

MANUSCRIPTS
DUSTBALLS

Susan Udell

My hobby is collecting dustballs. In fact, not only do I collect them in varying sizes, shapes and textures, but I also cultivate them under the beds, sofas, and Persian carpets of my home. I am especially proud of the superior strain of dustball that I have developed in my garage . . . a super-jumbo, fast-maturing, speedy-proliferating hybrid, borne out of many years and aches of experience and an innate feeling for the filthy stuff.

How did I happen to come about this unusual hobby? First, may I emphasize that my particular talent is by no means unique. There are millions of people with the same God-given gift to develop superior dustballs. Unfortunately, since slobery and unworthiness have so often been equated in our society, to claim publicly this penchant for the dust would automatically label one as a "terrible person." Hence, for many years, I, too, fought the deep-seated tendency to overachieve in the area. But thanks to my mother, who harassed and harangued me in my every waking hour to clean my room, I never really lost the knack.

When Mother married, she received three cases of PINESOL and a sterling silver dustmop handle. On their honeymoon, she toted a travel-size can of LYSOL SPRAY DISINFECTANT along and sterilized the bathroom, drawers and sheets of their hotel suite. Until this day, she does not feel virtuous or "complete" until she has done two full loads of laundry (each with a double-rinse cycle), vacuumed the house and scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom floors on her hands and knees. Sometimes she finds it difficult to locate greasy stains and dirt (she lives alone) . . . but when it gets her down, she catalogues her 231 bottles and cans of spray cleaners . . . or shampoos the Siamese cat. Then she calls me long-distance to ask if I have cleaned the house lately.

When it was time for me to enter college and dormitory living, my mother brainwashed me for two months on the virtues of cleaning . . . and thus keeping the family free from SHAME. As luck would deem it, my pimply-faced roomie was a little goodie country girl who spent every

waking hour arranging and rearranging her possessions into neat little compartments or tidy little stacks. When ever she was depressed about the prospect of yet another dateless weekend, she arranged and rearranged. When she saw me going out with such fierce frequency, she arranged and rearranged. On the other side, the only thing I arranged and rearranged was the assortment of junk that lay on my bed. Each night I would fashion a body-shaped clearing to sleep in . . . and about once a month, when my pile of rubble would begin to encroach upon her side of the room, to a point of hindering her movements . . . I would gather everything up and deposit it under my bed. At such times, I would usually be overcome with a mild sense of guilt.

The interesting thing about Sheila was that I think she really admired me and my bohemian predilections. Sometimes I would catch her looking over to my side of the room with such longing. I concluded that she was just a poor driven soul who would have given anything to be a little carefree like me. Still, in spite of all this incoming admiration, I was haunted by a gnawing sense of guilt and unworthiness, especially every Sunday night, when Mother would call to ask if I had cleaned my room.

During my sophomore year and second roommate, I developed an ulcer. Not only was Antoinette a paragon of tidiness bordering on the excessive . . . but a Phi Beta Kappa and an evangelist to boot. It was like living with Mother, only worse, because Toni not only flaunted her neatness and organization, but her brains as well. To her perverted way of thinking, brains and tidiness were one and the same thing. And she never let me forget it. She further aggravated me by being ready for bed every night at 8:30 pm, having done her 21 credit hours' and honor's thesis' worth of studying, and then allowing a half hour for spraying ODOR EATER into her shoes, ironing the next day's ensemble, showering, shaving, arranging her head in perfectly engineered rows of miniscule, metal curlers, and swallowing, in alphabetical order, 9 kinds of natural food vitamins. On weekends she executed dust with several brutal sweeps and read Nietzsche. And she had this disgusting habit of "Tsk, tsking" whenever I was readying to forsake cleaning and studying for something gayer, like an Ingmar Bergman movie. The year of judgment finally ended with my love life in the gutter, my grades in the pits, and my morale just a degree from suicidal, especially on Sunday nights, when Mother would call to ask if I had cleaned my room.

When I decided to move into an apartment during my senior year, my sanity hung on loose threads. But the moment I walked into the freeway-view, one-bedroom apartment that was advertised in the college paper, I knew that I would find some kind of peace. Gorgeous cobwebs were arranged in every dusty corner. Rubble protruded from beneath the studio bed. And there were no clothes hanging in the closet . . . they were all lying in a heap on the floor. As it turned out, I had finally met my match, my equal, my soul-mate. In that blissful year of co-habitation with Amy, our herd of roaches grew from 6 to 87 and our pile of collective clothing reached ceiling height. We bought another bed to store junk under and acquired Ralph, a rabbit . . . who added droppings to the confusion. When Mother visited me on graduation, she spied the roaches and fainted. When she came to, her eyes pierced into mine with the silent, but deadly, accusation of SHAME, SHAME, SHAME. And so again, after one marvelous guilt-free year, I began to feel a sense of unworthiness.

After graduation I moved to Hong Kong to seek my fortune and to escape Mother. The minute I landed at bustling Kai Tak Airport, I started to believe in reincarnation. Hundreds of little men rushed out of the woodwork to gather my luggage . . . and later . . . when a friend confirmed that yes, indeed, every household employed a maid, or amah, I knew for sure that in a previous life I had been a Chinese princess. When I found Ah Ping, my dearly beloved housekeeper, I prospered in a career free from domestic worries and guilt. I knew that while I was working, she was at home cleaning, dusting, tucking, folding, cooking and keeping the kitty litter box free from odor. Three years later, Mother came to visit . . . and left smiling.

Soon after, I met my foreign correspondent husband, fell madly in love and moved to New York City. The implications of life back in the United States did not hit me until two weeks later . . . when in horror . . . I realized that I was now responsible for the health, welfare and home of another human being . . . and without help!

Desperate that he should not see me in the dusty light of reality, I hastened to get organized. The first step, according to Heloise, was to "eliminate." Agreeing that the less junk there was around, the less junk there was to throw around, I went on a ridding rampage. I threw out clothes, American Express receipts, tight shoes, green stamps, guarantees, warrantys, and anything that did not bear an official stamp that said "IMPORTANT, DO NOT DISCARD, KEEP YOUR FILTHY HANDS OFF!" Soon, my husband caught on and began to

sequester things away in his closet . . . like torn-out N.Y. TIMES clippings, old magazines and chewed-up slippers. "For future referencel!" was his battle yell, and I soon sadly realized that he, too, harboured an innate tendency to be a "terrible person." It now became urgent that I save both of us from our fate.

But soon after, Baby came along and I lost control of the situation again. Keeping the diaper pail empty and fresh-smelling became the major occupation of my life. Mother lived in dread fear that Johnny would die of "Montezuma's Revenge" in my kitchen . . . or suffocate on the cat-hair tufts that floated freely around the house. I can't say she had no cause for concern.

What's more, the more I saw of other people's houses, the more I regarded myself as a failure. Their gleaming chrome and polished parquet floors made me retch in disgust and envy. When I was feeling masochistic, I would invite myself over to a neighbor's. Soon I began to withdraw. I would go for weeks without answering the doorbell. I would take the phone off the hook to foil some conniving neighbor. I knew they were out there . . . all waiting to rush over and catch me knee-high in muck. When our babysitter discovered a cat missing and recruited eager neighbors to pursue my linen closets and bed-unders, I fired her with a vengeance. And soon, we even stopped going out.

Short of primal-screaming, I had to do something. My self-image was disintegrating. I would prattle on and on about the need to clean up, but I was always too exhausted or discouraged. The dust lay like an unconquerable mountain before me.

One midnight sitting forlornly on a sofa smeared with Ragu sauce, I decided that to have reached my level in life . . . with all the accompanying trials and tribulations and dirty diapers . . . was to be deserving of something better . . . that if I had the least bit of inclination to live a fuller and more satisfying life, with more babies and rooms to clean . . . I would have to strip myself of all pretensions . . . all glorified images . . . and come to terms with the "real" me. If I was a "terrible person," I was going to have to accept it. If people could not respect me, it was *their* problem. If they wanted to clean instead of communicate, it was *their* time wasted. And if I was to become a societal aberrant with my unorthodox notions about familial priorities, I would create a society of my own.

And so, I came out of the closet. Like a crusader for dust, I placed an ad in the VILLAGE VOICE, daring people to strip themselves of dustcloths and dustmops . . . and to reach a new level of awareness. Nobody came to the first meeting.

Undaunted, I am getting more specific this week. I am publishing a definite set of guidelines for people to peruse, examine and hopefully accept. Called the TWELVE COMMANDMENTS OF CARRION, they are as follows:

1. Eliminate—less is less. Don't be intimidated by vulgar threats of husband.
2. Buy a big dog and station him permanently under the baby's high chair.
3. Get rid of bathtub ring . . . don't bathe. Shower, if you must.
4. Banish bedspreads. Decorative, but utterly unnecessary.
5. Buy paper plates, paper cups, paper utensils, paper napkins and a good trash compacter.
6. Buy twenty-five pairs of the same black sock and eliminate sorting. Use time saved to paste up BINGO BUCKS.
7. Don't take your family to other people's houses. They will soon forget what it's like to live in a clean environment.
8. Entertain in your favorite restaurant and say casually during a lull in the conversation . . . that you don't know why but Fido has been foaming at the mouth all week long.
9. To avoid "Ring around the collar" . . . let husband wear neck guard. Looks silly, but well worth ridicule.
10. Keep giant masking tape in the glove compartment of the car and remove lint "in transit" before making any public appearance.
11. Cultivate dustballs by sweeping lint, dirt and crumbs under the sofa, beds and carpets. Keep adding filth for about 3 or 4 weeks or until dustballs have reached full maturation stage. May take longer in the summer. Then vacuum and DO NOT DISCARD. Who knows when there might be a dustball shortage . . . or if they'll become a status symbol?
12. Twice a year, once before the Xmas holidays and again before Spring, send Mother a round-trip ticket and invite her to clean the house. She deserves it.

No doubt, people will laugh. Like the many famous who spoke too soon before their times and were misunderstood, I, too, might be

scorned and ridiculed. And no doubt, my mother will rant and rave and wonder where she went wrong.

But when I look into the mirror now, I do not avert my eyes. I see before me a proud woman who has risen above the petty criticisms of society . . . to excel in a field where she stands alone, and unsurpassed. A woman who has come upon the firm conviction that unless we know who we are . . . and what we simply cannot bring ourselves to do . . . we will forever be the slaves . . . rather than the masters of . . . the dustball.

A THEORY GROWS OLD

Karen Greene

Maybe he was old and crippled, but look at how fortunate he had been. Look at how many of his senile decrepit friends had taken up lodging in convalescent homes. No, he would never settle for that. Every picture-filled pamphlet with sauna and lounge scene found its way to the trash. Meadow Brook, Hillside, Leisure Village, Happy Valley—he had been recipient of all their “propaganda paper products.” Morning after morning he could be heard growling from his cushioned throne when Faith, his granddaughter, greeted him with the mail. Then Anita waited to hear the rustling of letters, pamphlets, and cards flying through the air like heaven bound doves. This was followed by silence—absolute and complete.

Within minutes Faith would emerge from her grandfather's room looking peaked, sometimes on the verge of tears. The wrinkled brow and clenching lips were a stranger to the face that usually glowed with the goodness of life. She was stunning with her long red hair and steel-blue eyes which seemed to laugh at the world. Unlike her mother, she failed to inherit the Moreheads' overly sharp jaw and gaunt cheeks. Perhaps these were to come with age. Anita liked to flatter herself saying that her daughter was her duplicate, but it was obvious that Faith was Jack Pearson's daughter. Everything reflected Jack, even Faith's ski slide nose and front bucktooth. She spoke with the same articulate tongue, used the identical hand gestures, and loved horse racing on Saturday afternoons.