

Product Placement

I've had it. I hate my mom. I hate my dad. All my dads!
My daughter Fiona's friend Lawrence is threatening suicide again. It is 4 a.m. I am in Fiona's room, where she has handed me her Nokia 3285 cell phone with Red Xpress-on™ Color Cover. Lawrence continues:
—They don't care about me. Nobody cares about me.
—Cut the bullshit, Lawrence, I say.
It isn't a strategy. I'm pissed now. I'm sick of Lawrence dragging Fiona through this crap.
—Fuck you man, he says.
—“Fuck you man,” that's all you got? I can't speak for the others, Lawrence, but I'm getting tired of feeling sorry for you.
—See ya, Lawrence says.
But he stays on the line.

Catching Fiona's eye, I frown at her perpetually-glowing Virgin Pulse 10" TV/DVD Combo, indicating I'd like to change the channel from the inane MTV-reality-whatever that is playing—a brief hiatus from her restless channel-surfing—some teenage characters sitting around in various stages of undress drinking, prominently, swirly red-and-white cans of Diet Cherry Coke™.

With a magician's flourish, Fiona produces the Crestron® Touchscreen Universal Remote from the morass of appliances, clothing, crustily decaying food and drink items, the vast array of grooming equipment that constitutes her room. Reflexively I tune to CNN Headline News® for the latest on the capture of Saddam Hussein. Over and over they are showing the same two shots of the bearded, haggard, hangdog Saddam, and a US soldier in Saddam's humble shack-hideout pointing out the entry to the “spider hole” where he was found. Along the bottom of the screen, CNN's hypnotic scrolling ticker reads: *Tip-off led to farm hideout near Tikrit.... “Disoriented” Saddam carried pistol but offered no resistance....*

Saddam says “I am ready to negotiate!”.... “President Bush sends his regards!” soldier tells Saddam.... Nearly half of new Iraqi army has quit, according to reports.... Halliburton accused of over-charging US for fuel.... Largest known prime number discovered; stay tuned for details.... Student “sex bracelets” latest urban legend?....

—Fiona honey, could you... Huh, sex bracelets? I stage-whisper to Fiona, putting my hand over the Nokia's tiny speaker, or where I think the speaker may approximately be located.

Fiona, 15, is profoundly embarrassed by much of what I do, sometimes even the way I breathe. Although none of her friends are around—and her mother and her little brother, who have done the drill before, have thank-fully gone back to sleep—she makes a face like I am the Lowest Retard of the Shit-digging Buttlickers from the Unholy Black Hell Beyond Hells. I have failed to understand even the most basic functionality of her cell phone, which includes Mobile Group Messaging and Predictive Text Input.

It's not the first time I've been unable to grasp the obvious. Fiona does not care that some of my Retard Shitdigging colleagues invented Mobile Group Messaging and designed all her precious devices, never mind that when we were her age we Almost Changed the World, and many of us are Really Sorry About Bush. Still, she can appreciate that Lawrence has not blown his head off—at least so far—on my watch.

—Dad! *God!*

—What? I yell-whisper.

—There's a *Mute*.

—I know you have Call Waiting—how do I get a second line?

—Press *Flash*. Geez.

I tell Lawrence to hold his dick for a few seconds—for some reason, this way of talking to him is effective—while I call 911 on the other line, then I persuade Fiona to run up to the kitchen to make us some hot Celestial Seasonings Red Zinger® tea with Hibiscus, Rosehips, Peppermint, Lemon Grass, Orange Peel, Natural Flavors, Lemon Myrtle, Licorice and Wild Cherry Bark. I don't tell Fiona that I love the Celestial Seasonings packaging because it looks like the druggy art of my own youth, or that I wish I were still smoking pot instead of drinking herbal tea. Especially tonight.

—My mom doesn't care about me, Fiona doesn't care about me, my *dads* don't care about me, says Lawrence after I *Flash* black and un-

Mute.

—Let me ask you something, I say. What are these Sex Bracelets?

—Huh?

—Sex Bracelets, they're on the news.

Something about wearing different colors as signals....

—You're a prick, says Lawrence.

—I need you to stop calling my daughter in the middle of the night, I say, recalling several annoying variations of the Nokia's 40 Distinctive Built-in Ring Tones, and then the Custom Downloadable ones that started appearing on our phone bill in recent months.

Fiona pads back down the stairs in her Splaff Gladiator flipflops (which, I never tire of reminding her, to her endless mortification, were known to the Older Generation as *thongs*). She has thrown her Old Navy® Tropical-Print Poplin Capri's on over the BC Apparel Blackwatch Tartan Classic Flannel boxers she had been sleeping in, whose waistband sticks up, just so, around her midriff. Fiona is nothing if not stylish, even at 4 a.m. She carries the two steaming cups of Celestial Seasonings Red Zinger®, but there is no place to put them—there are barely spots on the carpet where one can put one's feet—amidst the Domino's Ultimate Deep Dish™ Pizza box (doesn't she know that Domino's is evil and fascist?); crumpled cans of Diet Cherry Coke™ (same as the char-acters had been drinking on TV); rumpled pairs of Gap® Pencil Cut Tinted Authentic jeans; Old Navy® (again!) Ribbon Tanks with Satiny Bow in Fresh Air Blue, Bungalow Pink, and Surfer Orange; and countless *thongs* (the barely-underwear kind) which I do not wish to discuss, except insofar as they are Target® Women's Seamless Thongs, and Target participates in vaguely progressive community causes by giving to schools and by hiring Special People, unlike anti-abortion Domino's.

Standing, I hit my head on the Epoxy Powder Coated Steel Frame of her Ikea® Tromso bunk bed. I swear and drop the phone, half hoping it will now be lost forever in this teenage morass. However, guided by the glowing, blinking, and oddly comforting Sleep light of her 14" Apple iBook G4/933 1-GHz with FireWire and USB 2.0—somehow still visible on her desk through a thick camouflage of paper and clothing—we retrieve the Nokia, which I think Fiona could find even if the whole house collapsed into a rubble from the 7.5-magnitude earthquake that scientists say is inevitable around here in the next decade or two.

—You still there Lawrence?

—Yeah.

Warmed by the tea, I listen as Lawrence shares his suicide options. Last time, I recall, he threatened to hang himself, from a tree in the woods near our house, with a 30-foot length of Ace® Hardware 3-Strand Twisted Nylon Rope ("too much elasticity" wryly commented the police officer who intervened, along with my wife and half the neighbor-hood, following the frantic calls from Fiona). Now he is considering:

1. Ingest bottle of Benadryl® Severe Allergy & Sinus Headache Easy Swallow Caplets.
2. Tie Safeway plastic produce and grocery bags over head and seal with Duck Brand® 3" Core Gray Duct Tape.
3. Combine Benadryl®, Safeway bags, and Duck Tape®.
4. Slice wrists with Schick® Quattro™, The World's First 4-Bladed Razor with Ergonomic Handle Design for Advanced Precision and Control and Anti-Clog Technology for Improved Rinsability.
5. Suck exhaust from mom's Forest Green 1996 Dodge Grand Caravan ES minivan with 3.8L engine, Captain's Chairs, Easy-Out® Roller Seats, and Towing Package.
6. Jump off Golden Gate Bridge.
7. Blow out brains with friend's dad's 10mm Auto Glock® 20 handgun with Aro-Tek™ Hybrid Compensator and Titanium Spring Guides™.

Take Our Instant Poll—I imagine the text scrolling on CNN's ticker—*which method of suicide do you think Lawrence should choose?*

Fiona has excavated her 14" iBook G4/933, flipped open its familiar Apple icon and Think Different® sticker on the Opaque White lid, and brought to life about two dozen slumbering windows containing, mostly, AOL Instant Messenger (AIM®) sessions with various friends or groups of friends—speedy IM sessions made wirelessly possible, as I often remind her, by my SURFboard® SB3100 Cable Modem, Instant Broadband Series™ Linksys Etherfast Cable/DSL Router, and strategically placed Apple AirPort® Wireless Base Station, whose sleek flying-saucer shape can be glimpsed in the hallway through Fiona's bedroom door.

As if reading my mind, Fiona Googles the suicide question in a window of her Mozilla Firebird 0.7.1 beta Web browser: statistically, she finds, 86% of teen suicides are male, and teenage boys prefer the gun by far.

—Shit, Fiona says from her keyboard, Lawrence is saying he's listened to all the songs about suicide at *songsaboutsucide.org*. She is

IMing furiously with Lawrence and, I gather, several others.

—How many of your friends are online at this hour?

—*God, Dad. Please.* She squirms away as I try to peer over her shoulder.

The Nokia flashes and makes a Custom Downloadable Ring Tone that I haven't heard before. Helplessly I hand the phone to Fiona. She reads her incoming Text Message and replies in a blur of bilateral thumbing, demonstrating a digital dexterity that ensures I will never again challenge her to one of the Thumb Wars we loved back when she was Daddy's Little Girl. So long ago. Lawrence has sent Fiona "Adam's Song" by Blink-182 from the album *Enema of the State* (Parental Advisory: Explicit Content, available on the Apple iTunes® Music Store but illegally fileshared by Lawrence and Fiona), the song that gained national notoriety as the sound-track for a Columbine High School student's suicide in 2000.

CNN is showing an inventory of the contents of Saddam's shack, and I gesture urgently for the phone. Helpfully, as a kind of compromise, Fiona places it into the cradle of her bedside DCH-12K Nokia 3285 Hands Free Speakerphone.

—Lawrence, listen to this.

Amidst Saddam's rusty bed with fuzzy, mismatched blankets, the salami hanging from a clothesline, the fly swatter and the garlic press and the mini-frig with brown eggs, vegetables, and fruit are a book on interpreting dreams, two volumes of classical Arabic poetry titled *Discipline* and *Sin*, and a copy of *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky.

—Who cares, says Lawrence, although there was a slight modulation of his breathing with mention of the Dostoyevsky. Lawrence may be troubled, but he is well-read. The intrepid, embedded TV reporters complete the catalog of Saddam's bunker, which will no doubt appear on the front pages of tomorrow's newspapers:

- box of Lipton® Ice Tea;
- two cans of Raid® Ant & Roach Killer;
- cake of Palmolive Naturals™ Original soap;
- bottle of Dove® Intense Moisturizing Shampoo; and finally,
- 75-gram stick of Lacoste Pour Homme® deodorant, *the elegant, fresh, green and tonic eau de toilette for all sportsmen with a winning attitude.*

I am spellbound by the inventory, repelled yet delighted at the same time. What does it mean that Saddam's pathetic hideout is stocked with the same products as our kitchens and bathrooms?

Did Proctor and Gamble and the others try to prevent—or conspire to obtain—these free product placements?

—You can't make this stuff up, Lawrence! I say Hands Free. It's on CNN, The World's News Leader®!

Fiona shoots me the look that means I am Talking Way Too Loud, Stop Shouting at the Speakerphone. I thought I detected from Lawrence a stifled giggle (it may have been a suppressed sob) at Saddam's deodorant, my favorite item also, but he does not admit to sharing my enthusiasm:

—The News is, the World sucks, man.

—Tell me about it.

And he does. Lawrence tells me about The Church of Euthanasia's mission to relieve the tragedy and suffering that our species is creating in the world (*Thou Shalt Not Procreate; Save the Planet, Kill Yourself*). He tells me about the Gaia Liberation Front's mission to preserve the Planetary Ecosystem and Liberate the Earth by facilitating the Extinction of our species (*Humans = Alien Invaders*). He tells me about the Gnostic belief that the Soul is trapped at birth within the Flesh of a human body and is released only upon Death.

I am impressed, stunned even, and at the same time strangely calmed by Lawrence's research and erudition on the logic of suicide.

—I agree that our species is behaving badly, I say. And I agree that All We Are is Dust in the Wind (Fiona scowls and sticks her finger down her throat at the allusion to a '70s song)... Or that, as they said on some *Star Trek* episode, we are just Ugly Bags of Mostly Water.

—It was *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, says Lawrence. It was Episode #18, "Home Soil," Stardate: 41463.9.

—Right, I say, as if knowing the episode numbers and Stardates of specific *Star Trek* shows is normal, but thinking that at least we have some cultural currency in common.

—Anyway, I continue, My point is that *knowing that*, knowing we are insignificant from a cosmic perspective gives us a certain ... nobility, yes, a tragic nobility, especially insofar as we care for one another along the way to our, er, inevitable....

—Jesus Christ—talk about *bullshit* man.

I recoil from the DCH-12 Hands Free Speakerphone, as if Lawrence is inside its gray plastic shell, the glowing Red LED Indicator showing him still alive, eyeing me angrily. Fiona starts crying, smearing the Almay® Hypo-Allergenic Natural Espresso Eye Defining Pencil

eyeliner she failed to wash off before bedtime. Lawrence is right in that I've gone too clichéd, just when we were getting somewhere. But I recover nicely:

—What I'm trying to say is only this: the difficult thing is to hold these two contra-dictory thoughts in your head at the same time, that Yes we suck, but on the other hand, No we don't.

I wonder if Lawrence is up to the challenge. In the end, I ask myself, do I actually care if he blows his brains out with a 10mm Auto Glock® 20 handgun with Aro-Tek™ Hybrid Compensator and Titanium Spring Guides™?

—I know you called 911 you bastard.

For Fiona's sake I do care, but I care even more that he might seduce her with some half-assed philosophy rationalizing his depression or chemical imbalance, bad wiring or whatever. But that probably gives Fiona too little credit. She is the one who finally realized she was in over her head and came to wake me from a sweaty, fitful sleep in which I dreamed the whole world had turned into Occupied Iraq and you had to call special roadside bomb detection units just to drive to the store.

Fiona and I exchange a micro-glance in which she appears to reappraise me as, ever so slightly, Above Subhuman.

We hear Lawrence breathing into the phone for a few seconds, which seems like a very long time while we stare at the Red LED, and then he says:

—When they come, I'm going to hide from them. Like Saddam's bunker.

Seeing the bunker's contents, I guess one can't help picturing oneself there with one's own list of necessities and small luxuries, hoping, perhaps, to ride out the war until clearer heads prevail. I wonder who it is that Lawrence is at war with. In any case his bunker plan seems a sign that he is still fighting. I consider answering his Church of Euthanasia and his Gaia Liberation Front, his possibly twisted version of Gnosticism, with the one line I remember from Samuel Beckett: *I can't go on, I'll go on*. Indeed the book can be glimpsed on my shelf in the hallway, its spine barely visible in the shadows below the Apple AirPort® Wireless Base Station, with the subtitle *A Selection from Samuel Beckett's Work*, Grove Press. In college I saw a stage production of Beckett's *End-Game*, which takes place in a bunker at the end of the world, where the two main characters talk about death and one keeps going up a ladder to peer out and report back on the devastation outside from two little windows, like eyes—so their bunker and the whole stage is

like being inside of someone's head.

—What will you put in *your* bunker, Lawrence?

Before Lawrence hangs up, we hear the police arriving at his house.

Fiona plucks her Nokia 3285—now containing the opening guitar riff from Blink-182's "Adam's Song" among its Custom Ring Tones—from the DCH-12K Speakerphone cradle, and I hand her back her Crestron® Touchscreen Universal Remote.

—Thanks, Daddy, she says. I want to grab her and hug her hard, to pass a smear of her unremoved Revlon Colorstay Fonde De Teint Oil-Free Medium Beige SPF 6 makeup from her cheek to mine. I must act quickly before she retreats into the green, blue, and white nest of her Nautica® 100% Cotton Beach Comber Comforter and resumes flipping the channels.