



ROB HARRELL

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

For Amber

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1

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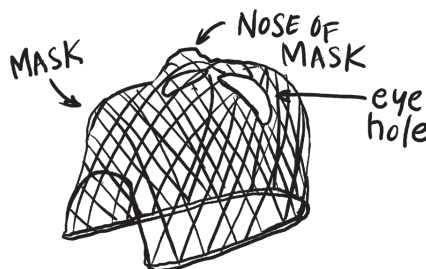
1

LET'S GET RADIOACTIVE!

I'm lying on a steel table, all too aware of the giant ray gun pointed in my direction. It looks like one of those room-sized five-ton laser things supervillains use in movies. The kind they threaten to destroy the planet with.

"What music're you into, Ross?"

I'm pretty sure the radiation tech is just trying to distract me as he bolts me down. A hard-plastic-mesh mask over my neck and head holds me still—they molded it to my face yesterday—and the tech struggles to click it onto the table. He scrunches his nose, pushing.



"Oh . . . anything. Whatever," I mumble through my teeth. The hardened mask doesn't let my chin move much.

The headpiece locks in, and the tech—Frank—gives my shoulder a bump with his fist. "C'mon, man. If you're gonna lie here for half an hour, you need some tunes. I've got all kinds. Name something you like. There are no wrong answers."

I scan my brain. "You could . . . Can you just . . . KZAQ?"

Frank stops and doubles over at the waist like he's been gut-punched. He hangs there, talking to the floor.

"Okay . . . No wrong answers but that one." He straightens up and winces at me. "Seriously? You like that Top Forty garbage?"

"It's . . . what my parents have on all the time . . ."

So dorky. I try to look away casually, but my head won't budge.

Frank stares before letting out an exaggerated sigh.

"*Fine*. But tomorrow, tell me what *you* like. Not what Mom and Dad like." He walks over and fiddles with an old-timey boom box on a high wall shelf, next to a teetering stack of CDs and cassette tapes.

Seriously? There must be a gazillion dollars worth of equipment in here, and they can't afford an MP3 player? I notice a bit of tattoo peeking out from the arm of Frank's scrubs. A lizard tail, maybe? Or a tentacle?

Beyoncé fills the room, and suddenly Frank is all business. “I know we went over this yesterday, but let’s review.”

He wraps his arms around his clipboard and begins, like he’s done this a thousand times.

“The gurney you’re on is going to lift you up and move you into place. The treatment takes twenty-five minutes or so. Keep your limbs and naughty bits inside the ride at all times. Do not throw things at the radiation techs. Do not FEED the radiation techs. Do not waggle your legs around like a synchronized swimmer. Do not pass Go. Do not hum the Goo Goo Dolls, as I DESPISE the Goo Goo Dolls.”

Frank steps aside to let another tech—Callie, I think—reach in and mold some blue clay over the bridge of my nose. She smiles at me and tells me it’s to protect my “good” eye from the beam. Then she pats my chest. I hope I don’t look as nervous as I feel, ‘cause I feel like a rabbit in a trap. My face is hot.

“Okay. Now for the important part.” Frank is back. “When I tell you, you’re gonna stare at the red X above you. The one we made over there by the big zapper yesterday. You’ll see it when the machine slides you over.”

The mask prevents much of a nod, but he seems to catch it. “Don’t move your eye off of that X, or your eye’ll

explode into a million pieces like the Death Star, m'kay?"

I let out a little grunt.

Frank puts his hand on my arm. "I'm kidding, Ross. I mean . . . kind of. Don't look away from the X. Your eye won't explode, but we're dealing with your vision. Important stuff. So keep your eye on the X, or it could . . . Just keep your eye on the X, and you'll be fine."

Callie steps back in with a U-shaped attachment that looks like part of a kid's car seat. She fits it over my face and helps me slip the molded mouthpiece into my mouth. My teeth lock into it when I bite down, and she snaps the ends of the U to the table. *Ka-chunk*. The table is attached to a huge mechanical arm, like something out of *Star Trek*.

My nose itches. I couldn't move my head if I had to, and something about that makes me all squirmy inside. I feel like a bug on a dissecting table.

Frank and Callie look down at me. "You good?" Callie squeezes one of my sock-covered toes. "Need a blanket?"

"Nuh, I'n goo."

"Okay." She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and gives me a friendly smile. Everybody smiles a lot here, probably because they can tell I'm freaking out. "We'll be right around the corner. You'll do great."

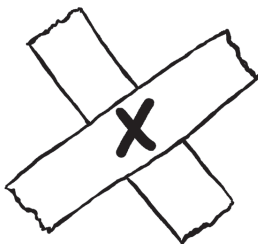
Frank winks. "No sweat. You'll see."

They walk off to my left, but I can't turn my head to follow them. The lights dim slowly as Gwen Stefani starts singing about bananas.

I'll admit it. It's a little freaky being the only one in here with all this machinery. All this . . . *stuff*.

I close my eyes and let out a long breath. It shudders as it slowly comes out, which somehow takes my nerves up another notch.

"All right." Frank's voice squawks through a tinny speaker. "We're gonna get started, Ross. Just relax and keep your eye on the red X. You're about to go for a ride."



After a few seconds of silence, there are loud bangs and a revving sound. The entire room full of heavy machinery comes to life with beeping and whirring and what might be big fans powering up. Maybe things heat up when the radiation gets going? I have no idea.

Then the gurney shudders, and I begin to rise.

Frank comes through the speaker again.

"Houston, we have liftoff."



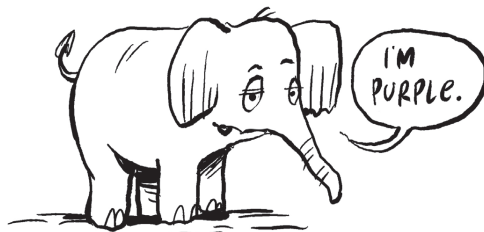
2

PROTONAPALOOZA

My vocabulary of scientific terms has grown by leaps and bounds in the last few months.

Biopsy. Malignant. Mucoepidermoid. Carcinoma. Lacrimal gland. Resection. Triangulation. Proton radiotherapy. I may be in seventh grade, but I ought to be qualified for med school by the end of this.

The hardest part of the treatment is keeping my eye focused in the center of that red X. The whole thing makes me incredibly nervous. If someone tells you not to think about a purple elephant, it's suddenly the only thing you can think about.



The harder I try to keep my eye still, the more it wants to slide off of the X. And my eye isn't the only thing drifting. My brain keeps taking me back to the day this all started . . .

So, there have been a few really Bad Days through this whole thing. Capital *B*, capital *D*. The first one was a few months ago. Mid-July. Right smack in the middle of what was supposed to be an awesome, relaxing summer.

The buildup to Bad Day #1 started when I'd been lying upside down in a chair reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was a summer reading assignment, and while I'm strongly against summer schoolwork, I had to admit it was a pretty good book. I got up and walked into the kitchen, and my dad's eyes got wide.

"Whoa! What happened there?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I opened the pantry door, searching for food. "What happened where?"

He came over and carefully touched the area above my eye. "Does that hurt?"

"Does what hurt?" I stepped into the hallway and looked in the mirror.

My eyelid was all puffed out—it looked like a bullfrog's neck when they blow their necks up.



"Whoa! That is nasty!" I poked at it. It was pretty gross, like it was full of fluid. We talked about whether I'd been bitten by something (no) or gotten hit by something (no)—and decided to ice it.

It went down over the next half hour, so we forgot about it.

Until the next day—Sunday—when I woke up late with another case of Frog Eye. We iced it again. Then, Monday morning, my dad took one look at me and called out of work—which is a super big deal—and we drove to see some eye specialist, Dr. Sheffler.

Dr. Sheffler told me I needed a "cat scan."

Turns out that's lingo for a procedure called a CT scan, but for a little while I was picturing a doctor waving a cat over me.

Thirty minutes later, I was in an ancient building near the hospital. I found myself wearing a hospital gown—the dumbest, most butt-revealing garment ever

designed—padding down a cold hallway in little brown socks with treads on the bottom. They put me on a steel bed, my feet sticking through a giant mechanical donut, and at this point I started getting genuinely nervous—and kind of wishing my dad hadn't stayed in the waiting room.

A truly enormous male nurse—he looked like he should play for the Colts—came in and put an IV in my arm (needle one out of three billion if I'm counting).

He warned me, "Ross, when I inject this, it might feel like you're peeing your pants."

It made me laugh—until a few minutes later when he squirted the contrast dye into the IV line and I got all warm and felt EXACTLY LIKE I WAS PEEING MY PANTS!

Even though I WASN'T PEEING! OR WEARING PANTS!

So weird. It couldn't have felt MORE like I was peeing if I'd actually just let go and whizzed myself.

Sorry.

I digress.

Afterward, Dad and I went to grab an early sub at Dagwood's, as they have awesome milkshakes and their sandwiches are the best thing ever put between two slices of bread.

Dr. Sheffler had told us we'd probably get the results

in two or three days, so it was pretty far from my mind as my dad parked out front. I was busy considering the wide array of delicious sandwich options I'd soon have.

Then my dad's phone rang. He pulled it out, looked at the screen, and frowned. My dad was looking over at me when he answered.

"Hello?"

I only heard my dad's side of the conversation.

"Yes, it is."

"Wait. You did?"

"Okay."

"Right now?"

"All right."

"Absolutely. We'll be there in five minutes."

He hung up and slid the phone all the way into the pocket of his jeans before he said anything. "That was, uh . . . Dr. Sheffler. He has your scans. Wants to see us now."

"Is that bad?"

"Nah . . ." He started the car. "I don't think so." He was trying to sound casual, but his face had gone kind of slack. "Let's just swing over there and . . . you know, we'll grab . . . we'll do Dagwood's afterward."

I peppered him with questions, but he assured me the doctor hadn't told him anything.

Then he was just quiet, which wasn't like him. I'd have killed for a knock-knock or a dad joke right about then.

"So," Dr. Sheffler said, when we were back in his office. He used his foot to hook a rolling stool over and sat down in front of us. He set down the file he'd been holding and leaned in, his elbows on his knees like a basketball coach in a huddle. I felt my dad tense up beside me. I cracked a few knuckles.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Dr. Sheffler continued, speaking carefully. "Let's not beat around the bush. The scan picked up something. A mass, above your right eye." He looked right at me, his mouth squeezed in a tight line—it was a look that somehow said *I'm sorry I have to tell you this* and *This is serious business that we need to discuss like adults* at the same time.

"Really?"

I'll never forget the way my dad said it. *Ree. A. Lee?* Like he'd just found out dragons exist, or that day is night.

That's honestly the last thing I remember clearly.

I mean, I didn't pass out or anything, but they kept talking while my body and head went kind of fuzzy.

I heard bits and pieces.

“... tumor? No way to know yet ...”

“... needle biopsy as soon as we can ...”

“... could be benign, but let’s ...”

“... in the lacrimal gland above the right ...”

“... size of a gumball ...”

“... not time to panic yet ...”

Then all of a sudden, we were at the somber shaking-of-hands and thank-you part. They’d schedule this and that and call us.

And then we were outside. Sitting on the couple of steps outside the front door.

My dad pulled me into him and rubbed the top of my head. Gave it a casual kiss that seemed anything but casual.

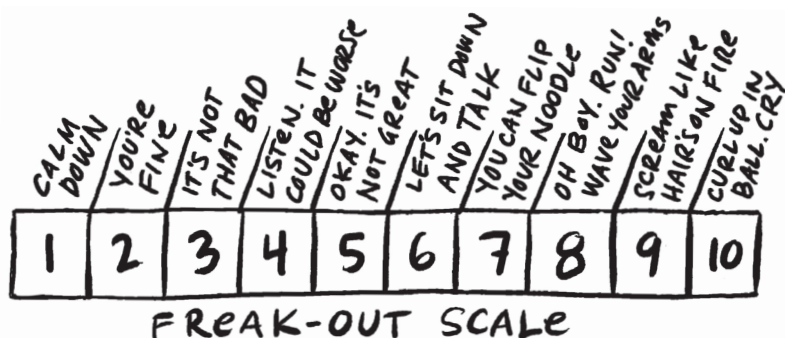
“It’s all gonna be fine, Ross. Okay? The dumb thing is most likely benign, y’know?”

We sat there for a while, him rubbing my shoulder. I kept thinking, *How serious is this?*

I remembered when my mom went through this—even though I was only four when she did—that “benign” was the good kind of tumor. Or, not good, but not necessarily dangerous. “Malignant” was the bad kind: Cancer. The *Big C*.

But—what now? Was I supposed to cry? Should I wail

and throw myself down on the ground? It would have been helpful if Dr. Sheffler had given me a chart, from one to ten, circled the six and said, *This right here is how much you should freak out at this point.*



While I sat on the office steps, my dad went a few paces down the walk to call my stepmom, Linda. Then he called my grandmother (Gammy) in St. Louis, who sniffled and called me Rossy about a thousand times when I got on the phone.

I thought about texting my friends Abby and Isaac, but I couldn't yet. I had no idea what I'd say.

Later, when we got home, Linda set something yellow out for dinner that I poked at but didn't eat.

I remember sitting in the basement playing *Annihilation: Moon* until my thumbs ached.

Eventually, the day got dark and ran out the way

even the worst days do. I went to bed but couldn't sleep, so I just lay there watching headlights slide across my ceiling to the sound of my dad and Linda low-talking in the next room.

All I felt was numb.

3

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.

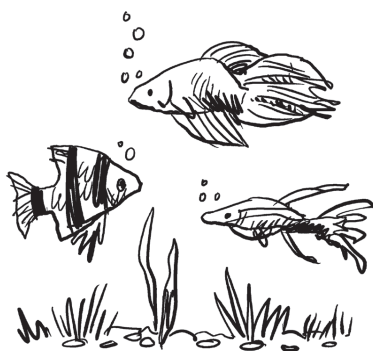
Frank steers me over. "Ross, I want you to meet someone. Or to be more accurate, warn you to stay far, far away from him."

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 wigged 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.