

Ass Infection

I almost died from an ass infection. Seriously. Pay attention. Be warned. The giant ass infection is the most ignoble, stupid, hard-to-get-sympathy-for, ugly, ridiculous injury that you can get. And you can get one anywhere, anytime, and there's nothing you can do to stop it.

For mine, I went all the way to Boquete, Panama on vacation with Amy. Boquete is a beautiful town nestled in a beautiful valley. It's surrounded by hills green with coffee plantations and rainforest, and sits at the feet of the Volcan Barú, a tremendous, seven-cratered, dormant volcano. Boquete is where we went for our goddamn horse ride. It was all very nice—the view of the volcano was splendid—but there was an awful lot of trotting involved. Amy cackled as she jounced around in the saddle, her amusement at a new experience spilling out of her in splashes of laughter.

I was trying to remember a horse-riding lesson from when I was seven. Do you post by going up when the horse goes down, or the other way around? I found myself trying various moves to counteract the horse's pounding. Everything I did was wrong, but I couldn't stop myself. The result was a two-hour beating and a saddle sore. It was nothing major, a mere abrasion, a few layers of my skin now attached to my underwear. Chafing, I supposed, that was all. I put some ointment on it and tried to go about like normal.

We had another day in Panama, crossed the border into Costa Rica, and spent a few days on the magnificent southern coast. We went swimming

beneath a pristine waterfall, went boogie-boarding at sunset in the magical Pacific, and floated down a mountain stream in inner tubes. My ass concerned me no more than did my elbows throughout this portion of the trip. Little did I know what was to come.

From San Jose we took a bus to Monteverde, the celebrated Quaker town in the mountains with three major conservation areas and delicious cheese. The bus, typical of Central American public transportation, left at 6:30 AM for its slow, motion-sickness inducing journey along torturous, unpaved mountain roads with frequent stops and no AC. At some point on the five-hour ride I began to become quite uncomfortable. Was it just the springs of the barely-padded seat jamming into my butt? The fact that my clothes had been damp for two weeks and my boxers were rubbing? Or was it just raw skin where my saddle sore scab had fallen off?

Whatever it was, it was back there and I could feel it getting larger and deeper and inflamed. At the hotel I had Amy investigate. It was "just a little red." Something was lurking there in my bum, but what? The skin felt stretched and taught, the same sensation as when an angry huge zit is about to birth itself on the tip of your nose, erupting in shiny, pink pain. Only this was much bigger, and not on the tip of my nose.

I applied more ointment and scrubbed it with antibacterial soap, but with little hope. There was no opening. The evil was beneath the skin.

As the days passed in Monteverde, my discomfort evolved from only slightly bothering me when I sat down, to a dull, constant pain, to sharper and sharper spikes of throbbing agony. While standing or walking around, I felt

okay, sort of, but sleeping on my back or right side hurt enough to make me not do it, and sitting down became almost unbearable. I found myself trying to sit in strange new positions—all the way forward with my back rigidly straight, my head angled over my plate at meals, or with all my weight on my left cheek, anything to keep the pressure off the growing thing that was taking over my ass and my vacation.

I knew I had to deal with this thing soon. I pictured Amy disinfecting the Swiss Army knife with a match, myself bent over a stump in the woods behind the hotel, biting on a stick. We were going home in two days and I prayed it wouldn't come to that. The travel books said that Costa Rican hospitals in major cities were pretty good, but I figured with my abysmal Spanish I could wind up with my legs amputated or worse. I would deal with it in the States, and bear it stoically until then. All I had to do was survive another five-hour bus ride and a four-and-a-half-hour flight.

"My ass! My ass!" I whined every ten minutes.

"Shut up already about your ass. And stop touching it! You're making it worse."

Amy had as much sympathy for my injured bottom as she would for a hangnail. But at this point it hurt constantly, and sitting was nearly impossible. At dinner, I sort of hovered over the chair, and at night I slept on my stomach. Tylenol did little to help. The ointment did nothing.

We caught the 6:30 AM bus back to San Jose, and I was miserable. I had all my usual Central American bus anxieties—I couldn't eat for fear of throwing

up, I couldn't drink anything for there was no bathroom on the bus and pit stops were at the driver's discretion, and I couldn't sleep for fear of having the bags stolen which happened to someone on the way up. In addition, almost every position I attempted made me feel like I'd been shot. I tried sitting in ways that delivered a low hum of constant discomfort, which were preferable to the stabbing jolts of agony. After two hours, I was running out of these positions. After three, I was sitting on my leg. After four, I tried kneeling in the seat. My raincoat proved useful as a bolster, and this got me to the end of the ride. From the bus we got in a cab, which was better, because I could sit completely sideways with my right cheek in the air. Finally, we made it to our hotel, and we collapsed. Amy had her own problems. She had been violently allergic to our hotel room in Monteverde (the walls, ceiling, and floor were paneled in some exotic wood that set Amy off) and was generally exhausted from the trip she had jokingly but accurately referred to as "army training." We attempted to enjoy San Jose—we ate lunch and found an interesting gallery—but at about three in the afternoon we headed back to the hotel. I was limping by now, and sucking my teeth when I stepped down too hard. Amy was sick. We watched "First Blood" on Cinemax. It was pretty good.

Standing, sitting, lying down, it no longer mattered. The thing on my ass hurt like hell, and I didn't know if I could fly the next day. Amy had an idea. If we could find something to numb it, maybe I could get through the flight. She thought Anbesol or some canker sore stuff might do it. There was a farmacia nearby, so I wrote down "Anbesol – Topical Antiseptic" in ersatz Spanish on a piece of paper and went out. The farmacia was a narrow shop with a counter

displaying combs and candy and shelves behind jumbled with Rogaine, Tums, shampoo, Prozac, aspirin, foot pads, and prosthetic limbs. I showed the guy my piece of paper, and he called over the other guy. "Toothache?" he asked me. "Si. Toothache." They called someone else on the phone. Scrambled around on a step ladder. Picked up a few things, and shook their heads. Finally they handed me a small brown vial with a yellow label. I bought it.

I couldn't really read the label, but it seemed to say "extract of rhubarb." It couldn't hurt me any more than I already hurt, I figured, and Amy applied it with the little brush attached to the lid, painting my besieged bottom iodine brown. The thing was raised now, "In 3D" as Amy put it. It looked like half a Silly Putty egg stuck on my bottom. The rhubarb made it sting, get cold, and tighten a bit. I felt a little better. We went to sleep watching some movie in which Jim Belushi switches roles with Charles Grodin. I love cable.

Flying home, I had the middle seat in our row. The woman by the window must of thought I was some creepy ass-freak the way I wriggled and shuffled as the effects of the extract wore off. There was more beverage service on that flight than I have ever seen, which caused the aisle to be constantly blocked with carts, and denied me bathroom access much of the time. Halfway through the movie, I had my chance, and rushed to the toilet. As I dropped my pants and swabbed myself with extract of rhubarb I couldn't help smiling despite the pain. If that woman by the window could see what was happening in this bathroom... Sadly, this time, the extract did little to relieve my suffering. I think the infection had developed a resistance to it, and actually

began to consume and thrive on it. I spent the rest of the flight stuffing blankets and pillows under myself, moaning softly.

My dad picked us up at Newark. We had dinner at my parents' house, and then I tried to casually announce "I'd like to stop in the emergency room on my way home, if that's okay." This brought on the questions, the hemming, the hawing, and ultimately the dropping of the pants.

"It's a boil," said my dad. My mom was incredulous. "A boil? What the hell is a boil?" But she agreed that I should see a doctor right away. I was dissuaded from the emergency room, and sent to A "Critical Care" facility instead. It would be faster, less bureaucratic, and all they were going to do was give me antibiotics, anyway, right? My mom called to tell them I was coming and that I had out-of-state insurance. That seemed to be fine with them, so Amy and I drove over. First, though, she took a picture of the Easter-egg of pus and pain growing out of my ass.

We signed in, took a seat and waited. After maybe thirty minutes, we were sent into an examination room. A man in his fifties with a white coat and stethoscope came in and took my blood pressure, weight, and temperature. He asked my why I was there, and nodded and jotted when I said that I had a huge infection on my butt. Amy mentioned the shots we had gotten before our trip, in case there would be a conflict with whatever they prescribed, and he nodded again. "You'd better tell the doctor." Tell the doctor? Who the hell was this guy? The warm-up act? "And put this on." He handed me a blue gown. I kept my T-shirt on, took off my pants and boxers, and put on the gown with the opening in the back.

After another fifteen minutes, another guy arrived. He looked at the chart, told me to lie down on my stomach, and parted the gown. Then he grabbed the giant, painful thing, and I banged my feet against the back of my head as I spasmed in agony. "Does this hurt?" he asked.

"Ah...yes. Yes, that hurts."

"I'm going to give you to the other doctor. He's had two of these already this week. Wait here."

Two or three ass infections every week? In Northern New Jersey? Dear God! The Horror! It could happen anywhere!

Then he came back. He moved me into another room, told me to lie face down on that table, and left again. My face was six inches from the wall, but I could see that a woman had walked in to the room. She said hi, said hello to Amy, and then flooped my gown up, exposing my ass yet again. "Ah-ha." She appraised the gleaming red thing. "Yup." Amy began to giggle. Another woman walked in. "That looks painful," she said. "I think there's someone in the waiting room who hasn't seen my ass yet – should we get him?" I offered. Amy kept laughing.

The other doctor arrived, flooped up my gown, called the first woman over, and within seconds, poured a very cold fluid all over my exposed buttocks. "Just relax. We're going to give you some Novocain. This will hurt a bit, but that should be the last thing you feel down there for a while." As he said this the nurse stabbed an enormous spike directly into the center of the thing. Amy stopped laughing. Blood and pus shot everywhere, got on the doctor and the nurse, ran warm and sticky down my legs. I yelled, I swore. Someone had just

taken a sharp thing and stuck it into pain. I don't know the words for how much this hurt. Then the doctor said "No, do it at an angle, from the side." And she did it again, with a twist.

I couldn't see what was happening, but it involved scalpels, a lot of gauze and vigorous kneading. After a few minutes I stopped writhing and sort of collapsed, gasping, beaten. I tried to curl my legs up against my body, hoping to pass out, but the nurse straightened them and held on to my ankles. Dr. Berry kept a patter of instructions going, talking to my ass while he drained it. I tried hard to focus on his words, but only registered a few disconnected phrases: "Soak in warm water...packing may fall out...back in forty-eight hours...may need surgery...one more day... IV antibiotics...diarrhea...rest...make an appointment for Friday." He plugged up the new hole in my ass with gauze and left the room, reminding me several more times about the need to come back on Friday. The nurse told me to stand, then prepared more needles. "This is for the pain," she said as she stuck me again in the cheek with a flick of her wrist and a dart-throwing motion. "This is an antibiotic." And she did it again. "Now roll up your sleeve..." and she gave me a tetanus shot in the left arm.

I felt like I had been beaten up in an alley. My butt was bruised all over, my arm was tightening up, and I could barely move. I needed Amy's help to put on my pants and tie my shoes.

I limped to the reception desk for my prescriptions and bill, and held out my Oxford insurance card. Thus began our high-stakes game of "Managed Healthcare."

"Oh no. We can't take that. We're not your primary care physician, and you don't have a referral."

Wow. Tough defense. But I thought I knew how to get through it. I went for the loophole.

I knew this, but I thought I knew the system too. "Ah," I said with confidence as I extended my hand and held the card a little closer to her nose. "But I don't need the referral in the case of an emergency and this," I raised an eyebrow knowingly, "was an emergency."

She smiled, put one finger on my wrist and pushed my hand gently, but firmly away. If that was the best I could do, she had check-mate in three.

"We're not an emergency room. We're Critical Care. If you'd gone to the hospital...No. You'll have to pay."

I put my insurance card away, and surrendered my Visa card instead. Six-hundred-and-eighty dollars to have my ass drained.

Amy drove home while I kneeled in the back seat. We spent the night with my parents, and went back to the city the next day. I was too weak to unpack or go to work or worry about my insurance or do anything. Dr. Berry had told me—several times—to return to his clinic in New Jersey in two days to have him look at my ass again. He was so adamant about this that it did not occur to me to ask if any other doctor could do the follow-up. He seemed to want to do it himself, and that made sense to me, as he would be able to really tell if I was getting better. So, after two days of total inactivity, I staggered out into the shittiest weather imaginable: fierce rain, wind and cold. I waited almost

an hour for a bus that let me off at the bottom of a hill about a mile from my parents' house where I could take a car to the doctor's.

The streets were filled up to the curbs with filthy slush, and my feet were soaked within the first two minutes of walking. The cold made my ass-pain dull and constant. When I finally got to the car, I found it covered in ice, and it took me ten minutes to chip enough of it off the windshield to allow me to drive. I made it to the doctors' two hours late.

"I'm here to see Dr. Berry."

"Oh, he's not in today. Take a seat. Someone will be with you shortly."

I made the trip for his ass-expertise, and he scheduled me for his day off.

Bastard.

I was sent into an examination room, given the gown, and told to wait some more. After half an hour, I began pacing. After another fifteen minutes, I opened the door and stood there in my socks and gown for everyone walking by to see. Was anybody in this clinic a doctor? Forty-five minutes later, the bearded thug from last time arrived. I read his name tag, and noticed his title—"Physician's Assistant." Great. Not even a real doctor. I came three hours in the slush and waited another hour-and-a-half for a Physician's Assistant. He flooped up my gown, tore off the bandage (removing another patch of ass hair) and grabbed the wound. I yelled. He asked if it hurt. I was still yelling, so he said he'd get the nurse to give me some pain-killers. He left for ten more minutes. Then he came back with a woman who skewered me again, and the

squeezing began. "Did you soak it every 2 hours?" "Uunnngthhhhhh!" I answered. Every 2 hours? All Dr. Perry had said was "soak it."

The Physician's Assistant said, "One in twenty of these need surgery, and you're it."

"Rrrrrraaaaa! Goddam! Fuck!" I said.

"You really have to relax. We need to squeeze out all of the fluid and pus." I made them give me a tongue depressor to bite while they worked it. By the time they were done, I had a mouth full of splinters.

They told me to soak it every 2 hours, gave me new and stronger pain killers and an antibiotic that could turn yogurt into yoo-hoo. They told me to come back in two more days, and asked if I wanted to schedule surgery. My abscess, or cyst, or staph infection, or whatever it was would have to be removed in its entirety if I couldn't soak out the evil in 48 hours. I decided never to go back there again.

I drove myself to the pharmacy, got the new drugs, and drove to my folks' place. I took a couple of my new barbiturates, and made myself an omelet and a cup of tea. The receptionist at my Brooklyn doctor's told me he'd call me back. He never called.

Just as my dad was about to drive me back to Brooklyn, the phone rang. It was my grandma, asking about my trip. My dad immediately told her about my "boil" and she told him the story about how when she was a girl, she had twelve boils on her back simultaneously, and how her mother removed them with bread soaked in milk. My Grandma should tell her story to my doctors.

At home I sat in a purple Rubbermaid tub full of warm water for twenty minutes every two hours. Amy changed my bandages so much my ass was completely free of hair. She noticed that the hard tissue around the infected area seemed to be growing, and called my primary physician's covering doctor. He gave us cryptic instructions to meet him at a nearby hospital the following morning.

I waited at the reception desk in the hospital building he described. Ten minutes later, he walked up to me. "Jason? Come with me." The doctor whisked me down a hall, into the Pediatric area, and into an examination room. He drew the curtain, but didn't have to give me the instructions—I had heard them so many times in the past few days. I dropped my pants and bent over the table. It occurred to me that this man might not actually be a doctor, and I was about to be the victim of an elaborate ass-scam, but what could I do? The "doctor" bent in for a good look at my tush. He expertly flicked his wrist and peeled the bandage off in a single motion. He poked and probed the infected area and said, "No, you're not going to need surgery. This is healing nicely." He told me to take the antibiotics and keep up the soaking. He splashed some saline on it, taped it up, and we left the room. He shook my hand, and walked quickly away, passed through a door into another part of the hospital, and disappeared. I had signed nothing, paid nothing, filled out no forms, and given no insurance information. This doctor, based on the worried tone in Amy's voice and the terrible seriousness of my ass condition, snuck me into a major New York hospital, squeezed my butt for free and pronounced me on the mend. He literally saved my ass, and I owe him.

After a week, I didn't need Amy's help anymore. I could get by with a bandage and triple-antibiotic ointment, which I could apply all by myself. The whole experience was rough on Amy, but she got something out of it. Whenever we meet new people, go out to dinner, get invited over for drinks, Amy usually waits about an hour before asking, "Have we told you the ass story?" And she tells it. It's interesting to see who invites us to get together a second time.

While planning for the trip to Central America, I read about all the potential diseases and parasites available to me. Bot Fly, Malaria, Yellow Fever, Dengue, Chiggers—the list goes on and on. "Drink lots of water," the books say and "take Lariam starting one week before you leave," and "spots of blood on the sheets indicate bed bugs." Nothing mentioned, even in passing, the all-consuming ass infection.