

## Liquid Gold

“Helen, I’ve got it.” My father sat down at the kitchen table and took my mother’s hands in his. “Liquid manure,” he said. His hazel eyes were shining.

She extracted her hands and reached across the table for her pack of du Mauriers. “Dacker, would you hand me my lighter?” She tapped the tip of the cigarette on the table, then put it up to her lips.

He passed her the lighter, shaking his head. “Kee-rist, would you listen to my idea?”

“I heard you,” she sighed. “Liquid manure.”

“Right. And you know why? Think of an old lady with a garden on her balcony. Wouldn’t she like to fertilize her flowers with some nice rich horse manure?”

My mother pushed the brown curls out of her eyes with the back of her hand as she took another drag of her cigarette.

“Of course she would,” he continued. “There’s no better fertilizer! But who wants a bag of horse poop in the city, Helen?” He jumped up excitedly. “That’s why I’m going to bottle it. It will be like liquid gold.”

“*Liquid gold?*”

“We’ll sell thousands!”

“Where the hell are you going to get liquid manure, Dacker?”

“I have a plan.”

It was true: he did have a plan. And he already had a company to carry out that plan. The Seepray Company was registered May 12, 1955, exactly four months after their wedding — or four months and three weeks after their first date. Following their condensed courtship, my newlywed parents were now living in a cheap farmhouse outside Toronto. This was significant because my father’s plan would involve their new neighbor, a race-horse breeder.

It would be thoroughbred poop.

Red Holmes was just coming out of the stables when my father walked in through the gates. In the track in front of them, a sulky driver was flicking the whip lightly above the haunches of one of Red’s champion harness racers. The air was sweet with the smell of fresh horse manure.

"How many city people buy your bags of manure, Red?" my father asked as they shook hands. He was looking just beyond the stables, where steam was sizzling from a heap of horse dung.

"I don't sell manure," Red said.

"Well if you did, how many city people do you think would take a sack?"

Red shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course no city person wants a sack of horse manure," my father went on, answering his own question. "So here's my idea: I bottle the run-off from your pile and sell it. All I need to do is install a vat right there." He pointed to a spot. Red's eyes followed his finger to the base of the steaming pile of horseplop.

"I don't sell manure," Red repeated.

"Think of the money, Red. If we make 75 cents for every bottle..."

"I got a race coming up in Batavia. The purse is eighty G's."

"Come on, Red."

While he waited for the rains to do their work filling up his 45-gallon drums, my father invested what should have been that month's rent money in crates of clear glass bottles. They came with airtight rubber stoppers. He had labels printed that he and my mother pasted onto each one: Dack's Liquid Gold.

True to its name, the liquid that started collecting in the vats was a rich, golden brown. After every rain, my father hurried over to fill more bottles. Then he loaded them by the caseload into the back of his Chevy Brookwood station wagon, capped so tightly you couldn't smell what was inside.

The Brookwood, now sitting in their driveway full of Liquid Gold, was a sporty red with whitewall tires. It had been purchased, like everything else, on credit. This month's payment was coming up, while their rent was now three days past due. Dogged by phone calls from a landlord no more understanding than the bank manager, my parents set out in the Brookwood to settle their debts by peddling essence of thoroughbred manure.

My father was in high spirits. A new car made you feel like a winner, and the product was just what everyone needed — only they didn't know it yet. My mother sat pensively in the passenger seat. She was wearing her best dress: pale blue, white checks and a Peter Pan collar, with a full skirt cinched up around her waist. My father wore a wide-shouldered suit jacket and cuffed pants. Behind them, the manure bottles clinked and jostled as they rolled down the road.

The sun that streamed in through the Brookwood's wrap-around rear window sent golden reflections skittering around inside the car.

My father decided to start local, with a garden center not far from where they lived.

"You know you shouldn't shit where you eat," my mother warned him.

"I don't know what you're talking about. They're going to love this." He pulled into the parking lot.

"I'd like to see the manager," my father said to the cashier at the till. She took in my father's dress suit, my mother's Peter Pan collar, and closed her cash drawer to go get her boss.

The manager came out of the nursery to greet them, followed by a puff of warm, wet air redolent of compost. "How can I help you, Sir, Ma'am?" he asked. He wiped his hands on his overalls.

It was clear that they had overdressed. My mother, who had seemed so sure of herself while laying out their clothes, now looked embarrassed. She stepped into the background to let my father do the talking.

"Now, I want you to think of an old lady growing flowers on her balcony," my father said as they settled into the patio chairs of the garden furniture display. He leaned forward in his seat. Below his pant cuffs, you could see the herringbone pattern of his socks.

"We're going to help that old lady," my father said.

The manager had crossed his arms over his chest, but now he, too, leaned forward.

In less than five minutes they were on their way again, whitewall tires churning up the gravel as they sped out of the parking lot. My mother, with a look of disbelief, held a check out in front of her in both hands.

"You see, Helen? I told you it would work." My father gave the steering wheel a victory smack.

As my father had predicted, the liquid manure truly was liquid gold. They easily sold out their first cases to the garden centers they visited that day. They filled the Brookwood again and again until all their stock was distributed to stores across southern Ontario.

A couple of weeks later, they returned to the garden center where they had made their first sale. The manager had called them in to ask about putting in place a standing order.

"Would you look at that!" my father said, stopping in front of the window display. He put the case he was carrying down by his feet to take a better look. There in front of him, bottles of Dack's Liquid Gold were arranged in tiers in the front window. He gave a low whistle, then put

his hand on my mother's back. When together they went into the store, the sun shining through the liquid manure was washing the floor tiles with gold.

As things would soon turn out, that window display was a spectacularly bad idea. A chemist would know what went wrong. Was it because the sunlight made the liquid manure expand? Or maybe the problem was those airtight caps, trapping the gasses. The only thing we know for certain is that the methane built up, and the rubber stoppers made sure that there was no place for it to go. All at once, on store shelves everywhere, the bottles exploded.

Across the province, shops were being drenched in liquid golden shit.

By then, Dack's Liquid Gold had paid the rent on their house in full, which was a shame, because my father and mother had to leave town in a hurry.