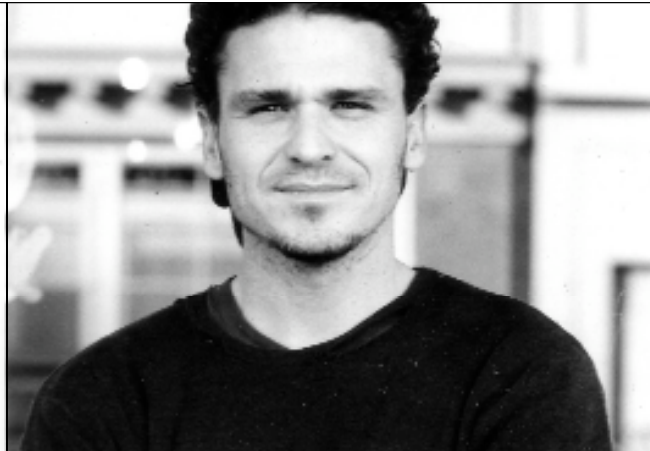




YOUR MOTHER AND I



This short story appears in the new collection *How We Are Hungry* by **Dave Eggers**, who also wrote *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and *You Shall Know Our Velocity*.

told you about that, didn't I? About when your mother and I moved the world to solar energy and windpower, to hydro, all that? I never told you that? Can you hand me that cheese? No, the other one, the cheddar, right. I really thought I told you about that. What is happening to my head?

Well, we have to take the credit, your mother and I, for reducing our dependence on oil and for beginning the Age of Wind and Sun. That was pretty awesome. That name wasn't ours, though. Your uncle Frank came up with that. He always wanted to be in a band and call it that, the Age of Wind and Sun, but he never learned guitar and couldn't sing. When he sang he enunciated too much, you know? He sang like he was trying to teach English to Turkish children. Turkish children with learning disabilities. It was really odd, his singing.

You're already done? Okay, here's the Monterey Jack. Just dump it in the bowl. All of it, right. It was all pretty simple, converting most of the nation's electricity. At a certain point everyone knew that we had to just suck it up and pay the

money—because holy crap, it really was expensive at first!—to set up the cities to make their own power. All those solar panels and windmills on the city buildings? They weren't always there, you know. No, they weren't. Look at some pictures, honey. They just weren't. The roofs of these millions of buildings weren't being used in any real way, so I said, Hey, let's have the buildings themselves generate some or all of the power they use, and it might look pretty good, to boot—everyone loves windmills, right? Windmills are awesome. So we started in Salt Lake City and went from there.

Oh hey, can you grate that one? Just take half of that block of Muenster. Here's a bowl. Thanks. Then we do the cheddar. Cheddar has to be next. After the cheddar, pecorino. Never the other way around. Stay with me, hon. Jack, Muenster, cheddar, pecorino. It is. The only way.

Right after that was a period of much activity. Your mother and I tended to do a big project like the power conversion, and then follow it with a bunch of smaller, quicker things. So we made all the roads red. You wouldn't remember this—you

weren't even born. We were all into roads then, so we had most of them painted red, most of them, especially the highways—a leathery red that looked good with just about everything, with green things and blue skies and woods of cedar and golden swamps and sugar-colored beaches. I think we were right. You like them, right? They used to be grey, the roads. Insane, right? Your mom thinks yellow would have been good, too, an ochre but sweeter. Anyway, in the same week, we got rid of school funding tied to local property taxes—can you believe they used to pull that crap?—banned bicycle shorts for everyone but professionals, and made everyone's hair shinier. That was us. Your mother and I.

That was right after our work with the lobbyists—I never told you that, either? I must be losing my mind. I never mentioned the lobbyists, about when we had them all deported? That part of it, the deportation, was your mother's idea. All I'd said was, Hey, why not ban all lobbying? Or at least ban all donations from lobbyists, and make them wear cowbells so everyone would know they were coming? And then your dear mom, who was, I think, a little tipsy at the time—we were at a bar where they had a Zima special, and you know how your mom loves her Zima—she said, How about, to make sure those bastards don't come back to Washington, have them all sent to Greenland? And wow, the idea just took off. People loved it, and Greenland welcomed them warmly; they'd apparently been looking for ways to boost their tourism. They set up some cages and a viewing area and it was a big hit.

So then we were all pumped up, to be honest. Wow, this kind of thing, the lobbyists thing especially, boy, it really made your mother horny. Matter of fact, I think you were conceived around that time. She was like some kind of tsunami—

Oh don't give me that face. What? Did I cross some line? Don't you want to know when your seed was planted? I would think you'd want to know that kind of thing. Well then.

I stand corrected.

Anyway, we were on a roll, so we got rid of genocide. The main idea was to create and maintain a military force of about 20,000 troops, under the auspices of the U.N., which could be deployed quickly to any part of the world within about thirty-six hours. This wouldn't be the usual blue helmets, watching the slaughter. These guys would be badass. We were sick of

the civilized world sort of twiddling their thumbs while hundreds of thousands of people killed each other in Rwanda, Bosnia, way back in Armenia, on and on. Then the U.N. would send twelve Belgian soldiers. Nice guys, but really, you have a genocide raging in Rwanda, 800,000 dead in a month and you send twelve Belgians?

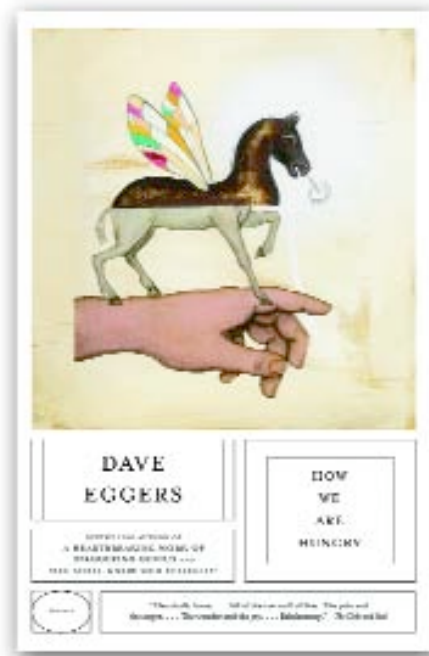
So we made this proposal, the U.N. went for it, and within a year the force was up and running. And man oh man, your mother was randy again. That's when your fecundation happened, and why we called you Johnna. I remember it now—I was wrong before. Your mother and I were actually caught in the U.N. bathroom, after the vote went our way. The place, all marble and brass, was full of people, and at the worst possible moment, Kofi himself walked in. He sure was surprised to see us in there, on the sink, but I have to say, he was pretty cool about it. He actually seemed to enjoy it, even watched for a minute, because there was no way we were gonna stop in the middle—

Fine. I won't do that again. It's just that it's part of the story, honey. Everything we did started with love, and ended with lust—

But you're right. That was inappropriate.

We went on a tear right after genocide, very busy. I attribute it partly to the vitamins we were on—very intense program of herbs and vitamins and protein shakes. We'd shoot out of bed and bounce around like bunnies. So that's when we covered Cleveland in ivy. You've seen pictures. We did that. Just said, Hey Cleveland, what if you were covered in ivy, all

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the buildings? Wouldn't that look cool, and be a big tourist attraction? And they said, "Sure." Not right away, though. You know who helped with that? Dennis Kucinich. I used to call him "Sparky," because he was such a feisty fella. Your mom, she called him "The Kooch."

We're gonna need all three kinds of salsa, hon. Yeah, use the small bowls. Just pour it right up to the edge. Right. Your brother likes to mix it up. Me, I'm a fan of the mild.

Right after Cleveland and the ivy we made all the kids memorize poetry again. We hadn't memorized any growing up—this was the seventies and eighties, and people hadn't taught that for years—and we really found we missed it. The girls were fine with the idea, and the boys caught on when they realized it would help them get older women into bed. Around that time we banned wearing fur outside of arctic regions, flooded the market with diamonds and gold and silver to the point where none had any value, fixed the ozone hole—I could show you that; we've got it on video—and then we did the thing with the llamas. What are you doing? Sour cream in the salsa? No, no. That's just wrong, sweetie. My god.

So yeah, we put llamas everywhere. That was us. We just liked looking at them, so we bred about six million and spread them around. They weren't there before, honey. No, they weren't. Oh man, there's one now, in the backyard. Isn't it a handsome thing? Now they're as common as squirrels or deer, and you have your mom and pop to thank for that.

It's jalapeño time. Use the smaller knife. You're gonna cut the crap out of your hand. You don't want one of these. You

the whole thing happened pretty quickly. We had most of the billboards down within a year. Right after that, your brother Sid was conceived, and it was about time I had my tubes tied.

Give me some of that cobbler, hon. We're gonna have the peach cobbler after the main event. I just wanna get the Cool Whip on it, then stick it in the freezer for a minute. That's Frank's trick. Frank's come up with a lot of good ideas for improving frozen and refrigerated desserts. No, that's not his job, honey. Frank doesn't have a job, per se.

I guess a lot of what we did—what made so much of this possible—was eliminate the bipolar nature of so much of what passed for debate in those days. So often the media would take even the most logical idea, like private funding for all sports stadiums or having all colleges require forty hours of community service to graduate, and make it seem like there were two equally powerful sides to the argument, which was so rarely the case. A logical fallacy, is what that is. So we just got them to keep things in perspective a bit, not make everyone so crazy, polarizing every last debate. I mean, there was a time when you couldn't get a lightbulb replaced because the press would find a way to quote the sole lunatic in the world who didn't want that lightbulb replaced. So we sat them all down, all the members of the media, and we said, "Listen, we all want to have progress, we all want a world for the grand-kids and all. We know we're gonna need better gas mileage on the cars, and that all the toddlers are gonna need Head Start, and we're gonna need weekly parades through every town and city to keep morale up, and we'll have to get rid of Three Strikes and mandatory minimums and the execution of

retarded prisoners—and that it all has to happen sooner or later, so don't go blowing opposition to any of it out of proportion. Don't go getting everyone inflamed." Honestly, when lynchings were originally outlawed, you can bet the newspapers made it seem like

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see this scar on my thumb? Looks like a scythe, right? I got that when we were negotiating the removal of the nation's billboards. I was climbing one of them, in Kentucky actually, to start a hunger strike kind of thing, sort of silly I guess, and cut the shipdoodle out of that left thumb.

Why the billboards? Have you even see one? In books? Well, I guess I just never really liked the look of them—they just seemed so ugly and such an intrusion on the collective involuntary consciousness, a blight on the land. Vermont had outlawed them and boy, what a difference that made. So your mother and I revived Lady Bird Johnson's campaign against them, and of course 98 percent of the public was with us, so

there was some real validity to the pro-lynching side of things. You can be sure that the third paragraph of any article would have said "Not everyone is happy about the anti-lynching legislation. We spoke to a local resident who is not at all happy about it..." Anyway, we sat everyone down, served some carrots and onion dip and in a couple hours your mother and I straightened all that out.

About then we had a real productive period. In about six months, we established a global minimum wage, we made it so smoke detectors could be turned off without having to rip them from the ceiling, and we got Soros to buy the Amazon, to preserve it. That was fun—he took us on his jet, beautiful

thing, appointed in the smoothest cherry and teak, and they had the soda where you add the colored syrup yourself. You ever have that kind? So good, but you can't overdo it—too much syrup and you feel bloated for a week. Well, then we came home, rested up for a few days, and then we found a cure for Parkinson's. We did so, honey. Yes that was us. Don't you ever look through the nice scrapbook we made? You should. It's in the garage with your Uncle Frank. Are you sure he's asleep? No, don't wake him up. Hell, I guess you have to wake him up anyway, because he won't want to miss the comida grande.

After Parkinson's, we fixed AIDS pretty well. We didn't cure it, but we made the inhibiting drugs available worldwide, for free, as a condition of the drug companies being allowed to operate in the U.S. Their profit margins were insane at the time, so they relented, made amends, and it worked out fine. That was about when we made all buildings curvier, and all cars boxier.

After AIDS and the curves, we did some work on elections. First we made them no more than two months long, publicly funded, and forced the networks to give two hours a night to the campaigns. Around when you were born, the candidates were spending about \$200 million each on TV ads, because the news wasn't covering the elections for more than 90 seconds a day. It was nuts! So we fixed that, and then we perfected online and phone voting. Man, participation went through the roof. Everyone thought there was just all this apathy, when the main problem was finding your damned polling place! And all the red tape—register now, vote then, come to this elementary school—but skip work to do it—on and on. Voting on a Tuesday? Good lord. But the online voting, the voting over the phone—man that was great, suddenly participation exploded, from about, what, 40 percent, to 88. We did that over Columbus Day weekend, I think. I remember I'd just had my hair cut very short. Yeah, like in the picture in the hallway. We called that style the Timberlake.

And that's about when your mom got all kinky again. She went out, bought this one device, it was kind of like a swing, where there was this harness and—

Fine. You don't need to know that. But the harness figures in, because that's when your mother had the idea—some of her best ideas happened when she was lying down—to make it illegal to have more than one president from the same immediate family. That was just a personal gripe she had. We'd had the Adamses and Bushes and we were about to have the Clintons and your mother just got pissed. What the fuck? she said. Are we gonna have a monarchy here or what? Are we that stupid, that we have to go to the same well every time? This isn't an Aaron Spelling casting call, this is the damned

presidency! I said What about the Kennedys? And she said Screw 'em! Or maybe she didn't say that, but that was the spirit of it. She's a fiery one, your mom, a fiery furnace of—

Ahem. So yeah, she pushed that through, a constitutional amendment.

That led to another busy period. One week, we made all the cars electric and put waterslides in every elementary school. We increased average life expectancy to 164, made it illegal to manufacture or wear Cosby sweaters, and made penises better looking—more streamlined, better coloring, less hair. People, you know, were real appreciative about that. And the last thing we did, which I know I've told you about, was the program where everyone can redo one year of their childhood. For \$580, you could go back to the year of your choice, and do that one again. You're not allowed to change anything, do anything differently, but you get to be there again, live the whole year, with what you know now. Oh man, that was a good idea.

Everyone loved it, and it made up for all the people who were pissed when we painted Kansas purple, every last inch of it. I did the period between ten-and-a-half and eleven-and-a-half. Fifth grade. Wow, that was sweet.

Speaking of ten-year-olds, here comes your brother. And Uncle Frank! We didn't have to wake you up! Hola hermano, tios! Esta la noche de los nachos! Si, si. And here's your mother, descending the stairs. With her hair up. This I was particularly proud of, when I convinced your mother to wear her hair up more often. When she first did it, a week before our wedding, I was breathless, I was lifted, I felt as if I'd met her twin, and oh how I was confused. Was I cheating on my beloved with this version of her, with that long neck exposed, the hair falling in helixes, kissing her clavicles? She assured me that I was not, and that's how we got married, with her hair up—that's how we did the walk with the music and the fanfare, everything yellow and white, side by side, long even strides, she and me, your mother and I. **R**

In about six months, we established a global minimum wage, we made it so smoke detectors could be turned off without having to rip them from the ceiling, and we got Soros to buy the Amazon, to preserve it.

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