

PROLOGUE

I had leukemia. I had it and now I don't and that should be that. Only it's not. It's a memory that won't go away. Not a haunting memory, not a slow-motion replay of a rear-end collision where you find yourself clenching your arms against the seat, looking back over your shoulder for the too-fast car that isn't there. No. Leukemia is vague with occasional flashes of coherence. It is a constant hum.

During the summer of 1992, not even two full years after my last stay in the hospital, I would be sitting on the back porch with Dad and Jane – all of us sharing sections from the thick Sunday paper, arguing over who would get the comics first – when a palpable memory would surprise me. I would not be expecting it, and the memories were still so fresh.

Perhaps one of my legs had fallen asleep, or the coffee had cooled slightly, a tight bitter taste. Something: a glint of sunlight reflecting off Green Lake down the hill. *Anything*. There would be a sudden flash in my brain, telling me that the tingling sensation was *exactly* the way my legs felt after those first seven weeks at the University of Washington Medical Center: emaciated, weak, thin, practically useless. They wobbled when I tried walking up the stairs after I'd finally made it back home. That feeling would come crashing down around me. I would be sitting in a comfortable chair on the back porch with my parents, warm morning sun pouring through the windows, good coffee, all of that, but suddenly my legs are

once again beyond weak and tired, a memory of such aching, exhausted pain.

I'd stare through the newspaper. And then I'd be tasting the chemo again, tasting it bad like it was during those earliest weeks. Maybe I'd feel a quick rush, a hot spurt in my veins of something, I don't know what or why, and I'm flat on my back again, in this claustrophobic subterranean hospital room, one of many faceless nurses standing at my side. She is pushing iodine into my bloodstream so the CAT scan images will be clearer, all because of mystery fevers out of nowhere, again and again, this time well into my final round of chemotherapy. Only now my doctors and nurses and family and everyone else are all but certain — *shh, don't tell anyone* — that the solution to the mystery is that my fevers are starting from somewhere inside my skull.

These were real. Tangible. It doesn't do them justice to simply call them "memories." The colors would be so clear, the smells, the sounds, the heat in my veins, that nasty metallic taste, and then quiet fucking tears that would need to be blinked away before Dad or Jane might notice.

The constant hum of leukemia would transform into a brief shout.

Pay attention, it says. Do not forget me. I can make your body remember, even if your mind wants to forget.

As if I could.

I'm talking with Mom, in that same hazy summer after graduating from Carleton, a couple of years after everything. We'd be talking in the kitchen at the new house her and Paul had recently moved into up the hill near Fairwood. She's working on a grocery list, standing in front of the refrigerator with a small note pad, opening and closing cupboards almost at random, adding more items to her list. I'm leaning up against the corner by the double sinks, swishing a glass of water around, listening to the ice clank against the sides, asking her what she thinks about insurance. We would talk about this fairly often after graduation. It concerns me, my

inability to find medical insurance with such an ominous pre-existing condition. COBRA won't last forever. I'm an adult, now. Didn't get into grad school. Don't have a full-time job. What am I supposed to do if I can't find a "real" job? I sure as hell can't afford insurance premiums if I keep waiting tables or working shitty office temp jobs in downtown Seattle. The clock is ticking.

I'm not even paying much attention to what I'm saying, just random questions for her to field. She's *The Mom*, the solid, strong business woman. She knows about these things. But suddenly she's crying. Real tears, running fast, and they make me uncomfortable. "I'm sorry," she says. "It still surprises me how quickly they come. Just when I think I have it under control..."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be sorry, Robert. It's me."

Her memories, I think, are sometimes even stronger than mine. Or perhaps they are simply that much more painful. More painful to be on the outside looking in, unable to do anything but worry, unable to dab peroxide on a skinned knee. Leukemia is one thing that a mother cannot kiss and make better.

When I was in the hospital, both sets of parents encouraged me to take notes, keep a journal, anything to help me to remember what we were going through. There were so many free hours, so many days where I couldn't do anything but move from my bed to my bathroom and back again.

Just jot down some details, they'd suggested. Take your time. Write things down.

My sister's best friend had given me a new Sony Walkman during my first month in the hospital, one of many thoughtful gifts from many early visitors. It was an upgraded model, with an additional button to press that would allow me to speak into a small microphone at the bottom and record anything onto a blank cassette tape.

“I know you’ve been tired,” Sharon had said. “But you can still speak into this if you want, you know. You don’t even have to write. Just preserve the memories.”

Another acquaintance — a long-time friend and former secretary of my mother’s — had also been shopping. Everybody, it seemed, was on the same page. Working together to get me thinking about the words I should be putting to paper. She’d picked out a hard cover notebook with a marbled blue cover and clean blank pages to go along with a gorgeous Waterman pen, blue, medium point.

I appreciated all of it. *Really*. But I was always so fucking tired.

“Besides,” I’d told them, individually, collectively, “How could I possibly forget? This isn’t the sort of experience that’s likely to fade from memory anytime soon.”

“No, no,” they would respond. “That’s not what we meant. *Of course* you’ll never forget that you had leukemia. But you might forget the name of one particular doctor. Not all of them, but maybe one or two. Or the man who worked in Food Services, the one with the vast personal library of movies on VHS tape, black-and-white classics, mostly, bringing a new one for you to enjoy every day with your lunch. You might forget what he looks like, his name, the different movies he’d brought. Even the way your chest felt, remember, when it was swollen with blood? When you couldn’t stop bleeding after your Hickman catheter was put in? These things. These specific moments are the kinds of details that might vanish forever.”

“Oh. That’s it? Nothing to worry about,” I’d told them

I was twenty, twenty-one years old, as confident as one can be after enduring weeks of chemotherapy and complications.

“Don’t worry,” I’d said. “I’ll remember everything.”

Wrong.

I remember that I survived. I remember only a few of the most lucid dreams. Names have slowly disappeared behind a dark wall of fog.

Specifics, for the most part, elude me. Or maybe it's just that I haven't made sufficient attempts to dredge my memory yet.

One of my first doctors at the University of Washington Medical Center — young, tall, square-jawed and ruggedly handsome, like he'd stepped straight out of central casting for some popular weeknight drama — had told my parents that one of the likely side-effects of my steady diet of drugs could very well be memory loss.

“We'll be prescribing them primarily to fight infection,” he'd said. “That's our immediate, short term goal. In addition to providing his body with some much-needed protection against infection, they might well do a number on his memory. He may forget. Might not be such a bad trade-off, no? Some things are better left unremembered.”

This, then, will be my belated attempt to remember, so many years later. *I will write.* I will chase my memories, tackling them from behind if necessary, capturing them on paper. Hopefully they'll progress in a linear, chronological fashion, but no guarantees. Memories like Jackson Pollack. A burst of color there, a dribble of paint, more splashes in the corner because that red reminds me of this shade of crimson, and before long there's a complete picture: the story of my leukemia.

CHAPTER 1

Here is how it all begins: in darkness. In silence. Colors slowly bleed in from the sides, an out-of-focus jumble of greens and blues and whites. The camera sharpens. It's a panoramic view, a wide countryside. The hills are damp with recent rain. Imagine a camera slowly panning across miles of vibrant green farmland. Roll soundtrack: low horns and a rippling piano. Or, better, an instrumental from the eighties, something like New Order's *Elegia*. Something preposterously British.

An old farmhouse passes by the corner of your eye. A broken stone wall. A light mist hangs in the air, as if the evening is unable to decide whether to return to the rain from earlier in the day or to just let the clouds disappear into the night. There's still some light left, but it's fading fast. The camera stops to focus on a group of white buildings. They're planted along the crest of a gentle green hill. The buildings look a little out of place: very modern and angular, surrounded by the rustic countryside, acres of multi-colored farmland and hundred-year-old thatched roofs.

It is a university campus, this collection of buildings, with a visible central path running from north to south, like a spinal cord. The students will call it exactly this, *the Spine*, as they walk from one end of the university to another. The buildings are close together, a compact design. The setting sun breaks through a gap in the clouds, reflecting off a long row of

dormitory windows on the south end of the campus. The camera continues to zoom in, closer, slowly, closer, until the upper two-thirds of the screen are filled by an open ground-floor window.

The imaginary camera pushes through the curtains. The room is small. There is a narrow bed against the near wall to the right, and a kind of combination desk/bookshelf/wardrobe on the other. The room is no more than six feet or eight feet wide. A door is centered in the wall immediately opposite the window. There is a small sink and mirror next to the door, sandwiched in the tiny space between the end of the wardrobe and the interior wall.

It's not a sink you use for cooking. It's much too small for that. Some nights you come home late after drinking with your mates, and you've flopped down onto your bed, staring at the spinning spinning spinning white ceiling, wishing it would stop moving. You know you're not going to be able to stumble all the way down the hall to the common bathroom. The walls would probably be lurching from side-to-side anyway, taunting you. It's understood, right, that you maybe shouldn't have had those last two or three pints. But the boys were buying, and you were drinking, and now it's a little late to regret the fun you'd had.

The small sink in the corner is useful for brushing your teeth twice a day — for checking your hair before you go out at night, and for quick standing “showers” when you've overslept before class — but it's *especially* useful for emergency late-night vomiting.

There is a young man sitting at the desk in this narrow, nondescript dorm room. He's pushed the chair back onto two legs, so that it rests up against the bed immediately behind him. His eyes are closed, but the leg he's used to push off from the desk vibrates with nervous energy. Headphones are tucked into his ears, snaking down to a bright yellow Walkman in his lap. His head moves in time, almost imperceptibly, with the fading soundtrack.

This is his room. His story.

No. That's not right. This is *my* room. *This is my story.*

I am wearing shorts and a sweaty tee-shirt underneath an oversized (and well-soaked) Pendle College sweatshirt. My shoes are kicked into some corner or another. I don't really care. I've just returned from a short run. There is a winding two lane road that circles around the entire campus, just about a mile, a perfect loop for running. It's been an incredibly convenient route this past handful of months. I'm able to squeeze in a quick run any time of the day. I'll just lift up my window, crawl outside, and start running. Most days I'll double or even triple the loop. Headphones securely fastened, rain seeping into my arms and shoulders, sharp breaths cutting through the mist.

I'm in decent shape. Better than average. I've been working at it since I'd first come to Lancaster last October, the almost compulsory "junior year abroad" from my idyllic Midwest liberal arts college. I'm probably as fit as I've ever been, between regularly hitting the weights at the gym, practice and games with the volleyball club, early morning or late afternoon runs, not to mention a short-lived attempt to join the crew team (because what could be a more stereotypically British experience, I'd thought, than rowing along glassy rivers in and around Lancaster).

So I'm in pretty reasonably great shape, right, but I am absolutely *exhausted* after only a single lap outside my window. After only one stupid fucking mile.

I'm not sucking wind, not out of breath, but I'm still categorically wiped out. Beyond lethargic: I'm dead on my feet. It doesn't make any sense. That's why I'm sitting at my desk, leaning back onto two chair legs, trying to figure out what's wrong.

It's been at least the past few days — or maybe closer to a week, I don't know — that I've been feeling more beaten down than normal. Nothing obvious, nothing specific, just steadily higher levels of crushing fatigue. I

figure it's just how it gets sometimes, late winter, when you can feel a cold approaching, all scratchy throat and tired eyes and limbs. That's not to say that it is a cold, or the flu, or anything. It's probably just my body getting so sick and tired of the non-stop rain and fog and darkness, of a sun that sets so early in the day — especially this far north — that it's felt like weeks since I've last had so much as a glimpse of the sun.

And it *is* late February, too. I get that.

Plus, I haven't had the best sleeping habits, either, since I've been here. Lots of late nights out drinking and carousing with the boys.

This shitty feeling could be anything. A warning shot, I suppose, telling me to get some real rest, to give my body some time to recover or else I'll end up sniffing and coughing until things finally start to warm up a bit in March.

I know it could be any number of perfectly reasonable, perfectly rational things. My quick evening run was an attempt to push back. My show of strength.

Look, body, I'm in charge here. Understand? We're going to get outside, even if it's cold and wet, and we're going to run. And we are absolutely not going to whine or complain or get sick. You got that?

It was supposed to be three laps, three miles, but I'm back here at my desk after only one. I'm still tired, dragging, and feeling even worse than before I'd gone out. Some show of strength. My body has called my bluff.

I look down at my legs, twisting them around so I can see the backs of my calves and thighs. Then I look a little more closely at my arms and hands. It's not good. The front of the chair falls to the ground. Momentum carries my arms over to my desk. I reach out for my journal, flipping through pages of notes and sketches and unfinished poems until I find a blank page near the end. I uncap my pen, then take a deep breath. Several deep breaths. My eyes are closed. I'm deliberating. Delaying. Do I really want to write this down? I'm afraid, I think, that putting these thoughts to

paper will somehow give them substance. It will lend them a permanence that I'm not sure I'm ready to face.

I guess it doesn't really matter. I'm feeling what I'm feeling, whether it's written in my journal or not. Simply writing something down doesn't make it any more or less true.

19 Feb 1990

A bruise on the outside of my right calf; a bruise that swells up around the ring finger knuckle on my right hand; a couple of bruises on the upper back part of both legs; a healthy bruise on my waist where Si Shaw pinched me (at least that one is explainable). A new bruise, strong, on my left foot. Small red spots on both feet that crawl a little ways up my shins. A sore on the inside of my mouth.

I don't know what is going on here, and I'm scared. Not scared enough to go to the doctor and say "oh, look, I've got a bunch of Mystery Bruises," but scared enough to write this down. I don't know. Maybe it's nothing. But my body is falling apart on me and I don't like it. Shit. This is just for the record: as of 19 Feb 1990 I am frightened because things are happening to me that I can't explain away.

My mind is racing. My heart.

I try thinking of diseases that make people bruise easily. The only word that comes to mind is hemophilia. Weak blood or something? That's hemophilia, right? Or is it anemia?

Fuck.

I don't know. I don't what it is, don't know what it might be other than something bad. My legs are still warm from my run. I rub my hands across the unblemished tops of my thighs. Inspiration comes quickly. I know, now, what to do about the uncertainty and doubt: a test.

I could test myself, test whether these bruises really have been happening so easily. Simple enough. I push back from my desk, stretching out my right leg, making sure to flex. I tense up, toe pointed. Calf and quad

both tighten. I make a fist. A good one. I focus on a spot on the middle of my thigh, a couple of inches below my shorts. I pound it. Twice. Three times. I use all sides of my fist, pounding with the bottom, then with my knuckles. I crook my pointer finger out to make a tiny knob. Again and again and again. One last time for good measure.

See, now, see? It makes absolute sense to punch my thigh multiple times — good, hard hits — and if it doesn't bruise tomorrow then I'm clearly okay. Clearly. This journal entry will become something to laugh about with the boys next weekend. A joke for the ages. My leg throbs red. It hurts, but I'm smiling as I stand up, thinking how clever I've been. This will be a good test. One day is the deadline. Twenty-four hours. I will give it one day to turn into a bruise.

This time tomorrow I'll know for sure.

CHAPTER 2

I wake up, groggy, around noon. Twelve or thirteen hours of sleep and I'm still tired. I've already missed both of my classes for the day. And I don't really care. I know I should have at least been able to get up in time for my Jane Austen class, which started maybe five minutes ago, but my bed is supremely comfortable. So warm and cozy. I could maybe lounge around under the covers for another several hours, plenty of time before I meet up with Simon to head over to volleyball practice later.

It is too tempting. Instead, I force myself to kick my legs out from underneath my comforter, wipe the sleep from the corners of my eyes, and shuffle over to the small sink in the corner of my room.

Cold water, cold washcloth, toothbrush and toothpaste. Swish. Spit. Blood.

Blood?

Another spit and this time it is all blood, no toothpaste. I tuck my thumbs underneath my top lip and lift up while squinting into the mirror. Blood pours out of my gums, running over my teeth. Shit. I've been brushing my teeth too hard, it seems. I guess this is what happens after spending so much time in England. All my mates have crappy teeth, you know? This must be what happens here.

I do not put two and two together. No light bulb moments for me here. There is no immediate association between what I'm seeing in the mirror and what I wrote about last night. It does not occur to me that there might be a relationship between them — or that perhaps this would have been a far better test.

My gums bleed throughout the day. They bleed while I devour a late lunch of a ham and cheese toasty with crisps (*not chips*) at the Junior Common Room. I can't really taste the blood in my food. I wash everything down with a tall glass of water. Volleyball practice is a sluggish, stupid waste of time, with frequent breaks to jog over to the water fountain to stay hydrated. And to discreetly spit out more blood, of course.

We're at the JCR at some point later in the evening, my regular after-dinner entertainment with the boys, enjoying multiple pints of beer between multiple rounds of pool. I remember that it was about this time yesterday that I'd come back from my run. I'm supposed to check my leg for bruising. I'm skeptical, because nothing has shown up throughout the day. This needs to be official, though, so I beg off from my next game of pool with Wayne.

The bathroom is empty, thankfully. I lock myself into the nearest stall and nervously pull down my jeans. I don't know why I'm worried. It should be fine. The light kind of sucks here, all flickering fluorescents, but it's the best I've got. I'm focused, careful, deliberate. I need to do this right. I need to be very thorough.

There's nothing.

The other bruises I'd written about in my journal — the myriad mystery bruises — can still be found pretty much everywhere I look. There's even some slight swelling around the pinky knuckle of my right hand after a stinger of a spike during practice earlier. The important one, though, the one I'd tried to create for myself isn't there.

Good. This is very good news.



There is a certain sameness to my time at Lancaster, a familiar and welcome repetition. Another night follows, another night spent at the JCR playing pool with Simon and Wayne and maybe a handful of other friends. It's early enough to still have a few other people hanging out reading or talking, playing pinball, sitting at the bar with a pint of ale. Faces I recognize if I don't know their names. There's a girl on the couch near the jukebox reading a thick textbook while sipping what looks to be a cider. Her name is Kristi, I think, or maybe Kirsten. Krista? I don't remember.

It's important to me, even feeling low, to be out with the boys. It's always a great time. Wayne has this cassette tape we've listened to countless times since I've been here. It's hilarious, this raunchy bit of comedy from Dudley Moore and Peter Cook, an improv radio show performed as these absolutely drunk-off-their-rockers characters they'd created, Derek and Clive. I'm sure they were legitimately drunk when they did these bits. They had to be. It's radio, though, so it's hard to tell.

The boys and I would come stumbling home from a night at the JCR, or from trying pints at some of the other colleges further up the Spine — the long central path that runs from Pendle College at very nearly the south end of campus up through various academic buildings and open courtyards to the north — and we'd all pile into Wayne's room well after closing time. He'd pop the tape into his cassette player and we'd play some of our favorite parts, mostly these ridiculously over-the-top conversations they had, simultaneously serious and ludicrous. Our laughter was contagious.

One of the funniest bits, the one that would have us doubled over, started with a riff about a non-stop disco dancer, and then somehow pivoted to this sing-songy improvisation about how one of their fathers has cancer. It's obviously ludicrous from the beginning. It picks up steam,

heading downhill as they try to outdo one another as small children might. It's hilariously inappropriate, making light of such a serious subject.

And so we somehow find ourselves several pints into the night, the quality of our pool games getting progressively worse, finding more and more humor in the moment. It's mostly just us in the JCR anyway. Why not recreate our own little Derek and Clive scenes?

"I've got cancer of that shot," Wayne says to me, after I pocket a tough shot down the length of the table. When I miss the much easier follow-up, I complain about having cancer of my pool cue.

"I've got cancer of both of your ugly mugs," Simon says from the other table.

I'm fading fast. When it's Wayne's turn to shoot I rest against the now-unused pinball machine. I'm utterly exhausted. At the same time, it's so much fun here with my mates, and the laughter is such a tonic for how lousy I've been feeling this week, that I don't want to call it an early night. I'll stay out as late as I can tonight, periodically wiping my teeth with my tongue so the blood doesn't show.

Kristi/Kirsten/Krista has set her book down on the couch next to her. She's glaring across the room at us. "That's not funny, you know," she says, as we laugh at Jim's cancerously bad break. "That's not funny at all. There are people with cancer. You shouldn't make jokes."

"Bollocks," Wayne says. "I've got cancer of their cancer!"

"Really hilarious. Really mature. I hope nobody you know ever has cancer. It's not funny." She stuffs her book violently into her backpack, then gives all of us a measured glance before stomping off.

CHAPTER 3

I wake up twice during the night. The first time I'm shivering. Frozen. My comforter is tucked underneath my neck. My knees are balled up around my chest. Goosebumps raise the hair on my arms and legs.

Why is it so cold?

The second time is the opposite. I'm sweltering. Boiling. The comforter has been thrown to the floor. My tee-shirt is damp, as are my sheets, both drenched in sweat. It is a restless night. My mouth is dry when morning finally comes.

The kitchen on our floor is down the hall a few doors from mine, just past the common bathroom. It is early Saturday morning, and none of my floor mates are up yet. I pad down the hall, barefoot, in my underwear and a sort of fresh tee-shirt that's at least dry, if not particularly clean.

I'm hoping to find some leftover orange juice from the other day. I can't remember if I'd finished it or not. There it is, though, tucked into the crowded refrigerator door: a small, half-empty bottle of OJ. I finish it in a few gulps. After rinsing out the empty glass bottle, I set it upside down next to the sink to dry.

Outside, the morning drips wet and gray. The skies are heavy with charcoal clouds. Winds blow down from the north. I'm smiling, now, as I look out across the hills.

Today, I tell myself, *is the day I will get better*. There's nothing like a rainy Saturday for staying indoors all day, slurping up chicken noodle soup, drinking orange juice, and reading and resting. *Today is a perfect day to mend this battered body*.

The morning air is crisp and clean. I'm content.

I stop to use the bathroom on the way back to my room. I am still exhausted and feverish, I know, maybe a little wobbly standing above the toilet, but even still — it's impossible to deny what I see. My urine is bloody. No, that's not accurate. It's not so much that my urine is bloody as it is that I'm just straight up peeing blood.

What the ...?

As far as I can tell there's no urine at all, just a steady stream of blood coming out of my body. The toilet water swirls red.

I shuffle back to my room. My left hand drags against the wall. I lock my door behind me. Not that anyone will be up for hours anyway, nor can I imagine Simon or Wayne knocking down my door, but I'm in need of some of that vaunted British privacy.

I glance at the clock on my desk: 7:52 AM. I'm trying to remember what I could have possibly done the day before that would have left me so utterly exhausted. There's nothing. There's no reason for this fatigue. There are no bruises on the top of my right thigh, either. Almost like a reflex, now, I run my tongue over my teeth and taste blood.

I will absolutely do something about this, I tell myself, crawling back into bed, eyes too heavy to keep open any longer, too tired to even finish my train of thought.

It's another couple of hours before I wake with a start. My window is fogged up. I open it about halfway and smell the cool air, thick and wet. On my desk, next to the window, is a crowded jumble of papers and books, pens, empty coffee cups, loose change. My journal is slim and black. It sits on a mostly empty corner of my desk. I lean up against the windowsill and

thumb through the pages. I'm looking for that last entry, about three quarters of the way through the book. I'd written a note to myself, not even a week ago, a list of symptoms that I was ready to ignore. Should I add one more?

This is all wrong, I tell myself. *You know this is so very wrong*. With that, I am out the door, rushing back to the bathroom. I am still not convinced. I am still looking for more evidence. There is one simple way to prove that what happened earlier this morning was a delusion, nothing more than a bad, bloody dream.

Another test: my bladder burns from the half-bottle of orange juice from earlier. *Without question*, I tell myself as I stand above the toilet, *definitely, absolutely, if this is bloody again, then I will go to the campus infirmary*.

Bloody it is. More blood than anything. It's as if I'd swallowed red food coloring by mistake, as if the whole thing was some elaborate practical joke. There is no pain. It does not sting or burn. But blood pours out of my body in a way that it should not.

I stalk back to my room and pull on a pair of sweatpants. Most of my clothes are dirty. Rooting through the pile on the bottom of my closet, I find a reasonably clean sweatshirt. No time to take a shower first (*at least there's some sense of urgency, now*) but I do still brush my teeth, spitting more blood into the sink. I slip bare feet into my well-worn Keds and storm outside.

The walk across campus is a lonely one. The infirmary is at the far north end of campus, well past the end of the Spine. On weekends, Lancaster University gets fairly deserted. Many students go home. There are only a few people up and about this morning, mostly around the library, and even fewer after I branch off north toward the outskirts of the campus. The wind has picked up again, blowing hard from the northwest. It tears across the top of the hill. It cuts through my thin denim jacket. My sweatshirt isn't

doing much to keep me warm. Rain-soaked grass numbs my feet when I try to take a shortcut. I am cold and wet and frightened. I am not prepared.

A sign on the outer door of the infirmary says that they are closed on weekends: *In case of emergency, please ring the bell. There will be a sister on duty.* I hesitate for a moment, debating whether or not this can wait two more days. The image of a twice-bloodied toilet bowl convinces me to stay. I ring the bell a few times before the door finally makes a series of unlocking sounds. A short woman pulls it open. She smiles and invites me inside.

“How can I help you?” she asks.

I’m thinking about how best to summarize the past couple of weeks. I don’t have a chance to say anything before she speaks again.

“One second,” she says, moving behind me to close the door. “Let us talk where it’s warmer.”

She leads me through the dark and empty waiting room to an expansive, high-ceilinged examining room. There are charts on the walls. Two low tables jut out into the center of the room, crisp paper stretched across the tops. Counters line the walls. At the far end of the room is a good-sized wooden desk. It is bathed in a soft light from the tall window behind it. Cotton swabs, Kleenex boxes, tongue depressors, and several loose manila folders decorate the desk. The sister sits in a brown leather chair.

“Now, then.” she says, picking up a small pad of paper before looking up at me. “What can I do for you?”

I start to explain some of my general symptoms. Just a few things, off the top of my head: tired, feverish, sick and tired for days.

“More than anything else,” I tell her, “it has been this intense fatigue. I just can’t shake it. But there are other things. A bunch of bruises. And see these?” I say, lifting my upper lip. “A bunch of sores. I don’t know why.”

She removes a tongue depressor from a bluish jar. “Hmm,” she says.

“And I guess the really important one happened earlier this morning. It’s why I’m here. My urine was all bloody.”

“Bloody? Was it painful? Did it burn?”

“No. It wasn’t — it didn’t. But it really freaked me out!”

She nods her head. “Yes, yes. Well, I’m certainly glad you came in. Do you think I could get a urine sample?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe. I’ve already gone twice this morning.”

She gives me a glass of water to drink, and a plastic cup to pee in. “The bathroom is just over there,” she says. “Take your time. Please try.”

There isn’t much to the sample, but what little I was able to force out is once again completely red. The sister rubs her right eyebrow with two fingers.

“Right,” she says, deep in thought. “The fevers and such I can understand. There has been a bug going around, and I can understand that. I’d prescribe plenty of rest and Vitamin C...”

She pronounces it *vit-uh-men*, which is one thing I’ve come to love about living in England.

“But those sores on your mouth. The bruises you’d mentioned. And this bloody urine. I am afraid there’s something more at work, here, something beyond my understanding. I am going to ring the doctor on call. He lives just a few minutes away. I hope I can reach him. He should have a much better idea of what’s going on.”

She steps away from the desk to make the phone call in another room. I’m too tired to think. When she returns, she relaxes in her brown leather chair, hands folded carefully in her lap. She asks me if I’ve been enjoying my stay in Lancaster. How long have I been here? Where am I from in the States? What classes have I been taking? Where are some of the places I’ve been able to visit? Scotland? Ireland? Europe? We talk for ten or fifteen minutes without saying a word about my health.

The doctor comes blustering in from the cold. His cheeks are red. He smiles and shakes my hand. His gloveless hand is cold against mine. The sister stands up and offers him her chair; he shakes his head no, then leans

up against the edge of the desk closest to me. He is maybe forty-five, fifty, with a salt and pepper beard. His eyes are dark and questioning. More of the same questions as before, with more of the same answers. He uses a cotton swab to dab at the numerous sores inside my mouth. He shines a pocket light into my eyes, then down my throat.

“Tell you what,” he says, after only a cursory examination. “I have a colleague at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary. It’s right in town here. My friend — Dr. Lorigan — well, I’d like for him to take a look at you as soon as possible.”

“But I don’t have a car or anything. I’m not sure how I’d get there.”

“Not to worry,” he says, chuckling. The sister here will drive you. We’d spoken about this possibility when she rang me earlier. I’ll stay here. There are some details I’ll want to share with Dr. Lorigan before you arrive. I’d expect he’ll want you to spend the night, what with the way you’ve been bleeding. You should stop by your room to gather a few things first.”

“What do you think is wrong?” I ask.

His smile is warm and comforting. “Too early to say. I’ll let my colleague sort that out for you. Not to worry. You’ll be in very good hands.”

“Do you think I’ll be there long? I mean, should I tell anybody?”

“Too early to say. Plan on staying at least the night, as I’d said, but beyond that I can’t really say.”

He reaches out to shake my hand again.

“Good luck to you, son.”