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A String of Saliva

A series of poor choices resulting in mono,
a trip to the hospital, and an attempt to
determine how the hell this happened

Ashley Kasha



I can't breathe. My eyes dart open, and I attempt to sit up in sheer terror, but my limbs are paralyzed. The little strength I have drains from my body; my nose is completely stuffed up. My mouth feels like sandpaper, and every time I make an effort to swallow, hundreds of swords poke me. Saliva is nonexistent. I tear up uncontrollably and try to call the nurse, yet barely a whisper is released. The nurse runs in and explains that she is going to put a fast-acting steroid in my IV to open my throat again. She inserts it and everything begins to blur. I close my eyes and my consciousness fades.



Layout by Doris Dorval.

I know I did this to myself. It started when I lost my voice, my nose became stuffed, I coughed constantly, my throat ached, and my lymph nodes started to swell. When I finally decided to go to the doctor, they broke the news that I had mononucleosis, popularly known as the kissing disease. Caused by the Epstein Bar virus, it is passed from person to person by saliva from kissing, sharing food, sharing drinks, or even sipping from the same straw. In my case, I got it from kissing. Before college, I only had one boyfriend and kissed a total of maybe four people. But once I got here, I spiraled out of control. Honestly, I don't even know why I

did what I did. I made a mistake. Well technically, I made eleven mistakes that led me to Crouse Hospital. I just wish I knew which guy gave me mono.

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Number 7:

This is by far the sweatiest party I have ever been to. I feel a bead of sweat drip from my upper brow and onto my arm. A wall of people encases me in the corner of the room, and there is no way I can get out of here at this point. A really tall guy in a Ras-tafarian sweatshirt stumbles over to me and pulls me in to dance. I'm drunk, so I decide to let him kiss me. His kiss tastes like weed and vodka. He is so drunk that he stumbles and almost drags me down. My friends keep asking me if I'm alright and I say yes. After a few minutes, I decide I've had enough; I weave my way through the crowd to the other side of the house, hoping to never see him again.

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"Yep, you have mono," the doctor says as I sit in an office at Health Services on campus.

Sitting in complete shock, I am unable to move any part of my body. I thought mono was supposed to feel like death, but I'm still a functional human being.

"You've had it for a while. That's why the test came back positive," the doctor continues. "Do you want a pass to get out of classes?"

I shake my head no. *I need to power through this.* The doctor hands me a sheet that reads, "HEALTH FAX: Mononucleosis." She also tosses me a ginger ale and some crackers as if it's a consolation.

Walking back to the atrium, I am com-

pletely disheveled. My next class is in half an hour and an exam awaits me. I have mono and a fever of 102. My phone buzzes. The group chat with my friends blows up with texts reading, "PARTY THIS WEEK-END?" and "WHEN ARE WE GETTING DRINKS?" I turn off the notifications and shove the phone back into my pocket. My mind wanders to the numerous papers I have to write, the novel I need to finish reading, and the PowerPoint presentation I am supposed to give in two days. My eyes begin to fill up with tears that I refuse to let fall. *What will people think of me?*

I walk to the corner where I see my friend from stats, Number 4. His bright blue eyes are looking down at his laptop, and his wavy brown hair is hidden underneath a backwards baseball cap.

"Oh my God, what's wrong with you?" he says after seeing the distress drawn on my face.

"I just found out that I have mono," I croak.

I sit down and rustle through my ratty purple backpack to find my stats notebook.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. You're going to get through this," Number 4 comforts. *Why is he even being like this?* He hasn't been this friendly to me in over a month since we hooked up. I could have given it to him! *Oh my God, I could have given it to him.* After a few minutes, Number 4 finally succeeds in calming me down and helps me cram for stats.

"Well, hopefully I didn't give you mono," I grimace.

"It's been like a month. I think I'll be fine," he chuckles.

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Number 4:

I sit on the bed in my dorm, side by side with my friend from stats. We laugh at our stupid mistakes, and I playfully yell at him for leading me astray on the last problem. I admit this is flirty banter; we see each other almost every day, and I need him to teach me stats. *Nothing will happen.* I will not let anything happen.

We finish our homework and lean back against the wall. He starts leaning closer to me. *This is fine.* Friends do that. He rests his leg on mine. *This is fine.* We're just pals. He rests his head on my shoulder. *This is fine.* Maybe he's tired? Oh no, he is leaning his head in. *Do not do this. I repeat, do not do this.* I look into his eyes. *Oh God, they're blue. I've never noticed that before.* Their crisp color is piercing, and his wavy brown hair is tousled so effortlessly. *I can't do this.* He continues to lean in, and finally I can't take it. I turn my head and kiss him.

We have only made out for a few seconds before I realize what we have done. I have ruined everything. No more flirty banter. Now it's going to be weird. *Why can't I just be friends with a boy and leave it at that?* I pull back.

"Wait! We can't do this. We see each other three times a week for hours. We sit next to each other in two classes. We can't make this weird!" I exclaim.

"That's okay. Let's just keep it simple. Can you do that?" Number 4 asks.

"Okay. Yes, I can," I agree mostly because I really want to kiss him again now that I know what I'm missing.

I'm not really sure what "keep it simple" means but I go along with it. We continue making out. I know I've made a bad decision, but I've run out of rationales. *This is fine.*

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I lie in my bed unable to move. My mouth is dry, and I am so thirsty. I want juice, but can't get it because it is in the fridge located just five feet away. I can't do it. I won't make it. My bed is too tall, and I am too weak. *I need help.* Going to the hospital may be necessary. My family can afford it; it's no big deal.

Health Services arranges for me to be picked up at my dorm and driven to urgent care. I stay in my pajamas and take my phone at just 8%. *I won't need a charger because I won't be gone long.* After slowly crawling out of my bed, I decide that I am strong enough to walk down the stairs to the lobby. I must look ridiculous hugging the walls to stay upright while wearing my blue shorts with white dogs and an oversized white T-shirt. I just need to make it downstairs to get some help.

Before I know it, I'm sitting in an uncomfortable plastic chair in a crowded waiting room. I slump against my seat and almost fall over. *I think I'm going to pass out.* I don't understand why I have to wait. *Can't they tell this is serious?*

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Number 8:

"You girls look like you could use a drink," Number 8 says to me and my friends.

His facial features are barely visible in the very dark and crowded DJ's, a local bar.

"I need a drink," I announce.

I leave my friends and follow him to the bar. We stand there as drunken hordes push their way to the front of the line. He stands behind me, crossing his arms in front of me and around my waist. Eventually, the bartender agrees to help us. We move through the sweaty sea of people, back to my friends,

where I'm now obligated to dance with him.

Number 8 leans his head to the side, and I know he wants to kiss me. I give in. Within three seconds it becomes incredibly clear that Number 8 does not understand how to make out with someone. I feel like a puppy is drooling on me, so I pull away to wipe a chunk of saliva off my lip.

Looking over at my friends, I call, "Hey guys, do you need to go to the bathroom?"

They take the hint and follow. I promise him that I'll be right back, but I have no intention of returning.

I know I didn't want to kiss him, yet I still did it. Alcohol could not have been my only motivator. *Why do I do this? What am I seeking?* Do I need the approval of guys to heighten my own image of myself, even guys I have no intention of ever dating?

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"We've reviewed your blood work. Your liver is severely inflamed and you are extremely dehydrated. We are transferring you to the ER to be observed overnight," the doctor tells me in a tiny examination room.

"What?" I barely muster. *I can't be this sick.*

The nurse comes in and says it's time to go, pushing me in a wheelchair with my IV through the hospital to my new room in the ER. *This place is massive.* The walls and floors are a worn down blue and little snippets of color peep out here and there in the form of children's drawings and flyers. An old man passes by me on a stretcher as he mumbles something in a foreign language. A young couple in ratty jeans and ripped sweaters hold hands with a young girl and tell her everything is going to be okay.

The nurse pushing my wheelchair mentions that they were low on beds, and I

could be getting the last one. *Do I even deserve it?* It's becoming clearer that there are so many people around me that could use the bed more. I look down at the floor and refuse to make eye contact with any of the other patients.

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Numbers 9 and 10:

After walking around for nearly an hour and fearing that we will never find a party, we finally find success at a frat on Euclid. I grab a drink and look around the party. For now, I'm just going to dance with my friends and have a boy-free night.

I am not very good with that promise. Within minutes, Number 9 is dancing with me. Looking around anxiously, I fear my friends will be mad at me for going for a guy when I previously made a big deal about being independent. Number 9 wants to kiss me but I can't mess things up. I'm way too drunk for this though, and I give in to swapping saliva with him. Within minutes I realize this is a bad idea. I move away to dance with my friends and decide to try this whole "boy-free" thing again.

Number 10 comes over and dances with me. He can't keep rhythm to save his life, but he's attractive enough. He leans in to kiss me. I pull away and look to my left only to see my friends staring directly at me.

"Let's get out of here," he says. "Wanna come back to my room?"

"No, I don't know you. I can't do that."

Going to sleep will help me forget this whole night happened.

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I finally decide it's time to go to sleep, and I lean back. The IV inserted in my left arm means I can't move too much. *I'll be able to get*

comfortable soon. Every time I lean my head back further, I am met by an unwelcome cough attack. I shut my eyes again, genuinely thinking I've forgotten how to fall asleep. I let my cough attack come and close my eyes yet again.

When they open, I'm greeted by a frantic nurse who starts asking me if I need anything. She fiddles with my IV; I begin to tell her to stop when I blink my eyes a few times and realize that she isn't there. *But it felt so real.* I force my eyes closed again, and this time my group from my business class is sitting on my bed yelling at me for not showing up to my presentation. *How did they get here?* I blink rapidly again, and all of a sudden, they vanish as well. I am alone in this room with my cousin Jessica, who drove all the way from Albany. No one else is here. I get a few more coughs out of my system and force my eyelids closed yet again, knowing all too well that trying to sleep is futile.

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Numbers 5 and 6:

I get in line for the bar and am greeted with a cup of jungle juice. Its bright red color is appealing, yet I am not fooled. I know this is filled with an obscene amount of alcohol, but I do not care. *This is fine.* To say I'm just buzzed is an understatement, which is why I do not reject a guy when he comes over to dance with me. His face hides behind a red baseball cap. I glance over to my friends, hoping they'll give me a signal that he's cute. They nod and smile, so he must be attractive. I continue dancing with a drink in one hand and not a care in the world.

"What's your name?" I finally ask him after the song ends.

Number 5 somehow takes this as the go ahead to kiss me because next thing I know

we're swapping saliva. After just a moment, I turn around and my friends are signaling me to leave. Number 5 and his friends decide to tag along.

We finally arrive at the very familiar hockey house. I walk inside the enclosed porch and sit on the windowsill. After a few moments, a very attractive guy makes his way over to me with his friend. I look up and see my friend Katie standing in front of me. Her eyes are gaping and her smile is uncontrollably wide. She wants to get another drink, so I get up and walk with her to the bar, as Number 6 follows.

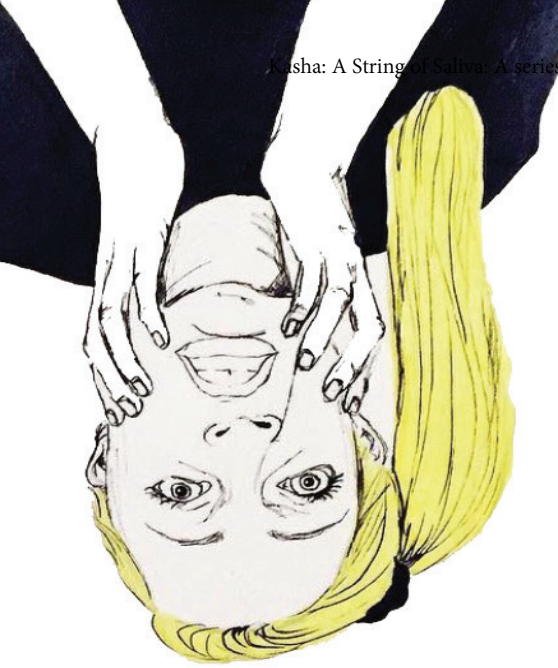
A bit later, we walk back to the windowsill, but somewhere in the ten feet between the bar and porch he stops, and looks into my eyes. I move my head towards him and we make out. This may be the jungle juice talking, but he is honestly the best kisser I have ever welcomed saliva from. I retreat for just a second and look up only to see Number 5 standing near the doorway looking straight at me. *Whoops. Sorry, pal.* I close my eyes again and continue kissing Number 6.

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All the steroids must be going to my head. Everything is blurring around me, and I don't even notice that they've switched my room until the nurse points it out. Apparently my cousin left early in the morning only to be replaced by my dad. He sits in the corner, brown eyes intent on me. I finally awaken after a coughing attack I had this morning. After fluttering my eyes open, I make eye contact with him. *He must be hungry.*

"Do you want some Swedish Fish?" I ask him, looking over at the leftover candies on the table that I am no longer able to eat.

"That's the first thing you say to me?" he



laughs. After a beat, his smile curls inward and his eyes begin to narrow. “You know, they almost put a breathing tube down your throat this morning. They are going to keep you here a few days to monitor that, and they still may have to do it.”

“Oooh, that’s not good,” I chuckle and close my eyes.

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“You can go home,” the nurse says.

I’m free. I’m finally free after four painful days. My dad comes over to help me out of bed, and we walk down the halls and out of the building, where I see the world carrying on without me. We hop into the car and begin to drive away. Rain drops patter on the windshield, and I lean my head against the window. The rearview mirror reflects my image, a very pale, emaciated face, with brown glassy eyes locked in a haze.

As we leave, I can’t help but think about

how I screwed up. I put a strain on my parents by needing them to fly three thousand miles to take care of me for twelve days and pay my hospital bills. I put a strain on my friendships by burdening them to babysit me when I couldn’t do ordinary things on my own. I think of all the parties I attended, the drinks I downed, the boys I kissed, and all the saliva that was exchanged. *Why did I even do this?* I shake my head. It’s time to own up to my mistakes and make a fresh start. Take 3 of the “boy-free” thing starts now.

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Number 1:

My friends and I enter the lacrosse house. With this being my first college house party, I don’t know what to expect. Nearby, a tall blonde woman with a nose piercing is grinding on some short guy. Another couple is making out painfully close to me. *I could never imagine doing that with someone I just met.* I’ve never been the hookup type. The music gets louder, or at least I get drunker. All of a sudden, I feel a guy dancing against me. *Do I turn around and see what he looks like? Or do I just continue dancing?* Thankfully I’m drunk enough to let the paranoia fade away.

Suddenly, he begins to turn his head towards mine and lean downwards. *Does this mean he wants to kiss me?* I have never kissed a stranger, and my stomach begins to churn. *I don’t know if I can go through with this.* As I turn around, I spot my roommate making out with some guy. Two of my other friends are taking turns making out with some lacrosse guy in the corner. *Screw it, I’m going to kiss him.* I turn my body towards him, and lean in. What’s the worst that could happen from just one kiss?

Illustration by Tori Thomas.