

Providing for his family and taking care of his retarded brother Arnie is exhausting work for Gilbert Grape. He doesn't have a lot of extra energy to spend on his sisters, especially not on his baby sister Ellen, who seems to despise him. In this scene, Ellen tells Gilbert why he should be a little more supportive and tries to explain to him how hard life can be for a sixteen year old girl.



## What's Eating Gilbert Grape?

by Peter Hedges

It's the same morning of the same day, and I'm asleep on the couch in the family room. I'm truly savouring this period of rest, this catnap, when a rude smell comes dancing up my nose and starts screaming in my head. My eyes smack open. I look around, fuzzy at first, only to find my little sister sitting there in shorts and a halter top, painting her nails. The smell of that – Jesus!

My little sister's name is Ellen. She turned sixteen last month. She also just got her braces off, and for days now she's been walking around the house, running her tongue all over, going "Oo-ah" – like she can't believe the feel of teeth.

Ever since Ellen got her braces off she has been one big pain in the butt. And now with a sudden penchant for lip gloss and painting her toes red, she has bumped to the big time – becoming even more of an already impossible thing. The smell of the polish forces me to rise up and look her in the eye. She stays

what's eating · hvat  
bagir  
providing for · hava  
umsorgan fyrir  
despise · vanvirða  
catnap · blundur  
dishes · kemur við  
smother · her: kvala  
pries · skrykkir  
give in · gevi eftir

fixed on the toe of the moment. So I say, "Little sister, must we?" She keeps painting, coating toe after toe, no response, no answer. So I say, "CAN'T THIS BE DONE SOMEWHERE ELSE?"

Without looking at me, my sister dishes this shit: "Gilbert, some of us are only sixteen. Some of us are trying to do something with our one chance at life. I am trying something new, a brand-new color is being applied, and I could use your support and your encouragement. When that is there, I might consider moving, but you are my brother. And if you don't support these new steps, who will? Who will? Tell me, who will!"

She breathes a few times fast through her nose, making a whistly noise: "I'm at such a difficult age. Girls my age bleed. We bleed every month, and it's not like we did anything wrong. Just to be sitting there in church."

"You don't go to church."

"Hypothetical, Gilbert."

"Don't use big words."

"Okay. I'm at work, mixing the toppings or making cones. And suddenly I feel it coming, and I didn't do anything. You are a guy, so you don't know how this feels. You should be understanding, and let me in peace. Do the one thing that brings me joy and a sense of completion. So thank you, Gilbert, thank you sooooo much!"

I stare at her trying to decide the most discreet way to murder. But she turns suddenly and stomps out of the family room leaving only the smell of her new toes. I decide to smother myself, as it is my most immediate option. Covering my face with an old orange sofa pillow, I begin the process.

It gets to the interesting part where my lungs want air and my heart doesn't, when I feel this poking on my arm. This family. If it's Ellen, I'll smother her, first thing, and if it's Arnie, we'll have a pillow fight, laugh a bit, then I'll do the smothering.

But this time the voice is that of my big sister, Amy. She's whispering, "Gilbert, come here."

I don't move ...

"Gilbert, please ..."

I'm almost dead. Surely she can see this.

"Gilbert!"

I give in to the idea of air and say, "I'm busy," from underneath the pillow.

"You don't look busy."

Amy pries off the cushion and pulls it away from me. My eyes adjust to the sudden light. She's wearing a worried and concerned look, but what else is new? This look of terror is most often her face of choice. And I've grown fond of it. I find its predictability somehow comforting. It's only when Amy smiles that you know something is wrong.

