

## DUG

Some people are just lazy by nature. They seem driven to conserve energy in all sorts of ways: watching the documentary on extreme camping in Alaska, because they don't see the TV remote in easy reach, using the garage door opener for home entry, because they don't want to dig through a purse for the house keys, even just eating around the apple's produce sticker instead of peeling it off and putting it into the trash. I am such a person. Laziness comes to me like manbuns come to millennials. Yet, one thing combats my otherwise naturally slothful self, exercise. It is necessary for both managing a chronic weight issue and burning off some nervous energy that would otherwise direct me to tell the grocery cashier about my misunderstanding the contractor that kept asking me for the cement, but I heard, "Where is the semen?"

After exercise, I clean up in the gym's shower to wash off the strain of moving and transform into a fresh and clean lump with no guilt. Being a creature of habit, I always go to the first locker room alcove to the right, put my bag on the bench and place my clean clothes in a giant pile next to it and shower in the first stall next to the door. I dress, dry my hair and put on makeup. Then I start my day.

One spring day, my pile of clothes included a black skirt with a wide crochet band just above the hem, a royal blue cotton t-shirt and black, chunky heeled sandals. The skirt was short'ish, just to the second knuckle of my fingers if I held my arms straight down but comfortably longer than a miniskirt – fun yet not screaming "I'm still young" desperation. "I am going to feel sassy in that skirt," I thought. I relished the idea of feeling very put-together. Though normally in my alcove with friends, this day the only other woman there was someone I occasionally crossed paths with. I didn't know her name, but she was Madeira Mom to me, because she had two daughters at The Madeira School where I had been a teacher for 13-years followed by years of being a substitute teacher. Over time I discovered that she knew my teaching friends and was an active member of the school community. And she was certainly always put-together. For her, it was effortless. My days of coordinated and thoughtful dressing were an absolutely conscious move that required prior planning and diligent follow through. I fought daily the urge to wear my pajamas all day, every day, every where.

She was already dressed and putting on finishing touches, as I dried off – pristine and shiny - and put on my bra and blue shirt. My hand swept back to the clothing pile to complete the rebirth, grabbing my cute, sassy skirt. The bench was left bench completely empty. No underpants. I stared in disbelief. I pack and check that I have everything the night before, check when I bring my bag down from the bedroom, check before I leave the house, but today, there were no underpants, no underpants had been in my little bench pile of clothes. "Oh crap! I don't have clean underpants! Now what do I do?!" I involuntarily said out loud. Without deliberation, Madeira Mom responds, "I would go commando." She had asked no questions, nor did she offer any further explanation to factor into her recommendation. She was automatic and absolute. But I was very much deliberating.

This was no light decision. Our undergarments are very intimate and personal. I do ascribe to the parental idiom that focuses on the presentability of our underpants in case of an accident - “this must be a good girl because she has nice underpants” thinks the EMT as their jaws of life extracts us out of a crushed car. It’s more than just that though. My underpants can also reflect who I am. I avoid granny panties - I may not be young anymore, but I still have life left in me. I avoid the lacy, skimpy ones too – I have life left in me, but I have to be comfortable – things need to be lashed in like sails to a mast. I like the middle of the road sort – cotton bikini, cover the essentials, stay put where they should stay put. But now I did not have the option of what type of underwear to don. It was dirty underwear or no underwear. Her quick commando decision said to me “better to remain clean-clean and naked than to sully oneself with dirty clothes and covered.” I wasn’t so sure.

I get staying clean as a priority. Years earlier I also forgot my underpants, and I did go commando in heavy, concealing sweatpants, as I toiled away on a list of daily to-dos. As I talked to people, though, I constantly thought to myself, “I am not wearing underpants, but I am talking to you,” with a ticker tape of thought scrolling across my brain, “Flee! Flee! Flee!” All conversation stalled at quick small talk as if superficial communication provided the buffer I was missing. I lasted about two hours into a day of errands before I had to go home and change.

This skirt was a wisp of thread compared to sweatpants. If I took her route, I could be in an accident and the paramedics working on me would easily think I am a regular underwearless type of woman. Yuck. Floozy. Slutty McSlut-slut. That nightmare of character impugning underwear-status my mother warned me about come true. Going with the other option, having announced my dilemma, Madeira Mom would *know* I went with the *dirty* underpants. I recoiled with the thought, “Don’t let her think you are a dirty underpants girl, a DUG.”

However, the lesser-of-two evils was clear. I would go dirty for now, but instead of going to lunch, getting work done at Starbucks, shopping and picking up my daughter after school in efficient order, I would go straight home and change. I said as much to Madeira Mom, who simply shrugged her shoulders as if to say, “Suit yourself.” Putting on the cold, wet, lifeless underwear on my clean, shiny happy skin was shocking. The clammy fabric stuck to my legs and the elastic bands pushed the cold into my skin. At least I was concealed. By this time Madeira Mom was ready to leave in her clean stylish outfit, her coiffed hair, and subtle yet flattering makeup. Then she left with just the briefest of a goodbye wave. I threw on my skirt, dried my hair without styling and quickly crammed my workout clothes into my bag.

Car keys in hand, I power walked towards the exit when my friend, Mel, came back from the shower and asked me if “that” was mine and pointed to a navy-blue blob of fabric. I turned and looked – there, in a small, enshadowed, nearly unseeable location under the locker room bench were my clean underpants. I knew before I even picked them up. Excitedly I leapt on the underpants and thrusting them into the air with an

outreached arm, exclaimed “HERE THEY ARE! I KNEW I PACKED THEM!” I threw down my gym bag, peeled off the old, used underpants and with enormous relief put on the proper and clean pair. “Much better,” I said with relief. Now I could live my day in peace and tranquility. After fixing my hair and adding a dash of makeup, I was ready. It was going to be a great day.

First stop, lunch at Chipotle’s for a burrito bowl with extra lettuce. As I walked into the restaurant, someone I recognized was walking into the Robeks next door. Yes, Madeira Mom happened to be right there at the same place at the same time. It was the first time I saw her outside the gym. In general, out of context encounters with people I know are fun. It makes the world seem smaller, more personal, and friendlier. So initially, I was tickled to see her. She noticed me too and said, “I thought you were going straight home,” finished with a small laugh. I “hmmm”-ed a mindless response with a nicely portioned smile, still enjoying the out-of-context encounter. Lingering on the thought of our worlds momentarily overlapping, I stepped into the line for food.

“But wait! Hold everything!! Something is not right here!” my mind declared, “She didn’t know I found the clean underpants! As far as she knew, I was still in the dirty pair. And, did she say that with a wink, a shrug, a tease or a bit of judgment? Was that a friendly laugh or was it more sinister? Does she think I am a Dirty Underpants Girl?! Noooooooo! I am not a dirty underpants girl! I am clean and shiny!”

But she didn’t know that.

“Oh my god! Why didn’t I tell her that I found my clean underpants? Why are my reactions always delayed! Now what do I do?!”

This wasn’t good. Of that I was certain as I sat mashing the lettuce in my bowl. What if she tells someone I know at the gym? What if at the school’s musical, I walk by, and she audibly mumbles “I wonder if she has on clean clothes *this* time?” What if I am running for a public office and she comes to my rally just to tell my supporters that she knows something about me no one else does? Sure, I have no political ambitions, but what if?! And I don’t deserve it!

10 minutes had passed, and it was unlikely she was still in carry-out only Robeks. Even if she was still there, I couldn’t go running in there and just announce that I had on clean underpants. She wouldn’t believe me. I would be the unclean girl who tried to cover it up. I couldn’t show her my clean underpants to prove it either. That could be grounds for a restraining order (“Officer, she shoved her underpants in my face, and she was still wearing them!”) I was stuck. I had to let it go for the time being. I had to just eat my mashed lettuce burrito bowl and figure this out.

That evening, I set to my task. Could I tolerate the idea that she thought that I was a dirty underpants girl? Then again, why should I care so much what she thinks? Isn’t that the moral of children’s books and after school specials? I talked to a few friends for feedback. Mel immediately told me not to stress about it. “Who cares?” she said. Of

course, Mel wouldn't care what others thought, and it could be worse to have someone think you are a DUG. Madeira Mom could have caught me in a 7-11 store, stolen coffee straws dropping out of a hole in my pocket, plinking on the linoleum floor. I needed them for a physics demonstration on electric resistance. I couldn't buy them anywhere. I had no choice. Wouldn't that revelation be worse than this? Maybe I was overreacting. Then again, Mel probably wouldn't forget her underpants, and if she did, she would never mention it out loud. Maybe she just couldn't relate to my situation.

My other friend, Kathy, said she would absolutely try to rectify the situation. Sometimes we *should* care what people think. The meaty 50-something-year-old woman, walking into Starbucks wearing a crumpled and clearly slept-in flannel lounge outfit, didn't care. People kept glancing over and avoided getting too close to her. I don't want to be a "wide berth" person! "Your underpants situation is tricky," Kathy conceded. Ugh! That missed opportunity! I concluded I had to fix it. The only real solution was to wait until I saw her and find a way to bring it up in a natural way to set the record straight.

Of course, I couldn't let her know that I needed to set the record straight, and with my can't-think-on-her-feet delayed reactions, I couldn't improvise. I needed a plan for our next gym encounter. The simple approach was an option. "I was so stressed yesterday until I found my clean underpants. I really hate not having clean clothes on." This seemed very forced, and its awkwardness undermined its own believability. No, it would have to be more subtle. I could act out the scenario again but with a new ending. By setting a pair of clean underpants off to the side, while dressing I could exclaim, "Hey, there are my clean underpants again. Just like yesterday." Better, but still too unnatural. I could coopt Mel into saying with dramatic exasperation, "Hey Chris did you drop your clean underpants... again?!" after which I would hold up the clean underpants triumphantly and say "Yes! Here they are, just like yesterday." It seemed a more plausible event to me. This would be my choice.

The next morning, I rehearsed my lines and prepared Mel for her role. I tested leaning over, picking up and thrusting my clean underpants into the air for ostensible spontaneity. It was going to be great, very authentic. I was ready to go.

She didn't show up. That was O.K. I thought, I could do it tomorrow with only slight modifications to the script. She was not there the next day. Nor was she there the day after that. The weekend came and the new week started. Talking about an underpants event a week after it happened could seem as if Mel and I talked about underpants a lot. And that is weird, maybe as weird as being a DUG. While this caused me to reconsider just letting it go, I couldn't do it. I would see it: a smirk, pursed lips, arms folded up tight to protect her clean body. I'd surely run into her some time. At this later encounter could I make up a story about a friend, say Mary, who lost her underpants earlier that day but found them? "Just like me that one time!" I could tell Madeira mom. Or I could steal Madeira Mom's underpants when she wasn't looking and then "help" her find them followed up with "You too?!" exclamation. Obviously, this was wading into some moral ambiguity, but weren't the risks were worth taking? Unfortunately, the weeks piled on without any sight of her. Saying anything to her about the "lost" underpants became more

and more stale and likely to fail. Besides, she lived with this idea about me for so long could I really undo it now? Maybe I was going to have to live with that false truth about me, to bear the burden of the banner, DUG.

Finally, after four months, I turned around the corner to our locker area and there she was getting dressed in her smart outfit. Tensing up immediately and with no prepared script for this eventuality, I stood there stock still. She started with innocuous chit chat, as I debated what to do. My mother's adage to an embarrassing situation, "No one will remember that over time," has not always borne out. People can remember some things forever. I remember some things about other people from long ago. I remember my friend Peter feeding 6 year-old Ronny Smiley mud burgers he had baked on a boulder in his back yard. He made mud milk to wash it down with. We were all 7-8 years-old. That was 50 years ago. My most vivid memory of Peter. 10-years ago a fellow health club patron literally danced through the weight equipment aisles for 20 minutes until she face-planted next to the squat rack. I definitely remember that. Though Madeira Mom didn't say anything directly, she could still, likely does, remember I was a DUG, at least to her knowledge. And here was my chance. I could overcome my lack of a game plan and seize the day, right the wrong. Wasn't it worth it to bring it up even if it was awkward? It would be now or never. But just then, I didn't see the point anymore. It's not that I didn't care what she thought, I did, but suddenly I could live with that. I wore myself out over the months trying to fix the problem. There was no gas left in the tank. Without skipping a beat, I asked her about her workout. She talked about the instructor, and as she went on, I relaxed. And I can live with a blemish, deserved or not. Besides, Europeans think Americans are too obsessed with cleanliness anyway.

Later that day I had frozen yogurt with friends. I filled them in on my story and one said, "You know, right now she is probably talking about finally running into a woman from the gym who was a dirty underpants girl." "Hum," I thought, "I wonder if I can still track her down."