

The SJ Guide to Life by Nina Reece.

*Welcome back to The Sabrina James Guide to Life Vol II. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you, the listeners, for checking in each day. Don't forget! If you missed episodes one to three of this volume 'Hospitals', you can catch up now online. If you missed out on Volume One, 'Fathers' then tough. That podcast has mysteriously disappeared cause well, that's just what they do. Today, on episode four...*

But I can't record and plan out my route at the same time, so I press pause and look up at the map. Each hospital wing has a colour connected by matching lines, so that people (or, the terminally stupid), can get about. Even this map looks like a brain. Hundreds of thin lines and coloured patches, pink zone connects to orange connects to green, connects to yellow; miles of pathways branching out and through a maze of parts and bits and rooms. The brain of an average person has about 86 billion nerves in it: neurons, axons and dendrites, all linked by 100,000 miles of synapses—about as far as I've walked around this bloody hospital (a conservative estimate). I skim my nail across the plastic, checking off completed wards in my head. Maternity (pink), episode one— but basically Fort Knox, had to sit outside and make most of it up; Outpatients (blue), episode two— brilliant, pure weirdos and chavs; Limb Fitting (purple), episode three, chucked out after trying to interview a paraplegic—and GUM, (brown). Are they for real? A brown zone, for the clap clinic? That is too good. Might even get some real live human being listeners! I press record, and whisper.

*...Today in episode four I'll be guiding you through the broooown zooone, yes that's right kids, put on your best pants — we're going to the clap clinic! Pause. Bit raspy, but I'll redo it later. Just need to get my thoughts down. Might have to scratch that bit anyway, no one calls says 'clap clinic' these days. Mum would. I turn around, that bitch-faced receptionist is eyeing me again. She gets a pin up smile and the middle finger, then I'm off. I*

am a web radio superstar, a hospital expert, a life expert, phone at the ready, *ideas* at the ready, stomping down the brown line with a flick in my hips.

*When arriving at a hospital main entrance, do not approach the receptionist. The chances are, your previous hospital experience is limited to frantic visits to A&E after having chopped off a finger (middle class listeners) or getting in a fight (everyone else). An A&E receptionist is calm, cool. She doesn't have time to be rude, she's got to help save lives goddamit! The main hospital receptionist is bored, mean, and normally has a mouth like a dried up grape. Steer clear!* Hmm, but maybe this bit is too specific to this hospital, her hospital. Maybe I need to keep it more general, or people won't believe me. I want them to believe me. I'm only doing this for them. I want to share my knowledge, so others can learn from it. I'm basically the digital Marie Curie. The last episode got three likes *and* a retweet. People are basically eating it up, I may even submit this for my media coursework.

*Listeners. The average hospital receptionist wants simply to ask you bags of questions that you do not want to answer: 'Name please, no— name of the person you're visiting. Date of Birth? No, their date of birth. Do you know what ward they're in? Are you the next of kin? No? Then what is your relationship to the patient? Your name please. Visiting hours are over now I'm afraid, and you can't take food on to the ward.' And on, and on, and ON until you just wanna give up and go home! The thing is, if you're not going in through A&E or Outpatients, the chances are your sick person is proper sick. You're gonna be here a lot, so don't panic about not knowing your way around the first time. Take a deep breath, say something like 'Right', and just head for the big old map.*

To get there, I have to walk through the central atrium and pass a florist, a Costa, a WH Smiths, a beauty salon and an escalator. The security guard needs to turn down his radio, the 'bleep... bleep' sounding way too much like a respirator, and how many patients actually use that beauty salon? *Nothing like a post-haemorrhoidectomy manicure.* The sweet smell of

flowers and coffee and are almost enough to make you forget where you are, but I've listened to the conversations around this place and I can tell: people are scared. This isn't a shopping centre, and they should really stop pretending it is, stupid silly escalator. Then, occasionally, you get someone like that woman in Costa; spindly arms sticking out of her hospital gown, bandaged feet wedged into bashed up slip-ons, wincing with tiny each step, and you think yes—*exactly*.

*A human brain is amazing. It has all these trillions of pathways and functions. You can imagine yourself in any life, at any point and everyone is fair game. I could literally be that poor old woman, right now. I could pretend to queue and shuffle and wince, and inside I'd be laughing, and imagining what everyone else is thinking as they watch, and all that time, if it was working properly, my brain would still be telling my heart to beat, and my lungs to breathe, and my eyes to blink.. But I'm not going to be that woman. Today, I'm going to be 'sexually active'.*

I get handed a clipboard and sit down under a poster that says 'HPV- Know the Facts.' The form itself, could be a whole podcast. Name? Fine, Sabrina James— (aka @truthurtz, aka gal-on-the-ward slash host-with-the-most). Address? Easy! Age? nine-fuckin-teen, a fully-grown woman. Date of birth? I actually quite like forms! Do you have any symptoms? What! Er, I don't think so. But I am tired, and my appetite's like, disappeared. But they don't mean that. They mean like, lumps, and bumps and... itching. How much detail are you supposed to write down? And say you don't have any symptoms, but you do have lunch plans—do you just say you have symptoms to get seen faster? But then, if they examine you and you're all clear, then they'd know you'd lied, and *then* you could be barred, barred from the clinic! Shame. This bit would be like:

*Do not be put off by the form, listeners. Honesty is not the best policy here. In fact, the more fucked up you say you are, the better. Get behind the blue curtain and figure it out from*

*there, no sense mucking around— cause let's be honest, if you do have chlamydia, you've got a lot to do. You have to call everyone you've ever slept with AND TELL THEM. There will be anger and humiliation, you'll wanna hit the nearest bar pretty quick, and ideally all before Eastenders, so basically, get on with it. Also, eye contact. Don't make any, with anyone. Everyone knows why we're here and no one wants to think about it. Definitely don't make eye contact with starey guy. He seems to be using the GUM clinic as a hunting ground for traumatised chicks and that is just plain nasty. Also, do not make eye contact with crying on the phone girl. Crying girl probably thinks she's pregnant and is right now going through all the possible outcomes of that with her mate, stay well away! Definitely, definitely, don't make any eye contact with the couple. There is always one couple. They are almost always straight, butt-ugly, and one of them is furious. This time it's the girl. Though, to be fair, she probably had better things to do with her morning than heave her legs into metal stirrups and have a cotton bud shoved up her peach.*

‘Sabrina James? Sabrina James please?’

My doctor is at least a hundred. The skin around her eyes is lighter than the rest of her face, and her big blonde bouffant hair doesn't move when she does. At least it's a woman, I suppose. Nobody likes a male fanny doctor-slash-blatant weirdo.

‘Sabrina. My name is Dr Shea. I'm going to ask you a few questions about your sexual health,’ she begins. I know what she's thinking. She has those mini glasses on, right low on her nose, and she has raise her head to look at you like mum does when she's trying to decide if you've been crying or if you're just stoned.

‘Since sexual health is very important to overall health, I ask all my adult patients these questions. Before I begin, do you have any questions or concerns, that you'd like to discuss?’ Adult, like it. I wonder if I can ask what an orgasm actually is?

‘No’, I reply, confident: ‘Just a routine checkup please.’

‘Okay. Have you been sexually active in the last year?’

‘Yes.’

‘Lovely. Now, do you have sex with men, women, or both?’

‘Well, only men so far— but I do love that ‘*L Word*’ show so I mean, who knows’.

I laugh. She doesn’t.

‘In the last twelve months, how many sexual partners have you had?’

‘I think, seven.’

‘You think?’

‘Yeah. Because, if you were about to have sex but he, like— finished, before, actually getting inside your—‘

‘Um, okay— yes. I shall put down seven’

‘Okay. No one else sees this do they?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘These answers. No one else sees my answers but you, do they?’

‘No, Sabrina. Everything you talk about in this room is confidential.’

‘Good. Then, um, put down nine.’

‘Nine. Okay. And do you have vaginal sex, oral sex, anal sex, or all of the above?’

‘Um... all of them.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘All of them, the things— that you just said.’

‘Lovely. Okay. Sabrina, have you ever been paid for sex?’

‘No! I mean—I expect like, toast, or whatever, the next day.’ She doesn’t even crack a smile. Maybe she doesn’t know what an orgasm is either!

‘And... have you ever injected drugs, or had sex with a known drug user?’

‘Well. I mean *I* haven’t, but I have been with some pretty out there guys. None that I

like, *knew* were on drugs or anything, but some definitely looked like they could have been. But not in that, like smacked out, Howard Marks kind of way— more in kind of a bad boy, Jonny Depp or like a Pete Doherty pre-Kate type vibe you know?’

‘...Right. So, you’ve never known any of your sexual partners to inject intravenous drugs?’

‘Not like, in front of me, no.’

‘Okay Sabrina, just a few more questions. Have you ever had sex with anyone from Sub-Saharan Africa?’

‘Well,’ I say ‘There was this guy called Tick.’

‘I’m sorry, Tick?’

‘Yeah, DJ Tick? He is this musician from Africa who was all aloof for the first five months of us knowing each other. We used to hang out down at this place in Stokey, one night everyone just left super early and it was just me and him. Obviously, stuff happened. It wasn’t a one night stand or anything though, we dated for a good month.’

‘And, where was Tick from, Sabrina?’

‘Oh! Chiswick. But his parents were Nigerian.’

‘...Right. Okay, and when was the last time you had sex?’

‘On Friday.’

‘And, did you use protection?’

‘Yes.’

‘And was it with a regular partner?’

‘Yes.’

‘And do you know if your partner has any other sexual partners?’

‘No. I don’t think so. We’re exclusive. Not like official official but like not seeing other people, I don’t think’.

‘...Okay. So, shall I put down, no?’

‘Um, yeah maybe put down no. And I’ll ask him, but like, in a subtle way.’

‘Okay, thank you Sabrina. If you’d just like to pop behind the blue curtain and undress from the waist down, I’ll return when you’re ready to begin the examination’.

This is the bit where you get an actual, qualified professional to check out your bits and tell you if they’re normal! They may say they’re looking for spots and funny smells but we both know, I just want to make sure she doesn’t jump back at the sight of it. I unlace my trainers and tug off my jeans, slide my Nikes under the plastic chair by the gurney and fold my jeans on top of it. I slip off my knickers and chuck them on top, but they look weird, grey and white polka dots all girly and twisted, so I tuck them under the jeans instead. Wouldn’t want Dr Shea to see them, which is super dumb. I lie down, keeping my phone close, and imagine.

*‘Stirrups’ are two giant metal spider’s legs with a plastic knee rest to hinge your leg over and a leather strap at the bottom where you put your foot. They look like a torture machine. Lever yourself into them too soon, and you’re split right open, pubes in the breeze before your doctor has even entered. She says she’s leaving so you can get dressed but she’s not. She’s leaving so that you can get into the stirrups in private cause she knows you’re gonna have to baby giraffe your way in there and no one wants to see that.*

‘Sabrina, are you ready?’ her voice makes me jump. As I’ll ever be Doc. She comes in, asks me to ‘pop’ my legs into the stirrups and covers me from the waist down with a piece of blue paper. My knees are high and the paper works like a tent, blocking out my own view of my bits. All I can see is Dr Shea’s blond hair bobbing up and down as she checks me out.

‘So Sabrina, what do you do?’

Why do people ask teenagers that question? Well Dr, mainly I sit on my arse, try to ponce fags off people I don’t know, loaf around my local shopping centre and take selfies. It’s a key

role, and I hope to be take it further in the near future.

‘I’m a student.’

‘Oh right, and what do you study?’

‘I’m doing my A levels? Media, Drama, and Business.’

‘Oh right. That’s a heady mix! Just shift your bum up for me, that’s great’.

‘Yeah. The business part was my Mum’s idea. She reckons I need at least one subject that’s not too airy fairy.’

‘Media isn’t airy fairy now is it? Nor is drama when you think about it. All those actors in films must work very hard to be so convincing. It’s not easy, it’s a real skill—you’ll just have to make your mum see that.’

‘She can’t see a lot these days. And what about the sex scenes? Can you imagine being that close to someone you hardly know, someone naked, and not actually having sex? And being surrounded by other people and lights and cameras and everything? But not actually having sex?’

‘Well. Just because you get naked with someone doesn’t mean you have to have sex now does it? Sometimes all the other things the things you do before sex, that’s what’s really enjoyable now isn’t it? I’m just popping the speculum in now dear, it will feel cold.’

‘Yeah, but— ah!’

‘Sorry.’

‘S’alright. But, that’s the main point of it isn’t it? That’s what you’re both doing there really, normally, not on a film set I mean. You’re both there to have the sex and the other stuff is just— preamble.’

‘Maybe. But I grew up in the sixties dear. We placed a lot of importance on the preamble, we practically discovered it. There! All done!’

‘How does it look?’

‘Just fine dear, all completely normal and healthy’.

‘Makes a change’, I mumble.

‘Sorry?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Ok. You can get dressed now. You’ll have the results in three weeks.’

Back on the brown line, top notch bits and oodles of material. I must remember everything. I’m getting my phone out to record my thoughts pronto when there it is. Big and cold, silver and scary. I panic.

*At the lifts you will have to make a choice. Do you press the down arrow, wait for the doors, slide in, squeeze your eyes shut to block out the guilt all the way down, then step on to the purple line, and follow it right back round to the main entrance, leave, breathe, and tell yourself you’ll come back tomorrow? Or, do you press the arrow pointing up? If you do this, if you go up, be aware that like the one you should currently be on, the top floors in a hospital are no joke. Be aware, that at some point in this lift, you will probably be joined by a gurney. Maybe you’ll be lucky and it will be empty, stripped of rough sheets and thin mattress, a simple frame pushed along by a simple orderly. Then the only thing you will have to think about is where this particular gurney has come from, and whether or not the sheets had to be burnt because they were covered in blood, and gunk, and shit, where it’s going now, and what will be wrong with the next person to lie on it. But if you are not lucky, the gurney won’t be empty. It will be heavy, weighed down as it is with a whole human being, and the orderly will be hefting it in, bumping it over the tiny gap between the corridor and the lift floor, and the sick person lying on it will say ‘uh!’ and their IV bag will start to swing as they roll their head towards you, lips gaping open, sweat on their forehead, and you will notice they’re kind of yellow and their fingers are twitching, and that the cannula shoved into the back of their hand, is thickening up one vein all blue and now chunky, under a square of*

*clear tape that looks so much tougher than the skin itself. And you will wonder if, when they take it off, any of the skin will come with it.*

I breathe in, press the arrow pointing up, and take it all the way to the tenth floor for Ward 10 Neurosciences. Away from the florists and the Costa, there is nothing to mask the sting of antiseptic that tells you that you are in a hospital, and people here are dying. But there's something else. Something musty, like a charity shop, a mix of mothballs and old wee, like all the lonely old dead people left their smell behind on the way out. The lights are dim. If you try you can hear the *shhku* of the respirator plugged in to the old woman in the private room at the far end of the ward. You can hear the TV in the TV room which no one ever watches. You can hear the burst air bubble in my trainer squeaking as I walk across the smudgy floor.

'Hi Sabrina'.

'Hi.'

'You're late today.'

'Yeah.'

'How are you?'

'I'm good thanks, how is she?'

'Um...'

'Right.'

'She's fine, she's just— you know. Bored.'

'Yeah.'

'She'll be glad you've come. What happened yesterday? And Monday?'

'College stuff. I've got a lot on.'

'Of course. Well, I think she's awake.'

'Thanks.'

Sometimes you wonder, about who designs hospitals. Who chooses the decor, the colours, the flooring? Who chose the glass panels in this door? Who decided, that it would be a good idea, to go for the glass embedded with these dark grid lines like a maths book? I pause outside the room with my palm on the handle. She's in there with dull brown hair that used to be so bushy, and a too-big head lolling to one side, and skin that's almost green now, and her mouth is turned down at the sides and I swear she looks even worse than two days ago and this place is making her sicker and through this fucking door she almost looks like she's in prison. Which is funny, cause—she kind of is.

*This is your last chance listener. If you get to this point, and you can't do it, you just can't face your sick person and you want to run away, and maybe come back tomorrow instead, you better do it now.* I push down on the handle, and go in.

'Hello love,' she croaks at me, 'How was college?'

I look at her, with the bag full of wee strung up next to her bed, and the wheelchair collapsed in the corner, and the get well cards that are so bright but are just sad because I know she probably can't even see them and yes the brain is amazing but it's also dumb cause when it stops working its too amazing to just be fixed. She'll want to hear all about my day, and my friends, and what I've been writing recently, and I know I won't tell her so I just say:

'Fine Mum. It was great, really.'