



The Travel Bug

by Anna T. Hirsh

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You haven't known true horror until someone who doesn't know you or speak your language points at you and says, "Herpes!"

I was twenty-five and living in Los Angeles. I decided the best way to use my precious vacation days at the post-production job I hated was to go to post-Communist Bulgaria to visit my good friend Noah, who was in a Peace Corps job that he hated.

The trip started off beautifully. I arrived in London only to discover that Bulgarian Airlines no longer existed. In response, my former airline had kindly rerouted my ticket through Paris on a different airline—for the day before. I have no idea why they thought that itinerary seemed logical, but the speak-Bulgarian-only airline employees left to gather all the paper clips and staplers in the empty BA offices seemed to feel I was just being picky. I flew standby on yet another airline and finally arrived in Sofia. After waiting for an hour at the baggage claim, it was determined that they had lost my luggage.

It was during all this fun that I noticed my lips felt rather... sensitive. They were raw and tingly, as if I'd been licking them a lot. I assumed that I was probably just dehydrated and stressed, and I didn't think much of it, subscribing to the theory that everything gets better with lip-gloss.

Upon the arrival of my luggage the next day, Noah, another friend of mine, Mac, and I embarked on a journey around rural Bulgaria. The plan was to hike, eat delicious cheesy-eggy-bready things that I never remember the name of, drink a lot of brandy, and eventually meet up with Noah's crazy girlfriend.

By that second day I had developed three almost-invisible blisters on my lips as well as a bright pink tone to my mouth in general. While one of Noah's friends regaled us with stories about the local Bulgarian Mafia (they had kindly gotten him drunk and purchased him a prostitute as a "welcome to the neighborhood"), I tried to not focus on the fact that my mouth hurt like hell.

On day three we went to explore an ancient fort, and my lips began to puff up—it actually looked like I had a duck bill. The blisters had quickly gotten much bigger and started to turn brown. In fact my entire mouth was beginning to blister. It was revolting. And it hurt worse than anything I have ever experienced, including breaking my shoulder. Mac and Noah called it "face cancer."

That night I woke up to discover that the leprous sores were leaking a yellowish fluid down my face. I was definitely not okay.

So far I had tried to remain cool about the situation in front of my friends. On day four we woke up, walked outside, and I started to

cry. Mac and Noah had no idea what to do. Through the tears cascading over my scabby, crusty, puffy lips, I finally got across how much pain I was in and how scared I was. I got awkward hugs and some cortisone cream.

Trying to make light of the situation, my friends began a dangerous game of truth-or-dare: admit something horribly embarrassing, or use a straw to drink from the glass of wine I just sipped with my crusty lips; reveal your darkest secrets, or dry off with the same towel that I used after a swim. Hah-hah.

The boys kept telling me that it wasn't so bad and that I was beautiful. But the truth is I was a wreck. I was dehydrated and having a hard time eating. I couldn't drink coffee, which I was heavily addicted to, and thus I was getting migraines. And the pain... imagine having someone air-pump your lips to the size of a football and then take a cheese grater to them.

We returned to Sofia and I decided I couldn't take it anymore—I had to risk healthcare in a country where dentists smoke in their offices. When Noah and I finally found a doctor's office, a woman walked out of the "examining room," took one look at me, and said, "Herpes!" My first thought was, "Oh God! It's true! I'm the dirtiest girl in the world!" An STD, leprosy of the lips, it was all the same to me. Then Noah informed me that this woman was the receptionist.

The thing is, pretty much everyone else in Bulgaria has herpes. Cold sores were as common as leather jackets and jaundiced-skin. But the real doctor told me that I had impetigo—a strep or staph infection commonly found amongst children, usually passed via fecal matter. Yum. I most likely got it from touching a doorknob or railing at LAX.

I started crying, which made Noah start crying. The doctor gave me antibiotics and a pat on the back, saying that my case was particularly bad, probably because of all the lip gloss.

I left the next morning after big hugs and promising Mac and Noah that I would see a doctor at Heathrow Airport. I spent the entire trip trying to drink coffee through a straw and bursting into fits of tears, totally freaking out the Arab guy sitting next to me. It only got better after that. After seeing my face at check-in, Virgin Atlantic made me see a doctor just in case they had to quarantine me.

The old guy who drove me in a golf cart to the medical building tried to comfort me by telling me that he had recently experienced blood in his urine and they thought it was syphilis, but he had turned out alright. The Heathrow doctors gave me a pass after they verified that I had impetigo and I was let on the plane. I spent the entire nine-hour flight holding a napkin over my face and pretending to be asleep in

order to avoid the soccer players who hadn't seen my face and thus kept trying to get my attention.

When I arrived in the United States, my friend Melissa drove me straight to the emergency room, telling me not to touch anything in her car because she didn't have health insurance. It was then that my recently acquired boyfriend called and I made the mistake of telling him I was going to the hospital. He wanted to see me. I really liked this guy, we had just started dating, and every millimeter of my lips was covered in oozing yellow scabs. He wasn't the sensitive type either. "Don't go!" Melissa yelled helpfully to him in the background.

I finally made it to a U.S. hospital and received steroids for the swelling and Vicodin for the pain. The doctor told me he had never seen a case of impetigo as bad as mine. I was passing out on the examining table when I heard my boyfriend saying my name. I had just enough time to cover my face and turn stop-sign red when he walked in the door. All I could say was, "I'm disgusting," and slowly uncover my mouth. His response was, "Can I get a blow job?"

Laughing made my scabs crack and bleed.

It was all gone two days later. Noah and Mac now bring up the impetigo every time I see them. They had been so sweet, but now they tell me that after I left they kept taking showers and couldn't stop itching for weeks.

It was bad. Even worse than when I got dysentery in Fiji, followed by my period, which morphed into a yeast infection.

I don't get the travel bug; it gets me.