

A 21st Century Boydult:

Wounds, Grit, Global Gallivanting...And HS.

By Gareth Marshall

Disclaimer and Important Health Notice

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Writing a book is a strange, lonely business, but I wasn't entirely on my own in this. This story was a long time coming, and it simply wouldn't exist without a few key people who kept me going.

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Prologue

Ayup, thanks for picking up my book. Now, let's get this out of the way upfront. If you've picked it up expecting a heartwarming story of triumph over adversity, some inspirational journey where I bravely battle a debilitating illness and emerge spiritually enlightened on the other side... you should probably put it down now. This ain't that book. Not by a long, uncomfortable, and frequently rather leaky chalk. Sorry.

This is a book about living life, or trying to live life, to the max, in spite of chronic illness. Bleeding and leaking too, there's quite a lot of that. It's about pain. The grinding, spirit-sapping, make-you-want-to-saw-your-own-leg-off-just-for-a-distraction kind that becomes an unwelcome, permanent housemate you can never evict; the sort that doesn't just hurt, it settles in and redecorates your entire bloody life.

It's about shame. The quiet, corrosive sort that takes deep root in your gut when your own body turns traitor, making you feel like you're wearing a faulty, ill-fitting meat suit that's determined to embarrass you at every available opportunity. It's about navigating the logic-proof hellscape of the National Health Service (NHS), a system so mazy, so indifferent, so hope-murderingly fucked, it could make a saint scream into a pillow and then set fire to the bloody thing out of frustration. You'll get all the juicy details soon enough.

And I hope, tender when it counts, because amidst all the blood and pus and bureaucratic bullshit, there's been love, real love, lots of travel, wild adventure and moments of unexpected, almost breathtaking grace and joy that have somehow, plentifully, managed to pierce through the cracks.

Consider this your fair warning: there will be some choice language. Because, frankly, some situations, some levels of pain, certain degrees of institutional stupidity just demand a good, solid, fuck. Sometimes, several. If that's going to get your knickers in a twist then this probably won't be your cup of tea. No hard feelings.

Building on that, I have to make a special address to the ladies: As mentioned, my language can be a bit...industrial, and that's because I'm telling this story like I

would to a bunch of mates down the local. I don't mean to alienate you with my filth, or anyone for that matter. I just couldn't imagine looking you straight in the eye and laying out these grim tales with the same unvarnished bluntness. I was raised right: you don't talk to women like that or use *that* kind of language. It was the only way for me to get this out of my brain and onto paper. This is exactly as it played out in my head and I hope you find something in these messy pages that resonates, or even makes you crack a chuckle or two.

And here's a cheeky ask, if you're up for it: if you're battling this wretched HS yourself, consider passing this book to your husband, your partner, your brother, your friend, your dad—or anyone you know really. Let them read it. Let them see what it's really like, from a fellow sufferers' perspective. I believe it will help them better understand what you're going through.

All of that said, if you've got the minerals for a true life story, warts and all, then please let me introduce myself. I'm Gareth Marshall. Born and bred in East Yorkshire, the North of England. 1985, B reg. Raised working-class, forged in village pubs, sprawling countryside and pain clinics. I've lived a few lives, some may say more than my fair share, though one of them I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, not even the bloke who invented clamshell packaging.

And for the last eighteen years, I've been the unwilling, often furious, host to one of the most under-recognised, bastard-hard-to-live-with diseases on the planet: Hidradenitis Suppurativa. HS for short. Have you ever heard of it? It almost sounds innocuous, doesn't it? Like a minor skin complaint you'd get a tube of cream for from Superdrug, maybe something involving lavender and a vague promise of soothing relief. Trust me, it's not. It's a full-blown, life-altering, spirit-sapping disease, and it affects, roughly, around 1% of people, yet nobody has ever heard of it. That has to change.

I'm not a doctor. I'm not a wellness guru either, peddling magical bollocks involving kale smoothies, positive affirmations, and the strategic alignment of your chakras with the phases of the moon. I'm certainly not "inspiring" in that OTT, made-for-TV-movie way people sometimes label the disabled or chronically ill, right

before patting them on the head and telling them how brave they are. Fuck brave. Surviving isn't brave; it's just a key part of being alive, i.e., not being dead. It's a refusal to let the dark side win.

I am a bloke who's spent the best part of his adult life trying to make sense of a body that seems determined to self-destruct in increasingly inventive and humiliating ways, often at the most inopportune moments imaginable—armpits that decide to weep with enthusiasm just as you're about to give a group presentation, or a groin that stages an explosive protest during a stag do away with old mates.

I'm telling it all in my own voice. Blunt. Honest. Northern. Sharp-witted, hopefully, and with plenty of piss-taking. This isn't going to be a neat, linear story. Because chronic illness isn't neat or linear. It's a messy bugger. It loops, it stutters, it ambushes you when you least expect it, usually when you've dared to feel a speck of hope, or just started to enjoy a brief, deceptive respite. So, this book jumps around. In time, in mood, in style.

And like any good pub yarn that goes off on one, if I start spouting medical stuff that sounds like double Dutch, or if my Yorkshire patter gets a bit thick, don't worry, I've put a couple of cheat sheets at the back for you. One's a proper rundown on HS, and the other's a bit of a Yorkshire dictionary for those less well-versed in our wonderful colloquialisms and turns of phrase.

While we're on the subject of extras, you'll also spot a few QR codes scattered about. Some link to songs, tracks that were the soundtrack to certain moments, or just ones that capture the mood of what was going on in my skull. If you fancy the full experience with these, then having a Spotify account handy, even a free one, will make things flow a lot smoother. Other QR codes link to images, some of which are pretty raw, detailing the arse-end of what this disease can do. So, if you're a bit squeamish, keep an eye out for the 'GRAPHIC' warning I've slapped on those ones. No biggie if you skip any of them out, the words will do their job either way.

If you get confused, it's likely a reflection of my foggy memory and not you! Once you've completed the book, that will make a lot more sense. Sometimes, it feels like a

gritty medical drama, full of questionable diagnoses and even more questionable hospital food. Sometimes it's a bewildered travelogue, me stumbling through foreign lands with a dodgy accent and an even dodgier immune system. Sometimes it's a furious rant about bureaucratic incompetence that'll make your blood boil and your faith in humanity wither. And most of the time, it's just a quiet scream in the dark, hoping someone, anyone, hears.

Whatever else it is, it's mine. My raw and naked truth. Nigh on twenty years of living, bleeding, laughing, loving, and enduring, distilled, or maybe just splattered, onto these pages. It's not pretty, but it's been a ride and it's real. So, you've been warned. You know what you're in for. Buckle up. Chapter one starts, as many of my worst days have, with pus, pain, and on this blissful occasion, on a cold concrete floor in St. Petersburg, Mother Russia. Ready?

Pull up a pew, grab a drink and let's get stuck into it.

Chapter 1: Do Not Disturb: Englishman Dying On Floor

The floor was cold. Not just cool, not a refreshing respite from the stuffy, medicinal fog that hung in the air like a shroud. No, this was a deep, penetrating, Soviet-era cold that leached the warmth from your bones, a cold that whispered of long winters and systemic neglect. It probably hadn't been cleaned properly since Putin was the new lad in the Kremlin, and whatever half-arsed effort had come since had only stirred the grime.

There was a faint whiff of disinfectant hanging on for dear life, but ultimately losing against something older, deeper—suffering, and the faint, metallic tang of blood. The corridor was busy, teeming even, but quiet in the waiting areas. It wasn't quiet, not really, but in my head it was quiet because I was blocking it all out. It sounded like all the people around me, Russians, were arguing and speaking aggressively with each other. A high-stakes clamour for attention, to be seen, with hospital staff abruptly telling them to sit down and wait.

And there I was, Gareth Marshall from Hull, connoisseur of crap carpets and damp British pubs, curled up like a question mark on this expanse of hostile Russian concrete, trying to find an angle, any angle, that didn't send a fresh jolt of pure agony shooting up from between my legs.

The harsh fluorescent lights hummed a monotonous, indifferent tune, reflecting off the worn-out, polished concrete floor—duller grey in the middle where countless anxious feet had paced. Somewhere in the distance were unpleasant sounds; the strange thing about pain is that it's a universal language, it smashes through cultural barriers.

It was July, 2012, and outside, St. Petersburg was sweltering under a muggy summer sky, the kind of heat that made your clothes stick and your temper fray. Inside this crumbling institution, though, the air was thick with a different kind of heat—my own feverish, internal furnace battling against the corridor's pervasive chill.

This wasn't a lifestyle choice, mind you, nor was the floor some sort of masochistic protest against the Russian healthcare system, it was the only option left after the bench. A standard-issue hospital bench, probably welded to the corridor wall sometime during the Brezhnev administration, all unforgiving metal and chipped paint. But with one crucial, asshole-centric design flaw for a man whose perineum felt like it was hosting a particularly violent badger uprising: armrests. Spaced just perfectly, with exquisite sadism, to make lying down, or even perching with any degree of comfort impossible. So, the floor it was. My little patch of purgatory.

How did I get here? Good question. One I was asking myself repeatedly through a haze of pain and rising panic. Adventure, mostly. But love, also. The stupid, reckless, follow-her-to-the-ends-of-the-earth kind of love. And an abscess. A proper bastard of an abscess, that had decided, with impeccable timing, to declare war on my gooch. This particular romantic jaunt to Moscow had started three days earlier, on the 10 pm sleeper train. As I tried to get comfy on that narrow, unforgiving bunk, I felt the bastard twinge for the first time.

Moscow. Christ. Even thinking about it now, years later, makes me wince, and then smile. What a wonderfully grand, stern city; a place I'd always wanted to visit, and this trip, right in the middle of my proper travel phase, had me buzzing with intrigue and excitement. St. Basil's Cathedral, with its mad, psychedelic onion domes looking like something Gaudi might have designed after a heavy night on the absinthe. Red Square, vast and imposing, the kind of place that makes you feel small and insignificant even when your nether regions aren't actively trying to secede from the Federation. I remember viewing Lenin—suspended in time in his mausoleum—very odd. *Why, just why?*

Then standing before the walls of the Duma, looking at the busts commemorating past leaders and military generals, all black and grey marble, symmetrical, in peaceful serenity. Looking at their perfectly sculpted faces, contemplating the blood on their hands, was a deep enough thought to detract my brain from the pain, if only for a few well-needed minutes. The sheer, overwhelming scale of the place... all viewed

through a thickening fog of escalating pain. My abscess, just a level 2 on the overnight pain train, was already pushing a 4 or 5 by the close of play on the first day.

We were doing the tourist thing, or attempting to. Backpacks on, trying to soak it all in. Veronika, my girlfriend at the time; a beautiful, enigmatic Russian lass and the primary reason I was in this fascinating country, was loving it, in her prime, showing me around her country's capital. We spent that first evening on an uncomfortable sofa at her best friend's sister's flat on the outskirts of the city. I woke up the next morning to a level 6 abscess and a cold shower—no hot water. Perfect. Throughout that second day of sightseeing, it got worse.



The Russian summer, an occurrence most people back in Hull probably didn't even believe existed, was in full, sweltering swing. Muggy as heck, like being trapped in a giant, invisible armpit. And I, with the forward-planning genius of a man whose primary concern is usually just not to make a tit out of myself, was wearing tight-fitting shorts. And for added comfort, form-fitting boxers underneath. Every step felt like dragging a cheese grater between my legs. By the afternoon, with the pain a solid 7 or 8, I ducked into a public loo, a grim, Soviet-era affair—no bowl, just a hole—and went commando, liberally applying some talcum powder I thankfully had in my backpack. It offered minimal relief. Walking around, trying to look suitably impressed by the grandeur of the Kremlin, felt less like sightseeing and more like some kind of medieval torture trial specifically designed for the crotch.

The abscess, this unwelcome passenger, it was like a primed race car sitting on the red line, hitting the limiter, just waiting to burst into life. Then, like someone flooring the accelerator, there'd be a lurch forwards of sudden pain, adrenaline, a sickening spike of it. It throbbed and pulsed when idle, almost matching my heartbeat. Every movement, every shift in weight, created surges of agony, shooting off in unpredictable, debilitating directions. It was hard to know exactly where the pain was radiating to; it all just kind of blended into a nauseating, full-body, overwhelming crescendo, the pulses of pain making me feel queasy and light-headed, like I might black out.

To make matters worse, Veronika had her own health drama kicking off. Problems with her eyes, something that had been bothering her for years and had suddenly started playing up again. Cloudy vision, and it was getting worse, especially in her left eye. She needed to get back to St. Pete, sharpish, to see her own doctors. The treatment she'd been having involved injections directly into her eyeball. Gross, I know, but apparently it worked, kind of. If eye drops didn't sort out an outbreak, she knew she had to get the injection. It was a pressure thing, she explained: leave it too long and it could cause serious, permanent damage. So, we were both falling apart, a right pair. The romantic Moscow trip, already somewhat tainted by my rapidly deteriorating groin situation, was officially scuppered.

I'd tried to hide the extent of my discomfort from Veronika initially, the usual blokeish grit kicking in—"I'm fine, just a bit tired, darl." But by the time we were navigating the crowded, echoing halls of the GUM department store, trying to find some overpriced ice cream, I could barely move. This wasn't my first abscess, far from it, but Veronika hadn't witnessed me have surgery before, or have one "down below." I was worried, my internal monologue a loop: how would she handle it? What would she think now it was in an intimate place? Am I rank to her now?

The thing down there, whatever it was, wasn't just a twinge anymore. It was a pulsing, burning, malevolent presence. I had to confess when she asked where my boxers had gone. She was, in her typical Russian way, matter-of-fact. No coddling, no excessive sympathy, just a practical acknowledgement of the crap situation we were both in. "Don't worry, Gazik," she said. It was, in a strange way, reassuring. This was just another problem to be dealt with.

We had the sleeper train arranged for our way back—ten hours on an old Soviet relic—rattling and swaying through the unending Russian twilight in a cabin the size of a moderately spacious coffin, on a bed as comfy as a slab of stone. During the trip, I had been dreading that journey back with an intensity that bordered on existential terror. Ten hours with my arsehole marinating in its own juices. Unadulterated, Grade-A fucking misery.

The train was due to leave at 10 pm, and we arrived at the station around 9, both of us struggling. Knowing I was totally fucked and had to endure this train ride, I did the only logical thing anyone in my position would do; I waddled to the kiosk in the station and bought a litre of vodka and some snacks: cured meat, olives, and crisps. The cheap voddy slipped down like elephant spunk. But in that moment of dread, facing a night of torment on rails, it felt like a necessary evil.

The train itself was loud and lively. Babushkas and Dedushkas settling down for the journey with a cup of tea, some Muslims setting up a discreet prayer area, younger people playing music and drinking, even families with kids making the trek somewhere. It worked, of course, the vodka. I drank half the bottle within an hour and passed out. It was nasty, but it did the job. Arrived in St. Pete the next morning, around 8 am, looking, and feeling, like something the cat had not only dragged in, but shat on and left for dead.

Veronika, worryingly, had needs greater than mine. We took a taxi straight from the train station to the hospital she needed. She saw her doctor quickly for the injections. Told me she'd help me out after, take me to the hospital she knew—the Hospital of Infectious Disease. Sounds charming, doesn't it? Almost makes you want to book a weekend break. I felt a smidge of guilt that my own bodily crisis was adding to her stress. She assured me this hospital was the place to go, that they'd sort me out. I wasn't so sure. I was a tourist, technically. No insurance that would cover this kind of thing in Russia. How was this going to work? She wasn't worried. Calm.

The abscess felt like a grapefruit now, hard and hot and teasing to burst with every involuntary movement, but stubbornly refusing to. The swelling was so severe it felt like a new growth, a rogue appendage I hadn't agreed to. There was no more pretending. Hospital it was. Or, more accurately, hospital it had to be. I couldn't endure it any longer. From her hospital, we took another taxi to the one I needed. The vodka from the night before was wearing off, leaving a residue of nausea and despair. The dread mounted.

The taxi ride to the hospital was wretched. Every bump in the road, every lurch, sent shockwaves of agony through my system. *Why won't you just burst, you evil*

twat. I was dripping with sweat by the time we arrived, despite the early morning chill. I must have looked a right state while shuffling the fifty-odd metres from the taxi to the hospital entrance, like someone trying to walk while holding in both a fart and a scream. A wheelchair would have been even worse, the pressure unbearable. The only thing better would have been horizontal, on a proper bed, but that clearly wasn't on the cards. I just had to soldier on. This wasn't my first rodeo with HS pain either, though I didn't know it was HS then, not properly properly as I do today. I thought this was the worst pain imaginable. All I knew was that I had to get inside that hospital and get this thing dealt with.

The place certainly lived up to its joyless name, at least in terms of atmosphere. Crumbling facade, long, echoing corridors. My first interaction with Sergeii, the doctor, was pure confusion. Veronika spoke with him as soon as we arrived, flagged him down like a New York taxi, then he gestured something to me that sailed over my head. He tutted and snapped at me a little, then gestured again, half-heartedly this time, then turned his back and walked off down the corridor chuntering to himself. I could hear him, but I couldn't understand a word. He told us to wait, Veronika said. How long? He didn't say. Great start.

He came back after about ten minutes and whipped me straight into a private room to have a gander. Sergeii was a diminutive figure, probably around five-foot-five and softly spoken, had light brown hair and grey eyes with deep crow's feet wrinkles. He lightly resembled Christopher Waltz, and was probably early forties but looked mid-fifties.

He wanted me to sign a form. It was all in Cyrillic, obviously. As I'd only been in Russia for a short while, the culture shock was still weighty, and I did genuinely wonder if I was about to sign paperwork allowing this man to remove my kidneys and spleen to sell on the black market. But by this stage, he seemed warmer, more relaxed. He must have sensed my worry because he moved closer to me—I was propping myself up against a wall, trying not to collapse and it felt very personal, very close. And in that moment, when I looked into his eyes, when I let the fear and vulnerability that had been paralysing me just wash away for a second, I felt I could

trust him. Just from that look. It was kind, reassuring. I knew, somehow, that he was going to help me. And frankly, that's all I cared about. This bloke, this tired doctor, he was my only hope.

It turned out to be the first of many meetings I'd have with Sergeii over the coming years, something I definitely didn't know then. But my gut feeling was right. He always helped when I came begging. Always treated me right, took care of me the best he could. Fair play. Big respect to The Friendly Butcher, as I'd come to think of him. Sounds a bit unfair, 'the butcher', but 'The Friendly Butcher'? Yeah, that summed him up perfectly. When I signed the paperwork, the pen he gave me felt heavy, a nice pen; I could tell he didn't give this pen to everybody, he was pleased to hand it to me somehow. I think in some way he was proud to be helping an Englishman—it would make a nice story for him, I just wasn't sure what story he would be telling exactly!

After I'd signed, he delivered the verdict, a combination of gestures and broken English via his phone and Google Translate. He prodded gently towards my groin—nearly hit the ceiling. "Abscess Garrett". "Big one". "Needing surgery. Today."—*No Shit Sherlock*. Spacibo (Thank you), I muttered under my breath.

Relief. Pure relief washed over me, so potent it almost made me buckle. Finally, someone was going to fix this. Cut it out. Make it stop. There was no time or emotional bandwidth for fear, not really. My system was already overloaded with pain and confusion. Adrenaline and instinct were keeping me upright. All I wanted was for this torment to be over. And until that point, I hadn't really believed Veronika was right, that I could even get help here. So, shock too, I suppose. I'd been expecting a battle, expecting to have to pay, a bribe maybe. But no, it all seemed kosher, relatively fuss-free.

Then came the kicker. The hospital was full. Chock-a-block. No spare beds for now. Surgery? Yes, Sergeii could fast-track me, paperwork be damned. They'd figure that out later. He was good like that—pragmatic. But a bed to wait in? Nyet. Not a chance. Veronika delivered the news, presumably from a nurse: "There are no beds, so you must to wait here." That typically Russian turn of phrase, the slight

grammatical error that somehow made it sound even more definitive, more unarguable.

So, wait I did. Leaning against the corridor wall, trying to find a position that didn't involve direct pressure on the bonfire between my legs. The metal bench, as I said, was a non-starter. It was stand, lean, or lie on the floor. I didn't want to lie down, didn't want to draw attention to myself, didn't want to look weak. Felt like I was representing my country, somehow, even in this pathetic state.

But eventually, after what felt like an eternity but was probably only an hour or two, standing became unbearable. My knees were shaking. Sweat was cascading down my stomach and back, making my T-shirt cling unpleasantly. The fever had taken hold; I was burning up from the inside out, yet shivering with cold at the same time. I have to change this situation, I thought.

Getting down there wouldn't have been pretty for anyone watching; it probably resembled a beached whale attempting a three-point turn on dry sand. But the cold concrete, surprisingly, felt...soothing. A perverse kind of comfort. You'd think it would be awful, and it was, yet the cold against my burning skin was a kind of respite. That summer was really hot and humid, and there was no air conditioning in these old government buildings. It was like being put in a fridge, for a while.

I used my hoodie as a pillow. A Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. hoodie, my favourite, bought three months earlier on a different adventure in Hawaii. Dark navy blue, yellow-gold writing, quilted, a bit luxury. Cost \$60 in Lahaina, far too much for a Yorkshireman, but Forrest Gump is my all-time favourite film, so Veronika treated me. Even as I folded it up, that dependable fella, I remember thinking about that, a kind, incongruous memory in the midst of the agony. It didn't take the pain away, not at all, but at least my head was comfy. Small mercies. It was wet with sweat by the time they finally came to peel me from the floor; I bet you could have wrung it out and made a puddle of my own shameful fluids.

So there I lay, on the cold concrete floor of a Russian infectious disease hospital, for a good stretch of time. The timeline gets fuzzy with pain and panic. One of the

porters came around with his mop. He told me abruptly to move. I think. I couldn't, physically or linguistically. I thought a sign would be useful, to place beside me: "Do Not Disturb: Englishman Dying on Floor". Just a thought. Instead, he just mopped around me, inches from my face. Standard.

Eventually, they found me a bed. Not in a ward, mind you. In the corridor. But it was a bed. And crucially, Sergeii gave me some stronger pain relief, morphine I believe, and the next few hours were a total haze, just waiting in a quiet, peaceful, but completely boring and sterile white corridor. That morphine dulled the edges of the agony and made the remaining wait slightly more sufferable.

During that time, lying there, what looped through my head? Not fear of dying, not then. My previous surgeries in England had been smooth enough; I wasn't jaded enough yet to contemplate my own mortality on an operating table. So I didn't have any fear and I expected a similar set of steps here. No, I was mostly thinking about how this was ballsing up my trip to Russia, my precious time with Veronika. Long-distance relationships run on borrowed time, and this felt like a cruel theft. I worried about her, her eye, how this disastrous turn of events would impact us. Luckily, I wasn't alone, Veronika sat with me, held my hand, a silent, reassuring presence in this unfamiliar carnage. She was there until I went for my surgery and was there after. I needed that and I'm grateful she was with me.

Some time later, the call for surgery came. Half an hour or so before, Sergeii had spoken to Veronika; she'd translated the process. It sounded much the same as in England. I was ready. From being whisked off on that wheeled bed to going under, it was probably less than two minutes. Just a final blur of movement, bright lights, unrecognisable words, the prick of a needle, and then... "desyat, devyat, vosem, sem, shest, pyat"...blessed oblivion, thankfully.

Waking up was groggy, the intense, specific pain of the abscess gratefully gone, replaced by the duller, more generalised ache of a surgical wound. But the overwhelming feeling was relief. It was over. For now. I could get back to enjoying myself—we had a million things planned. Little did I know, as I drifted in and out of a morphine-tinged cloud, that this wasn't just another flare-up, another inconvenient,

painful episode in my ongoing battle with my own body. This felt different. More significant. More...aggressive. This was the bastard well and truly advancing, planting its flag firmly in my unfortunate, newly conquered perineum, and it clearly had no intention of leaving quietly. This was a clear escalation.

Part 1 – CONSCRIPTION

Right then. This is where it all began, where I was first drafted into a war I didn't even know existed. Where I tried to bluff my way through the opening skirmishes, barely understanding the enemy I was up against. Consider this the call-up papers landing on the doormat part, Cadet.

You're probably thinking, 'What in the actual chuff is this 'Hidradenitis Suppurativa' bastard he mentioned?' Let me break it down for you, no nonsense. Because if you're going to stick with me through this often messy, frequently painful, and occasionally downright disgusting journey, you need to know what we're up against. You need to meet the uninvited cunt that's been muscling in on my life for the best part of two decades.

First off, let's get a few things straight about what this unwelcome guest isn't, because there's a load of untruths talked about it, and frankly, it does my head in. It's NOT contagious. Full stop. You can't catch it from me, or anyone else with it. Shagging me—hypothetically, calm down—won't give you it. And it's NOT caused by being dirty. This one really boils my piss. People see boils, they see abscesses, they automatically think 'dirty fucker.' Bollocks. I probably shower more obsessively than a brain surgeon with OCD. It's an internal inflammatory condition, not a bloody lack of soap-and-water. And finally, it's NOT just 'bad acne' or 'a few boils.' Comparing HS to a teenage zit is like comparing a water pistol to a nuclear warhead.

So, what *is* this Hidradenitis Suppurativa? (Say: *Hidra-DA-ni-tis Su-POR-a-tea-va*) Sounds like something out of a dusty old Victorian medical textbook, doesn't it? And that's because it pretty much is. Hidradenitis Suppurativa was first formally described by Friedrich Daniel von Hebra, an Austrian dermatologist, in 1864. He described the chronic, suppurative, recurrent nature of the disease involving sweat glands, and coined the name "acne inversa" as an early label. Later on, in the early 20th century, the name Hidradenitis Suppurativa became standard as they thought it arose from inflammation of apocrine sweat glands. Hidradenitis = sweat gland inflammation; suppurativa = producing pus.

But what is it? Well basically, my immune system is a confused, overzealous, self-sabotaging dickhead. Instead of doing its job and fighting off actual invaders, it's lost its marbles and decided to attack my own hair follicles.

Why? Fuck knows. Seriously. The medical profession is still mostly shrugging its shoulders on that one. And this internal civil war, it loves to set up shop in places where skin rubs against skin. For me, the prime HS real estate includes my armpits—oh, the joy. Groin and Inner Thighs—there's nothing like one of the lads going rogue and settling on top of a sore one. And of course, the best of all, my Perineum region—the land between your bumhole and balls. Terrific.

How does this delightful condition actually make its presence known? Well, it usually starts with these painful lumps under the skin, like angry, hard marbles that someone's buried deep, and then decided to set on fire from the inside out. Then, over days and sometimes weeks, these buggers turn into abscesses, filling up with all sorts of lovely gunk. You know, pus, blood, general bodily shite. They swell up, sometimes to the size of a golf ball, or bigger, throbbing like a bitch. Most of the time, mercifully, they eventually burst. Often spectacularly. Always messily. The relief from pressure is immense but fleeting, quickly replaced by the mess and a smell that'd make a maggot gag.

And if that wasn't enough fun, you sometimes, eventually, get these things called sinus tracts. Imagine tiny, angry, pus-filled underground sewers connecting everything up, burrowing away under your skin. That's where your 'bonus bumholes' come from—those extra, unwelcome, often weeping little openings that HS, in its infinite generosity, so kindly provides.

And the absolute cherry on top of this shit-flavoured cake? It's chronic. That means lifelong folks. No quick fix. No magic pill. It's with you for your full innings, your unwelcome, inflammatory shadow. And it comes in flares. You might have a few good weeks, maybe even a month or two. You start to think, with foolish optimism, that maybe you've got the bastard on the ropes. Then BAM! It all kicks off again, for no discernible reason, often with a renewed, resentful fury, just to remind you who's really in charge.

When I first got a proper inkling that this wasn't just 'a bad run of “boils” that kept coming back, when a doctor actually uttered those two magic, terrifying words—'Hidradenitis Suppurativa' and I later found that soul-crushing description in a dusty old medical textbook—'chronic,' 'lifelong,' 'no known cure,' 'Sometimes fades with age, or becomes more severe'—well, let's just say it was a bit of a moment. A moment of profound, life-recalibrating horror.

To track severity, they put us all into neat little categories; there's a whole bloody rating system. Like they've tried to turn years of leaking, festering agony into something neat and box-tickable. It's called the Hurley Staging system. Stage One basically says, “Quite a nuisance, a right pain in the arse.” Stage Two is more like, “Yep, definitely ruining your life now.” And Stage Three? That's full-blown body betrayal. Bonus points if you're leaking from places you didn't even know had plumbing.

Oh, and lastly, just before we go any further, a bit of essential admin:

You're going to see a few terms thrown around from here on in: perianal, perineal, and perineum. Now, if you already know the difference you can skip ahead. But if not, let me save you a late-night Google search.

- Perianal = right around the hoop. The skin and area directly circling the anus.
- Perineal = refers to the perineum. A fancy word for the bit between your bollocks and your bumhole (or vulva and bumhole, depending on your setup).
- Perineum = the actual patch of land between the cheeks and tackle. It's an unfortunate little triangle that sees more action than it ever asked for.

And just to be clear, that episode I had in St. Petersburg in 2012? Smack-bang in the perineal zone...lovely jubbly.

Chapter 2: Ages ago — Burger Nips And A Roman Nose

Now, let's get one thing straight off the bat. I wasn't always this bloke you just met—the one looking like a discarded extra from *Trainspotting* on that cold Russian hospital floor. There was a time before. A time when my biggest worry was whether my nose looked too big in the school photo or if the girls in Year 9 had noticed my unfortunate 'burger nips'. If only my future health worries had been so bloody trivial. Back then, the first rumblings of what would become a lifelong war with my own body were just distant, barely audible tremors. It started with pain, of course. Ended with tunnels and stink—if you're desperate for the gory details on that particular brand of misery, there's an appendix at the back of the book that'll scratch your itch. For now, let's just say it was the unwelcome, uninvited guest even then, already plotting its coup.

Sounds almost quaint now, doesn't it? And in many ways, it was. It was a life lived in the muted, damp greens and browns of rural Northern England, a standard-issue model, navigating the particular joys and anxieties of a village upbringing. Watton. That was our hamlet, a single street clinging to the main road connecting Driffield and Beverley, two small and pretty market towns.

No pubs, no chippy; just houses, a piss-smelling red phone box, and a bus stop on either side. Our end was the far end of the village, away from the road, surrounded by horsey-paddocks and fields of wheat, barley, and oilseed rape that stank to high heaven in summer but painted the landscape an astonishing yellow. The loudest sound most days was the cawing of crows or a distant hum of a tractor. It felt safe, in that insular, leave-your-door-unlocked-as-everyone-knows-your-business kind of way.

Weekends often involved kicking a ball about in a bumpy field or building dens in the woods by the beck—a strategically fallen tree our seat for contemplating life, or at least, the contents of a Sony Discman.

School was... well, school, wasn't it? Driffield School, a sprawling comprehensive. I wasn't Mr Popularity. More like Mr Blend-Into-The-Background, a tactic honed by trying to avoid unwanted attention, made trickier by two prominent physical features.

Firstly, the nose. My Roman nose. A proper, undeniable conk. It felt like it entered rooms five minutes before the rest of me. Secondly, and perhaps more mortifyingly, there were the ‘burger nips’. Puffy, slightly protruding nipples that, under a bog-standard white school shirt, looked less like normal male anatomy and more like someone had inflated them just enough to ruin my social life.

The bullying wasn’t horrific; mostly verbal, the insidious, soul-eroding kind. Nicknames. ‘BN’ was an early one, courtesy of Steven in maths, a dweeby council estate kid with NHS specs. BN, short for Big Nose, after a popular chocolate biscuit whose infuriatingly catchy jingle “BN BN, do do do-do-do, BN BN, do do do do, BN BN...” became my unwelcome theme tune. It stuck. Like shite to a blanket.

Then came “Cheeseman,” an import from my own mate, Dan, a massive Steve Coogan fan who decided I resembled Gareth Cheeseman, a comically inept salesman character. My friends weren’t malicious, but the name spread. Other kids, not getting the Coogan reference, just heard “Cheeseman” and ran with the most obvious, unpleasant connotations: “He’s cheesy.” “He’s got a cheesy cock.” Peak adolescent indignation. I learned to shrink, head down, shoulders hunched. Confidence wasn’t really in my vocabulary.

This all coincided, rather unhelpfully, with my parents splitting up. I was about twelve or thirteen, first few years of secondary school. Mum moved out. Suddenly, it was just me, my younger brother Ian, and Dad, rattling around in the too-large, too-empty family home. Dad, Roy—a self-employed painter and decorator, a man of few words and the sort of man who uses superglue to fix his dentures—wasn’t equipped for the silent turmoil. It wasn’t a bad home, just... quiet. And a bit lost. Adding to the misery, our aptly named kitten, Lucky, got run over in front of my eyes as Ian and I walked to the bus stop for school one morning. Brutal. Those early secondary school years? Not exactly my heydays.

I went off the rails a bit, as you do. Playing up in class, getting lippy with teachers—a low-level irritant. School became something to endure before escaping to my bedroom, my fortress, with posters of Salma Hayek, Newcastle United icons, and my dream car: a yellow TVR Cerbera. Blasting music on my old, knackered boombox

was my escape. Dad's stolen Meat Loaf tapes and Dan's borrowed Rage Against the Machine CDs; they cracked something open in me.

I was still knocking about, mind. I'd made a new friend in my class at least. James, Jimmy, Jimmathy, Goodwill—he hated being called Jimmathy. Sorry Jimbo. We just nerded out in his bedroom playing Gran Turismo and Tekken, any game we wanted to really, from the video shop opposite his house. He lived in Driffield, in a poky little three-bedroom terraced house, with just enough space on his bedroom floor to fit a teenage Gaz-shaped body for extended late-night gaming sessions. I was still meeting my old primary school mates for a kickabout at our infant school. Little flashes of normal life, I suppose, before things got properly complicated. Thankfully, I did just enough work to scrape the GCSEs needed for A-Levels. But those were tough years, confidence-wise.

Then, in a move that surprised everyone—myself included—I signed up for A-Level English Literature, Sociology, and... Performing Arts. Not out of some mad artistic awakening, or a hidden love of interpretive dance. No, this was pure classic teenage scheming. Lottie, my girlfriend, mentioned it casually—"Come do Performing Arts with me." She loved to dance. But the idea took root and mutated. I mentioned it to my old primary school mate, Blake, and laid it out as plainly as a lad with burger nips and social trauma could: the girls were in drama. Loads of them. The hot ones. And not just any hot girls, the ones who didn't tolerate dickheads.

My logic? Proximity equals familiarity. Familiarity equals a shot at cool. And if the cool girls liked me, the bullies might think twice before gobbing off. Especially since most of the loudmouths were the same hopeless tossers clumsily trying to flirt with those very girls. I figured they wouldn't dare take the piss out of me if it meant getting the cold shoulder from their would-be conquests. It wasn't artistic. It was tactical.

It worked. It worked like a charm! Before, I'd just blend in. A bit of a ghost. But now? I was the idiot at the front of the class giving it full beans. The one who, when made to deliver a line, could actually sell it. Girls started talking to me. Laughing with me. I made lots of friends. The bullies? They re-routed.

And do you know what? That daft, hormone-fuelled decision? It opened a door. One I didn't even know existed at the time. And through that door came stuff I never could've imagined: places, people, moments that rewired the course of my life. All of it began because I hated being picked on, and saw a glint of hope in a drama class full of pretty girls. Funny how life works, isn't it?

This foray into greasepaint properly kicked off with the competition Rock Challenge in the spring of 2002, when I was seventeen and in the first year of my A-Levels. Lottie was all over it. The audition: learning a routine to Kylie Minogue's "Can't Get You Out of My Head." Dancing was not my forte. Two left feet. But Lottie helped. We'd practise during lunch breaks, the air thick with teenage effort—epically-bad BO levels—and Kylie's relentless beat.

I even persuaded some mates to audition. It was three months into my master plan. It was working already so I decided to share some of my devilry with some of them: Pulford, Jenny, Paddy, Kitch, Chappy, and Lunny. Some of them also had girlfriends doing it too. The audition itself, in the main school hall, was terrifying. But I got through it. Made the cut. Not all the lads made it. But, seeing my name on that list... I reckon I grew an inch.

We had a secret weapon now too: the lads. Strong, sporty lads, most chasing, or pleasing the birds. So many boys in the production; something most other schools couldn't achieve. We could choreograph different routines. We could maximise our advantage. And we did. We won the regional heat, then another one; it might have been a national final?! I'm not certain, but the prize? A trip to Australia the following summer in August 2003—to perform live in an arena of 20,000 people, plus it would be shown on live TV—as the special guest for their national final! We, or maybe just I, didn't even know that was the grand prize until we had won. Insane.



And through it all, there was Lottie. My constant. We'd got together when I was about fourteen and a half. My primary school friend, Kat, lived in Watton and was in Lottie's class at secondary. Lottie started coming over to the village. We'd all hang out, a village tribe, me, Ant, Andy, Kat, Gemma, and Lottie. We'd play tig, blocky,

rounders, spin the bottle—as a rite of passage. Bikes were our freedom. The adolescent romance blossomed.

Kat fancied me, I think, but that was never on the cards. I was drawn to Lottie; she just had a way, so pure and honest. That first kiss happened at Kat's. Messing about on her bed, throwing the duvet over ourselves. Kat, playing Cupid, kept lifting the duvet. So childish and innocent. Eventually, it happened. Darkness. Our hands found each other. Then, a tentative, awkward, and completely brilliant kiss. Lottie always had such minty-fresh breath, a beautiful smile, and she smelled great—feminine, just her natural smell. It was magical. The kiss was fantastic and from that moment my life became about hiding unexpected erections. We spent the first year mostly just kissing, sometimes for hours.

Lottie was lovely. Kind, funny, smart. She saw past the big nose and burger nips and I started to see a different version of myself. We were together for nearly six years, from fourteen to almost twenty. A lifetime. We grew up together. Navigated the teenage years side by side. A sweet, uncomplicated love. I once got ridiculously jealous, especially about her hot pants. She had such a perfect arse! And yes, it definitely feels creepy typing that now. We argued about it once in my car. She was confused, hurt. "They're for you," she said, "because you like them!" I thought she liked the attention. Classic male insecurity. But she called me out on it, gently but firmly. Made me see how ridiculous I was being. A valuable lesson in trust.

The pinnacle of this transformation came during my final year of A-Levels. Our school staged *Les Misérables* as the Christmas production that year. A massive deal. I auditioned, fancying myself as Marius, the romantic lead. Seemed like a decent fit. I could sing a bit, though that had mostly been a private thing, reserved for the shower or when no one was in. So there I was, standing in front of three bemused performing arts teachers, belting out Labi Siffre's "So Strong" a cappella, like a nervous Pop Idol contestant who'd forgotten their backing track.

A few days later, the cast list went up. I scanned for Marius... not there. Gutted.

Then I saw it. Higher up. Jean Valjean... G. Marshall. I'd nailed it!

Jean effing Valjean. The lead. They wanted me to play a grizzled ex-convict on a redemption arc. I was convinced they'd cocked it up. There was a bit of shock around school. Lads with actual singing lessons had gone for Valjean. And I, the quiet kid, had bagged up. I knocked on the staffroom door to confirm it wasn't a prank. No, they assured me. They thought I had the voice, the presence. The... gravitas? At seventeen? *Right*. I grew another inch.

No sense holding back at this point so I threw myself into it. Rehearsals became my life. I learned all the songs—"Who Am I?", "Bring Him Home", Christ, that high note, "One Day More", all of them. My mate Ben got Marius. Blake played Javert, my nemesis. Mr Watson, the music teacher, helped endlessly, particularly with "God on High."

Opening night. Christmas 2002. Nerves like razor blades. Dry mouth, shaky hands: shitting myself. Standing in the wings, waiting for the chain gang scene, hearing the orchestra. Then, the moment I stepped out, feeling the heat of the lights, I sang those first, desperate notes: "What have I done? Sweet Jesus, what have I done?"... and something took over. It wasn't just acting. It felt like; me. All the frustration, insecurity, longing, it all poured out.

And people responded. They cheered. They gave me a standing ovation, every show. It wasn't just a fluke, a pity cheer. Not on six different occasions. My mum, Judi, beaming, tears in her eyes. Something I'll never forget. For a few nights I was Jean Valjean on the "big" stage. I'd pulled it off. Taking that final bow each night to the roar of applause... a feeling I'd never experienced. Accomplishment. Connection. Transcending my ordinary, awkward self. I grew a foot that week.

That experience lit a fire. Showed me I wasn't destined to just blend into the background. Maybe I could be someone. The world seemed brighter, full of possibility. The burger nips and big nose didn't matter so much when you were bringing an audience to their feet. This was me finding my voice, finding confidence, finding love and for a while, things felt good.