

ZAC & MIA

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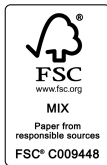
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For the Zacs and Mias. The real ones.

PART ONE

ZAC

1
ZAC

A newbie arrives next door. From this side of the wall I hear the shuffle of feet, unsure of where to stand. I hear Nina going through the arrival instructions in that buoyant air-hostess way, as if this ‘flight’ will go smoothly, no need to pull the Emergency Exit lever. Just relax and enjoy the service. Nina has the kind of voice you believe.

She’ll be saying, *This remote is for your bed. See? You can tilt it here, or recline it with this button. See? You try.*

Ten months ago, Nina explained these things to me. It was a Tuesday. Plucked from a maths lesson in period two, I was hustled into the car with Mum and an overnight bag. On the five-hour drive north to Perth, Mum used words like ‘precautions’ and ‘standard testing’. But I knew then, of course. I’d been tired and sick for ages. I knew.

I was still wearing my uniform when Nina led me into Room 6 and showed me how to use the bed remote, the TV remote and the internal phone. With a flick of her wrist she demonstrated how to tick the boxes on the blue menu card: breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner. I was glad Mum was paying attention because all I could think about was the heaviness of my schoolbag and the English essay that was due the next day, the one I'd had an extension for already. I do remember the clip Nina had in her hair, though. It was a ladybird with six indented spots. Funny how the brain does things like that. Your whole world is getting sucked up and tossed around and the best you can do is fixate on something small and unexpected. The ladybird seemed out of place, but like a piece of junk in the ocean it was something, at least, to cling to.

I can recite the nurses' welcoming spiel by heart these days. *If you get cold, there are blankets in here*, Nina will be saying. I wonder what clip she's wearing today.

'So,' says Mum, as casually as she can. 'A new arrival.'

And I know that she loves it and hates it. Loves it because there's someone new to meet and greet. Hates it because this shouldn't be wished on anyone.

'When did we last get a new one?' Mum recalls names. 'Mario, prostate; Sarah, bowel; Prav, bladder; Carl's colon; Annabelle...what was she?'

They've all been oldies over sixty, well entrenched in their cycles. There was nothing new or exciting about any of them.

A nurse darts past the round window in my door—Nina. Something yellow's in her hair. It could be a chicken. I wonder if she has to go to the kids' section of stores to buy them. In the real world, it'd be weird for a twenty-eight-year-old woman to wear plastic animals in her hair, wouldn't it? But in here, it kind of makes sense.

My circular view of the corridor returns to normal: a white wall and two-thirds of the *VISITORS, IF YOU HAVE A COUGH OR COLD, PLEASE STAY AWAY* sign.

Mum mutes the TV with the remote and shifts in her chair. Hoping to pick up vital audio clues, she turns her head so her good ear is nearest the wall. When she tucks her hair behind her ear, I see there's more grey than there used to be.

'Mum—'

'Shh.' She leans closer.

At this point, the standard sequence is as follows: the new patient's 'significant other' comments on the view, the bed and the size of the ensuite. The patient agrees. There's the flicking through the six TV channels then a switching off. Often, there's nervous laughter at the grey stack of disposable urinals and bedpans, prompted by the naive belief the patient will never be weak enough or desperate enough to use them.

And then there's a stretch of silence that follows their gaze from one white wall—with its plugs and Labelmakered labels and holes for things they can't even imagine yet—to the other. They track the walls, north to south, east to west, before they sag with the knowledge that this has become real, that treatment

will start tomorrow, and this bed will become home for several days, on-again, off-again in well-planned cycles for however many months or years it'll take to beat this thing, and there *is* no Emergency Exit lever. Then the significant other will say, *Oh well, it's not so bad. Oh look, you can see the city from here. Look.*

Some time later, after unpacking clothes and trying out the cafeteria's coffee for the first time, the new person inevitably crawls into bed with two magazines and the knowledge that this isn't a flight after all, but a cruise, and their room is a cabin beneath the water's surface, where land is something only to dream of.

But whoever is in Room 2 isn't following the standard sequence of action. There's a loud thump of a bag and that's it. There's no unzipping. There's no click-clacking of coathangers at the back of the wardrobe, no rattling of toiletries in the top drawer. Worse, there's no soothing verbal exchange.

Mum turns to me. 'I should go say hi.'

'Only because you're losing,' I say, trying to buy the new patient some time. Mum's only behind by five points and admittedly we're both having a crap round. My best word has been BOGAN, which caused some debate. Hers was GLUM, which is pretty sad.

Mum lays out BOOT and adds six points to her tally. 'Nina didn't mention there was a new admission.'

She says this without irony, as if she actually expects to be told of the comings and goings of patients on Ward 7G. Mum's been here so long she's forgotten she belongs somewhere else.

‘It’s too soon.’

‘Just a tea...’

My mother: the Unofficial Welcoming Committee of the oncology ward. The maker of calming teas, and the bringer of cafeteria scones with individual portions of plum jam. The self-appointed sounding board for patients’ families.

‘Finish the game,’ I tell her.

‘But what if they’re alone? Like what’s-his-name? Remember him?’

‘Maybe they *want* to be on their own.’ Isn’t that normal? To want to be alone sometimes?

‘Shush!’

Then I hear it too. I can’t make out the words at first—there’s a plasterboard wall between us, about six centimetres at a guess—but I hear a simmering of sounds.

‘Two women,’ Mum says, her hazel eyes dilating. Her mouth twists as she listens to the ‘s’s and ‘t’s that spit and hiss. ‘One is older than the other.’

‘Stop snooping,’ I tell her, but it’s not as if we can help it. The voices are growing louder, words firing like projectiles: *Shouldn’t! Stop! Don’t! Wouldn’t!*

‘What is going *on* in there?’ Mum asks, and I offer her my empty glass to press, spy-like, against the wall.

‘Don’t be a smartarse,’ she says, and then, ‘That doesn’t actually work, does it?’

It’s not as if my family doesn’t fight. There were times, years ago, when Mum and Bec would go right off. They’d be on their feet, vicious as Rottweilers. Dad and Evan would back out of the house, escaping to the

olive farm where blistering voices couldn't follow, but I'd often stay on the verandah, not trusting them to be left alone.

The fights lost their intensity once Bec turned eighteen. It helped that she moved into the old house next door, which was once used for workers. She's twenty-two now and pregnant, and she and Mum are close. They're still as stubborn as hell, but they've learned how to laugh at each other.

There's no laughing in Room 2—the voices sound dangerous. There's swearing, then a door shuts. It doesn't slam because all the doors are spring-loaded, closing with a controlled, unsatisfying *whoosh*. Then footsteps rush the corridor. A woman's head flashes past my window. She's short, her head skimming the bottom edge. She's wearing brown-rimmed glasses and a tortoiseshell claw that grips most of her sandy hair. Her right hand clutches the back of her neck.

Beside me, Mum is all meerkat. Her attention twitches from the door to the wall, then me. After twenty days in Room 1, she's forgotten that out in the real world people get pissed off, that tempers are short, like at school, where kids arc up after getting bumped in the canteen queue. She's forgotten about egos and rage.

Mum readies herself to launch into action: to follow that woman and offer tea, date scones and a shoulder to lean on.

'Mum.'

'Yes?'

'Save the pep talk for tomorrow.'

‘You think?’

What I think is they’ll both need more than Mum’s counsel. They’ll need alcohol, probably. Five milligrams of Diazepam, perhaps.

I lay down NOSY, snapping the squares onto the board, but Mum doesn’t take the bait.

‘Why would anyone argue like that? In a cancer ward? Surely they’d just—’

As if through a megaphone, a voice comes booming through the wall.

‘What...on...earth...?’

Then a beat kicks in that jolts us both. Mum’s letters clatter to the floor.

Music, of sorts, is invading my room at a level previously unknown on Ward 7G. The new girl must have brought her own speakers and lumped them on the shelf above the bed, facing the wall, then cranked them right up to max. Some singer howls through the plasterboard. Doesn’t she know it’s *our* wall?

Mum’s sprawled on all fours, crawling under my bed to retrieve her seven letters, while the room throbs with electropop *ass-squeezing* and *wanting it bad*. I’ve heard the song before, maybe a year or two ago.

When Mum gets up off the floor, she’s holding a bonus T and X, a strawberry chapstick and a Mintie.

‘Who’s the singer?’ Mum asks.

‘How would *I* know?’ It’s whiny and it’s an assault on my senses.

‘It’s like a nightclub in here,’ she says.

‘Since when have you been in a nightclub?’

Mum raises an eyebrow as she unwraps the Mintie. To be fair, I haven't been in a nightclub either, so neither of us is qualified to make comparisons. The noise level is probably more blue-light disco, but it's a shock for two people who've spent so long in a quiet, controlled room with conservative neighbours.

'Is it Cher? I liked Cher...'

I'm not up to speed on female singers with single names. Rihanna? Beyoncé? Pink? Painful lyrics pound their way through the wall.

Then it hits me. The newbie's gone Gaga. The girl's got cancer *and* bad taste?

'Or is it Madonna?'

'Are you still playing or what?' I say, intersecting BOOT with KNOB. The song is banging on about riding on a *disco stick*. Seriously?

Mum finally pops the Mintie into her mouth. 'It must be a young one,' she says softly. Young ones upset her more than old ones. 'Such a shame.' Then she turns to me and is reminded that, yes, I'm a young one too. She looks down at her hand of disjointed letters, as if trying to compose a word that could make sense of this.

I know what she's thinking. Damn it, I've come to know her too well.

'They must be good speakers, don't you think?' she says.

'What?'

'We should have brought your speakers from home, shouldn't we? Or bought some. I could go shopping tomorrow.'

‘Go steal hers.’

‘She’s upset.’

‘That song is destroying my white blood-cell count.’

I’m only half-joking.

The song ends, but there’s no justice because it starts again. The *same song*. Honestly, Lady freaking Gaga? At this volume?

‘It’s your turn.’ Mum places BOARD carefully on the...board. Then she plucks another four letters from the bag as if everything is normal and we’re not being aurally abused.

‘The song’s on *repeat*,’ I say, unnecessarily. ‘Can you ask her to stop?’

‘Zac, she’s new.’

‘We were all new once. It’s no excuse for...*that*. There’s got to be a law. A patient code of ethics.’

‘Actually, I don’t mind it.’ Mum nods her head as proof. Bopping, I believe it’s called.

I look into my lap at the T F J P Q R S. I don’t even have a vowel.

I give up. I can’t think; don’t want to. I’ve had enough of this song, now playing for the third time in a row. I try to suffocate myself with a pillow.

‘Do you want a tea?’ Mum asks.

I don’t want tea—I *never* want tea—but I nod so I can be alone for a few minutes, or an hour, if she tracks down the newbie’s significant other and performs Emergency Scone Therapy in the patients’ lounge.

I hear water running as Mum follows the hand-washing instructions conscientiously.

‘I won’t be long.’

‘Go!’ I say. ‘Save yourself.’

When the door closes behind her, I release the pillow. I slide my Scrabble letters into the box and recline my bed to horizontal. I’m finally granted precious mother-free time and it’s ruined by *this*. The song begins again for the fourth time.

How is it possible that Room 1 can be such an effective sanctuary from the germs of the outside world, but so pathetic at protecting me from the hazards of shit music?

I can’t hear the girl—I can’t hear anything but that song—but I reckon she’ll be lying on her bed, mouth-ing the lyrics, while I’m doing my best to ignore them.

Room 2 is pretty much identical to mine. I know; I’ve stayed there before. They have the same wardrobe, same ensuite, same paint and blinds. Everything is in duplicate, but as a mirror image. If looked at from above, the bedheads would appear to back onto each other, separated only by the six-centimetre width of this wall.

If she’s lying on her bed right now, we are practically head-to-head.

Further down the corridor, there are six other single rooms, then eight twin-bedders. I’ve been in each of them. When I was diagnosed the first time in February, I became a frequent flyer for six months, moving through cycles of induction, consolidation, intensification and maintenance. At the end of each chemo cycle, Mum would drive us the 500 kilometres

back home where I'd rest, get some strength and make it to a day or two of school, even though the other year 12s were preparing for exams I wouldn't get to sit. Then we'd yo-yo back to Perth, settling into whichever room was free and bracing ourselves for the next hit.

We both expected chemo to work. It didn't.

'If you can't zap it, swap it,' Dr Aneta had rallied when I relapsed. On a planner she highlighted a fluoro yellow block from November 18 to December 22. *Zac Meier*, she printed. *Bone Marrow Transplant. Room 1.* The first eight or nine days would be to zap me again, she explained, ready for the transplant on 'Day 0'. The rest of the stay would be for strict isolation, to heal and graft in safety.

'Five weeks in the same room?' Shit, even high-security prisoners get more freedom than that.

She clicked the lid back onto the pen. 'At least you'll be out in time for Christmas.'

Before leukaemia, I had enough trouble sitting in a room for two hours, let alone a whole day. Everything interesting happened outside: footy, cricket, the beach and the farm. Even at school, I'd always sit by the window so I could see what I was missing out on.

'Room One's got the best view,' Dr Aneta said, as if that could sweeten it. As if I had a choice.

The song ends and I hold my breath. For a moment, I hear only the predictable sounds: the whirl of my drip; the hum of my bar fridge.

I wonder if the newbie is counting the squares on

her ceiling for the first time. There are 84, I could tell her. Eighty-four, just like mine. Or maybe she's already re-counting them the opposite way, just to be sure.

