

THE SINGLE DAD

By Richard Cahill

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SHOULD YOU BUY THIS BOOK?

Or, to ask the larger question, should you buy any book? Or just wait for the DVD or the reality show to come out? Situations where a person has to buy a book are not common nowadays, but you obviously have found yourself in one. IF YOU ARE A MALE, you are probably in an airport gift shop, on the brink of departing on a transcontinental flight, and you know that having a paperback to stick in front of your nose while flying is the only way you can assure yourself that the friendly obese person wedged in next to you, in the kidney to armpit fashion so beloved by the modern airline industry, will not spend the next six hours telling you about their life, their kids, or how their colon re-routing made medical history while the Midwest whistles by beneath your feet.

But there are lots of books in the gift shop, along with packages of gum the size of throw pillows and rolls of Life Savers available for what you would normally pay for a vodka martini. Should you buy this one? Probably not, if you're a single guy. Buy a magazine instead, one that features photos of celebrity women snapped just seconds before their clothes fell completely off. You can fantasize about these women, even though they are all married to male movie stars who are older than your father. If you're a married guy, buy an action novel and dream that you, like the hero, are saving the universe with a callous disregard for your life and a sense of studly self-regard that wisecracking, plucky, big-breasted heroines find irresistible, even though in real life your tree-hugging wife won't even let you buy a car with a V-8.

But what if fatherhood has already happened to you, or even more dismally, fate has left you a Single Dad? Not sure? Can't remember? Take this quick quiz and find out!

ARE YOU A SINGLE DAD?

1. You are sitting in pleasant surroundings (a bar) surrounded by other adult males, (Your friends) somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Someone says “I got my brother-in-law’s limo for the weekend. Let’s go to Fort Lauderdale.” You reply:

- a. Sure! Buy me a twelve-pack and I’ll drive until we get to North Carolina!
- b. Great! I’ll tell my girlfriend I’m working overtime to save up for her ring!
- c. Super! I’ll tell my wife I joined the National Guard and have to spend the weekend defending Florida!
- d. Sorry, I can’t go; cans of Spaghetti-o’s are two for one at Pathmark starting tomorrow.

2. Some moron cuts you off in traffic and then gives you the one-fingered symbol of extreme disrespect when you let him have a light, corrective tap of the horn. You:

- a. Follow him at a distance of approximately eight inches, mouthing death threats and gesturing with the automatic pistol you always keep under the seat, until he pulls into a police station parking lot, then peel off at a hundred miles an hour after screaming the “f” word at him (not the main “f” word, but the derogatory term for a gay male) at the top of your lungs.
- b. Crush his flimsy mini SUV into the guardrail with your 450 horsepower Dodge Ram 4X4. Tell your girlfriend to write down his license plate number so you can send him the bill for the scratch on your front bumper afterwards.
- c. Tell your wife that the only thing standing between the guy and instant death at your hands is your wish to spare her the trauma of testifying at your trial.
- d. Tell your son that he probably lost the rest of his fingers playing with his dad’s power tools.

3. You win an all-expenses paid trip for two to a Caribbean island known for its powdery sand beaches, strong rum drinks, sensuous native girls and lavish casinos. You take:

- a. An exotic dancer you have known for fifteen minutes.
- b. Your girlfriend, after you spend \$800 for vacation lingerie, stimulant potions, massage oils and love toys at the Boom-Boom Boutique.
- c. Your wife.
- d. Your kid.

4. While hosting a tequila-tasting party, you are suddenly overcome by fatigue. You fall asleep on the sofa. You are most likely to be awakened by:

- a. Your neighbor, who wants his sofa back.
- b. Your girlfriend's best friend, coming to help her pack up her things.
- c. The telephone book, flung at your head by your wife, open to the section marked "Family Law."
- d. Your child, playing the drum set your ex sent him for Christmas.

5. You play hooky from work to attend the Businesspersons' Special at the nearest major-league ballpark. You paint your face the colors of the home team. The game is being televised, and the cameras focus on you during the seventh inning stretch. You are most worried about being recognized by:

- a. The police
- b. Your girlfriend, because you are sitting next to your favorite waitress from Fran's Sports Bar and Motorcycle Repair.
- c. Your wife, because you are sitting next to your girlfriend.
- d. Your kid, because you used up all of his markers painting your face.

SCORING: Give yourself four points for every “a” answer, three points for every “b” two for “c” and one point for each “d.”

16-20 points: You are single, and probably will be for life, and you may be a dad several times over, but you will never be a Single Dad. Put this book down, and look for a publication that has a lot more pictures in it.

10-15 points: You are single, but even your mother wouldn’t let you watch a kid for longer than a standard commercial break. You are free to pursue your primary interests, sex and microbrews, full time. You shouldn’t even be buying a book, unless one of the girls behind the counter is super hot, and you are trying to impress her, in which case you should have enough sense not to be buying a paperback.

5-9 points: You are married, and most likely a dad. You don’t think life can get any worse. Trust me, it can. Buy this book and read every word. It is a harbinger of your potentially dismal future, your own personal “While England Slept.” It may inspire you to renew your wedding vows, despite that being possibly the worst way to spend a weekend outside of a maximum security prison (Seriously-you might as well wear a “Completely Whipped” t-shirt). It will at least make you a whole lot sneakier about breaking them.

4 points or less: You are a Single Dad. This is your Boy Scout manual, your tour guide, your Cliff Notes for life in hell. Buy a copy for every toilet tank in your house.

IF YOU ARE A WOMAN: You are buying a gift. This book is perfect.

LIFE AS A SINGLE DAD

Single dad. Two words that smacked more of carefree fun have scarcely been uttered. Okay, maybe “long weekend.” Or “open bar.” Or “Why don’t you come with me to Aruba?” spoken in breathy tones by Megan Fox, whom you have run into at the 7-11.

That’s more than two words, you say, and you’re right, but before I can answer you ask “Did Megan Fox really say that to *you*?” and I say “More about Megan later,” while secretly thinking “*If this goober really believes Megan Fox has to buy her own cigarettes, I could unload those old Arena Football tickets on him for enough to get lunch,*” and get back to the subject.

Single dads are a rare breed in this fresh century. Single Parent means Single Mom. If you doubt me, just check the media. Look up anything on your computer that claims to be helpful to the single parent; you’ll notice it’s also riddled with pop-ups concerning skin moisturizers, brow waxers, the works of Justin Timberlake, and other subjects men know nothing, and care nothing, about. Likewise the magazine rack. Women’s magazines have pages of sensitive, timely advice on how to raise children of divorce, while men’s magazines stick to subjects of more personal interest; sports, drinking, and what could euphemistically be described as inspirational photography. Moms have Oprah, and Dr. Phil, and other televised omnisciences, who spend hours every TV season discussing child development, and often bring actual live children onto their programs, especially children with interesting problems, like having long prison sentences to serve or compulsively throwing up if merely shown pictures of food.

Modern dads, who tend to throw up if merely shown a picture of Dr. Phil, are left to get most of their major advice on any subject from sports personalities. This is unfortunate, from a child-raising point of view. When the Monday Night Football announcers use the word “kid,” they mean someone who is already twenty-four and weighs more than a sofa bed. You can watch every football game from now until Super Bowl CIXTII¹, but Dan Deirdorf will never give you a single useful parenting tip, like how to get your ten-year-old to untie his shoes before putting them on, instead of trying to shoehorn his feet in with your flip-open cell phone.

This book is meant to plug those gaps in your parenting portfolio. But don’t panic; it’s guaranteed not to make you cry, or even think. It’s not going to make you worry that anything you’ve already done is wrong because, being a guy, you wouldn’t think that anyway, even if you

¹ Sixty-two.

had just thrown a bucket of anthrax spores into the fan. It's going to "empower"² you, with "parenting tools,"³ so that raising your kid becomes even more effortless and efficient, something that can easily be done during half-time.

IN THE BEGINNING

Single Dads were once as popular as living indoors. The whole thing started with a Single Dad, according to the best available report. He created His children and placed them in a beautiful garden. This automatically qualified him as a Single Dad, because if He had been married His Wife would have told Him this was a stupid idea, just like your wife would never let your kids play in your formal dining room, which is why they always asked you if they wanted to do it. The Original Kids trashed the place, naturally, just like your kids broke the doors off the china closet. The Original Dad punished them, instead of getting punished Himself, for letting the kids in there in the first place, which the Original Wife, if She had existed, would have arranged. He gave his children The Original Time Out, which, according to many respected theologians, is still going on.

PRIMITIVELY SPEAKING

Life was short, nasty and brutish, full of predators like saber-toothed tigers and packs of huge, prehistoric wolves, in contrast to the modern condition, where life is long, nasty and brutish, full of predators like suicide bombers and reality TV hosts. In the old days, Single Dads were nearly as common as Single Moms. This was not because prehistoric divorce laws were more equitable. No one needed to get divorced, because almost always before you and your mate

² But not like Superman gets empowered. Too bad.

³ As opposed to regular tools that you get at Home Depot, which should not be used directly on the child, unless you want to end up on Dr. Phil yourself.

could stand sharing a cave together FOR ONE MORE STINKING MINUTE, the slower one of you would get eaten.

Thus it continued for many years, or Ice Ages, as they were called back then. The female would raise the male child until it was old enough to throw rocks, and then the male would take over, teaching his son how to throw rocks at stuff he could eat, and, equally importantly, how to throw rocks at stuff that could eat him, unless discouraged by being first hit by a rock.

Progress started with the invention of the spear. The invention of the spear was followed immediately by the invention of the practical joke. (“See this spear, son? Go stick it in that mammoth.”) War was invented. The first war was caused by a practical joke. (“See this spear, son? Go stick it in that Neanderthal.”) As long as the primary male occupations consisted of sticking sharp things into wild animals, making them hold still enough to eat, and the occasional spear fight with the neighbors, the value of fathering, even single fathering, was taken for granted.

The first disturbance in the primitive idyllic relationship between fathers and sons was the invention of tribal chiefs, which was considered such an astonishingly good idea, especially by the chiefs, that it was soon followed by the invention of pharaohs, emperors, kings, dukes, rajahs, earls, dukes, dukes of earl, princes, regents, dauphins, lords, lairds, knights, shahs, sheriffs, barons, moguls, prime ministers, dictators-for-life, middle management and other guys without formal titles who nonetheless had their own hordes.

In the case of most of the above, the father would designate his son as his successor as Leader Of The Pack. (This still goes on, especially in the Third World and the Republican Party) Whatever title he held, would pass to the kid upon his demise. Many sons were content to wait for this to happen. After all, if the old man went around dissing a whole continent by calling himself the Scourge of Europe, he was bound to tune in a little comeuppance sooner rather than later, leaving the kid to tone things down a bit and enjoy the family heirlooms, like France, in peace.

Some kids, however, were more ambitious. They saw Dad was having all the fun, starting wars, raping, pillaging, and not having to be home before dark, and they plotted to help nature along by arranging for something sharp to be stuck into Dad so they could take over the family business. Often the treacherous son was aided by Mom, who, frankly, was fed up with all the mead-drinking and slave-girl owning that Dad was putting on the primitive Visa card.

Sometimes the kid did the job himself; sometimes he was aided by a hired assassin, who stabbed the king in the back as he slept. This assassin may be regarded as the forerunner of the modern Family Law attorney.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of dads and sons continued to hold lower ranking positions, such as serf, slave, servant, peasant, peon, penniless nomad, indentured laborer, horde member, assistant pillager, foot soldier, private, cannon fodder, bush beater, hod carrier, fisherman, laborer, day laborer, hard laborer, forced laborer, food taster and account executive. Sons had no choice but to emulate their fathers. A typical day consisted of backbreaking toil in the fields of the manor, followed by light starvation and towards evening, a twenty percent chance of bubonic plague. The Crusades were invented, and subsequently discarded. Everybody was pretty well relieved when America was discovered, and they realized they no longer had to starve to death tilling the fields of Europe. They could now die of dysentery crammed into the holds of ships on the way to America.

At first the settlement of the New World changed the father-son relationship very little. Colonial Dads taught their kids how to hunt, fish and kill redcoats; Pioneer Dads taught their kids how to fish, hunt and kill bears. Colonial Moms busied themselves making priceless antique heirlooms. Divorce was unheard of. A person who hated his or her spouse could still entertain a bracing optimism that they would outlive them, and the lack of advanced forensic science meant that if someone arranged a premature exit for their partner, everyone else was likely to accept the explanation that "She got et by a bar," or "He got et by a redcoat," as true.

Meanwhile another century meant the invention of earth-shaking new inventions, inventions that changed the course of history, such as the train, the steamboat, and the telegraph, none of which anybody uses today. Divorce, however, was not invented until after the movies were discovered and Hollywood was born. Divorce, like plastic surgery and giving your dogs haircuts, was a gift to the masses from the celebrity classes, and pretty soon everyone was doing it.

Of course, your celebrity marriages, then as now, lasted approximately as long as the NCAA basketball tournament, so there were seldom any celebrity kids whose welfare had to be considered. People with kids still didn't get divorced until around the 70's, when, after a decade of good vibes, good music, great protesting and the shimmering possibility of the creation of a

world community based on pillars of peace and love, they discovered they had turned into their parents and were listening to disco. They headed for the courtroom in droves.

This led to discovery by modern jurisprudence that fathering was no longer necessary. Mom's job had changed little; in fact her résumé had expanded. Besides raising and nurturing the kids, she now had concerns like air-freshening, waxy buildup and keeping her husband from using her loufa to scrub the car. True, the Little House On The Prairie had become the Little Split-Level In Buena Vista, but mothering had survived the transition.

Fathering, on the other hand, had imploded. Nobody wanted to follow in their father's footsteps anymore. Dad was regarded as quaint and perhaps a little cracked. After he taught you how to throw a baseball, and, more importantly, how to hit the dirt when a baseball was thrown directly at your head (Dads still loved practical jokes) he had little more to offer the son in the way of career guidance. He, after all, worked in a big, sweaty factory with a just a few capital letters in its name (GE, GM, US Steel) while Junior wanted to draw a paycheck from a company with different initials, like MGM or UA. He dreamed of working for the movies. He couldn't look to Dad for advice on how to pitch a treatment or whose phone calls he should return. Not that he could look to Mom for this, either, but Mom at least knew how to dump spaghetti out of a can, so when his mother and father filed papers so that they could quit sharing the same last name, Junior was usually ordered over to Mom.

Thus Single Moms began to greatly outnumber Single Dads. They became a recognizable social phenomenon in the eighties, like platform shoes or Donkey Kong. Single Dads, in the meanwhile, survived only in rural niches and on TV sitcoms. Otherwise, guys for the most part became Divorced Dads, hollow men who exercised their parenting skills, such as they were ("We cook hot dogs in the dishwasher because your mother got the frying pan in the divorce, that's why!") every other weekend and on Wednesday nights.

Then the push for sexual equality acquired an irresistible momentum, like a presidential campaign once your wealthy friends have contributed a trillion dollars. Mostly the oppressed sex wanted equal access to high-paying, major stud-type positions in the booming economy; there was no discernible demand by women to move into male-dominated sectors like plumbing and garbage collection. However, an unintended side effect of the movement was that occasionally a guy would ask for custody of his kid.

This was usually followed by a query from the Family Court bench in regard to where the guy's lawyer had gotten his law degree. "Off the Internet," was considered the acceptable answer, and everyone had a nice laugh and Mom got custody and enough child support to raise the kid and build an experimental aircraft besides. Sometimes, though, in extreme circumstances, such as the mother being a full-time Arctic explorer, or having spent the previous 400 days attending Grateful Dead concerts, *the request was actually granted*. The father was given child support, usually enough to at least take care of the basic food and shelter needs of the child's pet hamster, and a new kind of Single Dad was born.

This book is for you. Many times, during the upcoming years, as the inevitable worries of parenthood crowd your thoughts, worries about school, about your child's social and physical development, about the forthcoming dangers of your kid's teenage years, and about whether the Raiders are going to shore up their pitiful secondary, you can turn to these pages for solace, for comfort, for the knowledge that you are not alone, and for my personal opinion, which is that the Raiders will never win another Super Bowl.

Yes, changes are on their way, my friend, and not just on the Jet coaching staff. Luckily, (for you, not your kid) you will be able to bring your uniquely male perspective to household problems. For example, you may learn to cook, especially after a year or so of eating at Burger King, but you will never learn how to bake. (Pop-Tarts do not count as baking) You will learn to sew on buttons, but only after you have satisfied yourself once and for all that Super Glue won't work nearly as well. You will learn to do laundry, but you will never give a crap about static cling.⁴

Problems like bedwetting, dental visits, keeping your kid out of dork clothes, making lunches are now yours. For dental visits, just remember the Golden Rule of Dental Scheduling- the doctor does work Saturdays, but his next available Saturday appointment is the weekend after Chelsea Clinton becomes President. For lunches, strive for variety, and don't forget a piece of fruit every time, otherwise your kid will be unarmed during food fights. And as for the bedwetting, I suggest knocking off the Coors Light at least an hour before you hit the sack.

In return for these few minor inconveniences, you will gain entry into the ethereal yet satisfying world of parenting, with all its attendant hopes and fears. Many a day you will look

⁴ What's the big deal? The first time I hear about anyone getting seriously electrocuted by a sweater, I'll start buying fabric softener, I swear.

into your son's bright, eager eyes and wonder what kind of man he is destined to be, poet, banker, President, maybe, and when he has surpassed all of your wildest dreams for his future, will he then break down and explain the mysterious stain on the vaulted ceiling?

There are many other books out there to guide you along parenting's way, but frankly, none of the other ones mention beer or ESPN, so this is the one for you. Other books purport to know the answers to such questions as: Should you use physical punishment to discipline your child? Or should your child see you naked? The authors make a federal case out of these so-called issues, mostly to pad out their books, in my opinion. The answers are 1, Yes and 2, No. On to the good stuff!

THE FIRST STEPS

Single. Free. Now that you've paid twenty thousand dollars to a slime eel of a lawyer, and undergone the legal equivalent of a WWF⁵ steel cage wrestling match with your ex, with less steroid use but much more bad language, that's you. And because your ex-wife's plan for life is to stay as far away from you as possible, she's going to remarry someone from a different state. A different state of the former Soviet Union, that is, and when the judge hears about her plan to move to Vladivostok, he, holding his nose like he's buying a case of mustard gas for a guy with a Middle Eastern accent and no ID, awards custody to *you*.

Dad. Dadding is a weekend job, or has been, up to this point, mostly consisting of barbecuing in a beery haze and assuring the your boy that he is not missing any crucial episodes of The Power Rangers while you monopolize the tube watching four consecutive football games every Sunday. Now that you are gearing up for full-time fatherhood, you are conscious of your increased responsibilities. No more shirking on the child-rearing front. The molding of your child's emotional, social and intellectual capabilities are in your hands alone. Single Dad thinks *"I gotta get this kid his own TV."*

⁵ Actually, now called the WWE, after legal action by the *other* WWF, the World Wildlife Fund. They were worried you were getting the two mixed up, which meant you couldn't tell the difference between a starving otter and a menacing, 400 pound man in a Speedo. Apparently, they think you are pretty stupid.

The burden may seem overwhelming at first. Go one day at a time, and remember the five most important components of raising any child of divorce. 1. Food. 2. Clothing. 3. Shelter. 4. Maintaining communication with the boy's mother. 5. Emotional support. 6. Science projects.

That means 5=6, which is good for you to start learning, because soon your kid will be bringing home math homework you don't remotely understand with things like that in it. Let's begin.

Food. Two types. Eat in. Anything you cook with your own hands your child will reflexively hate. Save eating at home for breakfast, when he can pour himself a big bowl of Hyper Chocolate Sugar Gobs. Don't worry about it having the same nutritional value as a glue stick. He likes it, and the school gives him lunch anyway. The only other at-home cuisine he will eat without acting like it has a big chunk of landfill clinging to it is delivery pizza. Single Dads feel their waists growing and their arteries shrinking with every slice, while their kids eat three bites and are itching for another ride on the Cholesterol Coaster an hour later. They all scream for Diary Queen, so the doting Single Dad picks up the car keys and his Lipitor in a single smooth motion.

Eat out. Anyplace with a playground consisting of big colorful tubes and small dented plastic balls that thousands of unwashed children with ketchup on their socks have slithered around in is superior in your kid's mind to any place that actually serves edible food. Forget fine dining. No longer do you have to decide between the seared tuna or the stuffed portabello. To super-size or not to super-size, that is the only question. The same for beverages. Single Dads know immediately when Slurpees come out in a new flavor, like Mucho Caffeine Green, but have to strain to remember that a Chardonnay is best suited to a grilled cheese sandwich.

Clothing. Buy prodigiously. Your son will actually wear only three shirts and two pairs of pants all year, but you don't know which shirts and pants those will be, so buy him enough in September to outfit a boy band for a major European tour. He will select his favorites, usually T-shirts with the most offensive art and slogans on them. The rest you may leave, brand-new, in his closet while he outgrows them.

Shelter. Live in an ill-kempt condo with a big, hairy, hard-shedding dog. This is one of the unbreakable rules. DO NOT try to substitute smaller, cleaner, or more convenient pets. It is an invitation to tragedy. (More later on Pets That Die, including Gerbil Heaven, or Theology of Eternal Life For Stupid Rodents That Choke Themselves to Death Underneath Their Spinning

Wheels and How to Determine Maximum Size Dead Gerbil That Can Be Safely Flushed Without Having To Call A Plumber) Resign yourself to the fact that your son will utterly ignore the dog a week after he's gotten it and every week thereafter, leaving you to feed it, walk it, vacuum up after it and conceal it from the Homeowner's Association.

Communicating with non-custodial parent. Remember, she lives in Siberia. When it's 4 PM here, it's 3 AM there. Let him call her then.

Emotional support. This you are going to be lousy at, because you are a guy. Just because the only time you remember personally needing emotional support was when the Rangers failed to make the playoffs again, does not mean that your child is not a bundle of nerves rubbed raw by the grit of your divorce. Your child may feel abandoned by his mother, and may worry that you, too, will leave him. If he asks, with a trembling in his voice, how long *you* will be "there" for him, answer him reassuringly. Exaggeration is permissible here. Pick some poetic, seemingly eternal time. Try "As long as the sun shines," or "As long as there are ants in the kitchen."

Science Projects. Always announced at bedtime the day before they are due. You can fall back on the old Volcano Made of Play-Dough, if your kid has remembered to put the lid back on his Play-Dough, which is marginally less likely than going to Aruba with Megan. So after four minutes of frantic, ill-tempered brainstorming, when your son says he has an idea and asks to borrow the camcorder, you let him. The science project turns out to be titled Inside A Lightning Strike. The kid turns off the lights, puts his action figure of Thor, The Thunder God (with actual tin foil ax) in the microwave, sets it on High Nuke, and videotapes. This is followed by Fire In The Microwave, What Do You Mean, You Took The Fire Extinguisher To School For Your Last Science Project? and When You Put Out A Fire With a Wet Blanket, Try to Make Certain Beforehand It's Not The Electric One. The science project got an A-minus, but we're still waiting to hear from America's Funniest Home Videos.

WEEKENDING WITH THE SINGLE DAD

Weekends are far different now. Gone are those fabulous bachelor weekends, when you tumbled out of bed, bright and eager for the weekend social whirl, at about four in the afternoon on Saturday, and didn't sleep again until you were safely at the office on Monday morning. Likewise your typical married weekend, lying around the house in your underwear, hoping your wife stayed at the mall long enough that it would be too late to clean the gutters, mow the lawn, or perform some other onerous household chore she might remember you ought to do when she returned, belongs in the memory bin.

Now you spend every weekend with your child, and the most important thing about weekending with your child is finding the right kid to have a sleep-over with him. Sleep-overs are vital. They give your kid the chance to fight with somebody besides you. Usually your child will make the decision for you. "Can (insert name of Some Other Kid, hereafter referred to by the acronym SOK, which, appropriately, is what you will feel like doing to him after the weekend is through) sleep over?" your kid will ask.

"Fine," you reply, thinking this will get you out of playing video games with your kid. SOK can do it. Playing video games with your kid consists of holding the controller box while a series of blasts and explosions occur on a complicated little screen. Then your kid says "You lost," and sniggers in an unbelievably annoying way.

Two minutes later you are regretting your quick OK on Some Other Kid. Types of sleep-over guests range from kids so dangerous they can teach your child how to make plastic explosive out of ordinary household items, to kids so sensitive they will die if you take the lid off the peanut butter in their presence, and you don't want either one of those. The first kind of kid can usually be identified by the items in his luggage (car battery, a machete, lighter fluid, carton of cigarettes). This kind of kid often sports a small but stylish goatee; he has been shaving since he was eight, and knows enough about submission holds to be able to force you to build a skateboarding ramp over your back porch.

Take immediate action upon sighting this kind of kid. Say in a loud voice "Your friend Bruiser is here, son. Are you ready to go to the library? The all night Read-In starts in five minutes." By the time the blue-haired old librarian says "Time for everyone to sit in a circle," Bruiser will be off, hitchhiking to the nearest sleazy video arcade, which, frankly, is where he belongs.

The second will be identified by a parent, who will ask if you have any peanut dust in your house, pronouncing the words “peanut dust” like most people would pronounce “deadly, kid-killing toxic waste.” As you know, we didn’t have peanut or latex allergies when we were kids, but lots of kids have them now, and you certainly don’t want your kid’s overnight guest puffing up like a miniature Rush Limbaugh, just because there’s a single Beer Nut left under the recliner from the last time the Cowboys won the Super Bowl.⁶

This kind of kid is easily deterred. Since you are a divorced guy with custody of a boy at the most slovenly of male ages, ten, you may safely assume that *there is every kind of damn dust ever invented in your house*, so answer “Yes, buckets of it,” and just in case the kid shows up anyway, dump the contents of the Oreck on the front steps.

But it’s too late for those precautions-you’ve already agreed. SOK arrives around seven PM on Friday night. His mother, her eyes glistening with gratitude as if you were Ed McMahon holding a check for her, drops him off. SOK is carrying a suitcase the size of a Plymouth Prowler, and you notice that his mother is clutching a pair of airline tickets and a passport in her hands. But you stupidly ignore these signs of trouble, just like you would probably ignore chest pains if you were jogging in Fort Lauderdale on National Thong Day.⁷ You say to SOK’s departing mother “Have a nice weekend.”

“Hasta la vista,” she says, in a practiced accent, and you notice she seems to be talking to her kid as much as you.

Your kid and SOK immediately go into the dangerous burst of activity known to parents as Kids Trying To Have All The Fun All At Once. Trying to stop them from playing Halo and living room whiffle-ball while simultaneously attempting to spray-paint the cat is as useless and annoying as watching anything with Kardashian in the title. The only thing to do is wall them off and hope for the best. This is known as the Chernobyl technique, because it was first practiced by eminent Russian nuclear scientists drunk on vodka when their favorite chain reaction went amuck, and by using it you are emulating the finest drunk scientific minds. But, unlike the Russians, you don’t pour a hundred million tons of concrete on the kids, because that would negatively affect the resale value of your condo, already perilously low because of the

⁶ 1996, and counting. America’s Team, my ass.

⁷ Unfortunately, as of this writing, this important holiday is officially recognized only in Brazil. Write your Congressman today!

skateboarding ramp. Merely close all available doors between yourself and the kids. Lock 'em. Take a walk. On the way back, pick up some vodka.

Fortunately, the half-life of kids having fun is far less than that of the radioactive stew that went boom-boom at Chernobyl. For example, all of the Stromtium90⁸ buried in the Ukrainian soil will still be glowing like the TV the kids left on in your den 60,000 years from now. You only have to wait until about three AM, when you can unlock the doors and tiptoe into the living room, where the children have fallen asleep on the rug under a thick layer of discarded candy bar wrappers, like Hansel and Gretel asleep under the leaves of the wood. This is time to contemplate your son's innocent sleeping face, or kick him and run away, whichever suits you.

THE SINGLE DAD AND MAINTAINING A THRIFTY, ORGANIZED HOUSEHOLD

There is only one way to do this. Buy everything at a convenience store. This is imperative for the Single Dad. Almost everything you can purchase at a regular supermarket can be bought at a convenience store for almost twice the price. This is necessary and well worth it because it is faster. Speed is vital to the Single Dad because of the huge amounts of time consumed by simple work and parenting obligations. For example, it takes the Single Dad up to one hour of adroit manipulation to persuade his child to get out of bed and get dressed on a school morning. When this fails, as it almost always does, it is followed by five minutes of primal screaming and threatening, which in turn is followed by an intense 90 seconds of physically wrestling the child into his clothes and shoving him out the door. A moment of complete tranquillity follows, but then the Single Dad abruptly remembers that the child has not had a good breakfast. He jumps into the car and drives 75 miles an hour through his sleepy residential neighborhood so he can toss a granola bar at his son right before he clambers aboard the school bus. And the Single Dad curses when that granola bar bounces off his child's backpack, hits the street and gets ground into Granola Extra Flat by the school bus tires, because he remembers he paid a dollar-twenty-seven for that granola bar at the Shop-n-Split.

⁸ Named after Strom Thurmond

Why not just grit your teeth and wait out the supermarket line once in a while? Answer: Because every time the Single Dad goes to the supermarket, it is Old Person Day, where everyone over the age of sixty gets an extra ten percent off their entire grocery order. The trouble with Old Person Day is that sixty-year-olds never take advantage of it. They are still too spry. They're ahead of you in the line at the Wham Bam Thank-You Mart, buying snuff and quarts of malt liquor. The average age of the person in the supermarket on Old Person's Day is 89.6. They bring busloads of them in from the nursing home, and each of them is tanking up their cart with enough groceries to last them a dozen years more than their average life expectancy.

Old people don't trust the Universal Product Code, so they deliberately look for items where it has been warped, wrinkled, or smudged over. Single Dad, fuming behind in the line, craves to wipe that satisfied smirk off the old geezer in front's wrinkled face as the words "PRICE CHECK!" reverberate for the fifth time throughout the store. The happy codger knows that once again *every single store employee* is running around frantically to make sure he's getting the full nickel off that the box of macaroni clutched in his hand.

Meanwhile, your kid is taking advantage of the extra time to whine for every candy bar in the impulse rack, the ballgame starts in five minutes, and that gallon of your kid's favorite ice cream, Fudge Bog, is melting hopelessly all over your iPhone, which you have stupidly left at the bottom of the cart.

The convenience store is much simpler, although more dangerous. Convenience stores get robbed, but you take heart at the sign saying Police Officers May Be Posing As Store Employees. Then you look at the clerk, who is a four-foot eleven person of indeterminate sex, wearing carpal tunnel braces on both arms and working the cash register nearly as fast as the continents are drifting apart, and you realize that the police are not really involved at the moment, but you remember that all you have in the fridge is an empty six-pack ring and a couple slices of pastrami that have been in the meat drawer since Barack Obama lived in Indonesia, so you bravely push through the doors.

Prices at convenience stores range from the merely whimsical to naked extortion. The best deals are on things your kid wants, like candy and donuts; things you really need, like cheese curls and turkey loaf, cost a little more. Things that you *might* need on an emergency basis, like Band-Aids or sunscreen, are priced slightly lower than a first-class seat on a manned

mission to Mars. You realize that the Speed O' Light Store is where the hospital gets its thirty-dollar aspirins.

Buy only necessities. Bread, milk, bologna, beer and chips. Gaze longingly at the magazine rack, where *every single magazine*, whether men's, women's, gossip, exercise, or low-rider, has a picture of Jennifer Anniston, or someone who looks just like her, on the cover. Throw in a treat for your kid; you have to because you have let him run loose in the store while you fantasized about you and Jennifer getting in some quality time together. He selects a battery-powered GI Joe candy gas mask that injects fruit-flavored sugar vapor *directly into his teeth*. Let the clerk total it up. Let your kid jump up and down and make faces in front of the security camera. Don't worry if this annoys the cashier. You just gave him six bucks for a travel shampoo. As you take out your wallet to pay for the items on the counter, you think grimly that at least you're still spending less than you would if you bought the same items at an airport gift shop in Osaka. Then your kid points out that you still need to buy batteries for the mask.

YOUR MOTHER STILL THINKS YOU ARE AN IDIOT, AND YOUR BOSS THINKS YOU'RE USELESS-SELF-ESTEEM FOR THE SINGLE DAD.

There is a mellowing that comes with the passage of time since your days as somebody's husband ended. No longer are you confronted every day with the ugly reality of married existence, which is that the most significant person in your life thinks you are hopelessly inadequate in every aspect of providing for their needs. Now the most significant person in your life is your son, who thinks *exactly the same thing*. Being a Single Dad is a lot like being married, except you will never catch your son trying to put paraquat in your Bit's O' Bran because he has deciphered your latest Yahoo screen name, Redy4dvrc.

Your mother becomes more intrinsically important to you than she has been since you learned to bathe yourself. She will watch your kid for you from the time he comes home from school until you get off work, if she lives nearby. This keeps you from having to enroll the boy in After Care. After Care costs a hundred bucks a week and consists of your son sitting around watching TV with other divorced kids. These kids usually have stepfathers with nicknames like

Tugboat and Biggie, who are *huge* professional wrestling fans, which means your kid is getting whacked by at least one well-aimed folding chair every day.

Your mother does not baby-sit to save you money, though. She watches your kid so she can figure out what kind of criminal he is going to become as a result of being raised by you. She buys you parenting books by the shelf-load, and pops surprise questions about their contents at you when you arrive to pick up the kid. Don't let this catch you off guard. Answer any way you want. *Nobody reads parenting books, especially your mom, otherwise you wouldn't be such a divorced mess, right?*

"Of course I read '*Socially Damned-Preparing The Children Of Divorce For Their Lives Of Inevitable Tragedy*,'" you tell Mom. "Cliff and Lemming are two of the most respected authorities in the field. I especially enjoyed Chapter 10; *Trial Separation-Highway to Hell*." Don't worry that there is no such book, authors or chapter. Parenting books all blend together after a while, like old rock 'n roll songs did when you used to take a lot of drugs. (*Highway to Hell* is an old rock 'n roll song, as a matter of fact, by AC-DC. This is info for you younger single dads out there). Speaking of old rock and roll, don't you think it is remarkable that you can remember complete lyrics from songs by dinosaur rock bands, most of whose original members have been dead from overdoses since the 70's, that you first listened to while your own synapses were being soaked in a chum-bucket of illegal substances, but you cannot remember even the *title* of a parenting book? That is but one of the wonders of the human brain.

No matter what kind of job you have, be it simple (opening fan mail for Al Gore) creative (corporate accounting) or vital to the future of humanity (working at a beer distributor) it will always take second place to your role as a single parent. This will be a source of endless annoyance to your boss. It means you will never be able to come to work early, leave late, work weekends or drive all night to make that emergency conference in Altoona. Frankly, it's one of the few benefits of being Single Dad. Your boss has kids, or at least there are some pictures of younger people in his office. Point to them, while you are explaining regretfully that you are NOT the man for that fact-finding trip to Moosehole, Manitoba, in January. End with the phrase "You know how it is when you have kids."

Of course your boss does not know-he works eighty hours a week, and hasn't seen his kids since his ex moved to New Zealand with them and her skydiving instructor a couple of Presidential elections ago, *but he cannot admit that*. "Oh, yeah," he says grudgingly.

“Send me a postcard from Moosehole,” you say cheerily and duck out of his office. You know you will never rise in the organization; in fact your only ambition is to remain corporate deadwood until you can retire, when your son will be thirty-six and hopefully less dependent on you. You have the satisfaction, though, of spending another weekend of precious bonding time with your child. Just make sure you keep charge of the remote. And if he starts whining to watch something about Manitoba on the Discovery Channel because he has already seen the episode of Sponge Bob you are immersed in, assert your fatherly authority. Explain to him that possession of the remote goes to the person that pays the cable bill. If he argues back, you can smack him with one of those parenting books.

PARTYING WITH THE SINGLE DAD

This is not to be confused with partying as a college kid (going to a frat house kegger and waking up on their sofa in the morning) partying as a young adult (going to a neighbor’s backyard kegger and waking up on their tool shed in the morning) or partying on vacation (going to a luau and waking up on a different island in the morning). As a Single Dad, you will have little opportunity to attend boisterous, hard to remember events like these. The Single Dad concentrates on two types of parties, which are birthday parties for other kids and his kid’s birthday party.

Birthday parties for other kids are easy. Pick one of your son’s friends, one you really dislike. (The little snot who keeps bragging about the fifty-four-inch TV in his bedroom is a good choice) Buy him a gift that costs at least fifty dollars. Wrap it. Notice that the gene that enables female people to wrap things neatly is not located on any of the male chromosomes. Dress your kid in clothes without stains on them. These are clothes that he never wears, so you can assume he hates them. Shove the ugly wad of wrapping paper and Scotch tape into his hands. Drive him to the party and drop him off. Yell “Have a good time!” even though he is still complaining about having to wear a polo shirt. Drive away in time to catch the kickoff. Pick him up three hours later. There will be no need to check your watch. You can safely assume that

when the game is tied with four minutes left in the fourth quarter, it is time to go get your kid. Generally, your kid has had a lousy time and is ready to leave. Only if the game goes into overtime will he want to stay another half-hour.

Your kid's birthday party is a social challenge, one that you are ill equipped as a guy to meet. Gone are the days when a birthday party consisted of cake, ice cream, your family, a couple of your best friends, a pile of presents and a festive dash to the emergency ward later on because you were pulling wheelies on your new bike. Birthday parties nowadays have to have a theme. Here are some possibilities:

Have the party at home, as before. Now, however, you must rent a gigantic multi-colored inflatable jump-around-in thingy for the kids to play in. They are variously called Moon Bounces, Space Bounces, or, more simply and to the point, Regurgitators. That costs three or four hundred dollars. The company that owns the thingy delivers it and inflates it. Kids love it. Kids never get tired of jumping up and down, no matter how many bloody noses it produces. If you are dumb enough to have your party on Sunday, the gigantic thingy people will leave the thingy on your lawn until the next weekend or at least until it kills all your grass. The advantage of this kind of party is that you never have to leave your house. The disadvantage is that nobody else does, either, and at ten PM there will be at least one hyperactive brat still boinging mindlessly away in the House O' Horror or Spiderman's Web or whatever the thingy is formally named. Hose him out of there so you can get some sleep.

Have a pool party. This can be done year-round only if you live in some sensible place like Florida, San Diego or Hawaii. Otherwise your kid has to have been born during summer vacation. The day of the party will be abnormally cold, damp and rainy. This will not ruin the party. Kids will swim under any conditions. The advantage of this type of party is that no one whatsoever need go in your house. The clubhouse has a bathroom, and the pizza parlor will deliver poolside. The disadvantage is that you will have to spend at least ten minutes swimming with the kids. They will all attack you like a horde of blue-lipped piranhas, except for the one kid who can't swim. He merely dangles his feet in the water, yelling lustily to conceal his hydrophobia. He is destined to be a social worker or a humor writer or otherwise occupy one of the wussy economic niches. He is like the Deepak Chopra book someone left on your toilet tank. You don't pay any attention to him until he falls in. His resuscitation by the paramedics is the signal that the party is over.

Hire a clown. Make sure he is bonded, so when he sets your house on fire juggling lit torches, your insurance company can deny the claim. If the clown smells strongly of whiskey, don't let him borrow your car, even if he promises to come back with fifteen other clowns to jump out of it. At a certain age, your kid will be too old for clown parties. If he and his friends use the torches to set the clown on fire, or start drinking whiskey with him, it is a sign that they have reached that age.

Go to a birthday party place. The most infamous of these is Chuck E. Cheese. Chuck E. Cheese (and this is a 100% true fact) is a GIGANTIC TALKING RAT who operates a chain of pizza and gaming parlors designed to cater to kid's birthday parties. All of the flashing, noisy games are calculated to be irresistible to kids. You pay for tokens. After your kid has spent several hundred dollars worth of tokens, he has accumulated enough "tickets" to redeem them for something plastic made by Third World teenage slave labor, and worth about seventy-five cents. The state lottery gives you a fairer deal than Chuck E. Cheese, and your bookie is Mother Theresa compared to the big rat.

Fortunately, you only have to buy about ten bucks worth of tokens for each kid. After they run out, their parents have to start shelling out for tokens. This will make them hate you, but not nearly as much as they hate Chuck E. Cheese.

The disadvantage of this kind of party is that it costs almost as much as a national missile defense system. The advantage is that Chuck E. Cheese, in a display of mercy that raises his ratty self only a degree or two above Martha Stewart in overall loveliness, serves beer. Don't have more than a pitcher or two, though. You don't want to wake up in the company of a giant talking rat.

CHAPTER II

SEX, DATING AND WOMEN-WHY YOU WON'T GET ANY FOR YEARS TO COME

SEX AND THE SINGLE DAD

There is no actual sex in this chapter. The word “sex” is used in the title to attract the readership of fellow Single Dads, who know that there is no sex in their actual lives, either.

Single Dads everywhere know one of the big reasons you made that walk up the courthouse steps is to recover the sex life you lost by getting married. Now that you're the custodial stud, you think *no problem*. Women are naturally attracted to men that have children. You see it going on all the time. Beautiful single girls are always stopping to chat up Dad and Junior when they're in the park together. Guys with prize Pomeranians or drooping basset hounds for date-bait are left to let their dogs sniff each other, while the hotties go straight for the guy with the stroller.

Unfortunately you quickly discover that the hotties, operating on the assumption that the child has been left in your care very temporarily by its mother, are merely rushing over to make sure that you don't accidentally kill it. Here are some actual phrases you can expect to hear when you venture out as Proud Dad With Offspring:

“That child should be sitting up.”

“That child should be laying down.”

”That child looks cold.”

“That child looks overheated.”

“Is there sunscreen on that baby?”

“Does that child's mother know you have it?”

“Have I seen you on America's Most Wanted?”

Take it from me, women are not naturally attracted to men with children. Women are naturally attracted to children, period, and every single one of them thinks they have more knowledge about child care packed instinctively into that extra X chromosome than you, as a male, could learn in a decade of actual bottom-wiping and bottle-feeding. This is especially true of women who have no children. If you suspect that the woman who is lecturing you on the myriad parenting mistakes you are making just by pushing your kid around the park is childless, (You can usually tell because they have the calm, well-rested look of people who sleep anytime

they need to) call her on it. Ask her point-blank if she has kids of her own. If she admits not, say, as mildly as possible, “I’ve never had a menstrual period, so I don’t tell *you* how to have one, right?”

This will send her packing in an extreme ire, *which is exactly the opposite effect you intended to achieve*. Congratulations, dolt-boy. You might as well have stayed home and watched the Lumberjack Channel in the first place.

Eventually though, you’ll find a date. Then the question is, do you bring the kid along? The answer is NO. Having the boy with you on a date makes you almost as fun and irresistible as sticking the crab cracker up your nose.

Eventually your son will be able to sit through a lengthy dinner at a superb but relaxed restaurant, observing, joking, hitting the right notes of charm and joie de vivre to make him a perfect dinner companion, a wit with a way with a wine list. Someday, your son will be that person. By then, you will be dead.

In the meantime, you have to find a sitter. Grandma is out. She goes to bed at nine PM, which on weekends is when the kid has gotten bonk-ass loony by watching violent cartoons and chugging heavily caffeinated sodas all day long. He is no more ready for bed than he is for Harvard Law. Leave him with her, and midnight will find him tiptoeing into her dining room in his pajamas with a soccer ball in one hand and a softball bat in the other.

Babysitters come in four types: 1. Overpriced. 2. Useless. 3. Both. 3. Junior high Lolitas who sit too close to you while you are driving them home. This kind of sitter always has a heavily armed insomniac for a father.

For safety’s sake, do not use any of them. Get your sister to do it. She’s married, so you know she’s going to be home. All she demands in payment is that you watch her kids AND yours all next weekend while she and her husband get as far away from them as their MasterCard balance will allow.

There are three types of women you can ask out. 1.Single 2.Married. 3. Single Moms.

Forget married. Like you have the time and tactical skills to pursue a surreptitious relationship? You can barely remember to buy the fourteen pounds of steel filings your kid needs for next week’s school project, *Magnets Are Our Friends*, which will be followed by next week’s home improvement project, *Leaving Steel Filings In Pockets Means Shopping for a New Washer*.

Forget single. Single women want uninterrupted attention. They're not getting it from you. At the romantic restaurant, just as you lean across the table, drawn like a moth to the warm reflection of the candles in her eyes, your kid is taking an Albert Pujols swing at that soccer ball. It's heading right for the antique hutch. Your cell phone is going to ring real soon.

This leaves Single Moms. You have something in common. You spend the date talking only about your children. Within a half-hour, you realize that each other's kid is on its way to being a hopeless sociopath or a neurotic wreck. You leave each other, promising to call, but each intent on severing the relationship so that your unique child won't be exposed to some trashy, generic brat, or the man/woman that raised him/her. You forget that since you both have sitters, this is your actual and only chance ever to have sex. You remember this the instant her porch door closes. You feel like hitting yourself.

This can go on for months. The child, never particularly sensitive to the needs of the Single Dad, decides to experiment with puberty and puts a poster of Jessica Alba on his door, where SD can run his deprived fingers over her perfect little glossy navel while he sobs uncontrollably. TIP: This is fun, or as close as you're going to get to it, but don't let your child catch you. Alarmed, he will decide against puberty, (he notices what it's done to you) take the poster down, and replace it with one of Pikachu. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Pikachu, he is an asexual, electrically charged Pokemon. For those of you unfamiliar with Pokemon, you are reading the wrong book.

THE SINGLE DAD EXPLAINS *LA DIFFERENCE*

Eventually you will find a woman that is willing to put up with you being a Single Dad. Once you do, you will want to hold on to her. Maybe that is because she is your soulmate, sensitive even to your unspoken moods and needs. Maybe it is because she understands the mind of your child. Maybe it is because you remember what it was like not to have sex for nineteen months.

In any event, you remember that you are 0 for 1, or maybe even deeper in the count, in the relationship game. You need help, and if you don't think so, just pick up the phone and call your ex-wife's attorney.

Don't want to spend the two hundred bucks an hour? Fortunately for you, having invested in this book is nearly as good. Remain riveted to the page while the Single Dad explains *La Difference*.

La Difference is the French expression for that immutable gulf of misunderstanding that separates men from women, although it's also a pretty good term for the immutable gulf of misunderstanding that separates the French from the rest of the world. It means "the difference," which should be obvious enough, although a lot of French is not nearly as obvious, which you know if you have ever gone to a French restaurant where the *le garcon* (which, in French, means "supercilious little bastard who refuses to speak English to you even though he grew up in Rahway") does not even bother to conceal a snide chuckle as you mispronounce your way through the menu and finally settle on something utterly inedible, like creamed snail guts.⁹

As victims of the war between the sexes (not to be confused with sex between the wars, which according to some people, caused The Great (Post Coital) Depression) you single dads out there are entitled to know why you lost. Was it all a misunderstanding, as your lawyer attempted to tell the court, or was it a direct result of you being a CARELESS, SELFISH, CABLE-TV OBSESSED MONSTER WHO GAVE HIS SPOUSE NO CHOICE BUT TO HAVE AN AFFAIR WITH NEARLY EVERYONE WHO HAD A NICER HAIRCUT THAN HIM, as your ex's attorney would have it?

Well, neither. As the best-selling book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, and Marilyn Manson is from Pluto* explains it, men and women just think differently in different situations. Fortunately, The Single Dad will be able to explain to you the female thought process in regard to the three most important of these situations, which are: asking for directions, key rings and mental telepathy.

The first and most controversial of these is asking for directions. Women have wondered ever since the dawn of time, when early man, while attempting to find a decent Chinese takeout

⁹ Then he sits in the back, eating a cheeseburger and laughing at you. You think that real French people eat snails? It's just a joke on us, like them selling atomic bomb triggers to Saddam Hussein and the way they keep saying Jerry Lewis is a genius.

joint he sort of remembered, made a wrong turn and accidentally settled North America instead, why men refuse to ask for directions? The answer is simple. Men have to ask directions from other men. If women knew where anything was, they wouldn't be so endlessly insecure about the direction thing, right? So you have to ask other guys. They're mostly what's hanging around gas stations anyway, which is where 91.7 percent of directions are asked. (The other 8.3 percent are asked of kids on bicycles in remote suburban cul-de-sacs, where the answer is almost always "I don't know, and I need to go to the bathroom.")

Once a male passes puberty though, he loses the ability to say "I don't know." It's true. The gene that allows adult people to say "I don't know" is located on the female chromosomes. If you ask a guy anything he doesn't know, he will just make something up. Test this for yourself. Head downtown. Go to the sort of neighborhood where every other storefront is either an adult bookstore or a bail bondsman. Pick out four winos. Ask them a non-wino related question, like whether they think nuclear fusion will ever be a viable energy source. Three of them will have detailed opinions. The fourth will tell the others they are all full of it, and then throw up.

So you don't ask directions because you know it's useless, and just keep driving, and end up in Newark instead of Brigantine, if you manage to find New Jersey in the first place. Then you decide to break down and buy a map. This gives the women and children in the car a chance to go to the bathroom, which they have been begging to do ever since you turned the key in the ignition, practically, and a chance to complain about the filthy nature of the restroom when they get back. With map in hand, the woman is able to guide you to your destination, although she will also take delight in pointing out how many extra tollbooths you will be paying at as a result of your refusal to ask directions.

The key ring difference is easy to explain. You are confronted by it one day when you ask to borrow your special someone's car, and she tosses you a set of keys that appear to be attached to a piece of fur that formerly belonged to a largish male wolverine, and is nearly as easy to cram into your pocket. Some women object to fur, so they attach their keys to beach balls or troll dolls or pieces of underwear they have brought home from male strip shows or small-scale replicas of downtown Detroit, but you get the idea. As you drive off with, for example, a framed 8x10 picture of Brad Pitt dangling between your knees, doubts about your relationship are bound to surface. Once again, *la difference* erupts. The explanation is innocent, unlike most

of her thoughts about Brad Pitt. The attached morsel is to enable her to find the keys in her purse in less time than it would take a locksmith to arrive. Think I'm joking? Take inventory of her purse. The Single Dad did. He found:

1. 6 lipsticks, 12 mascaras, 2 sanitary napkins.
2. 4 address books, 7 postcards, four 33-cent stamps.
3. High school ID card, driver's license, CD player, proof of insurance.
4. 846 useless little makeup nubs.
5. 521 phone numbers scribbled on napkins.
6. 9 rolls of undeveloped film.
7. One large, heavy gold ring that glows with Elvish lettering when heated in fire.

What's even scarier is that she has at least three purses.

On the subject of mental telepathy, the gulf of misunderstanding is vast. She believes in it, and you don't. How many times have you heard "I know what you're thinking!" spoken in a preemptory tone, like she just discovered you doodling on the wallpaper in the guest bathroom? Most of the time you just go "Huh?" because you were wondering innocently if your having memorized every single episode of *The Simpsons* entitled you to some kind of tax break, but then *just once* she says it when you are thinking about what might have happened if you had asked that little Australian blonde to have a drink with you in the hotel bar that afternoon herself was spending your \$400 a day romantic getaway in the room having cramps, and that's it. From then on, the guilty start you gave means you're busted.

Now that she's discovered her telepathic talents, she expects you to display yours. This is accomplished by use of the phrase "You should have known!" when you are caught in some egregious offense, like forgetting her mother's poodle's birthday. It is no use to reply "Nobody told me." "Nobody told me," only works with other guys. If you are in the White House one afternoon, and accidentally press a large, red, ominous button and launch a nuclear strike against the Bahamas, and the President rushes up screaming "Did you press that button?" simply reply "Nobody told me not to," and the President will say "Oh, okay," and lead you to the White House fallout shelter, adding "Let's blame it on Joe Biden," with a wink as Armageddon commences. Guys understand that not being told is a perfectly good excuse.

Women don't, so the best thing to do is hang your head humbly when you hear the phrase "You should have known!" and beg forgiveness in the proper way, on your knees, with your

American Express card held out in a supplicating fashion. The Single Dad just had to do this, on account of he should have known not to do an inventory of anyone's purse. The Single Dad doesn't regret it, though. The ring makes a great thing to hang his keys on, and now he has these guys on black horses to pal around with and they seem to be quite good at giving him directions, although he always seems to end up in Mordor, which is a lot like Newark.

CHAPTER III: MALE BONDING-DOESN'T IT SOUND VAGUELY DISGUSTING, AND DO YOU REALLY NEED IT AFTER YOU GET DIRECT TV?

OTHER KINDS OF DADS

The Single Dad knows that the advice provided in these pages is useful not only to his fellow Single Dads, but to the various other kinds of dads out there. For most of us, it is easy to become a dad. We are genetically programmed to seek fatherhood, and can achieve the moment of Dadness in the most cramped and unlikely places that American or foreign car manufacturers can design. Thereafter, what you make of Dadhood, or vice-versa, is up to you. There are many books available to guide you along fatherhood's path. Buy a couple, and stick them in the garage next to the owner's manual of that weed whacker you sold to your ex brother-in-law Earl, because you will be reading them nearly as often.

Of course, some dads need no guidance, because for them fatherhood is as easy as flunking a paternity test is for an NBA superstar. The MARRIED DAD comes to mind. Between the time potty training occurs, and the Married Dad has weaseled out of changing his last diaper, and the September the tuition bill for the child's freshman year in college arrives, Married Dad can ignore his kids entirely. He does not have to, naturally, and many Married Dads will pay some attention to their children, sometimes attending school plays or driving their lids to organized sporting events. (See HOCKEY DAD) However, that is optional. MOM sees to it that

the kids are fed, clothed, educated and medicated. Married Dad is left to earn the pile of money needed to raise a modern American family (if bundled together in tens and twenties, would cover the entire square footage of Six Flags, New Jersey, to a depth of four feet) and to daydream pleasantly about the inevitable day when they will introduce ESPN3.

Likewise, DIVORCED DAD. Three simple steps. 1. Locate pile of money similar in size to the one above. 2. Send to MOM. 3. Wait for your kids to come out of therapy.

JOINT CUSTODY DADS exist in that never-never land between outright irresponsible bachelorhood and every-other-weekend-and-Wednesday-night parenting. The most important thing about being a Joint Custody Dad is hiding all the evidence of your sordid single existence from your kid or kids during your brief hours of fatherhood. Bury the copies of Maxim under the towels in the linen closet; for damn certain your kid isn't going to volunteer to take a bath while he's over. Stick your case of Old Soak Malt Liquor in the garage. And for God's sake don't let your little tyke figure out what sites you've bookmarked on your computer. Then sit back, relax, and try to figure out how you're going to persuade your mom to watch the kid Saturday night so you can cruise the Beer Bungalow after that little blonde who winked at you four weekends ago.

The SUMMER DAD has wisely moved two or three time zones away from his ex, so his fatherhood is limited to the months of school vacation. The Summer Dad is a variation of The Joint Custody Dad, except that he only has to hide the accouterments of adulthood once, in June, and resurrect them in September. Throw them all in a box and duct-tape it shut. If you're a young Dad with a lot going on, you may need a refrigerator box. If you're a little older, shoe may suffice.

The Single Dad was once a Summer Dad, and he looks back on those days fondly. Nowadays he packs his single life away in August, and doesn't get it back again until mid-June. The box is shrinking sadly, too. At present it might hold a coffee maker. If you ever decide to let your kid know what you're really like, just write "CHRISTMAS" on it before you stick it on a high shelf, and leave a pair of scissors handy.

Finally, there is the STEP-DAD. This is the person who married your ex-wife. He deserves your admiration and gratitude, but above all, your guidance. He needs to be reminded that your kid doesn't belong in any house with an extensive gun collection, whether it is kept locked up or merely consists of pistols stuffed under the sofa cushions for accessibility's sake.

He should be told that he can't buy your kid's affection with expensive presents, especially dirt bikes, jet-skis, or cases of fireworks.

Above all, when dealing with the Step-Dad, keep it civilized. We're all adults here. The Step-Dad has his own opinions on child-raising. Discuss them with him rationally, then tell him as politely as possible, to try out his crackpot theories **ON HIS OWN DAMN KID**. Above all, in the interests of keeping the peace in your sundered family, let him know gently but firmly that if he does anything that permanently damages your child's psyche, like hitting him, forcing him to eat grits, or letting him become habituated to watching pay-per-view professional wrestling events, you will kill him.

As a man and as a father, you may find yourself passing through many or all of the stages above, in a life voyage as mystical and unfathomable as women and mothers experience, except that you have to pay for everything. You may be in turn Married Dad, Summer Dad, Single Dad and even Step-Dad, when your new significant other introduces you to her three kids and their three fathers, and leaves you to babysit the whole bunch (including the fathers) while she moonlights as a cocktail waitress at the Quail Tail Café. Just remember the necessities of modern life with kids. 1. Pizza. 2. Beer. 3. Repainting the living room every year. 4. Trying not to think if there is a difference between your life and selecting four random kids off a school bus and paying for their health insurance.

WHEN YOUR EX MARRIES SOMEONE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM YOU- CULTURAL RELATIVITY FOR THE SINGLE DAD

The task of raising a child by yourself is semi-monumental. What facet of his well-being is the most important? His health? His education? His car insurance bill?

The question is mind-boggling, but fortunately, there is a simple answer. The most important thing for you, as a father, is that your kid turn out *exactly like you*. This is one of the paternal verities. While a kid, he should follow the same path you did, from the baby formula he suckles on, to the position he plays in Little League, to the kind of liquor he tries to smuggle into

the senior prom. When an adult he should belong to the same political party and doze through the same denomination of church service.

There are kids who actually do this, and there is no more fatherhood-affirming moment than the teary-eyed embrace you share than when your son joins your accounting firm, or your prison cell block, or both. However, most kids couldn't care less about the high hopes you have for them. What do you do when your kid says he wants to be a synchronized swimmer? Put the blame on someone else, naturally. His mother comes to mind. A Married Dad can always blame his child's mother for the way his kid turns out; likewise a Divorced Dad. How can a Single Dad, whose lifelong dream is for his son is to have him become a Supreme Court Justice, shift responsibility away from himself when his child announces he wants to be a motocross rider? It's easier than you think. Blame it on the Step-Dad.

Your ex will remarry. Don't waste your time wondering how. She got you to marry her, didn't she? Her new husband will be utterly unlike you. For several months out of the year, when your kid spends summer vacation with them, he will be exposed to this new male influence. Devastating changes in your boy are possible. He may come home speaking in a Southern accent, for example, or develop a taste for country music. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with the way Southerners speak or that country music is not a serious, compelling art form. You may even be a Single Dad from the South. Would you want your kid to talk like he was from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, or start listening to punk rock? You should, because he's easier to understand, and the songs are funnier, but you cannot embrace your son's new tastes with tolerance. Relax. Don't be hard on yourself. The Single Dad understands that it's not your fault you are a "redneck," sometimes also called a "bonehead yick-a-doo," especially when your pickup truck cuts him off.

There are two things you must teach your child in order for him to deal with the summer broadening of his cultural horizons. 1. People the whole world round are different from you. 2. Because of this, they are inferior.

For example, your son tells you his step-dad has taught him how to fish catfish, while you are a marlin fisherman. For those of you that don't know the difference between a catfish and a marlin, suffice to say that catfish are caught in easy-to-access freshwater ponds and streams, using cheap equipment and attracted by the use of (and this is 100% fact) something

called “stinkbait.” (“Stinkbait,” by the way, makes an excellent nickname for the step-dad, if you are not already using one)

Catfish are ugly and inedible.¹⁰

Marlin, on the other hand, are found in the distant Gulf Stream. It is necessary to hire an extremely expensive boat and crew to even get to where marlin are, and in the unlikely event that you actually get a bite when you get there, nine times out of ten the marlin will “spit the hook,” and get away, maybe swimming around your boat afterwards with a big smile on his face at the excellent joke he has played on you, the marlin fisherman. Marlin are attracted by artificial lures, brightly painted to look like little fish and having upwards of a dozen barbs in them, one of which will almost certainly become deeply embedded in your palm while you are handling it.

Marlin are beautiful and inedible.

The way to handle this situation, as soon as you see the summer pictures of your son, standing barefoot in some offensive muck, holding a stringer of whopping big catfish, grinning like Condoleezza Rice at a Chippendale’s show, is to immediately take him marlin fishing. Spare no expense. Spend at least eighteen hours on the water. Assure your boy that the excitement of his first marlin strike will make him forget that fact that he has been seasick ever since you left the dock. Figure out that marlins will start playing canasta and drinking Mai Tais before one ever bites your son’s hook. Motor in, sign your MasterCard slip with a gasp, and tell your boy he has had the time of his life.

Or, alternatively, buy some catfish. Leave the heads on. Make your kid eat them.

The other, ugly, possibility is that your kid may actually prefer to emulate his step-dad rather than you. The step-dad presents a more attractive masculine model, perhaps because he drives a Bronco with tires the size of the gun turrets on the USS Missouri, has seven dogs, and starts all of his campfires with a full quart of gasoline. Start undermining him immediately. Make fun of the way he talks. Tell your kid the reason he never takes off his Atlanta Braves cap is because he has a steel plate in his head, instead of the real reason, which is that the hat eliminates the need to shampoo. (Your kid will only admire him more for that) Point out that being able to kill largish insects merely by spitting a stream of tobacco juice at them makes his step-dad’s resume just a little *too* well-rounded. If the step-dad has a physical flaw, like a facial twitch or a

¹⁰ The Single Dad realizes that some people do eat catfish. They are probably being persuaded to do so by French waiters.

limp, mimic it in a humorous but kindly way. Also mention that he would never have married your kid's mom if all of his female cousins hadn't already been hitched

Do this with a spirit of tolerance and forthrightness. Kids can tell when you are merely jealous. Ideally, your son should realize that, while his stepfather will never mean as much to him as you, his natural parent, or possibly even as much as his next snack, somewhere in the heart of Dixie there is a man who will at least buy him a couple cheeseburgers every summer, if only to keep your ex-wife from throwing out his stinkbait.

ROLE MODELING FOR THE SINGLE DAD

The Single Kid doesn't have a role model, which, The Single Dad is told, should worry him. He's certainly not it. The Single Dad doesn't have an easily definable, role-model type job, like fireman or astronaut. My kid isn't even sure what I do for a living, but, frankly, neither is my boss, so it's not like the boy isn't perceptive. What should worry me about my son not having a role model is that most kids do.

I did. When I was a kid my role models were fighter pilots. I read a lot when I was a boy. This was before there were video games and there were only three channels on TV, so don't think I was a reader because I was some sort of incipient socialist or wanted to grow up to be Vice-President. I read because the only alternative entertainment was to go outside and have bigger kids chase me with sticks.

One of my favorite books was about the great fighter pilots of the World Wars. The best of them were called "aces." You got to be an ace by shooting down three or more enemy planes. Of course, the greatest ones shot down many more. America's greatest ace shot down forty-five. America's finest pilots didn't put up the biggest numbers, either. Britain and Germany both had pilots with higher totals. In retrospect, I realize that was because they were involved in both wars a lot longer than we were, but back then, I had a secret resolve. I would avenge this national humiliation. I would become America's greatest ace and shoot down over a hundred planes.

Fortunately, I was not able to carry out this vision of personal bloodthirstiness because of a lack of a well-timed war to fly in, and also because my vision turned out something like 20-

180. I also realized that shooting down even one plane that was shooting back at you was a signal personal accomplishment, and if by some miracle of combat I had ever managed to do so, I would have demanded all the medals the government could afford to give me, a parade, and immediate retirement on the spot.

Of course my son would never want to be a fighter pilot. We still have fighter pilots, but mostly they blow up other planes on the ground, if the enemy has other planes. Otherwise they just blow up the ground. This is a wiser strategic course, but lacks glamour. And my son doesn't need to shoot down anything. Thanks to the miracle of modern video games, my son has already destroyed thousands of flying, running, rolling, crawling and hopping targets. He's been an ace since he was about two and a half.

There's always sports, you say. All dads dream of their kids growing up to play professional sports. "*Geez, I'd love for my kid to grow up to be a spoiled, trash-talking twenty-something billionaire,*"¹¹ you say to yourself. "*In between getting suspended by the league for substance abuse and arrested for roughing up one or more of the mothers of my grandchildren, I'm sure he'd find time for chillin' with his old Dad.*"

Truly, no more satisfying relationship could be imagined, but sports are out for my kid, because I have never taught him how to spit. I don't know how myself. I cannot for the life of me produce one of those professional phlegm-bullets that MVP's let loose right before belting a three-run homer. Best I can do is a bottom-of-the-order spray that coats my chin more than the ground. This kept me on the bench throughout my sports career. My coaches could never put me out on the field and risk derision from the other team at my pathetic drooling. My pathetic hitting and fielding didn't help, either.

Baseball is the only true spitting sport. Hockey players and football players spit, too, but they wear helmets, so they have to spit into cups, like they were at the dentist's. Basketball players can't spit because they play on wooden floors that they have to dribble on afterwards, although pioneering basketball players may have experimented with spitting, because that would explain the origin of the word "dribble."

Baseball is the only sport where, on a glorious autumn day, before a stadium abuzz with eager fans craning to see the first pitch of the Fall Classic, the customary first shot from the TV

¹¹ By this the author does not mean LeBron James. The author means Randy Moss.

cameras is some old guy, (the manager) understandably cranky because his job forces him to wear size fifty-four striped pants in public, taking it out on the turf by shooting a rope of tobacco juice from between his lips. That is when you know the World Series has really begun. Each player, taking his cue from management, follows by expectorating before each swing of the bat and slap of the glove. It's a wonder they don't have to change into water shoes by the fifth inning. It is a little-known scientific fact that if all of the spit from the field at Shea Stadium could be drained and recycled after a doubleheader, the Northeast drought would be over.

Besides the hitting, fielding and base coaches, all the perennially successful baseball teams employ a Spit Coach. That's why the Yankees and the Phillies all expectorate beautifully. When the Royals or the Nationals make the playoffs, you're liable to see some shabby spitting. That's why baseball needs a luxury tax, so that the Brewers and the Padres can afford professional spitting instruction. Joe Garigiola never mentions that, though. The very position of Spit Coach is one of baseball's best kept secrets, which is actually good. You don't want your kid picking that guy for a role model.

I finally out and out asked my son whom he most admired. He thought. It was a long and suspenseful silence. What names would come forth? Who would occupy the peak of my kid's personal pantheon? The President? Lance Bass? Shrek?

"Carl," he finally said.

"Who's Carl?"

"He's a kid in my class. His mom puts brownies in his lunch every day. They're kind of gooey by noon, so he rolls them into little lumps and puts them in the grass. Then he picks them out and eats them whenever an adult walks by. It really makes them gag."

So I've decided to quit worrying about my kid's lack of a role model, in order to avoid thinking about Carl eating brownies. Also, Carl's mom may be wondering why I've sent her a box of cupcakes.

TWELVE GOOD THINGS ABOUT MY KID

“Make a list of a dozen of your child’s good points.” The Single Dad read this in a parenting book the other day. Ordinarily, the Single Dad, like everybody else, does not read parenting books, otherwise he could not claim to give out completely unskilled parenting advice. However, I was using the bathroom at my mother’s (who never read any parenting books, either, but thinks my kid will grow up to be another Bernie Madoff if I don’t) and she had cleverly removed all reading material besides parenting books, including some of the Single Dad’s favorite desperation reads, like *Collecting Stuff That Belongs In A Landfill* magazine and *Chicken Soup For The Elderly Control Freak’s Soul*, so SD was forced to ingest some actual, serious parenting advice. And, like someone forced to eat raw sea urchin at their first sushi bar, it wasn’t as bad as he expected.

Unfortunately, the Single Dad went directly from there to a backyard barbecue where the whole point seemed to be consuming enough alcohol to mimic a light stroke, so he didn’t retain much except that snippet of advice above, but it seems worthy enough. The point of making a list of your child’s virtues is that you can quickly consult it when you are so furious with the child you are ready to duct-tape him to the water heater and take a solo trip to Barbados for the weekend. This happened recently in our household, over the important issue of who had left a purple highlighter on the floor. The child adamantly denied any use of the highlighter, and steadfastly refused to pick it up as ordered, and was not amenable to the use of logic, however formidable, (WHO DO YOU THINK LEFT IT THERE, THEN? THE PURPLE HIGHLIGHTER GOBLIN?) in resolving the matter. Lucky for him, the Single Dad had used all the duct tape repairing the sofa, but next time, he’ll just whip out a little (laminated) card with his child’s virtues on it and read:

TWELVE GOOD THINGS ABOUT MY KID

1. Doesn’t play organized sports, which keeps me from being assaulted by Hockey Dads. (Also prevents me from meeting any svelte Soccer Moms, either, so on the whole, a mixed blessing)
2. Is not a professional wrestling fan. My girlfriend’s kid is a professional wrestling fan, so I know what a horror it can be. He even has the action figures of his favorite wrestlers, which he leaves in the tub, so that I have showered with the Rock and the Hulk, which leaves me in

the dubious position of having fulfilled someone else's fantasies. 'How can you let your kid believe in something so obviously fake?' I berate her, and she points out she lets me believe in Pamela Anderson's bosoms.

3. Is resigned to the fact that he only gets a new video game platform once a year, at Christmas, and has to whine tirelessly during the rest of the year for new games to play on it. These games cost fifty bucks each, so this is not an insignificant amount of whining. In fact, it is only a successful amount of whining when I realize I would rather listen to an audiotape of *The Tipper Gore Story* being read aloud by Gilbert Gottfried than listen to one more second of my son begging for *Pokemon Death Match*.
4. Conserves water, energy and household goods by bathing only when ordered to and only using soap if actually observed.
5. Knows the difference between Shaq and Shrek.
6. Compulsively tells me what happens next in any movie or TV show he's already seen, whether I've already seen it or not, a fail-safe that prevents me from getting lost in any narrative from Austin Powers to the Power Rangers.
7. Will abruptly decide he hates a particular cereal right after I've bought a pallet of it at Costco. Wait. Not a virtue. Tough to come up with twelve of these things, isn't it?
8. Will happily wear the same clothes, including socks and underwear, for up to a year, making him easy to identify, by sight and smell, so I don't embarrass myself by taking the wrong kid home from the mall or the post office accidentally.
9. Does not insist on wearing sneakers endorsed by any particular professional athlete, as long as they cost at least a hundred bucks and have some special feature, like concealed roller wheels or a gas-powered spring in the heel, which makes them impossible to wear them through airport security.
10. Doesn't put ketchup on pancakes. Doesn't put syrup on hot dogs. Doesn't dip chips in Cream of Wheat. Won't touch Cream of Wheat with ten-foot chip, actually.
11. Supports economy by wanting me to buy him everything he sees on TV, including toys that could obviously be only enjoyed for more than a few seconds by autistic beings from the planet Neptune, and blatantly farcical products on infomercials.
12. Can stonewall better than an ex-wife or an ex-president. Quibbling over the what definition of "is" is would be child's play for my child, who will stick to any story to cover up wrongdoing,

even if it is about as likely as Vladimir Putin popping up on *Hollywood Squares*. (WELL HOW DID THAT HIGHLIGHTER GET ON THE FLOOR? DID IT JUST *GROW* THERE? ISN'T IT *YOUR* HIGHLIGHTER? WHY SHOULDN'T *YOU* PICK IT UP, THEN? IF YOU DON'T PICK IT UP IT'S THE LAST HIGHLIGHTER YOU'RE EVER GOING TO GET. AND I'M GOING TO GIVE ALL OF YOUR OTHER HIGHLIGHTERS AWAY TO THE POOR KIDS, WHO WILL BE GRATEFUL FOR THEM, EVEN IF THEY THINK THEY ARE A TYPE OF SNACK, IF YOU DON'T PICK UP THAT HIGHLIGHTER *RIGHT NOW!!!!*)

CHAPTER III: RELIGION FOR THE SINGLE DAD

The Single Dad does not advocate one religion over another. All of them are more or less serviceable, since they usually share two tenets in common. The first one is, that if your child is GOOD, when he or she DIES, they will go to HEAVEN, where nobody suffers and it is Christmas every day, without the attending bills. The second is that if your child is BAD, when they die, he or she will got to HELL, where they will spend all eternity wishing for a fire extinguisher and a glass of ice water, even if they only thing they will drink now is strawberry milk.

The great thing about religion is that you, the parent, determine what is GOOD. You may have high standards, like demanding that your child perform all household chores and homework assignments before they are allowed to use the bathroom. You may, like the Single Dad, have low standards, i.e., being GOOD means not using Daddy's electric razor to carve the dog's name into his favorite spot on the carpet.

The Single Dad does urge you to stick to mainstream religions. Belonging to a religion that permits you to have more than one wife simultaneously, or makes you wear special clothing, or one in which you have to send all your money to Seoul may result in you and your kid not being allowed to join the country club, or, even worse, having to attend church services that extend through one PM, Eastern Standard Time, which is when NFL football starts.

Also, belonging to a religion that requires the sacrifice of small animals, wearing dark robes and being in graveyards around midnight, or whose gods and goddesses have too many

arms or legs is also a bad idea, because these religions should frighten your child. If they do not, your child should frighten you.

Unfortunately, religion is only semi-effective in enforcing the rules. Your child does not really believe that he or she will die. They do not even believe that you will die, and won't until they fully understand the concept of life insurance. It is up to you, then, to impress your kid with the grim truth, which provides me with my lead-in to the only serious theological discussion you MUST have with your child:

PET HEAVEN

One of the most important things you, as Single Dad, can teach your offspring is the finite nature of earthly existence. This should not be done by threatening to kill anyone, including the child or your ex wife or wives. This should be done by the use of pets.

Nothing is more invariably fatal to a domestic animal than being owned by a child, and the more sensitive the child, the more likely the beast is to expire quickly. Dogs and cats that live to be twenty years old are always owned by old people. It becomes a grim, somewhat wheezy contest between Granny and Bootsie to see who can hold on the longest. However, a kitten given to a child promptly searches for the nearest moving Hyundai to throw itself under. This gives the child a harsh lesson in tragedy, and also a pretty clear idea of what the inside of a kitten looks like.

It's obvious that this is a unnecessarily grisly introduction to the subject of death, so it is recommended by the Single Dad that other, smaller species of pet be given to the child at first, so he is used to the impermanence of existence when that adorable puppy, oblivious to the endless hours of whining and promising that preceded its procurement, makes its mad dash for the most convenient set of rolling Michelins in order to end it all, and reduce the chance that the tragedy will permanently scar your child.

Fortunately, pet stores abound with many overpriced, easily killed animals of every genus, so hop on down to Pet's R Us or Petcorp or Petmart or Petsmart or Petutopia or any of a dozen similarly named, similarly smelling chain stores and you will get an exciting opportunity

to spend hundreds of dollars on an exotic beast and the equipment necessary for its survival, which, of course, will end up in the garage mere weeks from purchase, when its inhabitant fails to survive.

An excellent place to start is the reptile kingdom. Reptiles are not particularly short-lived, except when domesticated. Lizards are available in all pet stores. The most common types are chameleons, geckos, ginkgoes, ginsus, skinks, skanks, skunks and skitamarinks. While lizards may look quite different from each other, the main daily activity of all species is blinking slowly. Your child may stare at his unmoving his pet for hours, then emit an ear-piercing shriek of “Dad! He blinked at me!” usually at the exact moment your team is attempting a crucial, last-second field goal.

Lizards have to be kept in glass cages like fish. Incidentally, we are not including fish as pets here. Fish are not pets. Fish are decorations, although easily killed decorations whose bowl has to be cleaned constantly or it will start smelling like a pig farm on a warm day. Lizard cages have to be equipped with lizard furniture. For example, the pet store will try very hard to sell you a rock like this one:

All Living Things Lava Cave Rock

Inspired by natural lava rock formations, this Lava Cave Rock creates an appealing challenge for your reptile. He'll enjoy climbing and basking, or finding a quiet, secure place when he's looking for camouflage. Durable poly-resin is lightweight and easy to clean.

You'll notice that the lava cave rock is made out of poly-resin, which means it costs ten dollars. Rocks made of actual lava, which may be found for free by the side of the road, are not good enough for your pet, but you are relieved to find out that your child's lizard is looking for camouflage. You thought he was just blinking. Already he seems more like a member of the family.

Lizards are either descendants or ancestors of the mighty dinosaurs, the Single Dad forgets which, which means they once ruled the earth for three hundred million years, which is a *lot* of slow blinking, and it's just as well it's over. Your lizard will be lucky to last three weekends. Lizards may be baked by leaving them on top of a radiator in winter or frozen by leaving them in the jet stream of the air conditioner in summer. Alternatively, they may be killed

by a mysterious disease contracted from that stone you picked up in the state park in lieu of forking over a mere ten dollars for the All Living Things Cave Rock, you heartless skinflint.

Since you already have the tank, you might as well get a snake next. Snakes eat live mice, so you have to buy a separate cage for them, so that your boy can become emotionally attached to them before they disappear down Snakie's ravaging maw. Snakes may also be trained to eat freshly killed dead mice, which you can buy in frozen bags of twenty or so at the pet store. Chipping one of these tiny deceased mammals off the block of its frozen kindred and warming it for your snake's supper is one of the least appealing of all household chores, so when Snake-boy figures out how to get out of his tank and disappears, only to be found mummified behind the refrigerator by Aunt Clara on her annual inspection tour two months later, both you and your son are secretly relieved, and it serves Aunt Clara right for trying to move the refrigerator by herself anyway.

The death of your kid's snake signals that it's time to make the move to the mammal kingdom. Start small. Go hamster. All of the hamsters you see in PetsRWe look just like mice except for a few different color schemes. In fact, you get this sneaking suspicion that they *are* mice, and that PetPlanet is playing some sort of cynical game upon you, the gullible pet-buying parent, until you see that while mice are practically free, hamsters cost twenty bucks each.

Hamsters come in different breeds, like dogs. There are Norwegian Dwarf Hamsters, Shanghai Stir-Fried Hamsters and Napa Valley Pickled Hamsters. There is a variety called the Black Bear Hamster (100% true!) which the Single Dad assumes is the most ferocious and intimidating of the hamsters.

Hamsters are nocturnal, which means they sleep all day, so your child's interaction with his pet mostly consists of poking a finger into the creature's snoozing form and saying "Hey! Wake up!" The hamster soon learns to nap through even this abuse, and so it becomes boring long before almost any other kind of pet. Hamsters have to have wheels in their cages, and they turn downright Type A when the sun goes down, so you have to have a soundproof room to keep them in after sundown, otherwise the sound of that wheel spinning all night is enough to drive even the most devoted pet-owner to thoughts of hamstercide. Hamsters are hardy, warm-blooded creatures, like Norwegians, and are difficult to kill accidentally. Fortunately, for the sake of teaching your child the central tragedy of mortal life (everything you love eventually either dies

or wants a divorce) hamsters are naturally short-lived. The professional football season will usually last longer than your child's hamster, if you count exhibition games.

When a pet dies, it goes to Pet Heaven, which is subdivided among the various species (Hamster Heaven, Snake Heaven, Frozen Mouse Heaven, etc.) where little winged pet souls frolic in a cage-free, leash-free, frost-free eternity. Your son will ask about Pet Heaven with a trembling lip as soon as the spade is turned upon his first pet's backyard grave, and you'd better have an answer ready. Unlike the Sex Talk, which can be postponed any number of times, (the Single Dad's dad did not actually give him that lecture until he was twenty-three) the theology of Pet Heaven must be explained at the service. Mumble a lot, and reply "Of course!" emphatically to any question your child may ask, such as "Does God visit Gerbil Heaven?" Restrain yourself from smart-mouth answers, like "*Yes, and He dresses up like Richard Gere when he does it.*"

This is your child's first experience with tragedy. Proper handling of his psychological needs now will enable him to bear the pain of future final separations, such as those that occur during poker games and at pari-mutuel windows. When the sniffing finally stops, it's time to go get a parakeet.

CHAPTER IV: CULTURE AND THE ARTS FOR THE SINGLE DAD

PEOPLE MAGAZINE

Is Justin having sex with Britney? Well, yeah. Wouldn't you? And, apparently, reading about Justin and Britney's sex life makes other people happy. The fact that it doesn't make me happy probably indicates some kind of deep character flaw. "*Oh, look,*" I should exclaim. "*Justin and Britney are getting it on. The fact that I have picked up this copy of People out of sheer unabridged boredom in a diseased laundromat where I am forced to do ten loads of clothes at four dollars a pop because my son tried to wash his pup tent in my washer, causing every belt and spring in the machine to burst, no longer matters, because now I know that these two twenty-something young people with bank accounts equivalent to the annual municipal*

budget of Anaheim, California, are melding their perfect bodies together as often as President Bush uses the word “folks,” which is to say about thirty-five times an hour, and my heart is gladdened as if by a spring day, and I mean a spring day on which I won the lottery!”

I have just been informed by someone who reads *People* on a regular basis that Justin and Britney haven't “done it” for years, at least as far as the press is concerned. Boy, do I feel stupid, but that's the feeling you get when you read *People* in the laundromat, because the magazines tend not to be up-to-date. Ordinarily, you just read the covers of *People* and other magazines of similar ilk, when you standing in line at K-mart. There, you have plenty of time to enjoy your magazine covers, as the minimum wage check-out clerk pretends to be a handwriting expert and examines the signature on your credit card for up to a half-hour. These covers all feature a picture of a female singer or movie star, dressed in an outfit which, if they were not a singer or movie star, would mark them as an employee of an escort service.

The only time the cover of *People* does not feature celebrities is when there is a war or a famous crime or national tragedy. Then it features pictures of people whom we never heard of before they were dead. For one week *People* pretends these people were just as important as celebrities, then it goes back to printing close-ups of Christina Aguilera's navel ring.

Besides *People*, you can read the covers of tabloids. You can tell a tabloid because its name begins with the word “National,” and it is not printed on glossy paper. The color ones usually have a cover shot of Oprah Winfrey, taken when her weight compared to that of a mature bull elk. The black and white tabloids are even less appetizing; their covers have obviously doctored photos of half-animal, half human creatures with headlines like “RAT BOY MUST EAT SPARE UFO PARTS OR DIE!”

Reading magazine covers and laundromat Peoples will take up all the time you have to devote to adult literature while you are a Single Dad. Sure, you can toss a copy of *Beyond Good And Evil* on the toilet tank as an aid to regularity; you can fill your bookshelves with thrillers by Clancy and Grisham, but you will never actually have time to read any of them.

The one thing you will read are children's books. All kids want to be read to at bedtime, even if at other times of day they have no more interest in literature than they have in pork futures. It is an intrinsic part of the bedtime-delaying process, along with sudden stomachaches, unquenchable thirst and belated tooth brushing.

You will find that modern children's literature sounds one significant common theme for children, and that theme is that *orphans have all the fun*. Kids without parents go on adventures every day, while your child is left to note bitterly that he is lucky to get to a theme park two or three times a year. If he is especially perceptive, he will complain that his chances of achieving the nirvana of orphanhood are much lower than an un-divorced kid's, seeing as how it would require wildly fortuitous simultaneous accidents in different time zones.

Inevitably, your child will happen upon Harry Potter, the world's most seditious fictional character, from a parent's point of view. Harry is everywhere; in the movies, hanging around the mall in cardboard stand-ups, on the lips of your kid's peers. You can hang his posters or you can make him out of Legos. When you begin to read Harry, your kid will notice right away that Harry is in that happiest of human situations, an orphan rejected by his adopted family and sent off to a large, forbidding boarding school named Hogwarts (This is not a name I made up) where most of the students hate him and at least half of the faculty is determined to see him fail, if not actually be killed. Your kid will be entranced by this scenario, and pine secretly to switch places with Harry. Plucky little Harry is confronted time and time again by authority figures who sternly warn him that if he breaks some rule or enters some forbidden chamber, he will be turned into a toad or banished from Hogwarts, whichever seems worse at the time.

Harry, being the happy-go-lucky budding wizard that he is, immediately disobeys any rule that he is given. That is the only thing he has in common with your kid. Among other differences, you will note that Harry is always bravely engaged in mortal magical combats in dark places with evil wizards, whereas your kid will not even fall asleep in his perfectly safe room unless there is at least 75 watts of light bulb burning in it. If you point this out to him, your kid will resent you forever, but go ahead, since he will probably discover some other reason to resent you forever anyway.

There are two kinds of kid's movies. The first kind are bad kid's movies, which are nearly all of them. They cost about thirty dollars to see, once you pay for your ticket, your kid's ticket, and his friend's ticket, plus popcorn and drinks. Your ticket costs seven bucks, while the kids' tickets cost four. This is a gross economic injustice. If you have sat through the likes of *Atlantis*, *Treasure Planet*, or *Big Fat Liar*, as the Single Dad has, you know the only seat you pay more for and enjoy sitting in less belongs to an airline, and I mean middle seat, back row,

view of engine, sitting next to a sumo wrestler who hasn't had a bath since he left Kyoto. The good thing about bad kid's movies is you only have to see them once.

Then there are good kid's movies (*Shrek*). The bad thing about good kid's movies is that you have to buy the video, which means you will see them seventeen times a week for up to a year.

Juvenile TV shows also consist of two types; sopping and cliched dramas, where kids discover in the end their parents are wiser and more loving than they thought, or slap-happy comedies, where the kids operate on the principle that Mom and Dad are the most hopeless kind of scatterbrained idiots ever to escape institutionalization.

All TV shows and movies featuring divorced parents almost always end with them getting back together. This is a shameless emotional hook for your child, and after watching your kid's eyes tear up wistfully after viewing *The Parent Trap*, you may start to think that North Korea's having a nuclear bomb that it can launch far enough to hit Disneyland is pretty cool.

You will have to explain to your child that divorced couples getting back together has only happened in real life twice, both times in the nineteen-fifties and both times involving Elizabeth Taylor, and the chance of it happening again, particularly as far as your kid's Mom and Dad goes, is about the same as Dick Cheney making an aerobics video.

Cartoons are the best media to view with your son. Sponge Bob in particular illustrates splendidly two of life's timeless principles, namely that you should always pick friends who are dumber than yourself, because hanging around with them makes you look smarter, and if you make enough noise about any problem, someone else will solve it for you, just so you will shut up.

Japanese cartoons, for some reason called animae, should be viewed with caution. All of them involve large casts of similar, round-eyed characters involved in some universal but hard to understand struggle. Might be the translation. Large portions of the cartoon are always devoted to the characters screaming wordlessly at each other, preparatory to battle. This is not a cartoon. This is a flashback to your marriage. Change the channel.

CHAPTER V: HOLIDAYS, TRAVEL, AND EDUCATION FOR THE SINGLE DAD

THE HOLIDAY CALENDAR FOR THE SINGLE DAD

You will discover, now that you are a lone parent that holidays have acquired an entirely different meaning than they held for you when you were a single or married guy, which was deciding what seasonal sports extravaganza was best suited for viewing while you soothed your moderate hangover with a few light beers. Now you are in charge of the holidays. It is up to you to make them “special” for your child, and “special” does not mean letting them fetch cold ones for you until the last bowl game is over. What follows is the yearly calendar of holidays, and your minimum obligations for each one.

NEW YEAR’S DAY: Pick the child up from whomever you had baby-sit him the night before. Swear you will never mix tequila and nitrous oxide again. If you live close enough to a major urban area that hosts a huge parade featuring giant helium balloons of cartoon characters, endless groups of heterosexual men in drag strumming banjos, or floats consisting of the entire floral production of Central America sewn into the shapes of aircraft carriers, you will have to take him to it. Otherwise, he can watch it on TV, which is a powerful argument for living in the deep suburbs.

MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY AND PRESIDENT’S DAY: You don’t get off work for either one of these holidays, so your big problem is finding an unemployed female who is willing to watch your kid instead of hitting the sales. Good luck.

GROUNDHOG DAY: It’s February 2nd. If at all possible, celebrate by going to Hawaii, where they don’t have groundhogs.

VALENTINE’S DAY: You have to put together a little package consisting of a card and a piece of candy for every kid in your child’s class. When your kid comes home with all his cards and pieces of candy, notice that every other parent in his class can do this much better than you.

ST. PATRICK'S DAY: If you have not yet broken any New Year's resolutions concerning drinking, now is the time to do so. The less your kid sees of you on this holiday, the better.

EASTER SUNDAY: This holiday can sneak up on you, coming as it does on no particular date. Easter may occur on any Sunday from the middle of March to the end of April. The timing of Easter used to have something to do with the spring solstice and the phases of the moon, but nowadays it occurs on the Sunday after Tiger Woods wins his first golf tournament of the year.

The most important thing about Easter is not to miss the telltale signs it is approaching (giant cardboard rabbits everywhere) and thus be forced to wake up before your child does (4 AM is a safe bet) on Easter morning to purchase two hundred dollars worth of candy jelly beans and fake grass at the Circle K, then conceal it behind the radiator, so that when your child finally wakes up and discovers it, all of the candy has melted together into an irregular, jelly bean-studded chocolate brick.

MEMORIAL DAY: This is the first of the Summer Holidays, traditionally the least annoying, consisting as they do of merely an excuse to drink beer and barbecue, something you were planning to do anyway. Memorial Day barbecues are held in the garage, since it is usually sixty degrees outside and raining hard enough to make Noah nervous. The Single Dad prefers to barbecue with real charcoal, since the extra carbon monoxide the coals produce really whets the summer appetite, and it is easier to achieve the perfect summer burger (burnt enough to bring out the natural carcinogens on the outside, raw enough to be still fulminating with salmonella on the inside, marbled throughout with cholesterol) over a natural flame.

FOURTH OF JULY: The only flaw in this holiday is the necessity to leave the property to view fireworks or, conversely, to have visited one of the Southern states recently enough so that your own personal stash of pyrotechnics would give you an outside chance of defeating the Turkish Army in an artillery duel. This is the holiday where you or another family member has the best chance of ending up in the emergency ward.

LABOR DAY: This is the holiday when all non-working people (celebrities, politicians, attorneys, government employees, dictators-for-life, college presidents, sales managers, your ex-wife and your kid) gather together to honor working people. (You) You get to buy them drinks and cook them dinner.

COLUMBUS DAY, VETERAN'S DAY: See President's Day.

THANKSGIVING: Handled entirely by Grandma, thank God.

CHRISTMAS: This is the ultimate, the Big Kahuna, the Grand Coulee Dam, the Pimp Daddy of all holidays, and deserves its own special section.

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS FOR THE SINGLE DAD.

Chestnuts roasting on the open fire. Jack Frost nipping at your nose. And a petite, angry blonde in a honking big SUV gunning it for the last space in the parking lot of a mall the size of the Pentagon, causing the Single Dad to throw himself abruptly into the nearest convenient filthy snowbank. The lesson here is that Christmas is a dangerous time of year for both chestnuts and pedestrians, since both are subject to extremes of temperature and being suddenly crushed.

But what is the true meaning of Christmas? *Well, it usually gives a much-needed boost to the stock market.* No! Wrong answer! Try again!

Okay, so what's wrong with a season that brings you twenty-eight college bowl games, and a full rack of pro football, too, just when the weather is getting so outstandingly miserable that the only sensible thing to do is throw a blanket over the recliner and a foam insulator over your beer and not venture any further than the mailbox until January 2 rolls around? You've always wondered how Ol' Boatshoe would match up against Northwest South Dakota State, haven't you? The Walgreen's Pepsi Blue CIA Diary Queen Bowl (formerly the Arthur Anderson Bowl) exists to answer that question.

But deeper questions lurk, and the Single Dad means to answer them, because lying in a parking lot amid a scattering of toys and charge receipts, picking the slush out of his underwear after being nearly run over by a Ford Expedition, always puts him in a quietly contemplative mood.

Christmas is about joy, about family togetherness, about peace and love for all humanity. It's also about listening to Christmas music, music that at any other time of year would have you hitting the SCAN button on your radio quicker than Sarah Palin switches off a rap song. It's bad enough to be eating what feels like your last meal at a plastic table in some awful mall pizza joint, apprehensively eyeing the phalanx of steely-eyed matrons ready to stampede unflinchingly all over you, the rookie Christmas shopper, the moment you venture out onto the tiles of the mall proper, without having to also listen to the worst song ever committed to vinyl, which happens to be Alvin and the Chipmunks singing "Christmas Don't Be Late." (Don't bother arguing or sending in your own candidates for this honor; Alvin has it, and after "Christmas" comes every other song the Chipmunks have ever recorded) Alvin is not alone; all segments of the music industry prostitute themselves shamelessly in the service of Christmas; the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sings "Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer," while Eminem raps out "Hark The Herald Angels Sing."

It's about hitting twelve different toy stores in hopes of finding that "hot" toy without which your child's Christmas would be as empty as Fergie's underwear. It's about getting sneered at by the clerks at each one, when they inform you they haven't had that toy in stock since Columbus Day. It's about shopping on the Internet, where you can order that toy with a lightening-fast mouse click and then wait for the summer solstice for it to arrive. UPS in this case stands for Underground Parcel Service, because they take enough time to *dig a tunnel to your house* in order to deliver.

It's about overeating to a degree that the result to your body is roughly the same as injecting a pint of Crisco directly into the heart muscle. People eat mince pie at Christmas, for God's sake. For those of you unfamiliar with mince pie, think of four really bad things you can attempt to squeeze into your arteries. Try fat, sugar, salt and syrup. Mix together and bake in a buttery crust. That's mince pie. Wash it down with some eggnog, and then take bets on whether your blood pressure is going to finish higher than the NASDAQ.

You cynic, you sneer. What about family togetherness? What about those heartwarming holiday visits? I can only imagine them, since our family has been forbidden by county ordinance to gather in groups of more than five during the holidays, since 1982, the year that Uncle Jed and Cousin Poonie set fire to the paramedics and ran off to Canada in search of a province that would let them marry legally, but I've been told about them, and what I've been told is you should never serve alcohol to people who bottom-line hate each other, especially if their Christmas stockings have included power tools or cutlery. You should never serve alcohol, period, because that makes you legally responsible for whatever the drunk person may subsequently do, including sober up and become President of the United States as a result of a disputed election.

Christmas means giving to those less fortunate than you as well, and there is always someone less fortunate than you, even if you are a single parent who has spent enough money to bail out General Motors to buy toys that your child will tell you his mother already got him, an expensive present for the girlfriend in lieu of paying attention to her during the holidays, and a thoughtful whiplash collar for yourself, as a result of your encounter with the Expedition. All right, there is nobody less fortunate than you, at least this side of the Sudan. Just walk past the guys with their bells and kettles and sneer.

Then there is the religious and ultimate meaning of Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Our Savior, or, if you happen to be Jewish, Muslim or atheist, My Savior, which traditionally is held in an overheated church packed with people who only go there twice a year, singing hymns loudly and praying the traditional Christmas prayers of praise, of thanks, and the Single Dad's own particular favorite, asking God to please let MasterCard forget his address.

Now the Single Dad looks at the words above, and is struck by the enormous wad of Scroogism contained therein, and is sorry. Christmas has its flaws and excesses, much like the Super Bowl, but we eagerly look forward to each and every one, don't we? Both Christmas and the Super Bowl, that is, despite that fact that you are probably neither a bookie nor a toy retailer. And unless you are an ancient Roman, you probably don't realize that while it will soon be time for Super Bowl XXXVII, it is already Christmas MMXI.

The Single Dad knows that there is a peace that comes with Christmas, late in the evening, when the presents are wrapped and bowed and crammed under the tree, when you can relax by the fire with a cordial and think back with a warm feeling of self-congratulation on the

year soon to go by, that you have made this safe haven for your child for yet another turn of the calendar, and that he will soon awake with joy on Christmas morning and tear into his presents and partake for a brief moment in the pleasant Yuletide illusion that somewhere out there, be it Heaven or the North Pole or the lottery office, some omniscient personage pays attention to our wishes. You fall lightly towards an exhausted sleep, visions of sugarplums, or maybe just an exotic dancer named Sugar, dancing in your head, soothed by the crackling of the flames, until you suddenly remember that you don't have a fireplace.

JESUS, TERROR, SUV'S AND ORLANDO

I have to admit that I, personally, have been terrorized by SUV's. Not SUV's driven by anybody on a jihad, though. For me, terror has lurked in the form of SUV's driven by my neighbors. Everyone has experienced the fear occasioned by attempting a simple right turn at the same time a huge SUV is trying to make a left at the same intersection. The SUV blocks your view of the road (and the sky) so you cautiously stick your car out a little further to check traffic. The SUV creeps out a little further too. This continues until you are halfway out to the yellow line, at which point a dump truck you were unable to see approaching comes crashing nearly into you, blowing his horn at your idiocy, and the SUV driver smirks at the top of your head.

You will also notice that very few men drive SUV's. Dad only gets to drive the SUV when it snows. The rest of the time it is driven by Mom, typically a skinny blonde woman who has eaten nothing but grapefruit halves with Sweet 'n Low since she was in ninth grade. Constant grapefruit consumption has made her very honked off at the rest of us. She swerves around furiously, unable to concentrate on her driving because she is fantasizing continuously about burgers molten with cheese and crates of cream donuts. She has her own support group, the Angry Anorexic Association. (This is the AAA you hear so much about) Tiny women in huge SUV's have completely surpassed elderly men in hats as the most feared group of drivers on the road.

Or else people of any sex or age who are arguing with someone else, usually their child, on their cell phones while attempting to park an SUV the size of a trailer park in a space the size

of an Escort. This is fairly terrifying, especially if you own the Escort and are sitting in it at the time. Just listen to this authentic re-creation of such an incident:

SUV DRIVER: (To cell phone) No! You may not borrow the Hummer to cruise the beach this weekend! Last time you did that, we found an entire Coast Guard life boat wrapped around the axle!

YOU: (Shouting) No! Stop! I'm down here! (CRUNCH!)

SUV DRIVER: (Still on phone) Oh, I must have run over a bottle in the parking lot! I have to get out and see if it's done any damage to my humongous tires, which cost more than overthrowing a medium-sized dictatorship! (Opens door, gets out, steps on your roof, slips, falls, and sues you)

Don't think that the Single Dad does not enjoy driving an SUV. Everybody does, which is why they are so beloved by the American public. In an SUV, you float high above traffic, nearly eye-level with tractor-trailer cabs, so you can finally see what those guys look like. (Mostly unshaven, bug-eyed, cap-wearing males who drive around like they are still mad about flunking the Serial Murderer Aptitude Test and who may be on significant amounts of what the Air Force calls "go-pills") All other traffic objects seem to be small and insignificant, asphalt-hugging bugs that probably deserve extermination.

SUV's suck plenty of gas, which means that large portions of Saudi Arabia, a foreign country, are being converted by your cavernous V-8 into good, old-fashioned American smog. Eventually, this entire desert nation, except for a few shrines and camels, will disappear out American tailpipes.

Also, the names of SUV's always invoke grand vistas, wide-open spaces, and mighty mountains. *Yukon. Santa Fe. Sierra.* There are no SUV's named after anyplace in Delaware. Just imagine it. *Wilmington. New Castle. Claymont.* Nobody would buy those things. When SUV drivers drive to the same workplace, mall and grocery store they have gone to every day of their lives, they want to go there in a vehicle named after a place they could not locate without a couple of broad hints from a global positioning satellite.

Let us also examine the theological underpinnings for SUV use. As you may have heard, a coalition of Christian and environmental groups recently launched a campaign called What Would Jesus Drive? The implication is that Our Lord would have favored smaller, more environmentally friendly cars. There are many references to the environment in the Gospel (lambs, lilies of the field, loaves, fishes, etc.) and very few to the internal combustion engine. Maybe none. People in the Bible walk, some for up to forty years.

Times have changed, though, and the view that Our Lord would necessarily prefer to drive some munchkin car is, of course, preposterous. Consider that He crews around with a minimum of twelve Apostles. Even if they don't pack more than a couple spare sets of robes and sandals apiece, that's still a lot of freight, so I doubt their hoopty is going to be a Fiesta. I expect they'll be driving the biggest, baddest Winnebago on the highway, with a rebuilt V-12 so they can burn rubber way ahead of John Madden or Willie Nelson or any of the other custom bus freaks out there, and you'd better believe they're slapping a *Honk If You Love Jesus* bumper sticker on the back.

Real terrorists often drive SUVs themselves. Those guys need a lot of space and frankly, from the way they look and probably smell, we ought to give it to them. The Single Dad read the other day about six terrorists in the Middle East who were blown up when their car-bomb exploded prematurely. Why do you need six people to drive a car bomb? There is only one answer, and it offers a gleam of hope in these hard times, and that ray of hope is: *We may not be winning the war on terrorism, but at least we've got the bastards car-pooling!*

Imagine such a car-pool.

The terrorists gather at the appointed hour.

TERRORIST #1: Shotgun!

TERRORIST #2: No, Abdul, no! I already called shotgun! You can ride shotgun *on the way back!* (Winks broadly at the rest of the terrorist crew)

Abdul, grumbling, has to sit bitch. The car explodes.

Your child may be frightened by the terrorist threat. It is necessary for you to reassure him. This is easy for the Single Dad, because we have a decrepit home in the Pennsylvania woods that is a lot closer to being a target for demolition than it is for terrorism. It is when we venture from home, to escape the butt-freezing, snot-heaving PA winters by super-sizing our credit-card debt going to Orlando on an airplane, that my kid's concern about terrorism ratchets up. Seize the bull by the horns. Ask loudly at the airline ticket counter for "the non-terrorist flight." Scowl darkly at any fellow passengers that appear to be of Middle Eastern descent, or who are wearing turbans, or need a shave. If any of them scowl back, tackle them and remove their shoes. Toss the footgear towards an airport gift shop while yelling "Fire in the hole!" With any luck, the shoe will explode, causing four-dollar candy bars to rain down upon the terminal like manna. Put a Bowie knife in your carry-on, to reassure yourself that airport security is working efficiently.

Forceful action, as described above, may delay your Orlando vacation by four to six years, depending on whether you get any time off for good behavior, but that's all good, because by then Orlando will have constructed a dozen more must-see attractions. Orlando is the only place in the world where there are motels with roller coasters *in their parking lots*. This is a 100% true fact. Imagine spending a day at one of the parks, jostling with the several hundred thousand other people all trying to buy eight-dollar cheeseburgers at once, then feeling that cheeseburger surge north while your stomach is going south time after time again as you whip around roller coasters that were designed by NASA to determine how fast they could shoot a man into space before his brain squirted out of his ears. Then, exhausted, head back to your room. Your child, spotting the roller coaster in the parking lot, looks at you with pleading eyes. "One more ride, Dad," he begs.

You slap him, of course. It's all part of the magical way you feel after tromping around the Magic Kingdom all day.

All right, you don't slap him, although you would like to. In fact, after spending three hundred dollars to stand in line all day, it's not just him you want to slap. You'd also like to cold-cock Minnie Mouse, or any other big, plastic, smiling cartoon character wherein there lurks a small, bitter actor who has a high tolerance for heat and is secretly working on a treatment for a

new reality show that blows the doors off the hidden world of people who wear huge, doofy costumes for a living.

The whole premise that a certain unnamed theme park is “The Happiest Place On Earth” does not stand up under scrutiny. The happiest place on earth would be locked in a microbrewery with the Victoria’s Secret models, reading a letter from your son that announces that he has won the Nobel Prize for video games, but is too busy playing to spend the money. A check is enclosed.

In order for you to believe that you are in The Happiest Place On Earth when you are, in fact, standing in a drained-out swamp in Florida with 400,000 other sweaty, annoyed people, you would have to be genetically re-engineered to enjoy the following:

Paying as much for an order of fries as you usually would for a taxi to the airport.

Being subject to g-forces that would give evil Nazi centrifuge scientists pause.

Forking over nine dollars for a picture of yourself screaming in abject, emasculated terror.

Trying Dipping Dots, “The Ice Cream of the Future,” for the first time. Throwing half-eaten package away in disgust.

Trying to find nondescript rental car in parking lot the size of Belgium, while carrying eighty-pound child who is as tired as *Survivor Twelve* will someday seem.

Believing that the Disney executives, who make as much money before lunch as you are likely to make in your whole life, got that rich by *really caring a lot about kids*.

Above all, you should enjoy standing in line. You should be able to think thoughts like “Boy, the lines are a lot nicer than yesterday’s,” and “Wow, they didn’t have lines like this when I was a kid.” A tattoo shop on the premises would be able to tattoo “Born To Stand In Line” on your biceps or belly-button, and there would be, of course, a long line for its services.

One thing about standing in line is that as they loop around, you keep running into the same people. If you have to wait for two hours to enjoy thirty-five seconds of pants-wetting fear, then you keep looping around with the same folks. You get to memorize them. *Okay, first the fat guy in the tank top. Then the woman wearing the “I’m With Stupid” T-shirt. No sign of “Stupid.” Then the teenage white boys who are obviously from the most sanitary, all-Caucasian suburb imaginable, but who nonetheless address each other as “Pimp” and “Dog.” Then the unbelievably attractive woman in the overstrained tank top and short-shorts. Then her boyfriend,*

who, were it not for the Cuban security guard, would have punched you out about three loops back because you've been staring at her chest as if your heat-ray vision could burn the bra right off of her.

You get the picture. After a while, it seems rude if you don't at least exchange email addresses.

Or you can take a vacation that combines travel with a learning and cultural experience for your child, although mostly what your child will learn is that you are too cheap to take him to Orlando. I urge you to make the mistake of going to Washington, DC, and trying to explain the Federal Government to your child. At first you can just enjoy the monuments and the metal detectors. Your kid will be so enthralled by the majesty and security of DC, so much so that he will ask how he can be President himself some day.

You tell him not everyone can be President, but there are other good government jobs available. You can be a Senator or a Congressman. It's true these jobs are not as well-paid as being Commander in Chief, and you have to get your own house and live without your own personal band to play a song every time you come into the room, but they pay pretty well and you can hold them for life, practically, if you don't get caught skinny-dipping with strippers or collecting campaign contributions from the Gotti crime family.

Plus there are other jobs you don't even have to run for. Cabinet positions, for example. Most Cabinet members are called Secretary, but they are not like the secretary at Daddy's work that wears fishnet stockings and he talks to sometimes when he is asleep. They are mostly older white guys. There are about seventy of them, including the Secretary of States, whose job it is to keep the states in line and make sure we have enough of them, and the Secretary of Defense, who works closely with the Secretary of Offense and the Secretary of Special Teams.

The way the government works is this: Every four years there is an ELECTION. This is preceded by two years of CAMPAIGNING. This is when prospective candidates for President prove their worth by spending most of their time in New Hampshire or Iowa, eating countless dinners with toothless dirt farmers and fur trappers, and arm-wrestling each other for the right to appear on radio stations with call letters like KHOG at 4 AM. Then there are the NOMINATING CONVENTIONS, which tick off the entire nation by pre-empting its favorite sitcoms, even though everybody knows how they will come out. (The sitcoms, that is)

I personally watch the conventions because they are funnier. What's better than watching Republicans try to form a conga line as the PA system blares out Donna Summer? Republicans can't conga any better than their wives can parallel park, but there's nothing like watching a bunch of overweight, late-middle age males in elephant hats dancing with each other to make you proud to be an American.

Next come the TELEVISED DEBATES. These are followed by fervid commentary in the press concerning who "won" the debate. This would be entirely unnecessary if a proposal of mine was followed, which is that the candidates, during the debate, would be allowed to make and use SPIT BALLS. This would have been especially useful in 2000. Al Gore would have droned on about spit ball parity, while George W, who obviously was the kind of beady-eyed, big-eared kid who was Spit Ball King of the fifth grade, would have peppered him. Nobody would have voted for a guy last seen on national TV with his pancake makeup covered with bits of paper and drool, and Bush would have won in a landslide instead of being forced to steal the election.

Next, the election itself, which is either decided by CBS five minutes after the polls close or the Supreme Court two months later. Then the government gets back to normal, giving us the regular amount of wars, recessions, tax cuts that never seem to affect you personally, and scandals, until it is time to get ready for the next election.

DELAWARE-SMALL MENACE

When driving back from DC, you will be annoyed at having to stop and pay two dollars to get through the tiny, yet greedy, state of Delaware. This may give you pause to dwell on one of the great unknowable questions, i.e., *why do we need Delaware in the first place?* From its murky shore to its moldering lowlands, it does not deserve to exist, or at least co-exist as the nominal equal of bigger, more interesting states, such as Wyoming or even Arkansas. Most of us ignore Delaware, or are just vaguely aware of it as a small annoyance, but that's like ignoring a burglar in the den, in my opinion. Trouble is bound to happen. A nation that is ready to war if some Arab tyrant so much as throws a slushball cannot afford to ignore the enemy within. Too

long has Delaware existed as a blemish upon the face of the nation; it is time to squeeze it off, or at least cover it with a thick layer of Clearasil. Like Hilary Clinton telling off the Iranians at the UN, I have prepared the following as an indictment against Delaware, and stand ready to defend it against the Delawarophiles, should any exist, and their fellow travelers.

For those of you who think it necessary to find Delaware on the map, it hangs low between the front forelegs of Pennsylvania like some awkward genitalia. To the west it encroaches upon the pleasant pastures of Maryland; to the east it is washed (and a much needed bathing it is) by the waters of the Delaware Bay. On this bay are some alleged “beaches” where the unwary may be seduced into swimming, not knowing that the waters off these sands are chiefly those of the Delaware River, whose quiet yet sinister flow has coursed over God only knows how many old tires and rotting gangster corpses before it washes against the bather’s toes.

Unlike Rhode Island, which is equally small and scurrilous, but mercifully off the main roads, Delaware cannot be avoided. It maintains its iron grip on the Northeast corridor like a knotted drawstring on the nation’s sweatpants, collecting two bucks from every innocent traveler both coming and going on the Delaware Turnpike, which, despite its grandiose title, encompasses a mere twenty-one miles, border to border. Because of the money Delaware rakes in from this strategically located stretch of rotting asphalt, it does not need to charge its own citizens sales tax. Is this not an example of an entire state operating on the same moral plane as a squeegee man?

The chief industry of its major city, Wilmington, is collecting late charges on credit card debts. The state is owned nearly entirely by the menacing Dupont family, whose members include napalm manufacturers and other convicted killers.

Wilmington has a baseball team called the Blue Rocks. The team could have been called the Pop Rocks, the Igneous Rocks, the Cleveland Rocks (I admit that might be a little confusing) the Rock Me Amadeus Rocks or the Metamorphic Shales, but Delaware chose the simple, completely incomprehensible Blue Rocks, as part of the state’s campaign to bewilder the rest of the nation. Your MasterCard statement is also part of this effort. Only a Delawarean would think of charging 15.23456% interest.

The tallest object in the state, natural or man-made, is the bridge out of it.

Delaware’s capital city, Dover, is named after Dover, England, a place with sea-cliffs so beautiful that one expects to see handsome, middle aged people standing on them talking about

acid reflux disease. Needless to say, no such scenery surrounds Dover, Delaware, a flat, cheerless place bisected by unlucky US Route 13.

Delaware changes its state motto every few months. After the birth of the nation, the other states planned to leave Delaware in the custody of the British, kind of like a palm-buzzer on the handshake of the peace treaty. Delaware, however, snuck under the tent-flap of the US by ratifying the Constitution faster than the TSA can find your junk and called itself “The First State.” Delaware was forced to change that when the other states, who had been tricked into thinking the intended motto was “The Worst State,” objected, so Delaware went with “Delaware-Small Wonder.” Even the Delawareans could not abide this naked distortion of the facts, so it was changed to the blatantly mercenary “Delaware-Home of Tax-Free Shopping.” As of this writing, the Delaware State Legislature, a body nearly as august as the Soprano family, was considering yet another change, to the painfully truthful “Delaware-It Only Costs Two Bucks To Leave.”

I offer the following solutions to the nagging Delaware problem:

First, we need to get another state. We want to keep the state total at a symmetrical 50, so dropping Delaware means picking up another candidate for the Union. Finally forcing Puerto Rico to make up its mind would be one solution, or splitting up one of the oversized states out West. Half of Kansas could be called Dorothyland, or half of California Disneyland, and no one would mind. Or make three states out of Texas and get rid of Rhode Island, too.

Then Delaware could simply be sold to some gullible foreign country, or attached to another state with a better reputation, like Hawaii. No one would care about having to pay two bucks to drive through Hawaii to get to Baltimore, and luaus and rainbows would replace traditional Delaware activities like betting at small, dilapidated racetracks and dying of boredom.

Rise up and march! Let us lead the unfortunates who populate Delaware’s squalid marshlands onto the firmer grounds of freedom, of independence from the iron grip of Dover and the Duponts, of pride in living in an altered state, hopefully a state at least large enough to contain a marathon, and less monotonous than a blindfolded bus ride. Awake, Delawareans! You have nothing to lose but your tollbooth.

Whew! Got a little excited there. Certainly I don’t want to insult all the residents, especially potential book-buying residents, of a whole state. Just kidding. No offense meant. I

urge all Delawareans to go back to their ordinary work of digging for clams or giving out my telephone number to telemarketers, instead of getting all worked up about the preceding paragraphs, and starting a lynch mob, or some other illegal formation. And it has nothing to do with being a Single Dad, so let's focus, here, and finish up this book.

THINGS BEING A FATHER HAS TAUGHT THE SINGLE DAD

Once again, the Single Dad found himself stranded in his mother's powder room without a word to read besides a parenting book. Got to quit having those heavy lunches.

SD picked up where he left off. The parenting book was still on the subject of lists. "Make a list of all the things you have learned being a parent," it suggested. "Many parents, upon doing this, feel an immediate gratitude towards their child, as they realize how profoundly they have improved themselves raising a child."

O-kay. When I was single, I used to be a nightclub manager on Oahu, where I had absolute power over nineteen-year-old girls wearing overstrained halter tops begging piteously to be allowed to pass through the doors using their obviously fake ID's. Now I live in a squalid condo in Pennsylvania, and have to beg underage girls to baby-sit for me at hourly rates approaching Warren Buffet's in order to leave the house.

You couldn't call that an improvement, but the parenting book is not talking about life-style improvement. Nor is it talking about saving more money or getting more sleep, neither of which you parents out there are ever going to do. It's talking about "the fruits of self-knowledge, self-learning, and self-awareness." Try spending *that* at the 7-11 next time your kid decides he can't live without the Harry Potter Magic Spinning Wand Lollipop. Parenting books tend to gush a bit sometimes, which is why most people would rather pull the discarded Tidy Bowl wrapping out of the trash can and read it instead, which is what the Single Dad is going to do the second he's done this list.

THINGS I'VE LEARNED BEING A FATHER

No matter what kind of remote and couch you have, the remote will always fit between the couch cushions, which will always be the last place you look for it.

The more expensive the rug, the more difficult it is to get “Gooze” out of it.

What it feels like to be inside the ball pit at a fast-food restaurant’s playground.

What it feels like to explain to the 22-year-old manager of the fast-food restaurant why it was necessary for you to be in the ball pit in blatant violation of the 42-inch height limit in the first place.

What it feels like to explain to the police that your threat to “knock the Special Sauce” out of the restaurant manager was meant to be taken allegorically.

That the phrase “I need to go to the bathroom” means “I need to go to the bathroom NOW!”

That the above is especially true of car trips. However, after the bathroom break is taken, the bathroomee will insist on wandering about the convenience store attached to the bathroom, eventually discovering at least fifteen overpriced items to beg for, including a pint of soda artificially formulated to resemble, both in color and taste, an article from Elton John’s wardrobe. Once chugged, it will insure that you are no more than a half-hour from your next bathroom break.

That the dog should have hair on it. That the cream cheese should not.

That while the child should be encouraged to take responsibility for his pet, he should not be allowed to choose its menu unsupervised.

That dogs vomit up the darndest things, including hairy cream cheese.

That although I cannot specifically recall when it was that I learned to use a napkin to wipe mustard off my fingers instead rubbing it off on my last pair of clean, navy-blue pants, I was probably older than ten.

That pizza should never be ordered with “extra-extra cheese,” otherwise the pizza parlor will deliver a pie shimmering with a translucent sludge that will slide onto the floor the minute the pizza is tipped a half-inch off the horizontal, meaning you just spent sixteen bucks to make your dog sick again.

That people with children who subscribe to *Home and Garden* are just fantasizing. They are like prison inmates reading *Playboy*.

That ketchup is not only a vegetable, it is the ONLY vegetable. You want your kid to eat a green vegetable, buy the green ketchup.

That my child thinks that following the Food Pyramid means he is allowed to make his french fries into a pyramid before he eats them.

Why I quit drinking chocolate milk. Why I started drinking beer.

That the reason I played outdoors, building tree forts and digging holes in the ground, when I was a kid was because there weren't at least *three entire television networks* devoted to children's programming back then. We got Saturday morning cartoons, period. My kid will be happy to play outdoors, as long as I program the VCR to record "The Fairly Oddparents" for him.

All of those networks are devoted single-mindedly to making your child miserable by reminding him of all the toys he does not yet own, even though he owns more toys than the entire juvenile population of Rangoon.

Buying your kid a book won't make him a reader; buying him a football won't make him a football player; buying him an art set won't make him an artist. However, buying him a video game will make him learn to beat you at it.

That the belief that childhood is necessarily brief and fleeting is a myth. Childhood is your whole life up until you have a child of your own.