my skeptical-elf routine so loudly that you can almost hear my voice coming through the soundless eight-millimeter film. Behind me in a sloppy line are my fellow elves, fidgeting and shifting their weight and picking their noses and engaging in general unprofessional stagecraft. I, on the other hand, despite my nontraditional garb, was the very picture of professionalism. I had overcome the handicap of my costume, the mockery of my peers and schoolmates, the stifled laughter of every teacher and parent in the audience, and I discovered the true meaning of Christmas. They had all laughed at the skeptical elf and made fun of his clothes, but the skeptical elf had learned that it was about more than just clothes and presents and decorations. He had learned what this holiday was all about, and he hadn't done it for them, not for himself, and, no, not even for Santa.

No, the skeptical surplus elf had done it all for one thing and one thing only . . .

The United States Army.

Kick me

By: Paul Feig

GROWING UP THROWING UP

When I was in grade school, it seemed like everyone was always throwing up. Every time I turned around, I'd hear a splat and see some queasy-looking kid standing over a puddle of puke. And then, seconds later, I'd get a whiff of that unmistakable throw-up smell. This always announced the imminent arrival of a janitor, who would enter carrying a large broom and a dustpan full of red sawdust to dump on top of the offending pool of barf, which was then swept back into the dustpan and spirited away by our unlucky custodian.

What a gig.

I've never been able to forget that red sawdust. I always knew when it was around because of its own distinct odor, something akin to an extremely cheap bottle of Grandma perfume, a sort of subdued peppermint smell with just a hint of mothballs thrown in. Throw-up smells terrible and, because of that, the red sawdust always smelled pretty good when it arrived. It wasn't something you'd want to smell every day, but when the air is ripe with the aroma of what was formerly inside of a kid, red sawdust was about as welcome a smell as fresh home-baked cookies on a rainy day. That is, until it was dumped on top of the vomit, where the two opposing fragrances would battle for superiority and produce a

tangy, sour bouquet, like a pungent French cheese gone horribly wrong in the back of a hot car.

As a kid, I never knew why janitors always used that red sawdust or where it came from. Years later, when I was working in the warehouse at my father's store, I learned that it was actually a manufactured product called sweeping compound, and was made to both soak up spills and keep dust from going into the air as you swept a dirty floor. Not knowing this back then, I figured that the red sawdust was just something the janitor had found lying around in the wood shop and decided was as good a substance as any to camouflage a puddle of throw-up. Because he had to do something so that we kids didn't have to look at it. All school professionals know that if one kid sees another kid's throw-up, that kid will then also throw up. And then another and another. Throwing up is contagious. One kid with a nervous stomach can set off a chain reaction in a crowded classroom that could seriously deplete the world's supply of sweeping compound.

I never understood how my peers could throw up so easily. To me, throwing up is about the worst thing that can happen to a person. The stomach-twisting retches. The complete lack of control of one's body. The hellish sounds of air being forced through the upwardly traveling bile. To this day, I think I'd rather die of food poisoning than have to throw the tainted food back up. I think I've only thrown up about three times in my life. But never in school. Things were bad enough without adding regurgitation to my list of problems.

My most vivid experience with throw-up happened in the second grade. It was show-and-tell day, and I had brought in a brand-new Hot Wheels fire truck that I was dying to show off and tell about. That truck, which I had wanted for months, was everything I had dreamed it would be and more. Bright red and so new that all four wheels were still straight. They hadn't had a chance to bend inward yet like Hot Wheels cars always did after a few play

sessions, so that when the car was rolled, it would simply go into a spin and tip over. No, this Hot Wheels fire truck was pristine. It even had a little ladder that you could move up and extend out. I'd been trying to get my mother to buy it for me for what seemed like a million years and had finally guilted her into it. The day before, she had accidentally thrown my favorite troll doll in with the laundry and had turned his bright red hair pink, and I played her like a royal flush. My tears could only be stopped by a trip to the toy store and, lo and behold, the fire truck was mine. And now I couldn't wait to impress my peers with it.

The teacher, Miss Drulk, had gone out of the room for a minute, and I was busy making the truck race to the scene of a fire on my desktop, complete with screeching tires sound. I was good at sound effects and was convinced that no one could do the sound of a car getting into an accident and blowing up better than I could. True, I couldn't do a machine gun as well as my friend Gary, and when it came to helicopters, Stephen Crowley was the king. But when it came to automobiles, the rest of the class could simply step aside. I was the master.

As I sat there, lost in my own noisy world, making the truck go into a catastrophic slide that saw it heading for a fall off the side of my desk—where it would then burst into flames in super-slow motion—Chris Davis, a perpetually dirty kid who sat behind me, tapped me on the shoulder.

"Hey, Paul, that's a neat truck. Can I use it for show-and-tell?"

What? I thought. No way. This was mine. I'd been waiting all day to show this baby off. "No. My mother just bought it for me."

"Aw, c'mon. I don't have anything to show. My family can't buy me anything. We're poor."

For a kid who was poor, he sure said it a lot. I'd always heard that poor people were proud, but the only thing Chris was proud of was telling you how poor he was. He was always talking about how his family lived in a shack, how they didn't have any clothes,

and how they had to eat birds in order to keep from starving. I never knew if I believed him or not. I couldn't imagine anyone's family sitting around naked eating robins and sparrows. But my mother had always drilled into my head that I had to be nice to people who were less fortunate than we were because we, too, might be poor someday. Did she know something I didn't? I would wonder. Were we on the verge of bankruptcy? Because I was terrified of the thought of having to walk around in front of my parents naked.

I stared at Chris for a few seconds, deliberating. He stared back at me with a pathetic look on his face. I stared at his hands. They were filthy. His clothes had food stains down the front. His hair was dirty and looked like it hadn't been combed in days. I wasn't sure if this meant that he was poor or if it was simply proof that the guy was a slob. However, my Sunday school teacher's voice rang out in my head: "Do unto others as . . ." Yeah, yeah, yeah. All right. I get it. Stupid Bible.

"Well . . . okay. Here. But be *careful* with it."

Fortunately, I had brought along one of my less cool Hot Wheels cars and I figured I could show it instead. I don't know why I didn't give Chris the less cool car, but I didn't. I guess I wasn't good at thinking on my feet when I was seven.

Miss Drulk came back into the room. I had a huge crush on Miss Drulk. She was beautiful. She always wore short dresses and her hair was done up in that 1960s straight-down-to-the-shoulders-then-flipped-up-at-the-ends style that I thought was just the most feminine thing imaginable back then. Simply put, she had blond *That Girl* hair. And she was always extra nice to me, too. Miss Drulk knew that the other kids picked on me and she always seemed to be coming to my defense. Once, when some third graders made a dog pile on top of me at recess, Miss Drulk came running over and made everyone get off. I was crying, as usual, and so she took me into the teacher's lounge and gave me carrot

sticks out of her lunch. I really fell in love with her that day. Even now, when I eat carrot sticks, I occasionally think about Miss Drulk. Her or Carl Slanowski, who used to secretly shove carrot sticks up his nose, then give them out to teachers.

Anyway, Miss Drulk came into the room and announced that it was time for show-and tell. When she said it I felt a twinge of excitement. But then I quickly remembered that it was going to be the poverty-stricken Chris Davis, and not myself who would be showing off the brand-new Hot Wheels fire truck. I immediately felt mad at the guy for guilting me out of my first moment ever of potential coolness.

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard it.

SPLAT.

Oh, no, I thought. It couldn't be.

I turned around to see Chris Davis sitting behind his desk, which was now covered with throw-up. COVERED. For a poor kid, he sure had a lot in his stomach. And what was buried under the lake of vomit?

My fire truck.

Chris had barf running down his chin and was about to start crying. Kids always cried after they threw up. Probably because throwing up was so disgusting, there was nothing else to do *but* cry. And if you cried, the odds were you didn't have to clean it up yourself. But when I saw Chris about to start bawling, I just wanted to slug him. I mean, if anyone had the right to cry, it was me. Couldn't he have pushed my fire truck out of the way when he felt the vomit coming? I mean, throw-up gives you a couple seconds of warning before it arrives. It doesn't just appear. You've got at least a few solid moments of nausea and tingling in the back of your throat that lets you know you have time to push a brand-new three-inch-long Hot Wheels fire truck that doesn't belong to you out of the [redacted] way. And didn't the kid even know he was sick? He must have at least felt queasy when he was talking to