

The Cold

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The first few days of my cold weren't too bad. The runny nose and scratchy throat were relatively average as far as colds go. Before, I was prone to some pretty serious seasonal allergies, so I was annually subjected to this discomfort. It wasn't until the fourth day that I really began to resent the sickness that resided within me. Waking up with completely blocked sinuses has to be one of the worst feelings ever. I smacked my tongue and cringed at the taste of my dry mouth from breathing through it all night. This morning's breath was certainly horrific. While the stuffed-up nose and sore throat are certainly downsides to being sick, the inability to taste breakfast is the ultimate torture. Withholding the taste of my orange juice or peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the morning should be considered a federal crime.

"Come lock 'em up!" I said to myself in the mirror. I was thinking of those super weird Mucinex commercials where the snot dude acts like a stoned drifter who somehow got into somebody's apartment. I skipped down the stairs to greet my mom at the table for breakfast. Of course, the classic PB&J cut corner-to-corner. Every sandwich connoisseur knows that triangles give the best bites all the way to the end. My face fell with disappointment when I bit into the side and couldn't taste anything. The dry paste of the peanut butter and the spongy texture of the bread was all that greeted my tastebuds on this now not-so-fine morning. I couldn't even taste any of the sugary raspberry jelly.

"Gabe, honey, are you feeling alright? You've hardly touched your breakfast." My mother's face brandished a look of parental concern with a touch of annoyance.

"Yeah, I'm fine. My allergies are just really acting up this morning."

I sniffled in the middle of my response and noticed a dull itch in the back of my nose. A stuffed-up nose and an itch I can't scratch. Just my luck.

"Well, the pollen count was pretty low this morning. You're probably coming down with something; are you sure you're okay? I can hear in your voice how stuffy your nose is." My mom was the type to be overly concerned when she finally did notice things. She pressed a cold, dry hand to my forehead and instantly prompted a violent sneeze that shook my entire body. As soon as her fingers touched my skin, the itching feeling was unbearable. I shrunk back instinctively.

"I said I was fine, Mom. I can take some cold and flu medicine before I head for the bus stop if it'll make you feel better."

"I think that's a great idea," she tentatively responded. "It's best to get a jumpstart on it now before it gets really bad." Her face was filled with confusion and worry.

I hastily popped two pills of cold medicine on my way out the door, making sure that my mom saw me down them with a bunch of water. On my way to the bus stop, I kicked a rock down the sidewalk. I usually grabbed a rock from the landscaping around our house and tried to kick it all the way to the waiting area on the corner of the block without having to pick it up with my hands. I was unsuccessful today and had to bend down to pick it up twice. I noticed the itch in my nose each time I bent over to pick up the rock. It was like a feather tickling the back of my nostrils, and I couldn't do anything about it. I was getting annoyed now. It's not like I wanted to deal with this all day. I tried to perform a classic farmer's blow by plugging one nostril and blowing hard out the other. No luck. I tried both nostrils and failed so miserably that my ears popped. Next, I tried sniffing air in. I nearly passed out from a lack of oxygen. I was trying so hard to just get *something* to come through, but I was unsuccessful every time. Later, I would fondly look back upon these foolish attempts. It looked like I was just going to have to tough it out.

I figured it would clear up sometime throughout the day, but I was wrong. My nose refused to budge in any of my classes. I couldn't even get a couple of air bubbles to creep through in my hourly attempts to

blow or sniff. My lunch was dumped into the trash half eaten. I couldn't taste any of it anyway. The strange itch continued to persist in the back of my nose. The weird part was whenever I tried to eat something, it would kick in, and I would have the sudden urge to sneeze. I couldn't get any of my food down because of it. I didn't really mind, though, since all the food on my tray just looked unappealing to me anyway, and the relief from the itching was worth the grumbling stomach. I texted my mom and asked her to pick up some stronger medicine on her way home, but I doubted it would help much.

"Gabe? I brought home some more medicine! I also picked up some Campbell's vegetable beef soup, your favorite." Mom had loads of other groceries in her arms as she came through the front door, but word of this soup caught my attention. I popped the top, dumped the contents into a ceramic bowl, and shoved it into the microwave as she put away the refrigerated products.

"How are you feeling, honey?"

"Fine. Not any better than this morning. Although I have noticed that the back of my nose has been itchy today." I was massaging the area underneath my eyes and around my nose as I said this. It had progressively gotten worse to the point where I felt this itch even if I wasn't bending over or trying to eat something.

"Probably both allergies and a cold. What rotten luck to get hit with both at once." Mom replied.

"Yeah, just my luck." I was sick of this cold, and it had only been a few days. I wasn't greeted with comfort from my soup. I nearly sneezed every time I attempted to bring a spoonful to my mouth. For some reason, whenever I tried to eat some vegetables or sip some broth, the itch would start bothering me, but not when I ate any of the meat. Beefless vegetable soup was dumped into the trash can that night. Later that night, while I was doing my science homework, I couldn't help but sneeze uncontrollably for nearly thirty seconds. It was one of the worst sneezing fits I had ever had. The itch in my nose had become unbearable. It was spreading through my eyes and cheeks and descending my throat. It sometimes felt as if something was tickling my

tonsils or the backs of my eyeballs. Each sneeze would have an itching response that seemed to reverberate out from my nose and extend to my eyes and ears. It got so bad that I thought clawing my eyes out would be a friendly alternative to what I was feeling. I had never had a sickness like this before. Honestly, nothing had ever made me feel like this before. The unusual cold was one thing, but the now constant state of itching was truly something spectacular. My mom expressed her constant state of worrying by running a hot shower for me and forcing me to take liquid cough medicine. Ugh. My head hit the pillow in hopes that I would at least feel a little better in the morning. Sleep overtook me instantly.

I woke up to go to the bathroom and found that whatever was clogging up my nose had cleared a bit. I was able to strain and suck in a bit of air. I was on my way downstairs, absentmindedly picking my nose, when it happened. The booger I had located and set my intentions on forever eradicating was flipping out of my grasp as if it were sentient. As soon as I pressed it against the inside of my nose, it would shrink back like a lively earthworm that had just been poked with a stick. Finally, I drew out a long string of snot in disgust. The only problem was that it wasn't detaching from my nose. I pulled on it with my hand clenched in a fist, but it just slipped through my grip in slimy defiance. Finally, I wound the strand around my hand and pulled with all my strength. There was a pop and a rush of cold air in my nose. Finally. The inhalation of fresh, cool air in my nostrils was nearly intoxicating. A sigh of relief escaped my lips as I enjoyed my newfound freedom. The breath hitched in my throat when I caught sight of the strand of mucus I had pulled from my nose. There was a disc-shaped object on one end, completely enveloped in snot. Placing it into my palm, I wiped away the mucus and found that the surface of the disc was slightly rough to the touch, like fine grit sandpaper. It weighed next to nothing and didn't look like anything the body could produce naturally. It was completely black with streaks of broken gray running through it. When I poked it, I felt that itchy feeling once more, but it was in the back of my head this time. Sneezing, I scratched the back of my scalp but couldn't get to the itch.

The *inside* of my skull was itching. Squeezing it slightly, I rushed to the bathroom, where I could examine it with better light. It was exactly the size of a Babybel cheese wheel. Was this what was blocking up my nose all day? I had no clue how or why it got in my nose in the first place. My mind was racing, and sweat started to bead on my forehead. The strange itching was constant and irritating. I suddenly felt a great urge to know what was inside of it. What made up this strange disc, and why was it in my body? It was obviously foreign in nature and was unlike anything I had ever seen. I feverishly rummaged through the drawers of the bathroom to find something sharp to cut it open with. The cold sweat had begun to drip off the end of my nose and streak down the sides of my face, but I paid it no heed. I found a pair of small cosmetic scissors and experimentally poked the disc.

Expecting more itching like before, my eyes flew open when I was met with a sharp pain in the back of my head. Like an electric shock had been applied directly to my scalp. My mind was screaming for clarity. To stop the itching and pain, but for some reason, I felt I needed to do this. I wasn't sure why, but I felt as if it was imperative to my survival to cut this strange disc open. The desire to discover the inside was nothing like I had ever imagined. It didn't come close to the cravings I would have for candy or to play a video game. This was something else entirely. It pulled at every fiber of my being and awakened a deep primal instinct that had been lost for hundreds of years. I set my teeth and jabbed the scissors into the disc. The pain was unbearable. My eyes clouded, and tears streamed from my eyes and salted my lips. There was no logical reason for me to feel this way. The disc had no physical connection to me, and the pain in the back of my head was nowhere near the area where I pulled it from. I was gasping for breath at this point, desperate for the pain to stop; I pulled the scissors from the disc and observed an oily black liquid leak from the puncture site. Suddenly, the room was filled with a sickly sweet smell as the liquid washed over my skin and dripped to the bathroom tile. It stained my hand and was warm to the touch. The smell made me dizzy and nauseous, but there was also a strange wave of serenity that enveloped me. The pain in my

head didn't subside as I thought it would and instead got worse. Stars were visible on the edges of my vision, but when I turned my head to look at them directly, I saw nothing. It was only at this moment that I thought of telling Mom about what was going on. To ask for her help. I was too weak to cry out or make my way to her room, and the thought of sleep sounded so divine to me. I slid to the cold tile on the bathroom floor and hazily stared at the object in my hand that led me to this predicament. The center of the disc that had been punctured with the scissors continued to leak the oily black fluid. It coated the bathroom floor along with my hand. It was so inky black that it looked like it was glittering. I might have even seen a strange shape forming in the liquid before the world faded to black.

I awoke in my own bed and was surprised to find my head clear and free of pain. It was so vivid. The colors, the pain, and the feeling of the greasy black liquid on my palm were something I couldn't get out of my mind. The brain plays some crazy tricks while the body is asleep. There was a small chittering sound in the corner of the room that suddenly caught my attention. It sounded like a squirrel. I reached for my phone on the nightstand and froze when I saw my hand. It was stained a faded black.

"So, it wasn't a dream," I said to myself more than anything. I was in awe of what I was seeing. How did I get back into my room? Did I try to wash the black liquid off my hand? What happened to the strange object I pulled from my nose? At the sound of my voice, the chittering sound reverberated through the room once more. Louder this time. It sounded closer, too. I quickly grabbed my phone and flipped on the flashlight while aiming it at the foot of my bed. What was residing there was no squirrel. It was unlike any animal or thing I had ever seen. There were three legs, and all of them were of different lengths. It should have wobbled because of this disability, but it seemed to carry itself with graceful elegance. With horror, I realized that it was patterned exactly like the disc I had pulled from my nose. Completely black with gray streaks shot through the body and curling around the legs. On the very top was a strange hole from which the chittering sounds came from.

They were hypnotic at this point. Rhythmically cooing and chirping. It was letting me know that everything was going to be okay. The sweet smell from my dream once again washed over me and set me in a strange trance. There was some part of my brain that screamed for help. I needed to get out of there. I should go after it and kill it before anything bad happened. I wanted to run out of my room, crying for my mom to save me. I stayed put. Frozen with fear and wonder at what was now crawling up the foot of the bed over the covers. Suddenly, my brain caught up to my eyes, and I scrambled to rise. Before I could blink my eyes, the creature was upon my face. The smell was intoxicatingly sweet. The creature began to nestle upon my face while positioning the ends of its spindly legs within one of my nostrils. Thick and greasy black liquid began to pour from the underside of the creature's body that was positioned directly above my mouth. My mouth opened instinctively to produce a scream, but the strange liquid killed the sound before it could pass between my lips. I began to choke and convulse with desperation. My fingers clawed at its warm and pulsing body in a feeble attempt to wrench the creature from my face. It was slippery and coated with a substance that made my nails slide without purchase. Wriggling with purposeful intensity, the creature manipulated its warm and quivering body through my nasal canal as its legs stretched my nostrils to inhuman proportions. Each of its legs slithered into my face and anchored itself in various positions. My head and face were once again filling with the pressure of a stuffed-up nose that I had felt from the previous day. I coughed and sputtered in vain attempts to expel the vile liquid. I was drowning. Amazingly enough, the creature eventually nestled its entire entity within my face and drew back its legs with one final sigh. The perfect fit. Breathing once more, I gasped quietly as I felt the creature make minute adjustments within my cheekbones. The itching once again resumed in my nose and behind my eyes as the creature took its rightful place within my facial cavity. Black spots faded into my vision once more as the night overtook me.

I suppose, in the end, I became thankful for my friend. They invigorated me with a strength I never knew existed. Sure, the

experience was what humans would call “traumatizing,” but I look back upon it with warm eyes. The days and weeks after the hatching were confusing. I still felt many of my former human emotions mixed with my new ones, the ones my dear friend flooded my brain with. Chemical keys that fixed themselves to my brain with purpose and wonderful intensity. Eventually, I gave in to the urges, and what I felt was elation. Feeding was an amazingly satisfying activity. The flesh tasted savory, sweet, bitter, and sour all at once. It was as if every dish imaginable was rolled into one exquisite meal of satisfaction. I never again craved human food or anything that had to do with them. Their bodies were an exception. Having the appearance of a seventh grader made for delightfully terror-filled meals. No one ever expects much from me until I show them what I am capable of. The itching that I so despised became a source of comfort for me. A constant reminder of something that relied on me. I never found out where my wonderful friends came from or why they chose me. I will never ask. The only thing I shall be grateful for is the opportunities they provided for me. Although, sometimes I still crave a peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut into triangles.

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