

#151 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 9, 2010

Brooms are nicer than vacuum cleaners

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—When I was in my 20s, I refused to buy a vacuum cleaner. I insisted on sweeping, though not very often.

I conceded to the relevant party of the second part her objection at that time: Vacuum cleaners did do a better job than brooms, particularly on shelves and lamp shades.

But I had a few arguments that would not disappear even after she swept them under the rug and stomped them.

A broom is quieter and more pleasant. It is cheaper to buy and operate, even after you throw in the cost of a half-decent dustpan. It does not need constant repair and a new bag every few months. It doesn't clog up with the least little thing, wrap a cord around your ankle or stop inhaling when it feels like it. No broom I've known has ever "disappeared" an engagement ring that had been left on the floor for safekeeping.

Brooms are cutting-edge technology in that they're energy-efficient and have a low carbon footprint if you're counting. They're greener than the alternatives, save for doing nothing, which continues to have appeal. They're even old school, as humble as the cloth coats that Republican women once wore.

In addition, a vacuum cleaner was, I thought, an irreversible step toward self-imprisonment in bourgeois conventions. So here I am 40 years later, locked up for life, grumbling to my cellmate—a Simplicity canister with a retractable cord.

But each morning, I still gather the night deposits of Yellow-Lab hair with a broom. We have fur inside, because Melissa insists that Lucy and Sophie sleep in the living room rather than outside in their heated kennels where she fears they will become anxious without a night light and a bedtime story.

Lucy and Sophie aspire to sleep upstairs, on our bed, with us, and preferably with their heads between ours. In the few times they've gotten there, they lie exquisitely still, hardly breathing, in hope that we will not detect their presence. Or if we do notice, they believe we will overlook it if they think very hard that they're somewhere else.

Over almost 30 years, I've worn out several brooms on dog hair. Melissa bought me a new one recently with a steel handle and a plastic fitting for the

bristles. Manufactured by Quickie, it broke after a dozen uses, thus living up to its name. She replaced it with a heavy-duty model—thick wood handle, long bristles that are stitched and wound forever.

Cinderfella needs a functioning broom to be properly oppressed.

I've never made a living pushing a broom, but I was a paid "floorboy" in my freshman year at Oberlin College. I was the lowest totem on the pole—told to empty the kitchen garbage for a 100-student dining hall, wash pots and pans, sweep the floor in the dining area and kitchen and then mop it. It was the worst job in the kitchen, but I was not in a position to sneeze at 85 cents an hour.

I do not recall any Oberlin women -- feminists or otherwise -- romancing me for having developed housework skills that my male peers lacked. Rather than chat up the boy with the broom, they ignored the help until, after the meal was finished, I indicated to the stragglers that it was time to leave by politely sweeping dirty napkins against their sandals.

I found nothing either degrading or noble about being a floorboy. It led in later years to potboy, breakfast-cook helper and, finally, waiter. Upon graduation, I could sweep a floor, scrub a 10-quart pot, bus tables and fix breakfast for 75 earnest Protestant seminarians who liked their eggs hard and dry.

By now, I've forgotten anything I might have acquired in four years of liberal arts education other than respect for good two-handed broomwork, which, thankfully, remains one of the few tasks of modern life that cannot be done while cell-phoning or diddling a Droid.

Brooms have been associated with good-government politicians and flying witches, though, for the most part, not one and the same. I've never known a broom to take a position, for or against, what it sweeps or how it's used.

Today's familiar sweeping broom traces back about 200 years ago to the farm of Levi Dickenson in Hadley, Mass. Thoughtful husband that he was, Levi bundled sorghum grass tassels -- commonly known as broomcorn -- at the end of a stick and gave it to his wife so that she could do a better job cleaning their marital floors. Melissa has an anniversary coming up.

A few decades later, the Shakers developed simple machines that allowed one person to construct a flat-bladed, straight-cut broom, one at a time. Current design and manufacture are not much different, though plastic, steel and rubber are chasing out wood and broomcorn.

All brooms are not created equal. The junky ones are junk. The stout ones

last. Crafted brooms sell for as much as \$500, because, I assume, they provide more lift and softer landings.

A broom made by a professional broommaker might be signed, even hand-numbered like an instrument. No one who makes vacuum cleaners does this, or even wants to do this with their product.

I realized as I wrote this column that I have at least one broom in every one of the buildings on our farm. Some, of course, have, over time, become more suggestive than functional. When their bristles are worn lower than a crewcut, I cut off their heads and use their shafts for tomato stakes.

Had I chosen to sweep floors as my career, I don't think I would have had regrets. Everyone has at least one broom to push through life.

But I would not feel the same way had I been condemned to a broom for 40 years.

Vacuum cleaners are here to stay, of course, including ours. In the dark corners of our broom closet, they even seem to be reproducing, judging by the growing number of little ones under foot.

I wish I could find others who hate vacuum cleaners as much as I do. We could email horror stories and post videos. We could form a political action committee, have rallies, support legislation, endorse candidates, finagle tax breaks for broom buying and get Harrison Ford to host a Hollywood fundraiser.

Our motto: "A good broom sweeps clean. Vacuum cleaners just suck."

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