

the
didirt
diary

Anna Staniszewski



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For anyone who's ever had to clean a toilet.



chapter 1

Rachel, what are you doing with that toilet brush?” Mom calls as she comes out of the house with a mountain of paper towels in her arms.

“Um, practicing?” I say, realizing I’ve been absently twirling the brush like a baton. I give it one more dramatic spin before chucking it into the back of our dented minivan. Really, I was distracted while calculating how much money I need to earn in the next month (\$287.22) to keep from getting in huge trouble, but that is definitely *not* something I can admit to Mom.

“All right, are we ready for our first day?” she says as she slides the minivan door shut. She’s grinning so widely that the skin by her ears is wrinkling.

I nod and try to smile back. I can’t believe I actually volunteered to give up my Saturdays to inhale bleach, but my efforts will all be worth it in the end. Fingers, toes, and eyes crossed.

Anna Staniszewski

We pull out of the driveway and head toward one of the fancy housing developments across town. To stop my feet from nervously tapping in my sneakers, I focus on my baking plans for the weekend. My mission is to create the ultimate to-die-for brownie. If that doesn't get everyone's attention at the Spring Dance bake sale next month, nothing will.

"I'm so glad you changed your mind about working with me," Mom says, pushing her honey-colored bangs off her forehead. "It'll be nice to spend some time together again."

"Yeah, it'll be fun," I say, my voice high and squeaky. "I looove Windex!" I find myself doing what could be a cheer-leading hand motion to show her just how excited I am.

Mom's eyebrows scrunch together, and I tell myself to calm down. Mom miraculously accepted that I'd suddenly changed my whole attitude about her new cleaning business in the span of two days. She *cannot* know the reason why.

"Just remember that we need to make a good impression today, so try to be friendly, all right?" she says, glancing over at me.

Something stabs at the pit of my stomach. "You mean, try to act normal."

The Dirt Diary

Mom sighs. “Rachel, why do you have to be so down on yourself? You’re going to be in high school next year. It’s time to get some self-confidence.” Mom has never had an awkward day in her life, so she thinks being freakishly shy is just something you can switch off like an infomercial.

“I *do* have confidence,” I insist. At least, I do in my ability to make an amazing dessert. Dad always says my recipes are a little piece of heaven on a plate. I just hope heavenly is enough to get the most votes at the bake sale this year.

Thinking about Dad makes a familiar ache spread through my chest. Ever since he moved to Florida two months ago—right before Valentine’s Day, no less—nothing has felt right. Even Mom, who usually tries to smile and plan her way through every crisis, has been acting totally weird for weeks. That’s why I have to make my Get-My-Parents-Back-Together Plan work, even if it means scrubbing every toilet in town. Our family just doesn’t make sense without Dad.

A few minutes later, Mom and I pull into a neighborhood of gigantic houses. All the lawns and bushes are blindingly green, even though it’s only the end of April. For some reason, I imagine the neon grass tasting like kiwi. Would a kiwi brownie be too weird?

Anna Staniszewski

We stop in front of a stone monstrosity with two towers, one on each side of the house. I can almost imagine archers camped out in the towers, on the lookout for intruders. A tiny brook winds around the house and under a bridge at the end of the driveway. That's right: these people actually have a moat.

After I drag myself out of the car, Mom loads me up with some cleaning supplies. I glance down at the mop in my hands. "Mom?" I say, pointing to a label on the end of the handle with the word *mop* helpfully written across it. "Am I going to have to take away your label maker?"

I expect her to at least crack a smile the way she normally does when Dad pokes fun at her Type A personality, but she just grabs the rest of our things and locks the car. I guess now is not the time to bring up how crazy-face Mom has been getting since Dad left. At least she'll have other people's houses to psychotically organize from now on.

When we reach the carved wooden front door, I suddenly feel super self-conscious in my ratty jeans and faded sweatshirt.

"Holy fish tacos, Mom. How do you know these people again?"

"My boss is friends with Mr. Riley. They play golf together."

The Dirt Diary

Wait, Riley? I spot a gold plate by the door with *The Riley Residence* carefully etched across it. My stomach goes cold.

“Do the Rileys have a daughter?” I whisper.

Mom’s face lights up. “That’s right! I forgot Briana was in your grade.”

Oh. My. Goldfish. Briana Riley. I scanned Mom’s list of cleaning clients before we left the house. How did I not notice Enemy #1’s name on it? I have to get out of here. If Briana sees me like this, it’ll be even worse than the Fake Boyfriend Troy fiasco. That whole mess gave Briana enough ammo to use against me for *months*.

But before I can move, the door swings open and a guy about my age smiles back at us.

“Hi there!” Mom says in the chipper voice she uses to answer phones at the law office where she works. “I’m Amanda Lee, and this is my daughter, Rachel. We’re here to make your house spotless!” She lets out a little laugh that sounds like a hysterical chipmunk.

I expect the guy to at least raise an eyebrow at the idea of Mom and me being related, since we look nothing alike, but he just says, “I’m Evan Riley. Come on in.”

“Is your mother here?” Mom asks as she files into the

Anna Staniszewski

foyer. I scurry after her, keeping my eyes down. I just have to get in and out of here without making a fool of myself.

“I’m the only one home,” says Evan. “But I think she left a list in the kitchen.”

“Great! We’ll start there,” Mom chirps.

Holy fried onion rings. I can’t believe I’m in Briana Riley’s house! And this has to be her twin brother. I’ve heard he goes to a private school for geniuses. So far, he seems a million times nicer than his sister. No one’s ever mentioned how cute he is.

The minute the thought goes through my head, my face ignites. Why can’t I even think a guy is good-looking without getting embarrassed about it? Of course, Evan isn’t as cute as Steve Mueller. No one is. Steve Mueller is the hottest guy in the eighth grade, probably in our whole town. Unfortunately, as of a couple months ago, he’s also Briana Riley’s boyfriend.

“Rachel, come on,” Mom calls, already down the hall.

I realize I’m still standing in the foyer, staring at Evan with my mouth open and practically drooling on myself.

He looks back at me with an uncertain smile. I can’t help noticing that his eyes are the same shade of green as his Celtics jersey. “Are you okay?” he asks.

The Dirt Diary

I try to nod and move forward at the same time, but that just makes me lose my balance. I stumble forward and—

Crash!

The mop and broom fly out of my hands and land on the floor, followed by several bouncing rolls of paper towels.

“Booger crap!” I cry, stooping to gather everything up. *Wait, did I just say that out loud?*

“Here, let me help,” says Evan. As he kneels beside me, I catch the scents of peppermint and laundry detergent. “Did you just say booger crap?” he adds.

I nod, mortified. Why do Dad’s goofy swears always have to pop out of my mouth at the worst times?

But Evan laughs as he gets to his feet, his arms full of paper towels. “That’s funny. I think I might have to use that sometime.”

I try to say “okay,” but for some reason it comes out in slow motion. “Ohhhhkkaaay.” This is even worse than the one time I tried to talk to Steve Mueller!

Evan just laughs again, in a way that makes me think he isn’t laughing *at* me. He grabs one of the rolls of paper towels and balances it on top of his head as he walks alongside me. I can’t help smiling.

When we get to the Rileys’ kitchen, I almost drop

Anna Staniszewski

everything all over again. Every surface gleams like it's covered in nonstick cooking spray. If we had this kind of kitchen at home, I'd be able to bake all the time without Mom complaining that I'm taking up too much space. I mean, they actually have three ovens!

"Thank you, Evan," says Mom, rushing to take the cleaning supplies from him. "We don't want to be in your way, so just pretend we're not here."

He shrugs. "I'll be in my room if you need anything. Don't worry about cleaning in there today." Then he glances at me and flashes a crooked grin. "See you later, Booger Crap."

Great. Perfect. Just the kind of nickname you want a guy calling you.

Ten minutes on the job, and I've already made a total fool out of myself. At this rate I won't even survive until lunch.