



# THE PERCH

VOL. 7 · SPRING 2024

## SUBSTANCE

# Cure for Pain

Allison Strong

**S**TANDING ON MY HEAD, my legs and feet bouncing off the top of the flimsy full-length mirror bolted to the back of the door, I see my bathroom floor up close: tiny strands of rotted black kelp, rings around the bottom of the toilet, and the chalky-white inside of half of a yellow pill that's probably last year's antidepressant. A Band Aid is stuck to the tile. This bathroom sees very little sun, so with my yoga pants and underwear down at my ankles — no wait, they're up around my ankles — my legs are cold and covered in goosebumps.

At least my double-action enema is warm. Thank God for small favors.

I'm upside down because the Fleet enema directions lie on your left side with your right knee pulled up to your chest with your arms folded comfortably position — won't cut it. Having taken pain meds for nearly ten years, I know a lot about enemas. Fleet only makes two kinds, saline and mineral oil. Yesterday, out of desperation, I purchased three double boxes of saline ones, poured the fluid halfway out, added mineral oil to the three-quarter mark, put the bottles back in the box and stacked them on the back of the toilet. Then, this morning, I brewed up some French Roast in the kitchen, topped off the bottles and here I am. Morning coffee chez moi.

I stand on my head until I get a crick in my neck. Then, I roll down and turn over to lie on my back, my feet halfway up against the mirror, my legs parted like wheelbarrow handles. Now my knuckles are free to knead my belly from pubis to rib cage, then side-to-side between my pelvic bones to replicate the washing machine motion of a healthy gut.

According to my Smartphone, I was on my head just shy of five minutes. The enema should have softened things up by now. I faithfully follow the directions, which say to get on the toilet, bear down and try to empty my bowel. The fluid flows out, absent any color or shred of fecal matter.

Shit. Now I'm going to have to repeat the process even though nowhere in the package insert does it say to do a second enema if the first one doesn't work. I can't do another headstand, though, that's out of the question.

I reach for a backup enema before going into the knee-chest position shown on the manufacturer's website. Blowjob position is more like it. Facing the wall, I get down on my knees and lower my head until the left side of my face presses down on the hard, Chiclet-sized floor tile and the layer of dirt and sand populating the grout. Great. Just great.

With steady pressure, gently insert enema tip into the rectum with a slight side-to-side movement. with the tip pointing toward the navel. Squeeze the bottle until nearly all liquid is gone.

Wait. Something's wrong. There's no warm fluid flowing into me. What the hell? When I pull the valve back out of my ass, I see the little orange cap I forgot to remove. God, I just can't concentrate. It's as though my every thought were being flattened by the weight of my upper body bearing down on my left cheekbone.

Having my head on the floor and my butt in the air keeps the ass-burning caffeinated slime from slipping out before it can loosen things up. When you're this constipated, time and gravity don't work in your favor. Gastroenterologists will tell you the colon's primary duty is to absorb fluid, so the longer you go without going, the drier, harder and more solidly blocked you get.

That's not what I want. I want the result promised on the green and white package. Fast relief in minutes. That's what I paid for. The package also says if you don't have a bowel movement within thirty minutes after the enema, then you should call a doctor.

That's how serious this is. It isn't just me.

The other issue is the pain in my lower back, which hates this position. My back problem is why I'm on pain pills to begin with, which is why I'm constipated, which is why I'm on my knees, my upper body bent forward and twisted like a pretzel.

Let me repeat myself: This isn't my fault. I have a bad back. A herniated disc to be exact. I need my pills, and I need them to work.

You could say I'm a professional patient. Getting ahold of those pills is my job. Well, one of them anyway. My other job is trying to stay alive. I'm not worried about dying of a drug overdose. My problem is, everything I've eaten the past three days is jamming up my gut, and my bathroom floor is strewn with sad, deflated enema works. If I can't take a shit after this, I should call a lawyer and sue Fleet for false advertising. At least I might get reimbursed for the cost of the enemas.

**You could say I'm a professional patient.  
Getting ahold of those pills is my job. Well,  
one of them anyway. My other job is trying to  
stay alive.**

I know what you're thinking. That I'm addicted to Oxy and abusing my meds. Wrong on both counts. I don't take OxyContin. Because of my bipolar disorder, my shrink put me on MS Contin, an older, slower-acting drug that he thought would be "less destabilizing," I think, is how he phrased it.

And I have to admit that before this constipation, I had the best of both worlds. By that I mean that for at least ten years, prescription opiates controlled my back pain with no ill effects.

Now, the only thing I can think of is the impossible need to relieve myself. I'm opiate-dependent, sick, and miserable, a total Florida stereotype. Not exactly what I had in mind when I thumbed through a travel brochure, thought the beach looked nice and relocated from San Diego fifteen years ago.

What Florida's tourism ads won't tell you is that over 85% of the nation's opiates during the early to mid-2000s flowed from the Sunshine State's pill mills, pharmacies, and wholesalers. Crooks, really, whose greed ruined compassionate pain care for people like me who need it.

Still, my husband and I love living near the water.

When two rays of morning sunlight reach through the tiny porthole of my bathroom window, I'm reminded of the time. But wait — here come the belly cramps. We're looking good. Yay! On wobbly legs, I stand for a second before throwing myself on the mercy of my old avocado-green toilet. This time, I really am taking a shit. It's the orgasmic kind that comes in waves. And then I'm done. Wipe, wipe, wipe again for good measure, turn around and flush.

There's a soft knock at the bathroom door and my husband's gentle voice. "Allie, are you okay in there?"

**I spring in and out of an ice-cold shower, towel of in two seconds, and rush to pull some thick, somewhat leak-proof underwear up and over my waist. Using the toilet as a chair, I work my legs into a pair of jeans, which is the easy part.**

Sometimes, you've just got to lie. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'll be right out!"

I wouldn't have been in the bathroom all this time, except I need absolute privacy, even from my husband. Actually, especially from my husband.

I spring in and out of an ice-cold shower, towel of in two seconds, and rush to pull some thick, somewhat leak-proof underwear up and over my waist. Using the toilet as a chair, I work my legs into a pair of jeans, which is the easy part. Zipping them up over my bloated belly, well, that's a separate struggle. When I stand up and look in the mirror, I wince. My stomach is massive, and my face is practically purple from all the blood flow. For all my sex appeal, I might as well be in a pair of Depends.

Sliding into my flip-flops, I cruise towards the family room. Mike grabs my car keys from the mantle and the two of us walk out our front door. In the hall, he turns to me and smiles.

Then he asks, "Why is your face so red?"

"What do you mean?"

Mike knows about my constipation. How could he not? But he's not aware of the headstands, not yet. Still, with these long periods of time I'm stuck in the john, Mike knows something's up. The thing is, he also knows when to leave well enough alone. Thank goodness for that. In the elevator mirror, I can see his sweetly familiar face, all fragile and tense. Brow bags of concern compress his big, round swimming pool blues.

I'm a coward. Instead of dealing with it, as soon as the elevator opens, I speed walk through the lobby, my sandals slapping the soles of my feet.

Once we're in the car, I blast the stereo. When one of the presets lands on Led Zeppelin's "Misty Mountain Hop," Mike and I nod and grin move to the music.

Then I have to go and ruin the mood by gushing about my friend Fair, who Mike can't stand.

Fair says, "If I split my pills in half, I'll be able to go to the bathroom again. What do you think?"

Rolling his eyes, Michael slaps the steering wheel. Joking, he mimics me, making air quotes with his eyes. "Fair says, Fair says. You act like Fair's the Second Coming. How come when I suggest the same things, you shoot them down?"

This freezes me, because it's true. Michael is "my person," but my BFF has a bigger piece of me than he's comfortable with. It's like being the toy the children won't share. To be fair, Michael's super tolerant. In all the years we've been together, Fair is the only person, place, or thing he's ever objected to. Anyway, Fair's idea of cutting my dose in half is great.

Why didn't I think of it myself?

Because. when it comes to prescriptions, I'm a druggie do-bee. Mood stabilizers, antidepressants, antipsychotics, I sometimes wonder if I've been brainwashed into needing these pills. And my pain management specialist prescribes 180 mg of MS Contin to be taken once a day, plus a separate prescription for Percocet to be taken whenever I have breakthrough pain. Needless to say, this isn't working out too well.

Something has to change. There's got to be a better way. A cure is too much to ask for, but maybe something that will control pain without killing me first.

Shit. 🐢