

I The Hurl

I first experienced “acid reflux” on June 18, 2017, about 3 a.m. It was right after high school graduation. To celebrate, I went to my best friend’s house party in New Bern, North Carolina. *My parents knew.* Her parents were away for the weekend. *My parents did not know.* We had all just gone for a midnight swim in the Trent River. My longtime crush, Will, was peacefully asleep in the guest room bed beside me. Through the window, the Trent mirrored the stars... watching their reflections ripple in the water nauseated me. I did not think too hard about the reason why. The only thing that went through my head was how utterly embarrassing it would be if I threw up in front of Will. Or worse... What if I threw up *on* him? Rushing to the bathroom, I knelt in front of the toilet and vomited as quietly as I could. Between heaves, I checked to see if I had woken him up. *All clear.* I took a breath. *Whew... That was weird.* Will stirred when I crawled back into bed.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure? It sounded like you were throwing up in there...”

Fuck. “Oh yeah, it’s no big deal. Must be something I ate. I feel better now.”

I didn’t. That night, I dreamt about going to hell.

The next morning, Will tried putting his arms around me. I wanted to let him. Instead, I pushed him off and ran to the bathroom. And I retched. And retched. Until nothing came out.

I remembered my dream last night, and reality began to set in: *I just had my first kiss. I just spent the night with Will. My parents have no idea. I just lost my virginity. My parents have no idea. If they did, they would disown me. I would deserve it. I betrayed them. I betrayed Allah. Why am I throwing up? What if I’m pregnant - no, wait, that’s impossible... What if-*

Oop. Will woke up. He was worried about me. I told him I had to go home, but that I loved him and that I wouldn’t trade last night for anything. I don’t know if he believed me. I don’t think he did.

II Time To Lie

The drive from New Bern to my dad’s house in Greenville took about an hour. Living with my dad had its benefits and drawbacks. Drawback: He didn’t know how to cook, clean, or generally be a parent. Benefit: He didn’t take much of an interest in what I was up to.

He didn’t question me when I ran up to my room immediately after getting home. I had to figure out a game plan. I couldn’t keep food down - eventually he would notice. *What would I tell him? Maybe*

that I got food poisoning... Yeah. Maybe that. I was scared. Only I knew why this was happening to me. Only I knew what I had done.

My dad noticed something was off when he called me downstairs for lunch. He had brought me some McDonald's - a 12-piece Chicken McNugget meal with medium fries and a large Coke. It broke my heart that he remembered my order. I didn't deserve this food, but I was too scared to tell my dad that. So, I sipped on the Coke until I couldn't anymore. Despite myself, I ran to the sink and promptly vomited. The bubbles from the Coke cut my throat. My dad held my hair back for me. *Please go away, just let me purge in peace.*

Later that day, my dad took me to see my PCP, Dr. Randolph. With her well-timed jokes and delightfully southern accent, Dr. Randolph never failed to put me at ease. I hoped she would tell me that there was actually something physically wrong with me, and that my incessant vomiting wasn't some kind of cosmic punishment for debasing myself. I wondered if she had ever gone through this... *Probably not. She grew up in the U.S. Isn't it, like, normal for teenagers to have sex here? She probably got laid all the time and never felt guilty about it.* "Alright sweetheart, now when did this start?" she asked. *Uhhh ... right after I threw away my shot at heaven?*

My dad was right beside me. A physician himself, he and Dr. Randolph went way back as colleagues. Of course, he couldn't help but chime in.

"Sudden onset vomiting this morning upon returning from her best friend's graduation sleepover. No other fever, diarrhea, stomach pain, or other symptoms. No significant past medical history or allergies," he stated matter-of-factly. He didn't even bother to look at me. A wry grin from Dr. Randolph.

"Nausea and vomiting right after the big graduation sleepover, huh?" My dad and I laughed at the same time. We both knew what she insinuated. I let my dad take this one.

"Oh man, that's funny. No, my daughter doesn't drink. Never has never will. Isn't that right, Myrha?" he teased. *Finally, something I can be honest about.* I obliged.

"Oh, absolutely Dr. Randolph. I don't drink. And honestly, I don't ever plan to. It's haram." *Did I really mean that? I never imagined I'd have premarital sex either. Lots of fun things are haram... What's the point of keeping halal now anyway? I can't undo what's been done.*

Dr. Randolph breezed through her history, oblivious to my secret. In fact, it seemed like she already had a diagnosis in mind. *Is she going to ask me about... God, I hope not.* But with a swift wink and wiggle of the brow, she asked "And are you sexually active?" She had to cover all her bases. Again, my dad laughed. I didn't join him this time. "Take a wild guess, Sarah," he chuckled. *Don't act suspicious.* I mustered a smile through tears that hadn't quite formed. Tears I wouldn't let fall. "No," I whispered, "I'm not." I wondered if she would ask him to leave the room and ask me again. Could she tell I was holding back? Did she know that something like this had to be a secret? Or had I played the part of the obedient Pakistani daughter a little too well for even my *doctor* to question my unimpeachable purity?

III Hey look man, I'm Just a Virgin (I'm not) with Acid Reflux (???)

You heard it here first - Dr. Randolph diagnosed me with GERD. It was perfect. It explained my

morning nausea. It explained why it was worse when I was horizontal. The best part? It explained why I *kept* vomiting. For days, weeks, months after. It explained everything, and the only other explanation was the real one - that every time I went to lie down, I thought of Will. Every morning, I relived *the* morning. And my body punished me for it. I told Will I had acid reflux and that I would like to keep seeing him. He obliged, satisfied with my diagnosis. Dr. Randolph prescribed me omeprazole, which I think helped a bit. At least it got rid of some of the nausea. *Some of it.*

She wanted to do an endoscopy, but I didn't let her. I was afraid she wouldn't find anything and then I'd have to invent some other explanation for my psycho-somatic emesis. Thankfully I didn't. It resolved on its own after a few months. *I know what really happened here. That's all that matters.*

In my chart, I still have acid reflux. This past year, I got a new PCP and tried telling her that the whole "acid reflux thing" was just a big mistake. I thought we could start fresh. I surprised myself - I guess starting medical school inspired me to correct what I knew was a misdiagnosis.

"Yeah, it's actually kinda funny looking back... I felt so guilty about having sex that it manifested physically. It was all psycho-somatic."

"Really? That's odd, it says here you have a history of acid reflux..."

"Ah, yeah I bet it does. That's actually my fault, I led my parents and my previous doctor on for a while about it. I was too afraid to admit that it was really the sex thing that did it. But I can be honest about that now. No acid reflux here, just some religious trauma!"

She forced an awkward laugh. I could tell she didn't really believe me. *Fine, don't believe me. Maybe I actually do have acid reflux. Maybe I just happened to develop it exactly alongside the mess I created for myself.*

I checked MyChart after that encounter. No note about what I said. Just "Acid Reflux" listed in my health summary, enjoying its place beside "IUD."