

Adam Matson

THE SUFFERING SERUM

Daniel stared at the image of his PET scan on Dr. Rudolph's computer screen. His torso, rendered primarily in shades of gray, was pockmarked with explosions of white, tumors burning like artillery craters on a battle field.

"It's everywhere," Daniel said.

"Yes," said Dr. Rudolph. "The cancer has metastasized."

What Daniel heard over the next few minutes was a grim litany of medical jargon. What he really heard was nothing at all.

"So how long do I have?" he asked.

"Four to six months," said the doctor.

"Ha."

He was thirty-four, and by his own account, had barely begun to live. During the last fifteen years he had ostensibly called himself an artist, and lived off his trust fund and the generous patronage of his parents. His life had drifted lazily by like the current of a summer stream. Expensive schooling in Europe, long caffeinated and cannabic nights painting and talking in SoHo lofts, one or two semi-successful exhibitions- it all suddenly blinked away. In his mind Daniel repeated the word over, over and over.

"And with treatment, I'll get, what, a few more months...?"

Dr. Rudolph outlined the prognosis, the various treatment options. Again Daniel heard almost nothing. The lymphoma had spread. The tumors were everywhere.

"Daniel, I'm going to page Dr. Caplan," Dr. Rudolph said. "If you're willing to hang around a little bit longer. We're developing a new experimental treatment for terminal cancers here at the hospital, and I think it would be worth your time to hear about it."

Daniel shrugged. He was now thinking of the conversations he would have with his parents, his sisters, his friends. He was scolding himself for waiting months to go to the doctor, long after something was clearly wrong.

Sometime later a tall bearded man entered the examination room, flanked by an assistant who looked about Daniel's age. The tall man introduced himself as Robert Caplan.

“So you’ve gotten some bad news,” Dr. Caplan said, taking a seat. His assistant, Dr. Susan Weiss, sat down beside him.

“Yeah,” Daniel said, his mind in a fog.

“We spoke with Dr. Rudolph, and based on your condition, Daniel, Dr. Weiss and I would like to have a conversation with you about treatment. Did Dr. Rudolph tell you what we’re doing?”

“No.”

“It’s an experimental treatment. We’re using a new drug, not available on the market yet, still deep in the research phase. It’s called Revivol.”

“Revive all? That’s cute.”

“It’s an intense form of chemotherapy,” said Dr. Caplan. “Much, much stronger than any of the drugs we typically use in cancer treatment.”

Dr. Caplan explained the drug, its history, its usage and testing (mainly on animals), but Daniel’s mind ricocheted from one cataclysmic death scenario to another. He heard little, tried to pay attention, realized he should be taking notes. He regretted coming to the appointment alone, but there was no one to come with him. Most of his friends did not yet know he was sick. He could not ask Lena.

“We’ve been testing Revivol on human subjects for about a year,” Dr. Caplan said. “With tremendous results. The treatment is extremely strenuous, eight hours a day, every day, for as long as you can take it, and you’d feel worse than you have ever felt in your life.”

“What do you mean, for as long as I can take it?”

“We haven’t had any patient last more than fourteen days,” said Dr. Weiss.

“What, before they died?”

“No, no, no,” said Dr. Caplan. “Before they quit. And it’s expensive, Daniel. We’re using a very rare and expensive drug, and this treatment is not even on the horizon yet for insurance companies.”

“What’s the cost?”

“Roughly ten thousand dollars a day.”

Daniel took a deep breath. He had his trust fund. Money wasn’t his primary concern. “Okay, so what’s the good news? Why would I do this?”

“Well, we make no guarantees,” said Dr. Caplan. “But the majority of our patients are showing great progress. We’re watching Stage Fours go

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into complete remission. Revivol destroys everything inside you, but it also rebuilds you. It's still too early in the study for concrete long-term survival data, but we've extrapolated the data from research on animals and our estimate for human survival is this: one day of Revivol likely equals two more years of life. Regardless of the type or stage of illness."

"Well, Jesus, sign me up," Daniel said. "I've got a quarter million in trust." He stared at a bunch of hazy numbers in his head. "That'll more than cover me for a full life, won't it?"

"This is not something to enter into lightly, Daniel," said Dr. Caplan. "The treatment itself could kill you. You'll be taken down to nothing. It will be the worst thing you've ever endured in your life, by far."

He listed the side effects in gut-wrenching detail.

"Patients call it the Suffering Serum," said Dr. Weiss.

"But by participating in the study you would be greatly aiding cancer research," Dr. Caplan said. "We're studying every aspect of the treatment, physical, emotional, psychological. We're running a concurrent study on how companionship affects treatment, so you would be going through the process with another patient."

"A chemo buddy?"

Dr. Caplan gave him a soft smile. "You had some bad news today, Daniel," he said. "And we understand that this is all extremely difficult. But you're young, and you appear to have the financial resources, and if you're willing to face the risk, this treatment could save your life. Could even give you a full life."

"Yeah, hm, let me think about it," Daniel said.

The first day of treatment Daniel was set up in a reclining chair in a small hospital room with windows overlooking a park. The nurses introduced him to his treatment partner, a young woman named Emily. Emily had already lost most of her hair, and her skin was gray, but Daniel noticed her body still looked relatively healthy and supple. She was not emaciated like many cancer patients he had seen.

"So what're you in for?" Daniel asked as the nurses set up their dispensing machines.

"Multiple myeloma," Emily said. "They gave me six months. I have a two year-old son. It was no choice at all."

"No choice," Daniel repeated. "That's it essentially."

He fingered the Hickman catheter attached to his torso, a pair of tubes connected to his major blood vessels, one in his chest, one in his neck.

“So we’re in this together,” Daniel said.

Emily took a deep breath. “I hope I can hold out. They said nobody makes it very long. It’s too hard. I’m going to think about Caleb.”

Daniel nodded. He had no one to think about. No small child. Emily, he realized, seemed to have it worse than him. There were degrees of dying, and he felt sorry for her.

The nurses fixed the first banana bags of Revivol onto Daniel and Emily’s dispensing machines, and turned the valves on their IV’s to start the flow.

“We’ll be watching you closely,” Daniel’s nurse said. “Call us if you need anything.”

Daniel gave her a thumbs-up. The medicine started to flow and immediately he felt a burning sensation in his chest. Within minutes the burn became so paralyzing that he felt like his body was being squeezed in a full choke-hold. In the other recliner Emily pinched her eyes shut and balled her fists. Daniel was barely conscious of her presence. The pain was all he could think about. He tried to think through it, count through it, breath through it, but his whole body was on fire. Eventually the pain reached a crescendo and planed off, and he found that by taking deep breaths, holding them, and exhaling slowly, he could steady himself enough not to want to rip the Hickman line out of his chest.

After four hours they were given a one-hour break. The nurses encouraged them to eat something, even a light lunch would bolster their strength, but neither Daniel nor Emily requested food. Daniel made a bee-line for the rest room adjacent his recliner and spent half an hour giving at both ends. When he returned to his chair he could barely stand, and his vision had narrowed to a sweaty tunnel. Looking over at his partner, he saw Emily curled into a ball, facing him but staring at the floor, her face bone white.

“It’s not so bad,” Daniel whispered, his throat sandpaper dry, and Emily managed a thin smile as Daniel fell into his chair.

In the evening Daniel was sequestered in a private room on the hospital’s isolation ward. A nurse drew his blood and took his vitals and measured his urine output, a process that would be repeated, she told him, every four hours during the night. Daniel ordered cream of wheat for

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dinner and ate some of it. He Skyped with his parents, who promised to visit the next day.

“Yeah, it’s no fun so far,” Daniel said. “But at least now I know what I’m in for.”

He watched basketball on television and tried to fall asleep, interrupted by frequent trips to the bathroom. When he finally did manage to fall asleep the nurse came into his room and took his vitals.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Gahh,” Daniel said.

The next morning he was exhausted before the treatment even began. His body dropped into the recliner like a blob of cement, solidifying in helpless inertia. He had barely slept all night, bothered by fever dreams and diarrhea and the blood drawings, which he hated and resented already.

Beside him Emily looked like a hollow pod from which two blood-shot eyes peered out. She greeted him with a slight wave.

“How about the pillows in our rooms?” Daniel said as the nurses hooked them up. “Are they uncomfortable, or what?”

Emily gave him a strange look.

“I may write a letter,” Daniel added.

“My breakfast was lukewarm,” she murmured.

“We have a few complaints so far,” Daniel told the nurse.

His sense of humor vanished as soon as the medicine hit home. Once again Emily became a blur nearby, a coincidence to the snapping viper of his pain. It was worse than the day before. Yesterday he had been stronger. Now his body simply surrendered. He closed his eyes and let helpless tears stream down his face. His tongue swelled in his cottony mouth, but the effort of reaching over to pick up his water bottle caused his head to spin. He laid there, nausea wafting through his head and stomach, unable to move or even think, trying to focus on anything that could bring his mind relief or inspiration. But there was nothing.

That night his parents came to visit him and Daniel was grateful for the company. After they left he curled up in his bed and hugged his knees to his chest and tried not to throw up. He cried himself out, cried at his own helplessness and vulnerability, as the reality of the treatment began

to sink in. They were killing him, destroying everything in his body. In a few more days he would not be able to leave the hospital or go outside, even if he wanted to. He would be too susceptible to germs. He was quickly becoming a prisoner, trapped in this small room. The nurses were friendly, but they did not love him. He wanted somebody to hold him, rub his back and his hair. He wanted to call Lena, to hear her voice. Wanted her to come lie with him.

But the room was dark and he lay there alone, not watching the television. Four years, he told himself. I've earned four years so far.

He ate nothing for dinner, and the nausea attacked him like a knife in his guts. He wondered if he would still be alive in the morning.

On the fourth day Emily lay whimpering in her recliner during their mid-day break. Daniel returned from the bathroom and slumped into his chair. He took a weak sip of water.

"Emily, are you okay?"

She moaned and turned to face him. "It's so bad, Daniel."

"No," Daniel said, his voice just above a whisper. "Walk in the park."

The murmur of his moving lips made him nauseous.

"My husband Ron comes to visit me at night," Emily said. "God, I can't wait to see him. It's the only thing keeping me going."

"What about Caleb? Does he come too?"

"No. I don't want him to see this. He would be scared and he wouldn't understand."

Daniel noticed her voice changed when she spoke of Caleb. She seemed to gain strength, even sat up in her chair.

"Tell me about him," Daniel said, closing his eyes.

"He's my little munchkin," Emily said. "Blonde hair, freckles, little pug nose. Ron has him hooked to our iPad, which I don't think is a good idea. I want him to play outside. He likes to run. I say run if you like to run."

The simple thrill of thinking about going outside both excited Daniel and filled him with weary dread. He opened his eyes and saw Emily was smiling now, and if she was happy that was good enough for him. He told her to tell him more about Caleb as he sipped his water and waited for the nurse to come back.

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By the sixth day Daniel had lost almost fifteen pounds. The medicine had burned the taste buds off his mouth and tongue, and he had to force-feed himself cream of wheat, which was like eating a wet pillow. The only thing he could taste was chocolate milk, which he drank as much as his stomach could handle.

Emily lay in her recliner, barely able to move. She looked all right physically, Daniel thought. She didn't seem to be losing weight. But like him she was completely bald and hairless. Daniel lurched across the room, holding the wall for support, and sat down in the chair beside her. They sat in silence for a while. Eventually Emily produced a photograph of Caleb, which Daniel held in his quivering hand.

"He was a miracle baby," Emily said. "I had leukemia when I was nineteen. The doctors weren't sure I would be able to conceive. Ron and I went to the fertility clinic, tried in vitro for over a year. Finally on our third cycle we got Caleb."

"He looks like a healthy boy," said Daniel.

"He is, thank God."

"So you've been through all this before?" Daniel asked. "Chemotherapy?"

Emily nodded. "Compared to this my first round of chemo was a chest cold."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-seven."

He thought of his own life over the last fifteen years. He had called himself an artist, but really he had been a rich kid with a little talent and no sense of responsibility. While Emily had been receiving chemotherapy eight years ago he had been living in France, spending all day in cafes and museums, spending all night drinking and screwing Swedish art students, painting or drawing when he felt like it. Those memories seemed worthless now, the libertine frolics of a dead young man.

"I've never done anything really meaningful with my life," Daniel said, looking at the picture of Caleb. "I just spent years fucking around. I had a girlfriend but I broke up with her. I told her she was holding me back."

"How was she holding you back?"

Daniel shrugged. "She was living in my apartment but she wasn't paying rent. She was a dancer and she was in the studio all the time. She couldn't really afford to work. I told her I was shouldering the entire financial burden, and I wanted more freedom to make art."

Emily said nothing. Daniel stared at the floor.

“It was a lie though,” he said. “I was living there rent-free too. My parents subsidized my life. I just wanted Lena out of the way. There was another girl I wanted.”

He handed Emily back the picture of her son.

“Sometimes I think I deserve this,” he said.

“Nobody deserves this,” said Emily. “You should call your girlfriend. Explain how you feel. It might make you feel better.”

Daniel nodded. He might call Lena, if he had the energy. After treatment he had been going back to his room and trying to sleep. His stomach muscles ached and cramped from vomiting. If he curled into a ball they didn’t hurt as much.

Dr. Caplan and Dr. Weiss came to visit Daniel in his room later that afternoon. They wore masks and gloves. Everything in Daniel’s world smelled like disinfectant and Purell. He lay in bed with the television on mute.

The doctors asked him about his strength, his physical health, his emotional state. They asked him about his appetite, his attention span, what he talked about when he Skyped with his parents. His head felt heavy and it was an effort to respond. Dr. Weiss took detailed notes. Dr. Caplan crossed his legs and sat casually beside Daniel’s bed.

“Your bloodwork and vitals look good, Daniel,” said Dr. Caplan. “You’ve been very sick, but you’re young. That helps. Most patients over fifty last about seven days.”

“Does anyone die from this?” Daniel asked.

“It’s happened,” said Dr. Caplan.

“Do you feel like you’re going to die?” asked Dr. Weiss.

Daniel felt tears welling up behind his eyes. “I’m scared,” he said. “I feel like if I catch a cold, I’ll be dead. I’ve told people not to come visit me, because of the germs. But I wish I had someone here.”

“You can have visitors,” said Dr. Caplan. “But we don’t want you catching a cold. Keep taking the antivirals and the antibiotics.”

“I’m worried I won’t be able to hold out,” Daniel said. “My goal is twenty-five days. That’s how many days I can afford, and that will give me fifty years. Won’t it?”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” said Dr. Caplan.

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“Does it help to have a partner?” asked Dr. Weiss. “Does it help to have Emily?”

Now Daniel did start to cry. “It does help,” he said. “I don’t even know her, but I don’t know if I could do it without her.”

That night he cried himself out. He thought of all the wrongs he had ever committed in his life, large and small, mostly routine acts of selfishness too numerous to name. He wished he could take them all back, spend the rest of his life helping people.

It was around midnight when he dialed Lena. The nurse had just come in to take his blood and vitals, but he had not yet fallen asleep. Lena answered after several rings. She sounded like she had been sleeping.

Daniel explained the Revivol treatment in as much detail as he could muster, and the silence on the other end of the phone was pregnant and deep. He thought he could hear her crying softly.

“I know I have no right to ask you this,” Daniel said. “But could you come and visit me? It’s really terrible here.”

“Okay, Daniel,” Lena said. “I can come tomorrow.”

The next day Daniel tried to use Lena’s visit as inspiration for getting through his treatment. He had told the doctors his goal was twenty-five days, but when the treatment began each morning, that number disappeared. He could only think of the next few burning seconds. He imagined his whole body filled with lava. The Revivol was like a living thing feasting on his insides, devouring his blood and bones and organs. When the last of the medicine finally drained from the banana bag and he came out of the fog, he remembered Emily beside him, and felt minutely better having someone else with him to face the beast.

That night he took a long shower in the little bathroom off his room, his first wash in two days. The door stood propped open and a nurse sat outside in case he fell or passed out. His Hickman line was covered in clear waterproof bandages. When he emerged from the shower, he stared at himself in the mirror. Naked he was a dripping, hunched thing, white and hairless, his limbs constricted angles of bone. The nurse removed the bandage over the Hickman line, and with it a rectangle of Daniel’s skin. She massaged the raw welts with a cool salve.

Lena arrived around eight o’clock. She wore the obligatory mask over her face, and at first Daniel thought she was a nurse, until he saw the plain terror in her eyes as she stared at him.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Daniel said. It was worse.

She sat down beside his bed and they watched television for a while. She told him about her dance workshops, and updated him on a few mutual friends. Daniel said nothing, listening, enjoying the sound of her voice.

“So those things we felt in your neck,” Lena said eventually. “Those were cancer?”

“Yeah,” Daniel said. “I was so fucking stupid.”

“It’s just... why would we have thought it was cancer?”

“I don’t know.”

He started to cry. She looked beautiful, and he wished he could get out of bed and leave with her, walk the streets of the city, stop off for pizza and coffee, go see a band at one of their bars. He would get there, he told himself. He would walk the streets again. He would inhale the air outside and sit in the park on warm nights. Just not tonight.

“Thank you for coming, Lena,” Daniel said.

On the tenth day Emily started crying during their mid-day break, softly at first, then choked, heaving sobs.

“Emily.”

Daniel could barely find the will to move, let alone the strength, but he wrested himself from his chair and staggered over to sit beside her. His body weight was down to nothing, and his head felt like an anvil lolling around on his neck.

“This is my last day of treatment, Daniel,” Emily said.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t afford it,” Emily whispered. “Ten grand a day, for God’s sake, who can?”

Daniel said nothing. Not for the first time he remembered that his trust fund, his natural born privilege, was literally saving his life.

“I applied for a special grant from a research foundation,” Emily said. “I got it. But they only pay for ten days. They said twenty years was a blessing and a gift. How could I argue?”

“There must be something you can do,” Daniel said. “How can they just cut you off?”

“That’s our fucking health care system.”

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The nurses returned for the second round. Daniel staggered back to his chair feeling helpless, leaving Emily to cry as she was hooked up to the Revivol. Through the afternoon treatment he tried to think of her, think of her playing with Caleb. She might get twenty years. She would see him grow up, but she might not attend his wedding. She would probably never meet her grandchildren. Twenty years were just enough to appreciate how full a life could be. It was almost worse to have life taken from you at forty-five than twenty. At forty-five a person had attachments and investments. She would just be hitting her stride.

When the treatment was over Daniel wanted to cross the room to Emily. He wanted to hold her and say goodbye. But he felt so weak and sick he could barely move. By the end of each day they were each barely conscious. Now Daniel watched, helpless and mumbling, as Emily was wheeled back to her room in a hospital bed.

By evening Daniel had regained enough of his faculties to think clearly. Dr. Caplan had told him that as part of the treatment, since everything was experimental and any information could be important, he would make himself available to his patients at any time of day or night. Daniel picked up the phone by his bed and dialed the number on Dr. Caplan's card.

"They're sending Emily home," Daniel croaked when Dr. Caplan answered the phone.

"Yes, that's true," the doctor replied. "Unfortunately the funding for her treatment has run out. We encounter this problem regularly, I'm sorry to say. We're pushing for more funding ourselves, but...."

"I have money," Daniel said. "I have a hundred and fifty grand left. That's fifteen days' worth of treatment. If we split the money between her and me we can both stay on for another week."

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. Finally Dr. Caplan returned, his voice softer than before, almost closer. "You'd be willing to pay for her treatment, Daniel?"

"Yes."

"At the expense of your own?"

"Yes."

There was another silence. "That's very noble of you," Dr. Caplan said.

"She has a little kid," Daniel said. "I have nothing. I've been a fucking leach my whole life, sucking money out of my parents' bank accounts. It doesn't matter if I lose a few years. But she has a family."

“If this is what you want, Daniel, we can do it. It’s your money.”

“It’s what I want. Please tell her she can continue the treatment.”

What he did not also say was that if he showed up for treatment in the morning and Emily was not there, he was not sure he would be able to go through with it. Dr. Caplan agreed to his terms, and for the first time since he’d begun taking the Suffering Serum Daniel had no trouble falling asleep.

The next day between treatments it was Emily who climbed out of her chair and lurched across the room to Daniel. She sat next to him and held his hand and rested her head against his arm. Too tired and ill to speak, they sat quietly together for the full hour, separating only when the nurses returned with the afternoon dose.

For seven more days they endured the treatment. Daniel could no longer tell from day to day if he felt better or worse. He answered Dr. Caplan’s research questions mechanically, in monosyllables. The medicine had burned his throat so badly that he could barely speak. But something did feel better. With each day he thought not of the years he was losing by paying for Emily’s treatment, but of the years she was gaining. Years she could spend with her son. During their mid-day breaks they held hands and tried to smile, but mostly just sat quietly together.

At the end of the week Daniel did not remember passing out during his afternoon treatment, but when he woke up he was back in his hospital room. Dr. Caplan and Dr. Weiss sat beside his bed. A nurse took his vitals and prepared to draw blood.

“How do you feel, Daniel?” Dr. Caplan asked, ever ready with his bearded smile.

Daniel gave him a weak thumbs-down.

“You’ve lasted longer than anyone yet,” said Dr. Weiss. “All eyes are on you now.”

“I hate to put this to you, Daniel, because you’ve been quite a warrior,” said Dr. Caplan. “But as you are probably aware, you have enough money left for one more day. If you’re up to it.”

Daniel swallowed. His throat would barely open. “Give it to Emily,” he whispered.

The doctors both stared at him. He did not even feel the prick of the nurse’s needle drawing his blood.

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“Are we to understand that you want to give your last available resources to your partner?” said Dr. Caplan. “Even though it means you will likely live a shorter life?”

“...sick of this shit,” Daniel groaned.

The doctors exchanged a glance and Dr. Weiss scrawled a note in Daniel’s file.

Dr. Caplan rested a gloved hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “Daniel, there’s something else we have to discuss now.”

Daniel nodded.

“As we told you before you began this process, this entire treatment and all its attendant research is experimental, and exploratory,” said Dr. Caplan. “But there were certain aspects of the experiment we deliberately did not disclose to you, so that we could study your natural behavior. You have been receiving Revivol this entire time, and you’ve held up well. We’re all extremely impressed with your progress. You have become the standard. But your partner, Emily, has not been receiving Revivol. She has been receiving a placebo.”

Daniel felt his heart lurch in his chest. His mouth felt somehow even drier than it had a moment ago. He opened his mouth to speak.

“No need to worry,” Dr. Caplan said, holding up his hand. “Emily does not have cancer. She did have leukemia, but her disease has been in remission for years. The truth is she’s perfectly healthy. She’s an actor, Daniel, a confederate in the experiment.”

Daniel’s mouth hung open, but he could find no words. Black emotions careened through his head—betrayal, embarrassment, anger, fear—but instantly they all fell away. What he felt instead of rage or indignation was profound joy and gratitude, a relief so full it warmed his entire body.

“So Emily’s going to be okay?” he asked.

“And so are you,” said Dr. Caplan. “You’ve had enough Revivol to give yourself over thirty years. And you can keep going if you want. The money you had wished allocated to Emily is still in your bank account.”

“I’m so glad she’s okay,” Daniel whispered, and now Dr. Weiss began to cry. “Why?” Daniel asked after a moment.

“We’re trying to use our research to make a statement about healthcare,” said Dr. Caplan. “And the data we’ve collected is very encouraging. We’ve run this same experiment many times, and in over seventy percent of the cases the patient with the excess financial means

voluntarily offered to use their own money to help their partner. Just like you did. Patients with means are choosing to save the lives of virtual strangers. Makes a pretty good argument for healthcare reform, don't you think? You had nothing to gain by helping Emily. In fact, you had much to lose. But you did it anyway. You should be proud of yourself, Daniel."

Daniel thought about Emily, recalled their weeks of arduous treatment. She had looked sick. Her skin was pale, her body hairless. But she had not lost weight the way he had. Had it all been an act? He wanted to commend her for her performance.

"Can I talk to her?" Daniel asked.

"She'll be with you tomorrow," said Dr. Caplan. "She requested to stay with you for as long as you remain on the treatment."

The next day Emily greeted him with a hug and tears in her eyes. Daniel could not think of anything to say to her. He wanted to tell her how happy he was that she was healthy, but for a long time he said nothing.

"Do you really have a son?" he asked eventually.

"Oh yes," she said. "Caleb is my munchkin. And I am married, and I did have leukemia."

"Why would you do something like this?" Daniel asked.

"Everyone was so kind to me when I was sick. My family, friends, strangers. The nurses and doctors. Once I got well I wanted to do something to help the cause. This kind of thing... isn't easy. I have to watch you be sick. But we're helping people."

The nurse arrived and began hooking up Daniel's IV.

"Are you really going to stay on for eight more days?" Emily asked.

"I'll try," Daniel said.

"I'll be with you the whole time."

She took his hand and laced her warm fingers through his. The nurse opened the valve on his IV and the medicine surged through his catheter. The burn arrived, fiery and all-consuming as ever, but with Emily holding his hand Daniel felt a little bit less afraid.