

Ole Smoky

In Nashville, TN

“Let’s see...you had burning during urination, right?” the nurse on the other side of the phone asked loudly and casually. I heard her mouse click in the background.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And when did you come in?”

“Tuesday, I think.”

“Okay, let me pull up your file here.” She breathed into the phone. “Can you verify your last name and date of birth?”

“Bastian, December fourth, nineteen eighty-five.”

“Greg?”

“Yeah.”

“Greg, you tested positive for chlamydia.”

“Shit.” I grabbed my penis, which was burning at the tip and up through the urethra. The feeling went away when I was distracted, but each time I remembered it I could feel the scratchiness of my underwear. “Well, I’m glad we know what it is. What do I do now?”

“Well, chlamydia is a bacterial infection. Come back to the clinic and we’ll give you an antibiotic to get rid of it. You said you don’t have insurance, correct?”

“Right,” I said. It was about three p.m. and I stood barefoot in the kitchen without a shirt on. I opened the fridge and stared at the loaf of bread on the middle rack and wondered what I could do with it. I took it out and set it on the table, along with a glass jar of jam and a plastic jar

of peanut butter, which was cold and solid. I put my hand over the phone. “Sunny,” I yelled down the hallway, “stop putting the peanut butter in the refrigerator.”

“That’s fine,” said the nurse. “We can prescribe and give you medication at no cost.” She paused as if waiting for me to say something, but I didn’t. “Do you have any questions for me?”

I pinched the phone with my shoulder and ear and unscrewed the lid from the jar of peanut butter and put in the microwave. “Should I call the people I’ve had sex with and tell them I have it?”

“That would be the nice thing to do, yes,” the nurse said, her voice becoming softer and more gentle.

“How far back, do you think?” I asked. I punched the numbers into the keypad on the microwave and pressed start.

“You said the burning started about a week ago?”

“Yeah, maybe eight or nine days.”

“Then I’d go back at least a couple months. It could have laid dormant for a while before it started causing you problems.”

I groaned. I thought about the people I’d slept with from back home in Greenfield, Minnesota. It had been a better-than-average month and there was a solid handful of people I’d have to call. But no one would want to hear the reason why I was calling them.

“I know it’s a hard conversation to have. But they’ll be glad you told them.”

“You’re right. I’ll do it. Thank you.”

“Okay. Come in as soon as you can and we’ll get your prescription. And, this goes without saying, but try to avoid sexual contact until you finish the bottle.”

“Alright, I will, thank you. I’ll be there soon.”

Gabby

“What’s up?” she answered quickly. She was usually on her phone. We talked through Snapchat.

She was the first person on my list, which had to be written out in order to make sure I remembered all the names. I figured the easiest way to remember everything was to lay it all out in chronological order, and I’d decided to contact them that way in the hope that it might help find out who gave me the infection.

Gabby had used me in the best way: as a sex-only, no bullshit booty call over the course of a few weekends. She would dial me up around midnight—drunk even though she was only twenty—and have her friend drop her off at the door of my mom’s house, where I was living before moving to Tennessee. In the heat of the moment we didn’t use protection and came too close for comfort, and she had no qualms when I asked her if she would take a Plan B pill.

She was beautiful. And the younger sister of a friend I had played on the football team with but they didn’t look anything alike. Her features were round and soft without a single angle and her skin shone like gold with a blush of rose. At this time, she had just returned from au pairing for a wealthy family in France and I couldn’t believe my luck when I found myself naked with her.

“Well, this is weird,” I typed and felt a flash of shame. I briefly considered giving a different reason for why I’d messaged. Instead, I remembered how she loved to lie. She had told blatantly untrue stories, such as giving her married boss a blowjob in order to get a promotion, or

having sex with a Parisian at the top of the Eiffel Tower. I reasoned that, as crazy as she pretended to be, she probably wouldn't be too mad about this. She might even like it—a new sex story to tell. I barreled through a short, fact-based spiel I'd worked out in my head.

I sent, "I just found out that I have chlamydia." The blue Snapchat arrow emptied into an outline, followed by a couple minutes of silence. I held my breath and was relieved when she didn't take a screenshot of the chat. I followed up with another message. "I just wanted to let you know that I have it, and that you might have it too."

"Lol I don't have it," she wrote.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure. I don't. But thanks for telling me you have it. Lol"

"Haha no problem"

"Is that all?" she asked.

I missed talking to her, but it was only because of her looks. She had too much self-confidence, propped up by looks, lies, and the idiocy of being twenty.

"Yeah, that's it. I hope you're doing well"

"I am! Hope you're good too"

I set my phone next to me on the futon and looked out my bedroom window at the front yard. My balls itched and I wondered if it was only chlamydia or some sort of hybrid STD that hadn't been discovered yet. The window to the outside was shut but I could feel Nashville's summer heat radiating through the glass pane.

I knew Gabby could be lying about not having it because, how could she know? Had she already gotten tested? I believed she was telling the truth insofar as she hadn't had any

symptoms, but for her, it might make more sense if she had already had it and was too embarrassed to tell me. I crossed out her name and put a question mark by it.

Sarah

“You *fucking* asshole,” she said.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I said, then hesitated. “I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t know what? That if you’re fucking lots of people at the same time you’re going to get an STD?”

I took an audibly deep breath in lieu of saying anything incriminating. I hoped it would say: *I understand why you’re mad, and I accept that this is my fault.* More time passed and I finally added, “I’m sorry, I just wanted you to know.”

“So do I need to get tested?”

“Yeah, probably, just to be safe.”

“Jesus. You are a slut. Seriously.”

“I know,” I said. I knew it was meant as an insult but it made me smile.

“And you obviously didn’t wear a fucking condom,” she said. “I can’t believe you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Bullshit.”

Sarah and I had met six years before we hooked up and had reconnected through Tinder. That had been the same time that I was applying for radio personality jobs across the country, in Nashville, Seattle, LA, and New York. When we ate our first dinner together at the El Corral in Plymouth, she told me she had a three-year-old son and an ex-fiance who she’d kicked out for

being a perpetual cheater. I thought she was messing with me about the boy, but he turned out to be real.

“I thought we were going to be something,” she said.

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. A well-executed breath wouldn’t cut it this time.

“Who did you get it from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Fucking-A Greg, how many people could it be?”

“I don’t know, a few.”

“Oh my god, I’m going to throw up,” she said, and hung up.

April

“Are you joking?” She laughed. April had a great smile and I could hear it through the phone.

I laughed too. “I wish it was a joke, but it’s not. I just heard back from the doctor today.”

April had moved back to Greenfield after playing collegiate volleyball in Wyoming and graduating with a journalism degree. We had gone to high school together but were in different classes and had rarely talked. I hadn’t known much about her then, but now I knew she was into politics, feminism, and anal sex.

“Women who are strong feminists are usually also the most...experimental,” she had told me one day in the backseat of her Camry. We were pulled off onto the side of a dirt road outside

of Greenfield. She was choosing her words deliberately. “That’s what I’ve noticed. I know my sister likes it, too.”

We had dated for a year and broken up three or four months before I swapped Minnesota for Tennessee. After breaking up we still had occasional sex that was angry and fun, and made us feel better about the relationships we’d destroyed, both between our families—who only lived two blocks from each other back in Greenfield and had started flipping each other off every time they drove by our house—and our circles of friends. We were rough with each other and we laughed about it.

“Hm,” I had said, nodding. Cicadas buzzed and we were surrounded by fields on all sides, plus an oil rig. We were cramped and naked as we laid on top of each other in the backseat, both sweating and sliding our skin on each other with a foot out the window to catch a breeze.

“Who do you think you got it from?” she asked over the phone.

“I don’t know,” I said. I tried to stop sentimentalizing. “I thought it might have been you.”

She laughed. “Shut up. You need to start wearing a condom.”

“I know.” I remembered a song—Blink-182, I think—that we liked to quote sometimes.

“Well, I guess this is growing up,” I said. Our conversation paused, awkward and warm.

“I miss you,” she said.

“I miss you, too.”

“Do you think about me?”

“All the time,” I said. I knew where this was going. I put my hand in my pants.

“What do you think about?”

I laid back on the futon with my head on the silk-sheeted pillow and looked at the popcorn texture of my ceiling, waiting for the right memory to come to mind. A few seconds later I said, “I think about New Year’s Eve, when we went out with your roommates and took ecstasy at that dance club in St. Paul.”

“We stayed up all night,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Usually I hate that, but I loved it with you.”

“I loved it, too.”

We paused again.

“Are you touching yourself?” she asked.

“How did you know?” I asked. She laughed. “Are you?”

“Of course,” she said.

I laughed. “Good.”

“Tell me you love me,” she said.

“I love you.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you.” I knew that I’d regret jerking off once I came—my urethra would throb, inflamed—but I didn’t care.

“Promise me.”

“I swear. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Petar

I had to send Petar a text because I knew he was at work, and I didn't have the number of the stripper we'd had sex with at the hotel downtown.

"Pete," I wrote. "How are you buddy?" It was about half an hour before he wrote back.

"i'm good man. how are you?"

Petar was a Romanian who'd moved to Minnesota with his family when he was around seven years old for a branch of Catholicism that had been excommunicated by the Pope but flourished in Greenfield. New members settled into town every year, buying large houses for their families with upwards of twenty kids—no shit—and if there weren't any houses large enough to buy, they'd build them. Petar and his family had been one of these transplants. He had a thick Eastern European accent that was augmented by a speech impediment that sounded like a heavy lisp.

About two weeks before I had started driving southeast, Petar and I played tennis before getting drunk, taking ecstasy and some poor-quality cocaine, driving to a strip club, and leaving their parking lot at closing time with a dancer named Linda, who looked younger but was actually five years older than either of us. Petar had paid for the hotel room.

"Does your dick hurt?" I messaged him.

"haha. no man. are you joking?"

"Lol no dude i'm serious"

"no mine doesn't. why? does yours?"

"Yeah it does. I have chlamydia. I just found out today"

"for real?"

“For real”

“damn that’s crazy. how’d you get it?”

“I don’t know. I thought it might have been from Linda.” A couple minutes passed before he answered.

“it couldn’t have been from her because i’m still hooking up with her and i haven’t gotten anything yet”

“Damn. It’s a mystery then. I don’t know who it could be”

“i don’t know either, dude. i’ve never had it”

“Lol. Shit.”

“how’s your new job?”

“It’s fun, but I only work three days a week, five hours at a time so it’s not much money”

“come back and work with me. i can get you a job”

Petar made good money doing physical labor in an assembly line at a company owned by a wealthy Catholic man in Greenfield. I wasn’t positive, but it was generally accepted knowledge around town that you had to be a member of the church to work there.

“If it comes to that I will. I’m gonna come back to visit soon. I’ll let you know when I do”

“sounds good”

Katie

Another ex-girlfriend from a few years before, Katie had unsentimentally dumped me while living together in a house with four roommates. She’d said our relationship “wasn’t fun

anymore,” but in my head, it felt like we had never broken up for good but had simply been put on pause. There was something easy and comfortable about her. A casual, content draw that made me think we would eventually rekindle and get married.

“Wow,” she said through the phone. “Thanks for telling me. I’ll go get checked out.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

It rolled off her and she changed the subject.

“How are you liking Nashville?”

“It’s not too bad. I work from midnight to five a.m. and fall asleep around six, then I sleep in ‘till about two. Then I have the house to myself until five-thirty when my roommates get home.”

“What are your roommates like? They haven’t killed you yet?” She was referring to the fact that I’d found the place on Craigslist.

“They’re cool. There’s Sunny, he just moved in too, he’s from Houston. And Brad, he works the lights and sound equipment at a hotel downtown. And Russell and Lisa, they’re who I pay my rent to. They’re renting-to-own the house from one of Russell’s friends.”

“Nice.”

“Somebody keeps peeing on the floor in the bathroom and I can’t figure out who it is. But besides that, everybody’s pretty cool.”

“Are you still talking to April?”

I sighed. “Yeah, sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t lead her on, Greg.”

“I’m not trying to.”

“She’s going to keep having feelings for you if you keep talking to her.” Her voice was stern.

Katie and I had had sex on the night of my going away party—which she’d organized, for some reason—on the Saturday night before I drove to Tennessee the following Monday. Whoever had given me chlamydia—which could have been Katie, though I doubted it—she definitely had it by now.

“Alright, well thanks for calling,” she said.

“No problem,” I said. “Thanks for being cool about it.”

“It’s what I do.”

Myself

I crossed the last name off the list and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Gabby’s name had a question mark by it, but no one else had offered much help in finding out the chlamydia’s origin.

I shrugged at my reflection. What else could I do? I had called everyone who could have given it to me or vice versa, and overall it hadn’t been the worst experience in the world. One of them must have been lying—if they’d passed it to me, they were probably too embarrassed to say so, but I wasn’t mad at them.

I stood in front of the toilet and tried to pee but it burned and I had to stop to take a break for a moment. Someone had peed on the floor again. I put my hand on the wall behind the toilet and leaned on it and caught my breath before starting a stream again. I winced as it came out and sucked air through my teeth.

When I was finished, I took a shower, got dressed, and drove to the free clinic.

Four Weeks Later

“This is Greg,” I said into my phone.

“Greg, my name is Wendy. I’m from the free clinic, where I believe you were a patient about a month ago. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct. How’s it going?” It was one-thirty and I had just sat down at the kitchen table with a bowl of Cap’n Crunch. Birds chirped loudly in the backyard.

“I’m doing fine, thanks for asking. Greg, I just wanted to let you know that there may have been a mix-up in your test results.”

I crunched on my cereal. “Oh, really? What do you mean?”

“Your results were mishandled and they seem to have gotten mixed up with another patient. We’re extremely sorry about that.”

“Oh, it’s ok.” I waited. “Is there anything I need to do?”

“No. I just—can you verify your last name and date of birth, please?”

“Bastian, December fourth, nineteen eighty-five.”

“Mr. Bastian, I just wanted to give you the correct results of your test.”

I waited. “Okay, sure.”

“You didn’t have anything. Your results came back negative for everything.”

I squinted. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“But—my penis, it hurt when I went to the bathroom.”

“Yes, you most likely had a urinary tract infection. Sometimes they can feel similar and have similar symptoms, like painful urination. But it wasn’t an STD, so it wasn’t transmitted through sex. No one passed it to you and you didn’t pass it to anyone else.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, nodding. I thought through the series of events. “What about the medication? It worked, it got rid of it.”

“Well, the antibacterial medicine worked because you still had a bacterial infection,” she said. “Just a different one.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Wow, that’s crazy.”

“I know. Mr. Bastian, I’m so sorry this happened.”

“It’s okay, really. It’s just, I don’t know.” I paused for a second. “I guess this is growing up.”

She laughed. “Yes, I guess it is.”