correct words next to each body part on page 67. In silence. And lower your hands – I said questions are for the end of class!'

I put my hand on Nour's arm. 'Honestly, Noz, how'd this guy ever get his teaching qualification? Did they used to hand them out with free food samples at the shop?'

'Looks like it,' Nour says, already setting to work.

08:59

We're watching a shaky, blurry video about reproduction, probably filmed back when my grandparents were still in rompers. First we see a man and a woman sitting on a park bench (with about a metre of space between them). The very next scene shows a newlywed couple walking out of a church: the man and woman, miraculously transformed into bride and groom. The man gives the woman a cautious peck on the cheek, and she giggles. Then there's another flash-forward – to the bedroom now – where the couple, both wrapped in thick winter pyjamas, crawl under the sheets. Finally, a terrible drawing of the inside of a woman's body appears, with a smiling sperm cell penetrating an egg cell.

'That sperm cell looks awfully happy,' I whisper to Nour.

'Wool jammies must be a turn-on for him,' she replies, and I snort.

'That is by far the worst porn I've ever seen,' Ahmad says over the little slideshow tune, and the entire class bursts out in laughter.

Mr Smeekens turns bright red. 'Ahmad! Out!' he yells.

Ahmad gets up and strolls to the door, smirking.

'Silence!' Mr Smeekens shouts. After a few minutes, the laughter dies out. Only Nour and I can't hold back our snickers.

16:45

I don't say this a lot, but I actually had a nice day at school today. Nour and I spent the rest of our lessons giggling. Nothing could ruin our high spirits – not even Jennifer Ketels calling us 'little girls' in the dining hall, after I'd imitated Mr Smeekens and Nour laughed so hard she could hardly breathe.

As I turn into Dad's street, I immediately spot the massive, shiny motorbike on the drive. Dad's beside it, spray bottle and cloth in hand, polishing like his life depends on it. I'm hoping against all odds that there's some explanation – maybe it's a colleague's. Or even Valérie's.

Of course not.

'Dad?'

'Emmie!'

'What is this?'

'A motorbike!'

'I can see that, Dad. But what's this about?'

'My latest purchase, honey. Isn't it gorgeous?'

I roll my eyes. Dad doesn't notice. He wipes the sweat off his forehead with his arm and opens a can of Coke.

'How was your day, Em?'

I grin. 'Really good. We had biology today.'

'That's great, honey. You're starting to show some interest in school.' He gives me a thumbs-up and takes a sip.

'It was about sex,' I say.

Dad chokes on his drink and starts spluttering, Coke trickling from his nose.

'I need to go study, Dad – you keep at it.'

I carry on into the garage. Dad's still coughing, and I chuckle. Nice day at school.