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BACK TO REALITY

My entire body jerks, and my heart starts pounding. That big X is staring down at me, and the mesh mask has me trapped. Did I start to fall asleep? That's a super scary thought, given the whole don't-let-your-eye-drift, exploding-eyeball thing. I blame it on the slow song that was playing at the time. Frank may have a point about me needing better radiation jams.

Then, suddenly, it's over, and Frank and Callie are back in the room unhooking me. Unmouthpiecing. Unmasking. Frank sticks out a hand and helps me sit up.

"You did pretty good for a first-timer. In three more days, you'll be a pro. And by the end of your eight weeks, you'll be stealing my job." He squints like he's inspecting me. Judging me. "Right? I can see it in your eyes."

He looks over at Callie. "He looks shifty, doesn't he?"

It's the beady eyes. We need to watch our backs." Callie is looking at something on her clipboard. She gives me a quick roll of her eyes.

As I hop down, Frank leans in and stage-whispers, "Don't mind Callie. She has an *enormous* crush on me, the poor thing."

Callie blurt-laughes and walks away. "See you tomorrow, Ross!"

I put on my shoes and grab my backpack from a locker by the door.

We pass Dr. Throckton's office on the way out. He's known to my family by the superhero-like name "the Man with All the Answers"—and he's the doctor in charge of my radiation. He's behind his desk, his hair sticking up comically, like he's been running his hands through it. Both feet are propped up on his desk, and he has his phone to his ear—but when he sees me, his eyes light up. He covers the mouthpiece and yell-whispers to me.

"How'd it go?"

"Good, I guess?" I answer. He pinches the phone between his shoulder and cheek and gives me two thumbs-ups. There's a blue ink stain on one of them.

Frank walks me down the hall to the waiting room,

asking if middle school is as unbearable as he remembers.

“It’s all right.” I shrug as we go through the electric double doors, into the waiting room.

As waiting rooms go, this one is pretty swanky. There are a bunch of comfortable couches and chairs arranged around several big aquariums. Halloween decorations are out, since it’s only a few days away. There’s even a complimentary drink station, with coffee and a fridge full of soft drinks and little water bottles.

I don’t see my stepmom. My guess is Linda ran to Starbucks for more iced green tea. She’s always running out for green tea.



An old guy sits beside one of the aquariums, sipping a cup of coffee. He lifts the cup in salute.

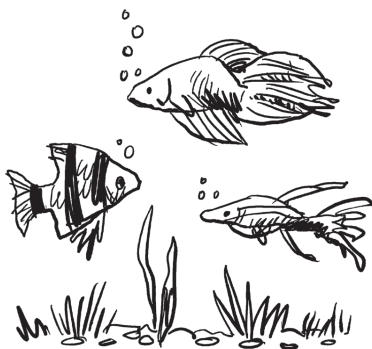
Frank steers me over. “Ross, I want you to meet someone. Or to be more accurate, warn you to stay far, far away from him.”

We stop in front of the guy. “Jerry, this is Ross. He just had his first treatment.” Then he addresses me. “Ross, this here is the oldest, crankiest man ever to stalk the planet.”

Jerry laughs—a wheezy, good-natured laugh—as he struggles up to the front of his seat. I shake his enormous hand. It feels like it’s made out of limestone.

“They stuck you with Frank, huh? I’d say it could be worse, but I’m not sure how.” Then his bushy eyebrows go up. “Go okay in there?”

“I think so. I guess?” I look away at the fish in the tank beside him. Why am I always so awkward?



“There ya go. Just lay back and let these guys do the hard stuff, right?” Jerry has a rough, deep voice—it reminds me of gravel in a blender. He leans back, and I notice the blue mesh band at the bend of his arm where he’s had blood drawn. I’ve gotten annoyingly familiar

with blood draws. I can tell you where my juiciest vein is, which is just weird.

Frank scans the waiting room. "Where's your mom, Ross?"

"Stepmom."

"Stepmom. Did she skip out on you? Flee the country?"

"Probably." I sit on the edge of a couch. I know how to wait. That's what phones are for.

"Well . . . if you're still here in three hours, I'll give you a ride. Least I can do."

Jerry shakes his head. "Oh, good Lord. Don't take that ride. They'll let anybody have a license these days."

Frank starts to walk away. "Keep trying, Jerry. You'll say something funny one of these days." Then he spins around to walk backward, pointing at me with both fingers like guns.

"Forty-four zaps to go, Ross. But, seriously. Tomorrow. I want suggestions for REAL music. Or I start playing you some of mine." He jams his backside into the doors and is gone.

Jerry studies me, deadly serious. "Do it. Bring music, or he's likely to play his band's CD. You've suffered enough."

"He's in a band?"

He blows on his coffee. "In the loosest sense of the

word." Then he grabs a magazine, so I guess I can take out my phone without looking too rude. I text Abby.

Zap 1 in the books.

She texts back immediately.

Was it bad? Are you a radiated mutant like Godzilla now?

Not really, but I can shoot laser beams out of my butt.

OOH! So jealous. Seriously, though. Did it hurt?

Nope.

Aces.

Abby had asked to come today, but I told her I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. She pressed, but I insisted she not come. If she'd come, there would've been hugs and high fives, and it would have been a Big Deal, and I feel like if I give this thing as little energy as I can, it'll just . . . fade away.

I think Abby understood. Eventually.

The front doors fly open, and my stepmom stalks in on a cloud of cool air and caffeine. "Ross! You're out! I'm so sorry. I needed a jolt, so I hopped over to Bucky's and thought I'd get back before you were out! How was Day One?"

One of the more annoying things about Linda is her insistence on calling Starbucks Bucky's. It gives me chills.

She stops in front of me and looks over at Jerry. "Hello."

I start to get up. "That's Jerry."

Jerry starts the process of standing up to shake her hand. "That's me. I'm Jerry Thompson . . ."

Linda flaps her hands at him. "Oh, no need to get up. We have to get going. It's nice to meet you, Jerry. I'm Linda." They shake hands quickly, and she turns to me. "You ready? I need to get you home. I have about two million things I need to do." She turns to Jerry and rolls her eyes. "Real estate."

Jerry smiles. "Ah, yes. Big doings." Then he kicks my foot lightly with one of his Velcro orthopedic shoes. "Nice meeting you, Ross. I'll see you around. I'm glad your Day One went well."

I stand up and pocket my phone. "Nice meeting you too. What day of your treatment are you on?"

"This round? Day Thirty-six. But who's counting?"



Linda's phone starts chirping as soon as we're in her Grand Cherokee, and we ride home to the sounds of Linda talking up a beautiful little three bedroom/two bath not too far from the lake. It apparently has amazing light and the most adorable breakfast nook.

I text Isaac, not really expecting him to text back. He hasn't been around much lately. Like. Not at all.

Hey. What's up? I just got radiated like the Hulk.

I sit there watching my screen, and I'm kind of surprised when the three dots start up. He's texting back for once?



The three dots flash, and flash and flash . . . And then they go away. I'm a little embarrassed to admit it, but my heart sinks. What's going on with him? I wait, staring, for the dots to start again, but they don't.

Eventually I cram my phone back in my pocket. The rest of the way, I just space and stare out the window. I've been getting pretty good at that lately.



At home, I go straight upstairs. I drop my pack and head to the mirror in my bathroom. There's no visible mark where the beam went in by my temple. Weird.

But looking in the mirror brings up some bad memories, seeing my scar and my closed, squinty, permanently winking eye. The biopsy. The diagnosis. The surgery. I try to keep that kind of looking to a minimum, so I don't get all wiggled out.

Eventually I go in and flop facedown on my bed. My phone starts buzzing in my pocket, but I'm asleep before you can say "proton radiation therapy."

I have a dream where I'm a french fry in a basket, getting lowered again and again into thick boiling oil. It sounds really dumb, but it's completely terrifying.



When I wake up, my room is mostly dark, and my dad is sitting next to me on the bed, his hand on my back. "Hey, Ross. You awake?"

I grunt yes, kind of.

“How’d it go? I want all the details.”

I roll over slowly, half awake. His hair is messed up on one side, and he’s loosened his tie. He needs a shave.

“Wow,” I say. “You look awful.”

He laughs and rubs his face with both hands. “Ha. Yeah. It was a day. And all I wanted was to be there with you.” He’s a trial lawyer, and he’s in the middle of some big megacase. It’s about some huge insurance settlement or something.

He lets out a long sigh, like he’s been holding his breath for days. “So, spill. Gimme the dirt. Start at the beginning and don’t leave anything out.”

So I slide back against my headboard, he settles back beside me, and I tell him.