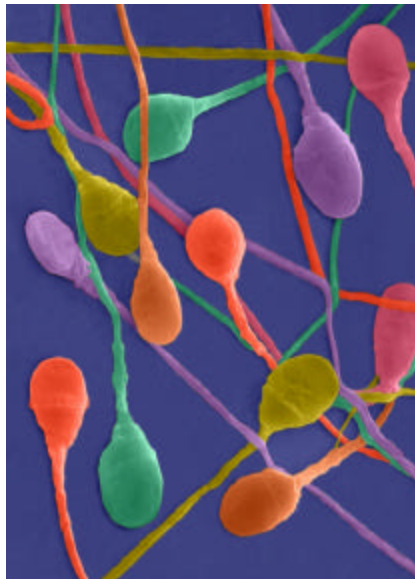


SEMINAL EXPERIENCE

My wife and I, both in our early 30's, had been trying to get pregnant for several months, and while this may not seem very long, many of our friends had conceived within the first month or two of trying. One couple even managed to hit it on their wedding night. On the other end of the spectrum, we also had friends who had suffered a series of miscarriages. With the biological clock ticking, those few unsuccessful months seemed to portend a grim, childless eternity to follow. I agreed to take The Test.



and transporting it to the doctor's office didn't, um, excite me. What if I were mugged? "That's right, officer, they got my wallet, my watch and my sperm."

Two mornings later, in the waiting room, a nurse greeted me. "Mr. Silber!"

Gosh, she seemed glad to see me. Was this the high point of her day? Only one question: How did she know who I was? Did something about me scream, "Masturbator"? Would the whole staff turn out to cheer me on?

She handed me what looked like an old jelly jar, led me to a bathroom, and said, "You don't need a magazine, do you?"

Feeling a bit like a crank caller, I phoned my wife's doctor's office and told the receptionist I wanted to leave a sperm sample.

"Is your wife a patient?" she asked.

She was, I assured her, in the back of my mind wondering whether if I said no they'd offer to let me come by anyway.

"Would you like to produce it here?" Her tone was perky, like that of a Disney World employee, as though to convey, "This is a *great* place to produce it!"

I did, in fact, want to produce it there. The prospect of producing it at home

What I was thinking: What the hell kind of magazines do you keep around here, *Playboy*, or hardcore stuff too? Which employee is actually assigned the task of purchasing them? Are the pages stuck together? What percentage of *Hustler's* subscription base is gynecologists' offices?

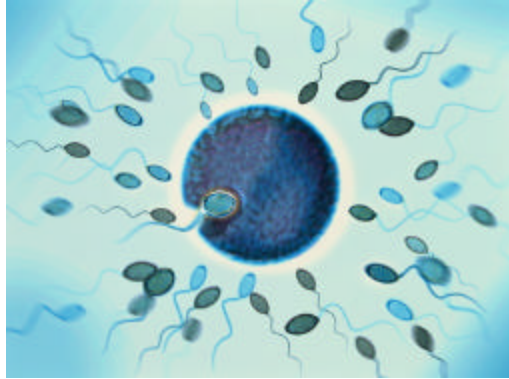
What I wish I'd said: "Yes. Do you have *New Republic*?"

What I, in fact, did say: "Um, I guess I'll be okay."

The bathroom had clearly not been designed with the sperm producer in mind. The tile was cold. The lights were that fluorescent blue-white that could make even George Hamilton look cadaverous. It was all so ... clinical. I felt like a lab rat. Sex for procreation is fundamentally different from sex for fun, I guess, even when it's with yourself. My manhood was at stake. What if I scored low? Could I just claim bad karma and take it over, like the SAT?

To counter all this mood-killing introspection, I tried to remember what the title character from *Portnoy's Complaint* would fantasize about when he was jerking off into a piece of liver. Unfortunately, all I could recall was the scene in which his mother nearly bursts in on him in the bathroom, and he has to make up a story about being in there so long because he had diarrhea, and culminates with her scolding him for flushing his poopie (as he'd claimed) before she had a chance to inspect it.

Anyway, all this got me thinking, wouldn't it be funny if somebody walked in on *me* right now? Then, of course, someone *did* jiggle the door. Was I taking too long? "Someone's ... *in here!*" I sputtered cleverly. The jiggling stopped. I began again.



Some time later, I managed to produce my sample (I'll spare the details except to say I owe an eternal debt to a well-known screen actress and a trappy girl I haven't seen since tenth grade). I emerged from the bathroom attempting not to smirk, striving to remember this was a scientific investigation, not some

adolescent hijinks. I tried to palm my sample, but the container was too big for my hand. I did my best not to look like a guy wandering around with a jar of his own semen, wondering if I could maybe pass it off as a wacky new product from Smuckers. Finally I

sat down, setting the jar on the couch a discreet foot or two away. Suave.

I waited nervously for about twenty minutes, periodically glancing over at my specimen, as though it might be beaming me telepathic messages. At last, the nurse called me into the lab. "Is that the whole sample?" she asked. Uh-oh. Was it too small? I had always assumed quality was more important than quantity. Or maybe she was worried I'd somehow missed the jar's wide mouth, that the john was now dripping with my wayward seed.

"It's all in there," I said reassuringly, sounding oddly like the pitchman from an old tomato sauce commercial.

In return for my sample, I was handed a lengthy form. *Date of last ejaculation*, they wanted to know. I was tempted to fill in my wife's name for "date," but levity seemed inappropriate to the moment. *Produced by?* I actually assumed I would fill in my own name here, perhaps adding "directed by" and "starring." But the nurse beat me to it. "We know how this was produced," she said in the somewhat scolding tone of the schoolmarm she now resembled. I half-expected her to call me "young man." She took the pen from my hand and wrote "masturbation" in the sort of fine, decorative little letters usually found atop a birthday cake. Having thus chronicled my sin for the ages, she had just one more question.

"Would you like to pay now, or have us bill you?"

What I was thinking: "I thought the point of doing it yourself is, it's free."

What I wish I'd said: "Can I leave a deposit—oh, I already did."

What I, in fact, did say: "Do you take credit cards?"

Suppose masturbation were always like this. You go to a big, impersonal facility,

answer a bunch of embarrassing questions, and when you're done, they charge you a hundred bucks. It would cut down on the practice considerably. Maybe I can sell this idea to the Pope.

"There," said the nurse after I'd paid, "That didn't take too long."



Another dig? Was I a premature ejaculator too?

"Well," I said, "I ought to be getting back to the office." As though if I'd had no other commitments, I might

have hung around a while. Perhaps had another go. Hey, what's a hundred bucks to a swinger like me?

That afternoon, the lab called. The nurse told me everything was "within normal range," and began to hang up. But I wasn't going to let her, um, get off so easy. For the record ... Sperm count: 142. Total ejaculation: 284. Motility: 76.1. Forward progress: 3/3+. Morphology: 68% normal. Head abnormal: 24%. Tapered: 14%. Amorphous: 5.2%. Pinheads (my favorite): 2.6%. Tail abnormalities: 8.3%.

My daughter was born just over nine months later. Someday I will take her back to see where it all began.