

**The Mind Solution: Healing TMS Pain with  
Doctor Sarno**  
By Robert Ensor, MSc

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*For my father.*

## *Acknowledgements*

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Disclaimer: I am not a doctor or a healthcare professional – merely a *concerned layperson* – and nothing in this book should be considered medical advice. This is a story about my recovery, intended for informational purposes, not a prescription for sick people; make your own decisions under the guidance of a medical practitioner and don't do anything merely because I did it. One of the morals of the story is to learn to think for oneself. Another is not to uncritically accept the ideas contained in health-related books! There are certain universals in life, but no two paths are identical. Many things that work for most people do not work for me at all, so what worked for me may not work for you. Mindbody treatment only worked for a minority of the patients Doctor Sarno considered to have psychosomatic ailments – even if (as I suspect) that is only because most of his referrals rejected his diagnosis and treatment! If you don't believe in TMS, this book can be approached simply as a memoir of recovery with some humour, psychology and scientific speculation thrown in (only the first third of the book is about suffering). If you have symptoms, I recommend that you see a doctor to rule out anything serious. It is also recommended that you only undertake any of the treatments referenced in this book under the supervision of your medical practitioner. Some of those treatments involve talking about stressful life events; if you have a diagnosed psychosis or other psychiatric condition this should only be done under the supervision of your doctor or psychiatrist. In the words of Nietzsche: *I am a law only for my kind, I am not a law for all.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche, trans. RJ Hollingdale. 1961. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

*You take the blue pill...the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill...you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes... – Morpheus, The Matrix (1999)*

*‘What an unaccountable thing, my friends, that seems to be, which men call pleasure! And how wonderfully it is related toward that which appears to be its contrary, pain, in that they will not both be present to a man at the same time! Yet if anyone pursues and attains the one, he is almost always compelled to receive the other, as if they were both united together from one head.’ – Plato, Phaedo (4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Apology, Crito and Phaedo of Socrates. Henry Cary Trans.

## **Chapter 1: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

My earliest memory of a clearly psychosomatic problem was getting a bad back at primary (elementary) school. It was a game of tag, and I was 'it.' As the other kids ran off laughing, I ran after them and felt a twinge in my back. It was quite bad for a five-year-old; I had to stop running, anyway. This cleared up in a few days, but an association had been formed.

At age 8, I noticed I had digestive problems the morning after eating citrus. By age 10, I had constipation, and haemorrhoids from straining on the toilet. My GP was surprised that a 10-year-old should have piles. I wonder what he would say about my subsequent medical misadventures...

At secondary school around age 12, I developed hamstring pains, typically during the hated P.E. classes (I am not, and have never been, a joiner or a team player). I went to see physiotherapists who attributed it to 'growing pains' or one leg being shorter than the other. To his credit, one physio who massaged the leg did say that I was being 'overly conscious' of the pain. It cleared up sometime after that. Later, during my GCSE's, I developed bad backs and stomach symptoms (aches, lack of appetite) that sometimes led to days off school. Around this time, I also became a surly teenager. Nowadays, you'd call it mild depression. My mum made an appointment for me to see an osteopath, because whenever my dad had a bad back (quite often) he would go there, and they provided some relief. Needless to say, his back problem kept recurring. I remember seeing him, a respectable, mid-to-high-ranking civil servant in his 50's, wearing a formal shirt, tie and trousers, rolling around on the floor, hugging his knee to his chest. It seemed ridiculous to me. With childish thoughtlessness, I laughed at him. Little did I know, a few short



years later I would be the one on the floor (or the bed) doing the funny manoeuvres to try and dispel back, buttock and hip pain, at the precocious age of 14.

So I went to see the osteopath. She was a very nice and compassionate woman who gave me temporary symptom relief and may have unwittingly set me up for a lifetime of pain. She gave me some back and hip stretches and told me I had an abnormally curved spine. I now know she meant I had lordosis, which is like scoliosis, except the curvature is front to back, not side to side. Because of my curved spine, she said, before I turned 30, I would be disabled with severe pain if I didn't improve my posture now, during my developmental years. In hindsight, she was just trying to 'scare me (or my back) straight' because I slouched on chairs at school and she thought if I just sat up, I could minimise the long-term damage. It was all perfectly well-intentioned, but nonetheless her words worked on my unconscious like a curse. I am and always have been tall; the whole idea that 'tall people have bad backs' was probably absorbed around this time, too. Yet another (not so) helpful notion, reinforced by the fact I knew other tall pupils who had back trouble while sitting on school chairs. I ignored the fact that all the other kids, including some tall ones, slouched on chairs and didn't have back problems.

Anyway, I performed the stretches diligently and stopped slouching. The exercises seemed to provide temporary relief and the back pain receded into the background. I had to perform the exercises before and after running or walking long distances.

When I was 16, my dad began to get strange symptoms. He had trouble playing golf. An osteopath diagnosed him with tennis elbow and had him doing rubber band strengthening exercises. Eventually, he had to give up golf. One day, while we were out running, he collapsed face first and had to be taken to the hospital.

I remember looking up at the typically grey English sky and thinking, what has God got in store for us.

It's a good thing I couldn't see the future.

We took my dad to the hospital and got him patched up, but it was weird how he didn't put his hands out when he fell. He was tested for various things. All the results came back negative. After many months of anxious googling and waiting, he was first diagnosed with depression by our GP. Then, when it was decided that depression couldn't explain the difficulty moving hands and arms, he was officially diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. Motor Neurone Disease is more commonly known in the US as ALS. It's what Steven Hawking had. It is a progressive, terminal neurological condition in which the patient slowly loses the ability to move. My dad's doctor told him that patients lasted about 2 years on average before dying. I wasn't there for the diagnosis, but my mum was, and she saw my dad's face fall when he received the news. He was devastated. Despite his death sentence, my dad remained slightly hopeful for a cure and was absolutely blown away by the specialist he saw, praising him as a 'really clever bloke', even though he couldn't do much to help, except provide voice recognition software and a fairly sophisticated wheelchair that could be steered via head movements. By the time we got the chair, my dad could no longer move his head well enough to use it properly.

That was when things really started to go downhill for me. I cried and grieved, but only privately in bed at night. This went on for a few months. Then, unable to cope with the stress, I tried to mourn my father's death in advance. After that, I emotionally switched off. I stopped crying. I repressed everything, but I didn't think it was repression: as a silly young man, I thought I was being tough. I thought emotions equalled weakness. Whenever they were

displayed at school, I (or anyone else) had been mercilessly punished for it by my lovely schoolmates. The British stiff upper lip and my own phlegmatic disposition doubtless had parts to play. Consequently, emotions were not often displayed, except for surliness.

I remember watching *Band of Brothers* on DVD around this time. The show follows a company of US paratroopers in the Second World War. It's really excellent – the definitive WW2 show, one of the best depictions of war on screen – I recommend it to anyone who hasn't already seen it. Talking to a scared private, the character Lieutenant Spears said, 'the only hope you have is to accept that you're already dead. The sooner you accept that, the sooner you'll be able to function as you're supposed to.'<sup>3</sup>

I really liked this philosophy. I became incredibly pessimistic and began to assume the worst would always happen. This way, I reasoned, I would never be disappointed. And if something good did happen, it was a bonus. I developed shin splints from running a 10k five days a week, even though I had been able to do it with no problem for years before. Around this time, I failed my driver's test. I was crushed and hated failing so much I swore I'd never fail another test (I didn't, for all the good it did me). I applied the Lt. Spears mantra to exams, too. I assumed I would fail, to relieve the anxiety and guard against disappointment. I still had my customary exam-season bout of hay fever, but I was less nervous and started nailing my answers. There was one Media Studies exam I didn't revise for at all. I pulled the answers out of the ether and got an A\* (95/100). The Spears approach worked!

I applied this hardcore pessimism to all areas of my life. Since the conclusion was always foregone (and terrible), the

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<sup>3</sup> *Band of Brothers*. 1999. HBO. TV Show. Episode 3, 'Carentan'.

suspense was taken out of life, and I became less anxious; in fact, I wasn't anxious at all. Previously, I had always been a worrier, so this was a revelation to me. I liked not being afraid. I developed a vague, poorly articulated nihilistic notion that I too would get a disease like my dad's and be dead before I turned 25. As I started university (I studied a thoroughly useless degree), I had trouble sleeping. My shin splints got worse. I googled it and decided pronation was the problem, so bought some special pronation shoes. The problem got steadily worse.

Then my dad died.

He died on March 30<sup>st</sup> 2012, one day short of two years from when he received the diagnosis (April fool's day, 2010).

## Chapter 2: The Slippery Slope

I was 19 when my father died. I was sad, of course, but also relieved that the suffering was over for all of us. Little did I know, the suffering for me had only just begun. During exam season that year, I developed a wisdom tooth-related infection and had to have one removed. The emergency dentist who saw me said that I had ‘second year itis’. In retrospect, that was another hint about the mindbody connection, but it went unheeded. About a month after my father’s death, I got drunk to celebrate my twentieth birthday. So far, so normal. What was not normal, was that I woke up the next morning with an absolutely dreadful hangover. I’ve never known anyone else feel so bad from a hangover. It lasted for 3 days. My gums also started bleeding whenever I drank (even small amounts), and gingivitis generally became more of a problem. Over the next couple of years, the hangovers got steadily worse. I stopped drinking altogether in 2014, mainly because a few hours of joyless inebriation listening to bad music wasn’t worth losing a week of my life. Booze was very easy for me to give up and I haven’t missed it at all.

In my third year of uni, I really took a nosedive health-wise. I started staying up late into the night, poring over obscure sociology and anthropology books. I worked 14-16 hours per day. Now, I’m sure you already know this, but let me tell you, that is no way to live! A very sadistic form of self-torture, reading all those tedious journal articles, written in academese from dusk till dawn. When I told my tutor I was bored, he laughed out loud and said, ‘We all get bored.’ Ain’t that the truth!

I took various legal stimulants (pre-workouts, coffee, caffeine pills, etc). My sleep cycle went to pot. I woke up at 2pm and went to bed at 10am. I had shadows under my eyes. I became

very tired, even on the rare occasions when I slept quite well. I developed severe brain fog, as well as hand and wrist pains. My doctor said these might be repetitive strain injury. I googled around and worried about carpal tunnel. I imagined a tunnel of sinews. Not a good name.

My handwriting has always been borderline illegible, a fact my teachers took great pains to remind me of, but for one exam, my hand hurt so much it really was unreadable. I also started getting chest pains. Sometimes I struggled to breathe. I googled chest pain. That was pretty scary. You're always told to call a doctor as it could indicate serious heart trouble.

So I did.

They performed all sorts of ECG's and blood pressure tests, at my insistence (the doctors correctly assumed I was too young to have a problem). Nothing was wrong with my ticker, but no one could explain what caused the pain. I worried; the symptoms became so bad, my anxiety about them broke through the protective sheath of pessimism, without dispelling that pessimism in the slightest. So now I was worried *and* morbid. Great combination. Don't recommend it.

Anyway, I finally graduated in 2013 with first class honours in Psychology, Anthropology and Criminology. I had an offer from Oxford University and with my usual overperformance in the exam hall, I easily satisfied their conditions. I enrolled, paid the fees and could have studied at Oxford, but I was too tired to handle the workload. Also, the offer was to study a master's degree in anthropology, and by then I was sick to death of anthropology. I don't really regret cancelling my enrolment. Some people need a degree for their intended profession; in that case, (provided boredom a.k.a. aversion therapy hasn't turned you off that field), I can see it would be useful. As a young man, I was incredibly

aimless and received no good careers advice, and not much advice of any kind. A careers website recommended by my school said I should be a florist. I have no interest in flowers. And in sixth form we were all vaguely encouraged to go to university. My dad, who had never been to university, was in quiet awe of *all* graduates, even though his vast experience in nuclear decommissioning meant he usually knew more than the graduates he worked with. Some of the more gifted students got put into a special program called ‘gifted and talented’ and received some advice, I think. I was not considered particularly gifted (despite consistently outperforming my teacher’s predicted grades and several members of the gifted and talented group) until A level exam results came. I got the best results of any boy in my year. By then, of course, it was too late. This was part of my lifelong tendency to be underestimated, which you will see more of later.

In fairness to her, my mother did say I would/should be a writer, but by then, I had been conditioned by thousands of hours of boring lessons, lectures and inane chatter to not listen to anyone, so I ignored her excellent advice. On the whole though, learning not to listen has been a useful life skill for me; perhaps the only useful skill, beyond basic literacy and numeracy, that I gained from my school years.

The education system in many countries operates via simple conditioning to make the student into a regurgitator. Fail to regurgitate what you are told accurately, and you are punished with a bad grade. Regurgitate more or less what you are told, and you get a good grade (not much of a reward, since in English state schools it is often considered ‘cool’ to be academically inept). Needless to say, this system does not produce very many imaginative adults willing to question received ideas and think outside the box, nor is it designed to. It tends to create people who

repeat what they are told by authority figures. You might think it would develop a good memory, but actually, I can barely remember anything I was taught at school. Many people I know have also forgotten most of their schooling. It's just so boring, the mind can't wait to dump it once the exams are over. Nonetheless, the subliminal effects of those 12 or more years of conditioning we all receive are endemic and profound. I see the effects every day, but they were particularly troublesome during my encounters with the healthcare system.

My schooling wasn't all bad. Sixth form (high school) was much better than what came before. There, I had some freedom to study what I was interested in. I enjoyed my AS level in Media Studies; I will always be grateful to our teacher for praising Ian Fleming's Bond novels in a lesson and showing us clips from *Band of Brothers* and *Mad Men*, two excellent shows. But the most useful lessons I received at school were in psychology class.

I was introduced briefly to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, and his concept of 'the unconscious'. The unconscious is everything in our minds we are not aware of. Repression is the process of pushing a feeling, desire, idea or memory from consciousness into the unconscious. According to Freud, this consisted of the id, or the repressed animal instincts (including sexual desire) and the superego. The superego is a kind of hypersensitive, guilt-ridden conscience, that is partly conscious and partly unconscious. The unconscious was contrasted by Freud with the ego, our conscious personality, or who we think we are. The superego and the id could be understood via psychotherapy: laying down on a couch and talking to a therapist. In our classes and textbook, Freud was kind of vaguely dismissed as a weird Austrian who thought everyone wanted to have sex with their



parents. It wasn't until much later that I was to discover there was more to Freud than that.

Aside from not placing enough emphasis on psychoanalysis (which was determined by the curriculum anyway), our psychology teachers and textbook – known as ‘the dog book’ – were excellent. I remember being taught about Pavlov's dogs.<sup>4</sup> In the experiment, the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov kept a kennel of dogs. He presented them with food and rang a bell at the same time. The dogs salivated and ate. Then Pavlov rang the bell without presenting any food. The dogs began wagging their tails with excitement and salivating, even though there was no food. They had come, via a process called conditioning, to associate the bell with the food. This association was so powerful it elicited an involuntary physiological response: salivation.

Two more experiments in the dog book merit a mention. Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments in the 1950's to test people's obedience to authority<sup>5</sup>. In the original experiment, there was a man wearing a white coat and calling himself ‘the experimenter’, an unwitting subject called ‘the teacher,’ who thought he was assisting the experimenter in a test of memory and learning, and ‘the learner’. Unbeknownst to the teacher, the learner was an actor and confederate of the experimenter. The teacher was the *true* subject of the experiment. The experimenter would order the teacher/subject to administer a small electric shock to the learner, who appeared to be strapped to an electric chair. The learner, being an actor, would pretend to be shocked, although no shock was actually received. The experimenter ordered the subject

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<sup>4</sup> Cardwell, Mike & Flanagan, Cara (2009). Psychology A2: The Complete Companion. Folens. ISBN 9781850082897.

<sup>5</sup> Cardwell, Mike & Flanagan, Cara (2009). Psychology A2: The Complete Companion. Folens. ISBN 9781850082897.

to increase the voltage. The learner began to groan in pain and scream, until finally the subject reached a fatal voltage, and the learner was left lying in his chair, apparently unconscious or dead. The experiment was replicated throughout the US and other countries. In a meta-analysis, it was found that an average of 61% of American subjects were prepared to administer a fatal voltage.<sup>6</sup>

I remember another study by Solomon Asch<sup>7</sup>. Groups of eight male students were selected for the experiments. There was one test subject in the room. The other seven were actor-confederates. They were all shown a chart containing a vertical line (Chart A). Next to it was another chart with a series of three vertical lines drawn on it (Chart B). Of these three, one line was the exact same length as the first line on Chart A, whereas the other two were clearly significantly longer and shorter than that first line. The experimenter asked his ‘subjects’ which line on Chart B was the same length as the line on Chart A. In most tests, the actors deliberately gave an obviously incorrect response. The goal of the experiment was to see how many subjects would give clearly wrong answers to conform to the other ‘participants’, who were actually confederates. 36% of subjects agreed with the obviously wrong assessments of the actors. I was appalled by these studies; by the blind obedience of a large section of humanity. As a rebellious and extremely unpopular teenager, I knew I couldn’t fit in, so I swore not to conform like many people apparently did and

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<sup>6</sup> Blass, Thomas (1999). "The Milgram paradigm after 35 years: Some things we now know about obedience to authority". *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. **29** (5): 955–978.

<sup>7</sup> Asch 1951. Effects of group pressure on the modification and distortion of judgements. Groups, leadership and men, research in human relations. Carnegie.

wore my nonconformity as a badge of honour. I can honestly say, that is one promise I have kept!

I also remember studying the placebo effect. Placebos are so powerful, researchers have to control for their effects, by splitting participants into a group given the actual drug and a control group given placebos. Neither the experimenters nor any of the participants know which group receives the placebo. This is why these studies are called double blind. If a drug or therapy doesn't exceed the effectiveness of the placebo, it generally isn't considered to be worth pursuing. Placebos have been proven to work consistently on a myriad of conditions, and their cure rate is usually significant (between 15 and 72%)<sup>8</sup>. This is an amazing fact that is quite widely known, but the full implications for health are rarely understood. In connection with this, I recall looking at a photo of stigmata – a condition in which Christians who sympathise with Jesus bleed from the hands – and thinking, 'wow, that is really weird.' But like most people, I swept it under my mental rug and didn't concern myself with it again.

The vaunted dog book also introduced me to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's thesis was that every once in a while, science undergoes a dramatic change; old theories are discredited in favour of different ones, which become the new paradigm. Experimental science then proceeds to add evidence to this new hypothesis, before it is eventually falsified enough times to trigger another shift. This insight, combined with the historical perspective gained from my autodidactic studies, taught me to be wary of blind faith in the validity of contemporary theories.

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<sup>8</sup> Brynie, Faith, PhD. The Placebo Effect: How it Works.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/brain-sense/201201/the-placebo-effect-how-it-works>

University couldn't compare with the dog book. The only real messages I took from my university lectures were that almost everything was a social construction and almost everything can be blamed on society.

Eventually, my reaction against three years of rather one-sided social 'science' led me to embrace the work of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He was the first to say that 'god is dead' and wrote many polemics against Christianity<sup>9</sup>. As someone who had never fitted in, or really had much in common with anyone, I enjoyed his rants against 'the herd,' and found some vindication for my eccentric personality in his work.

Nietzsche was a bad role model. He suffered from severe myopia, 'gastric spasms', haemorrhoids, dyspepsia, insomnia, seizures and various phobias, before going psychotic and collapsing on a horse in Turin. Ten years later, he died of a stroke. People think he went mad of a brain tumour or tertiary syphilis contracted from a prostitute, years earlier. I believe Nietzsche's nihilistic philosophy and his fate are inseparable. His father was a pastor. Freddy was originally a devout Christian and studied theology in the hopes of becoming a minister. Then he renounced his faith, repressed his former spiritual personality, wrote brilliant but misguided philosophy books, and became increasingly ill.

Under the influence of Nietzsche, Darwin and the paleo guys, I came to believe my slow physical decline had a physical-biological cause, so needed a biological solution. The German thinker was also a major fatalist; his concepts of *amor fati*, or love of fate, and the eternal recurrence of the same, the idea that

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<sup>9</sup> The Gay Science, Nietzsche, trans. R Kevin Hill. 2018. Penguin Classics; translation edition.

everything in life is repeated eternally, shaped my own budding philosophy<sup>10</sup>.

I became a hardcore pessimistic fatalist. In a soulless, entirely physical world subject to the laws of physics, there might be a small place for chance/randomness (I didn't think so), but there was no room at all for free will. We were all powerless, helpless victims to fate, so why bother trying to change ourselves or our lot in life? This was the soul-sucking, defeatist attitude I developed. As it turned out, my lecturers were partly right about the power of socially constructed beliefs to shape behaviour (at least when it comes to pain: more on this later). Who'd have thunk it?

I applied for hundreds of jobs for years but was always rejected, despite my good grades. I wasn't very glib in interviews, and apparently that is *very* important when it comes to getting jobs. I wasn't too disappointed, since I didn't really want any of the jobs and by this point my digestive difficulties had gotten so bad that I couldn't realistically be away from a toilet for more than 2 hours at a time. I became a grizzled Imodium veteran on the slippery slope of gradually worsening diarrhoea. It was a tough war, a pointless war, but somebody had to fight it.

Whilst lifting weights in 2012, I hurt my shoulder. The pain was centred on the rotator cuff area. My shoulder clicked when I moved it in a certain way. I went to see a doctor, who got me an MRI. He rather brusquely informed me that the scan showed nothing wrong with my shoulder. I couldn't believe it. He wanted to fob me off so bad and seemed to be angry with me for experiencing pain he couldn't explain physically. But I gave him the impression I had the potential to be a really persistent pain in

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<sup>10</sup> Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche, trans. RJ Hollingdale. 1961. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

the ass (a correct impression) and so he grudgingly referred me to a physiotherapist. The physio gave me a rubber band to strengthen my shoulder with. She was a good physio. I did the exercises diligently and after three sessions my shoulder was feeling better. I wasn't going to win any strongman competitions, but I was pronounced 'good enough' by the NHS. Still, the rotator cuff problem persisted on and off, and got so bad I didn't lift weights for years. I couldn't be bothered to get more physiotherapy. As it turned out, there was unexpected wisdom in my apathy.

Then I read a popular book about a version of the paleo diet. The idea was, if you eat mostly fatty meat and vegetables and limit starches and sugars, you get leaner, healthier and generally more super-duper. The author cited a study that 'showed' most people are lactose intolerant and went on and on about gluten and how bad it is. He wrote about how gluten can erode the gut-lining and cause gluten intolerance, the horrifyingly named 'leaky gut' and autoimmune diseases. The bottom line was, gluten and lactose caused inflammation, and this apparently was the mother of all maladies, even for people who weren't allergic or intolerant. Well, my masochistic, impressionable young subconscious really leapt on that one and ran with it. I began to think maybe *I* was lactose intolerant. After all, I *did* have a lot of diarrhoea; well above the normal amount! It all made so much sense...the planets aligned, the sun burst from the clouds, the secret order of the universe was revealed to me! The universal panacea was to give up dairy! I had been so blind! How could I not see it! You get the idea.

So I gave up most sources of lactose. My brain fog cleared. I no longer had diarrhoea or bloating (which had gotten so bad I looked pregnant most nights). I became leaner. My skin glowed golden, like a pat of the butter I had begun consuming in worryingly large amounts. My voice deepened overnight.

Suddenly, I had the rich tones of Sir Patrick Stewart or Sir Christopher Lee! Perhaps I could become a venerable thespian or get voice-over work. It was a miracle! The scales fell from my eyes. Halleluja for lactose intolerance! I had the elixir, sought in vain by the alchemists for centuries!

Except I didn't.

I had unwittingly taken a placebo and started on the slippery slope to what would become an unhealthy and ridiculous obsession with food. About a week into this supposedly miraculous diet, I accidentally ate some mushroom sauce on my steak. Boy, was that a mistake! As a connoisseur of diarrhoea, even *I* thought this was bad. So bad I blasted a hole in my sphincter. My doctor told me it was haemorrhoids. I began to obediently stuff suppositories up my butt. But the piles she had identified were just the usual, garden variety haemorrhoids I'd had for a decade or more, that weren't causing much trouble. Mine is a complicated, misunderstood anus of many layers. So complicated, it could have been a character on HBO's *Game of Thrones*. It turned out the real problem was an anal fissure – basically, a crack in the crack. All those suppositories had prevented it from healing! Woe was I! I swooned in despair.

Now, I have been known to criticise. So you can imagine what I had to say about that first doctor who missed the fissure. Then I read online that unless this healed in 6 weeks, I'd need surgery to repair my rectum. Surgery – with a high chance of rendering me temporarily or permanently incontinent. This got my attention! The race was on! I already had to sit on a donut (an inflatable ring, for those of you not cool enough to be well-versed in anal-injury lore). I think Martin Lawrence's character had one after he got shot in the butt during *Bad Boys II*, a classic film of the early 2000's. Much hilarity ensued at his fictional expense.

Anyway, I didn't want to add diapers to my donut. As a supposedly hip youth, I had to at least maintain a *pretence* of being attractive. Oh, how naïve I was. As you can tell, I have long since given up any such pretensions, and am all the better for it.

So there I was, staring down the barrel of lifelong diapers, with the clock ticking on my continence. It was almost as tense as an episode of *24*, except in my version, there were *a lot* more visits to the bathroom. The result was that I didn't fix the fissure in time, so believed I was stuck with it. After months of donut sitting, I started buying hand warmers and shoving them up there, because I'd read that heat increases blood flow and would therefore (or so I reasoned) help the rectum tissues to heal. Success! It worked! I basked in the glow of my glory, feeling like the MacGyver of anal fissures. There were some obvious side effects: hot days got very toasty! Because the hand warmers only afforded temporary relief, I kept doing this for years. I don't like to think what Doctor Freud would say about all this. Probably, a lot.

I got stomach pains, by which I mean, my actual stomach, not my bowels. I thought the fish oil and tablespoons of butter had inflamed my stomach lining. I went to my GP, who diagnosed gastritis and gave me a Proton Pump Inhibitor: a powerful antacid. Well, it stopped my stomach acid alright. I could barely digest anything. Everything caused me intense burning stomach pain, especially hard to digest foods like fats, spinach, and meat. I went down to 1600 calories a day, consisting of sandwiches, bananas, carrots and crisps. Another side effect was muscle spasms in my lats and legs. I looked it up and side effects of PPI's included hypomagnesaemia and hypocalcaemia, symptoms of which included – you guessed it – muscle spasms. Because I couldn't digest meat or milk, my diet lacked both minerals and the PPI tipped me over the edge into a full-blown deficiency. So I had to



stop taking it. I know this is boring but please pay attention. This was crucial to what happened later.

I started a master's degree (for something to do) and was able to slowly build up my diet again, probably because the degree kept me busy. I didn't go back to paleo. Even if I could eat some version of the diet without 'gastritis', it was too expensive and just plain difficult. So I 'regressed' to eating a lot of brown bread ham sandwiches, chips<sup>11</sup>, chicken, fruit and vegetables (mostly apples, bananas, carrots and pears). I got by on this diet. I could function, just about, but I was very tired, lacked *joie de vivre* (as my coursemates were wont to point out) and my brain was foggy as hell.

After completing my masters in 2016, I started writing and that was more enjoyable than anything else I've ever done, but I had no success with the literary agents. Even in my ramshackle state, I managed to produce 2 novels every 18 months (not that anyone read them).

In 2017, I read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, one of the greatest novels ever written. It is about a young man called Hans Castorp, who visits his ailing cousin at a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps and gets diagnosed with Tuberculosis. His short visit turns into a seven-year stay. The author implies that Hans has either been misdiagnosed by an opportunistic doctor, or that his illness is in some way psychosomatic. He enjoys philosophical debates with the other patients, flirts with a married Russian woman, listens to lectures on psychoanalysis and never quite manages to recover or do anything with his life.

There is a quote from Mann, that stayed with me:

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<sup>11</sup> Fries.

*‘What Castorp learns to fathom is that all higher health must have passed through illness and death. As Hans Castorp says to Madame Chauchat, there are two ways to life: one is the common, direct and brave. The other is bad, leading through death, and that is the genius way. This concept of illness and death, as a necessary passage to knowledge, health and life, makes The Magic Mountain into a novel of initiation.’<sup>12</sup>*

Over the next few years, I got progressively more exhausted and my bowels became more and more agitated. My brain smog went from Los Angeles to downtown Beijing. Some days, I lacked the ability to think at all. My speech was slurred. Needless to say, I couldn’t do much. Despite cutting dairy completely from my diet, my guts were as bad as they had been before I had the lactose false eureka moment. I also got fat. Pretty weirdly fat, if you consider I was only eating about 2100 relatively normal calories. My back pain got progressively worse, according to the (self-fulfilling) prophecy of my osteopath, all those years ago.

I know what you’re thinking. This kid was born in Swindon. Swindon! The Jewel of Wiltshire!<sup>13</sup> How could it all go wrong?

Well, in 2019, things got a whole lot worse.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Mann, HT Lowe-Porter. The Magic Mountain. Vintage.

<sup>13</sup> For my non-British readers, it may (or may not) interest you to learn that Oasis Leisure Centre in Swindon is the alleged inspiration for the name of the popular Britpop band Oasis.

### Chapter 3: Descent into Hell

*You only live twice:*

*Once when you are born*

*And once when you look death in the face – Ian Fleming, You Only Live Twice*

One day in February 2019, I had just finished writing my book, when I got up out of my chair and felt my back ‘go.’ This time was pretty bad. It didn’t go away when I did my stretches, no matter how many times I rolled around on my bed and hugged my knees in a weird foetal ball, as I had been trained to do by my osteopaths and physiotherapists. It didn’t go away for 6 weeks. This got me really worried. I remembered reading on the internet (that font of medical enlightenment) that if back pain didn’t resolve after 6 weeks, it was pretty serious and you should definitely see someone about it.

So I went to see another osteopath. This one has a good reputation and has worked with some famous people. She had also seen my dad, before his diagnosis of MND. She thought he had tennis elbow. In hindsight, that should have been a red flag. Anyway, I hobbled into her treatment room. She was a very nice lady who – and this is the first time this had ever happened with a healthcare professional – took a very detailed medical history, showed deep concern and really took the time to try and get to the bottom of my symptoms. I was quite flattered. She was alarmed by my limited range of motion and the chronicity of my pain, which made me alarmed – but then, I was used to being alarmed. (Un)luckily for me she had just been reading about a disease the day before I came into her treatment room. It was called Spondyloarthropathy (also known as Ankylosing Spondylitis), an

autoimmune disease.<sup>14</sup> It affected young men in their late twenties quite often. Apparently, it meant the spine degenerated slowly over time. There was a lot of accompanying pain. Sometimes their spines lost all cartilage and became like a bamboo stick. She said that a lot of the sufferers died somehow from a slowly constricting chest, and not being able to catch their breath. Well, she had me at degenerative. I was hooked.

I was strangely relieved to have a label to put on all my symptoms. I had been declining before without knowing what it was. Now I was declining with a blueprint, or prognosis laid out for me. Now I had a label! And like my father before me, I googled the hell out of it. Pictures of fused spines and incredibly stooped old men. My unconscious was enraptured. Oh, and there was a gene that apparently caused it. HLA B27<sup>15</sup> or something – it sounds like a US visa. That made it seem even more inevitable. Never mind that the gene is carried by approximately 8 in 100 people (Ankylosing Spondylitis affects maybe 0.5% of the US population<sup>16</sup>), and about 20% of patients don't have the gene. At our next session, I asked my osteo if it was incurable, though 'rationally' I assumed it could not be cured, only managed. Pessimism had made me a very sensible boy. She told me that only a tiny minority (approx. 1 in 100) recovered, and no one knew how<sup>17</sup>. I said maybe someone should look into how the 1 in 100 fixed it, instead of focusing on the 99/100 who don't cure the disease. Maybe, she said, the 1 in 100 'became happy'. Happy? I

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<sup>14</sup> Autoimmune diseases are conditions in which the patient's immune system attacks various body tissues as if they were invading pathogens.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ankylosing-spondylitis/causes/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hopkinsarthritis.org/arthritis-info/ankylosing-spondylitis/>

<sup>17</sup> I don't know if this figure is accurate. That is just what she told me.

could have scoffed. Clearly, *that* wasn't for me. Oh no. I was going down the autoimmune paleo route.

This is a key decision, and led to some seemingly bizarre behaviour, so allow me to explain my rationale, lest you think me a total fruit loop. Mainstream medicine doesn't hold out any hope of a cure for autoimmune patients, especially AS patients, since these diseases generally get worse over time. They just want to stick you on steroids or biologics with a high risk of side effects and 'manage' your inevitable decline. The only semi-credible alternative I could find to the mainstream approach for autoimmune disease was the functional medicine/autoimmune paleo approach. This is also the best-known approach that says you can improve your symptoms or even be free of them (and they have the success stories to back it up), provided you adhere to an absurdly difficult, expensive diet and supplements regimen whilst minimising your stress. This is hard to do, because keeping up the regimen they advise is very stressful in itself, as I was about to discover.

I refused to accept a life of disability. I'd seen with my dad how soul destroying it can be. And I was already in a terrible state. Mainstream medicine said those with AS only worsen over time. So it was a choice between those who offered me nothing but deterioration and those who offered hope of improvement and little to no symptoms. Is it any wonder I picked the autoimmune paleo method?

So I was going to repair that leaky gut come hell or high water. I was going to send reinforcements to the good bacteria and nuke the bad bacteria, who were apparently creating toxins and leaking out through my swiss cheese gut lining to cause inflammation in the spine and hips. I was prepared to accept the fallout (in this case, micro-organism die off). And I was going to

avoid like the plague anything that damaged that precious, incredibly fragile intestinal lining. So far as I was concerned, the more vigilant (read: paranoid) I was, the better, since the more I starved out bad bacteria and protected that gut lining, the more I'd recover. The problem was, I couldn't starve bacteria without starving *myself*. I don't think anyone has ever said 'leaky gut' so many times. I could have gotten the world record. I had already found a book on the subject. A book I praised to high heaven. That book became my bible (I'd better not reference it). The author had 'reversed' her autoimmune disease to the point she had few symptoms, but she had to stick to a very strict diet and certain other stipulations, so it wasn't really a cure. I didn't care. 'Reversed' was the best I could hope for in a degenerative, incurable-except-in-rare-cases-nobody-talks-about disease. I had already seen a popular Youtube video about a young person who had reversed her arthritis using this approach, so when I read this, I was sold.

I didn't bother going to a doctor, since I wasn't too pleased about what they did for me or my dad (basically, nothing). I embarked on a crazy diet. The War On Starch began. I started by getting rid of bread and substituted rice. Improvement. The pain receded a bit. I could walk more (with the aid of a stick). And I was losing fat! These results 'confirmed' my hunch about this paleo stuff. Then I dropped the rice, for I was a very ambitious boy, and improved a little more. I wanted to reverse my disease!

I ate a lot of sausages. I spend a lot of time in Austria, and the sausages there taste very um, laminated. They put them in a plasticky sheath thing. So that was fun.

I struggled on like this, remaining quite active, with a weird diet and a punishing stretching regimen (one hour a day!), until September 2019. In September, my granddad died aged 96. He was

a commando in the Second World War and was awarded the Legion d'Honneur, the highest military honour of France, when the French finally got around to sending the medal. He was also called Robert Ensor; I was named after him. He had quite a few scrapes of his own as a lad, to say the least. In November 1944, his landing craft was blown up as he came into Walcheren in the Netherlands. Everyone thought he was dead. His then-girlfriend, my grandmother, was told he was dead. So you can imagine her surprise when he turned up in his hometown of Morecambe, alive and well (but slightly deaf). 'Oh,' she said, in the typically understated manner of the time, 'you're back.' At his funeral, I wanted to play the theme tune for the Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*. I thought it was appropriate, given his 'resurrection.' It turned out to be even more appropriate than I thought, in light of what was to come. We settled on the Inspector Morse theme instead, since that was his favourite show.

I really went even further downhill at this point. On holiday in Austria, my indigestion got so bad I caved in and went to a pharmacist. I was given an antacid gel. This offered some relief, but one time I took it, it seemed to kill my stomach acid completely and I couldn't digest anything. I had terrible stomach pain and almost zero appetite after that. I knew these things were supposed to suppress stomach acid, but my acid level never really seemed to bounce back, which was alarming. My antacid phobia grew.

Peeing became very painful. My doctor ruled out a urinary tract infection, which was a relief, but not really, because we didn't know what was wrong. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't an STD! My diet wasn't working. The back, hip and stomach pain and diarrhoea were getting worse regardless of how carefully I ate. It was almost unbearable. My solution? An even crazier diet, of

course! So I ditched sausages and gradually pared away my diet until all I could consume for four months was 900-1100 calories per day of mushrooms, almond milk, cucumbers and cabbage juice. I read a study that said cabbage juice cured ulcers. I read *a lot* of studies. Became quite the little amateur scientist, for all the good it did me. Pretty soon, I could barely walk.

I had a nightmare, around this time. In the dream, I had terrible back pain. I thought my spine was broken. I checked my back and found it was actually my e-reader that was broken, not my spine. I woke up on top of my e-reader, in a state of panic and pain. I took the dream as a bad omen, as I lacked the tools to decode the true meaning. In hindsight, the dream was my unconscious telling me that the pain was a result of a broken informational paradigm (symbolised by the e-reader that contained my misguided ‘diet bible’), not a broken or damaged spine.

A few days later, my back went terribly trying to get out of bed. This was a real low point. I could barely move. Getting up was a nightmare and took ages. I have never endured such pain, and let me tell you, I had become quite the connoisseur of pain. Doctor John Sarno said he knew of nothing in medicine that can be more painful than TMS pain<sup>18</sup>. I’m not sure about that, but needless to say, it was excruciating. After this, I got even worse. I stopped taking walks. All I could do was shuffle around the house, cringing in anticipation of the next disabling spasm. I couldn’t stand still for longer than 2 minutes without horrendous pain, so trips to the bathroom were very tense. I couldn’t walk too far, too slow or too fast. I couldn’t bend at all. I had less flexibility than a nonagenarian or an Egyptian mummy. I couldn’t sit for long without getting up and moving chair. Since I had associated the

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<sup>18</sup> Healing Back Pain (Reissue edition): The Mindbody Connection. 2018. Grand Central Publishing.



worst pain of my life with getting out of bed, I could no longer sleep in a bed. I started sleeping in a sun lounger. I'd sit down, lean back and pull the blankets over me. I had to get up 4-6 times in the night because I couldn't sit for longer than about 90 minutes at a time. Also my urinary tract hurt, so whenever my bladder got more than halfway full, I had to go and take a leak. I took up swimming instead of walking but could only manage a few laps. My glasses were corroded by the chemicals used in the pool. I bought swimming goggles. Then someone stole my swimming goggles. It didn't matter: soon I wasn't eating enough calories to have the energy for even a light swim.

Desperate for solutions, no matter how off-the-wall, I went to see an acupuncturist. In the first session, she encouraged me to call my doctor. She kept praising my local hospital's rheumatology department and said that if I didn't act soon, my spine might degenerate even further, and I didn't want to become 'a cost burden to the state.' I didn't like the sound of that. If I wasn't extremely weakened, I'd probably have said something, but then again, I am English, and we can be *painfully* polite. I had yet to cost the NHS anything more than the one 10-minute appointment about urinary pain. I was slowly starving to death on 1000 calories a day and in a state of perpetual agony; let's just say the NHS's accounting department, important as they are, were not my top priority at that time. As it turns out, I cost the NHS remarkably little given how bad I was. Caving to the pressure, I made an appointment to see my GP, which I had to wait over a month for, despite my frail condition.

After the soreness from my first acupuncture session wore off, I improved quite dramatically. I even walked over a mile. But it didn't last more than a day or two. The second session was a different story. The soreness never really wore off. My back and

hip pain were especially bad. I got a burning sensation in my stomach, where the needles had been stuck in (in an effort to try and aid my failing digestion). I was horrified. What had she done to me? I called her and she said it couldn't be the needles; my underlying condition must be worsening, and I needed to see a doctor. She kept urging me to see a rheumatologist. Everyone did. I hadn't even got in to see my GP yet, and only he could refer me. I was still waiting. Even though everything inside me screamed not to go to the doctor, I was being a good little stooge and doing 'the sensible thing', even though experience had shown that doing the sensible or normal thing rarely worked out for me.

Finally caving to pressure, I called my GP. Unable to understand my symptoms, he asked me, impatiently, what was wrong with me.

'I can barely eat, and I can barely walk,' I said.

He sounded fairly incredulous. I called another doctor one night, in a state of abject despair, because I didn't know what to do and (naïvely, as it turned out) thought a doctor might be able to help. He offered me proton pump inhibitors. I said no, because of my previous terrible experience with PPI side effects when not eating enough. Well, now I was eating even less than last time. If I'd gotten nutritional deficiencies last time, this time the side effects would likely be even worse. He said, 'What did you call me for then? What do *you* think you should do?' It was the kind of reaction you'd get from a drug dealer, if you asked him for anything other than drugs.

'Just carry on as I am and hope it improves,' was all I could say to that.

'Right,' he said, and hung up.

I got the distinct impression he couldn't care less. But hey, these things are subjective. Maybe he cried for me.

I found a stool test company online to see if I had dysbiosis (an imbalance of gut bacteria) or SIBO (small intestinal bacterial overgrowth). All the autoimmune paleo people went on endlessly about SIBO as a factor in autoimmune disease, even though it's not recognised by mainstream medicine. To be fair to them, there is evidence of a correlation between SIBO/dysbiosis and autoimmune disease. Correlation does not necessarily equal causation. And even if it does, that does not mean SIBO is the *root* cause.

I sent off my stool sample and got a very comprehensive report. I had high IgA antibodies (an inflammatory marker) and zonulin (a measure of gut permeability or 'leakiness'). This reinforced the leaky gut theory, and the notion I had autoimmune disease. Based on the stool test and symptoms, my functional medicine doctor provisionally diagnosed me with 'autoimmune disease.' The report was also *very* detailed concerning my 'gut fauna'. What a thriving invisible world there is down there! An entire ecosystem of little critters. In my case, there was a dearth of good bacteria, above average *E. coli* (baddies) and an absolute explosion of the *Enterobacter* population, exponentially more than there should have been (reinforcing the SIBO hypothesis). I googled *Enterobacter*. It can become a superbug infection and has killed people in a weakened state in hospitals but in normal amounts it is just another harmless denizen of the bowel<sup>19</sup>. However, my levels were way higher than normal, and I *was* in a weakened state. So I began to worry my overgrowth would tip over into an infection and kill me. I called a doctor about this, and he reassured me that I wasn't going to die, but thought I had Crohn's disease and urged me to get diagnosed. He was intelligent and

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<sup>19</sup> Ramirez, D. Giron, M. 2022. *Enterobacter* Infections.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559296/>

patiently engaged with my alternative ideas about bacteria causing autoimmune diseases.

Another doctor I know personally came to visit me: Doctor A. She was genuinely concerned and did her best to try and help. She thought I likely had Crohn's too, although she did say that one of my stool test markers suggested I might not have it. She urged me to take a Proton Pump Inhibitor. I told her about the side effects I'd had last time. She told me that I should take steroids to control the inflammation. I objected to steroids on the grounds that they usually contain triggering ingredients like starch or lactose and the side effects would probably hit me like an eighteen-wheeler.

However, Doctor A did suggest that the illness, particularly the association of food with pain, could be psychological. I couldn't believe this. How could something so palpably physical as chronic pain, leaky gut, inflammation and diarrhoea, be in my head?

As it turns out, she was sort of right.

Not that Doctor A used it, but the phrase 'all in your head' is a bad one. It implies you're somehow a malingerer, making up your symptoms, even if that is not the intent of the person saying the words. The stigma conjured by the phrase, which remains a common way of thinking about psychosomatic illnesses, also deters the self-recognition necessary to dispel these conditions. I only learned much later that mindbody symptoms, whilst very real and physical, have a mental origin the sufferer is not consciously aware of. Although Doc A suspected my illness was psychosomatic, the only way she had been taught to treat it (the physical symptoms, anyway) was to use pharmaceuticals and physiotherapy. I shot the latter option down straight away by pointing out that I wasn't anywhere near mobile enough to do any exercises. To her credit, she was open-minded about a

diet/supplements-based approach and did not rule out the reversal of symptoms I hoped for.

It was around this time that I became *fascinated* by herbs. Herbs could kill bad bacteria, restore good bacteria, and improve digestion. I read many scientific studies and health articles to this effect. After some painful trial and error, gentian root, dandelion root and bitters were my go-to herbs. My house had more natural remedies than a witch's apothecary. I bought a natural antibiotic derived from garlic. That produced 'die off': in other words, it made me feel worse, but I was willing to suffer to kill the bad bacteria. So I started putting the stuff in my almond milk and banana smoothies. Gave it a nice garlicky tang. Yum.

My hands hurt terribly and cold made the pain worse, so I wore many layers of gloves. These thick gloves, combined with my general rigidity, meant that one day I knocked my 'delicious' almond milk, garlic extract and banana smoothie onto my laptop keyboard. The laptop was kaput, but the hard drive was saved by the repair man. I was starting to feel like Alan Harper, the ridiculously unlucky protagonist of *Two and a Half Men*. This was bad even for me.

Around this time, the hairs on my legs and arms began to fall out. This was probably a consequence of the extreme starvation. There was, I suppose, a risk of death around this time. I was kept going by the constant support of my mother, who was willing to do anything to keep me alive and help me recover, even though I couldn't eat the meals she desperately wanted to cook for me.

I had a blood test. The results came back mostly normal, except for a slightly abnormal bilirubin count.

Eventually I got my GP appointment. I brought my mother in with me, because I was too starved and exhausted to answer

questions clearly and make decisions. When she tried to say something, my doctor cut her off and said, ‘I’m talking to *the patient*,’ very impatiently. He insisted on making me lie down on his bed to touch my stomach. Lying down was a no-go for me at that point, because getting up was risky and potentially tortuous. Anyway, I did it, reluctantly, and managed to get up again; a very perilous venture at that time. His physical examination revealed nothing. No surprises there. He thought I had Celiac. Celiac could not explain why severe symptoms continued *after* I had eradicated all gluten from my diet. I told him so. If I had Celiac, there was clearly something else going on as well. I produced my detailed stool report and aired my theory *du jour*, that Enterobacter was causing my autoimmune condition. I had read some studies showing that Klebsiella, a close relative of Enterobacter (they both belong to the Enterobacteriaceae family) was correlated with Crohn’s disease<sup>20</sup>.

‘That’s not proven!’ he said, angrily.

Based on the slightly abnormal bilirubin levels on my blood test (probably a result of starvation), my doctor thought I had Gilberts, a largely benign liver condition that produces no symptoms except mild jaundice. I said, ‘Since Gilberts has almost no symptoms, it doesn’t matter whether I have it or not: it doesn’t explain my symptoms.’ My doctor actually had to agree with the obvious logic of this statement. He wanted me to get tested for Celiac disease. The test required me to eat gluten beforehand. This was one of the worst ideas I have ever heard in my life (and let me tell you, there is a lot of competition for that title). My GP knew

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<sup>20</sup> Rashid, T Ebringer, A and Wilson, C 2013 The Role of Klebsiella in Crohn’s Disease with a Potential for the Use of Antimicrobial Measures. Int Journal of Rheumatology. October.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3810322/>

how badly I reacted to gluten; I had told him all about the back and hip pain and diarrhoea. I refused to eat gluten since it would obviously cause me horrendous pain and diarrhoea for weeks if not months. At that time, in my weakened state, it might even have hospitalised me. Did it matter if I was technically allergic/intolerant? Yes or no, whenever I ate the stuff, I was poleaxed! It had happened hundreds of times before; it would happen again. Still he persisted with this idea of a gluten test. I kept saying no. He seemed to prioritise protocol/diagnosis over my actual health. Isn't diagnosis supposed to improve health, not undermine it? And if it does risk undermining it, what is the point? And whether I had Celiac or not, gluten wreaked havoc with my system, so either way, I obviously had to avoid it (while I believed in the leaky gut paradigm). These are the things that immediately occurred to me. I never did take that test. He also wanted me to take a PPI. I had already told him why I couldn't, so I told him again. At the end of the appointment, despite the fact I had already explained the dire side effects I got from antacids (including a PPI and the OTC antacid gel), he suggested that I take an over the counter antacid. After recommending the Celiac test, I thought he couldn't say anything worse. I underestimated him. He had just outdone himself.

After that dreadful appointment, my health went downhill. My GP referred me to a gastroenterologist and a dietician. He also booked me in for an ultrasound and had me send off another stool sample. I did not get a referral to a rheumatologist or an appointment for an X-ray; my back and hip pain were ignored.

The stool test was to confirm the results of my private stool test. I knew this wasn't necessary, since my private test was obviously far more detailed and sophisticated than anything the NHS could do, but for some reason my GP needed an NHS test

before he could do anything about it. I asked him over the phone, ‘Will this one test for Enterobacter?’

‘Yes,’ he said, sounding rather uncertain.

So I sent off another turd to be scrutinised by the white-coats. My stools were highly sought after. Everyone was interested in them! I had begun to wonder if my turds, being shipped around Europe in bio-hazard packages, were so toxic they couldn’t be weaponised. Now *that* would make a good season of 24.

They didn’t test for Enterobacter, like my doctor promised, but only the usual suspects of Staphylococcus, E. coli and two others whose names I can’t remember. Frankly, there’s no point obsessing about the names of these bacteria: it’s all the same shit.

I wasn’t going to let this drop. I was on the Hunt for Enterobacter (almost as tedious, pointless and painful as the Hunt for Red October). My mission in life was killing this bug. It was my invisible white whale and I was the Cap’n Ahab of gut fauna. As it turns out, I was right that the cause of the disease was inside of me, but totally wrong about Enterobacter. In my defence, I’m not a doctor, and I did actually find a cure in the end, where my doctors couldn’t (they didn’t even pretend to have a cure for what they suspected I had).

So I called my GP and asked him about Enterobacter again. He consulted a microbiologist who told him it was harmless. I wasn’t convinced. I wasn’t going to let this drop. Killing Enterobacter was my best hope for recovery at that time. If my GP couldn’t help me kill this sucker, I was going to find someone who would.