

The dirty work

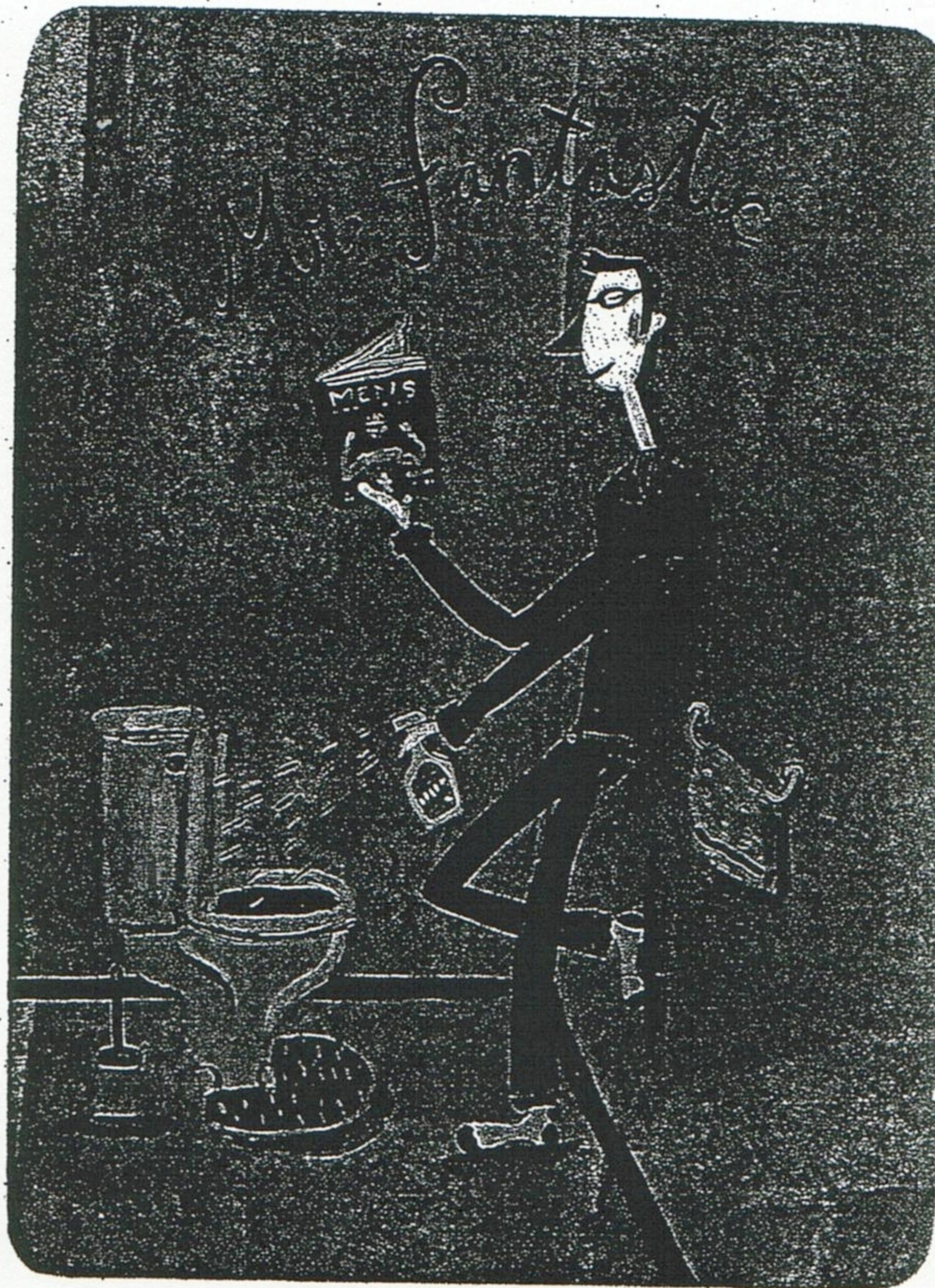
There's one thing virtually every couple can agree on: A clean home is better than a dirty one. But when it comes to the actual work it takes to get your home in shape—just think of all that washing, scouring, and tidying—many husbands and wives find themselves on opposite sides of the mildewed shower curtain.

"We don't fight about anything else," say Jim, 33, and Karen Mahoney, 29, of Flatbush, NY. "But when it comes to cleaning our home, the nagging and nit-picking start almost immediately."

The issues are manifold: Whose job is it to clean what? How often—and how thoroughly—should it be cleaned? Is any amount of clutter acceptable, or must it be banished completely? And if there's a dust bunny (or two) hiding behind the entertainment console but no one can see it, must it still be removed?

Take the cleaning compatibility quiz below with your partner to find out how well you match up when it comes to doing the dirty work. Then read on to learn how you can make your home livable—and still live together peacefully.

A his-and-hers guide to cleaning house—without screaming at your spouse. **BY WENDY AND DAVID HUBBERT**



His idea of scrubbing the toilet may not agree with yours.

Now that you know what kind of a cleaner you are (and he is, or not, as the case may be), you're ready to understand why fights break out between you and your honey. In the cleaning war of the sexes, there are five trouble spots:

1. DIRT THRESHOLD

She says: Looking at the exact same space, a man will see a den while a woman will see a pigsty. A man can look at a stove top and be truly unaware of the drops of spaghetti sauce sprinkled around the burners. Are there missing rods and cones in the male eye?

More likely, this phenomenon has sociological roots. Of the hundreds of small jobs that need to be done in a house, most men have been brought up with an awareness of the biggies, like vacuuming, but not of the more subtle tasks, like dusting the Venetian blinds. So they have a higher threshold for dirt, accompanied by a weaker eye for details.

THE CLEANING COMPATIBILITY QUIZ

IF YOU:

- Do the dishes after every meal (add 1 point)
- Leave dirty dishes on the table after every meal (subtract 1 point)
- Take out the trash (+1)
- Throw the trash in the can without first putting in a garbage bag (-2)
- Clean the refrigerator regularly (+5)
- Find something growing in the fridge—and leave it there (-5)
- Do a load of laundry from start to finish (+2)
- Drop dirty clothes on the floor instead of in the hamper (-2)
- Clean the toilets (+5)
- Assume that flushing the toilets is essentially cleaning them (-5)
- Put away the kids' toys (+2)

- Get them to do it on their own (+3)
- Clean the litterbox (+2)
- Forget about the litterbox until the cat pees on your bed to remind you (-4)
- Wash the car (+2)
- Wash the car floor mats in the bathtub (-2)
- Remove hair from the shower drain (+1)
- Leave hair in the drain until the tub overflows (-2)
- Replenish toilet paper, tissues, and paper towels (+1)
- Leave a scrap of toilet paper on the roll rather than having to replace it (-1)
- Clean something once you're reminded to do it (+1)
- Clean something without being told (+2)
- Hire a maid to clean it for you (+5)

SCORING: Add up your points, and compare your score with your spouse's.

- 15+ points = Neat Freak
You rule the house with an iron mop, and those floors—you could eat off them!
- 8-14 points = Comfortably Clean
You're careful to remove muddy shoes before coming inside, and you make your bed every morning—almost.
- 1-7 points = Slightly Sloppy
There's an old sock, three pencils, and 49 cents under your sofa cushions. You never met a magazine you didn't want to keep.
- Less than 1 = Unredeemable Slob
The clutter in your closets has developed a gravitational pull. You'd rather move to a new home than clean the old one.

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We're more likely to clean corners and crevices and to notice when something needs cleaning in the first place, while he's blissfully unaware.

He says: If there is a difference between how men and women see dirt, it's not due to something men lack, but rather something we have: It's called common sense. Let's admit it, if the bathroom floor behind the toilet is dirty, will anyone *really* notice?

Is it any surprise that, to many men, a bathroom can go a good two or three months with just a few daily touch-ups? Our wives, on the other hand, seem to feel a cleaning frenzy is in order every two weeks or so.

When Wendy sees one fingerprint too many on the walls, I head for shelter. It could be noon on a Saturday or 2 a.m. on a Tuesday—time has no meaning

Some believe that whoever doesn't cook should clean up. The key there is to volunteer for perpetual chef duty.

when she decides that we're living in intolerable filth. She becomes a whirling Tasmanian anti-devil, sucking up and destroying any unfortunate speck of dirt in her path. Frankly, if I didn't take cover, she'd probably Dustbust me.

2. THE BATHROOM

She says: In no room of your house is the difference between "tidy" and "clean" more clear. The typical woman's bathroom is a chaos of beauty products and wet lingerie, while a man's bathroom is clutter-free but filthy as a movie-theater floor. Errant body hairs, an inattention to spills, and a general lack of, shall we say, "aim" make men the prime causes of bathroom grime.

Yet when you ask a man to clean the bathroom, the filth is precisely what he will ignore. He'll jam all the cosmetics under the sink, throw your panties in the trash, and emerge feeling immensely self-satisfied. I once asked Dave to clean the tub, and he meticulously organized the shampoos on the rim but didn't touch the filmy soap scum.

Katy Glass, 41, of Washington, PA, was preparing for the arrival of dinner

guests and sent her husband to clean the bathroom. "After several hours, during which I'd cleaned the whole rest of the house," she says, "John came out of the bathroom with a proud smile. He hadn't touched the toilet. But he'd gotten out the ladder and washed the ceiling."

He says: Ask any woman about the ladies' room where she works and she's likely to cringe. When women have the luxury of not cleaning up after themselves, they are capable of leaving things on the toilet seat that would make Wes Craven scream.

But that same woman wants the bathroom in her home clean enough for company, and she wants her husband to clean the toilet—the logic being that he messed it up the most.

So how do I handle this duty with a minimum of fuss? Let me share with you my top-secret, patented, tool-free method for male commode cleaning, which requires only about five minutes of real

work. Bring a bottle of Fantastik and a magazine into the bathroom. Lock the door behind you. Open lid of toilet (if you haven't left it open already). Spray Fantastik on all visible surfaces, and wipe off with toilet paper. Flush 50 times while reading magazine. You won't have broken a sweat, but she'll think you've done hours of work.

3. LAUNDRY

She says: Laundry, like vacuuming, is a terrific task for men: a left-brain job they can see through from beginning to end. It requires no personal judgment or creative improvisation; one must simply follow the time-honored steps from A to B to C and use the correct amount of detergent.

However, there are snares. One, if you give this job to your husband, you can't expect him to do anything else. It will take him all day. Two, he must be pretrained in the laundry arts, from the proper technique for fitted-sheet folding to color and line-dry-only separation. And three, while his way might not be the best, it's still his way. Three successive repairmen have failed to convince

Dave that you can't fit a square peg (industrial-sized loads of laundry) into a round hole (a washing machine the size of a toaster).

Ideally, you should divide laundry detail according to each person's area of expertise. The person who realizes first that the laundry needs to be done is responsible for putting it in the washer. She who doesn't want her spandex bras shrunk to Smurf-size proportions should carefully transfer clothes from washer to dryer. And he whose shirts must be folded with hospital corners had better be there the minute that dryer buzzes or it'll be wrinkle city at work the next day.

He says: There are two reasons men end up doing laundry. One is the sinister clothing imbalance of the sexes, which is illustrated by Jim, 33, and Sharon Beecher, 34, of Stamford, CT. Like many people, Jim and Sharon determine that it's time to do laundry when one of them is out of clean underwear. The catch? Sharon owns more underwear, so Jim always ends up doing the laundry. Confesses Sharon, "I don't think he's realized that I just buy a new pair whenever I run out."

The other reason men become the specialists of the spin cycle is that we are the only ones qualified to do the job right. In other words, only a man can master the technique of extracting the last milliliter of detergent from the jug, vacuuming the lint trap, and high-tension folding using vice grips.

4. THE DISHES

She says: I've never lived with a dishwashing-compatible companion. My college roommate was perpetually annoyed by my habit of "showering" the dishes, washing and rinsing each one under the running tap, instead of "bathing" them, filling the sink with soapy water, scrubbing all the dishes, then refilling the basin with rinse water.

When Dave and I moved in together, I wanted the dishes cleaned as they were dirtied, while he was in favor of attending to them when the pile in the sink reached critical mass. What ended up happening, of course, is that every time he used a dish and put it in the sink, I rushed to clean up after him.

While he never actually did the job himself, Mr. Fussy-Britches had definite opinions on how it should be done, insisting that I pasteurize each dish in the sink before it went into the dish-

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washer to be cleaned—again. So a few years ago, when he had backseat-washed me one too many times, I snarled, “If you don’t like the way I do it, do it yourself.” It’s been smooth sailing ever since.

He says: Most men have a “wait and see” attitude regarding dirty dishes. Once we’re done eating, the dishes have served their purpose. So now, perhaps they will magically go away. Maybe fairies will clean them in the night. Or more likely, our wives will break down and wash them before we have to. Sometimes we resort to subterfuge, leaving a bite of food on a dish, for example, so we can justify placing it in the refrigerator instead of washing it. The oven is another virtually pest-free haven for dirty pans.

In the end, most husbands have to face the fact that, at least some of the time, the dishes are their responsibility. Of course, this is usually around the time we try to put hand soap in the dishwasher. In most households, the golden rule becomes “You eat off it, you rinse it, you put it in the dishwasher.” But some couples still subscribe to the idea that whoever doesn’t

cook should clean up. The key there is to volunteer for perpetual chef duty. (Hint: Domino’s does so count as dinner.)

5. CLUTTER

She says: While no one wants things dirty, the same is not true of clutter. An empty tabletop is, in my eyes, a thing of beauty; to Dave, it’s a potential home for one of the piles he creates on every available surface. Leah Elder, 32, of San Francisco, agrees: “My husband makes the piles,” she says. “I combine them.”

My spouse, unfortunately, is convinced that if his piles were merged or put out of sight, his brain would freeze up permanently. Dave’s brand of incessant Chinese-water-torture clutter is not the same as the occasional sheer messiness of life. Certain things—like children’s bathrooms or play areas—are meant to be messy for relatively short periods of time, and some partners are more comfortable with this than others. Says Katy Glass, “John sometimes gets upset when our children throw their bookbags around, so either I pick up before he gets home or I ask the kids to do it. And sometimes,” she adds, “I just tell him to lighten up. This is, after all, a home.”

He says: Creating clutter is a crime of which men and women are both guilty. Jim Mahoney says Karen has a habit of leaving the vacuum in the middle of the floor when she’s finished with it. Or she’ll accidentally drop a piece of paper on the rug and leave it there for days before he finally breaks down and picks it up. “When I ask her if she’s doing it on purpose,” Jim says, “she tells me, ‘Of course not. I just didn’t see it.’”

I’ll admit that when men are the clutterers, we’re equally oblivious. We drop clothes on the floor instead of in the hamper. We leave our shoes wherever we happen to take them off. You may think this is some kind of passive-aggressive attempt to get you to play Mommy and pick up after us, but trust me, we’re not that smart.

Eliminating clutter altogether seems an unreasonably strict and unfair goal. You’d do better to establish “safe zones” where the clutterer is free to build piles: in a closet, for instance, or on top of a nightstand. In return, the anti-clutterer is not allowed to organize anything in the zone. The penalty for uninvited entry into the zone is—horror of horrors—a larger zone. And the penalty for unauthorized spreading is nothing short of total pile termination. □

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