Germ Warfare

For Shari Margolese, spring cleaning becomes a battle of the sexes

April 1, 2006 By Shari Margolese

Ever since I switched HIV meds a few months ago, I have a new morning ritual: 1) wake up 2) race to the bathroom and 3) stick my head down the toilet. The other day, as I dropped to my knees for Step 3, I faced something equally humbling: the stench of urine.

“Who forgot to flush?” I shouted.

My husband hollered back, “I didn’t forget—I just didn’t want to wake you.”
“Thanks for thinking of me,” I retorted.

As a woman living with two men—my HIV negative husband and our 13-year-old positive son—I’m no stranger to slobbery. My guys, like many others, seem dangerously allergic to housework. I should add that I’m hardly Mrs. Clean myself. In the living room, I overlook grimy fingerprints and sweep all the dust under the carpet.

But in the bathroom and kitchen, I get picky. Since my son and I were diagnosed, 12 years ago, I’ve become acutely aware of the need to fight germs in the potty or sink. So I don my pink rubber gloves and slay brewing infections with gallons of bleach.

Indeed, I’ve ended up spoiling my men, as many moms do, whether positive or negative. The result? They’re untrained to help out around the house. I’ve resigned myself to a harsh truth: If I want a clean place to vomit, I will have to do the scrubbing myself.

Lately, though, it’s been hard to keep up. The meds have left me exhausted. Worse, as I rushed to the bathroom recently, I stubbed my toe and broke my foot. With Mommy Maid in a cast, the opportunistic bacteria are multiplying by the millions.

So when my cries of “Please help clean up” were met with a false promise of “Go rest—I’ll do it later,” I declared war. “Guys, family meeting in the kitchen—now!” I screamed.

“What?” my husband started. As soon as I mentioned housework, he folded his arms and said, “Why don’t we just get a real maid?”

“OK,” I replied, “but you’ll both have to give up your cell phones to pay for it.” Our son, the family’s self-proclaimed “equality czar,” added: “You have your own bathroom—can’t you throw up in that one?” Sure. But hobbling around my three-story house in a cast, I might not make it to the DBA (designated barf area) in time. The only answer? A team effort. Miraculously, they agreed.

I assigned duties to each member of my new cleaning corps. Week one, they managed to complete everything—except the bathrooms. So we added Inspection Day.

Everything was on track until I went out of town for an activist trip. I returned to a science project decomposing in the kitchen sink. “Come on, guys,” I lectured, “you know how important food safety is, especially when you’re HIV positive. Why didn’t you clean the kitchen?” Their defense? “But at least we vacuumed and folded the laundry!”

It wasn’t easy, but gradually, I won their sympathy vote. The more they saw me looking pathetic, my cement foot propped high up on pillows, the more they realized that I needed their assistance.

For now, I’m thankful. But I can’t help worrying: Will the teamwork end when my cast comes off? Lord knows, their training isn’t quite complete. Having staggered to the nearest bathroom (not mine), prodded by another gastric side effect, I reached for the toilet paper.

“Hey, who forgot to change the roll?”

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