

Diseased

It was the timing of it all that was so unbearable.

Surely the only thing worse than being struck down by a deadly tropical disease is being struck down two weeks after you finish your exams.

After.

If my face had erupted with gruesome pustules two or three or even six months earlier, I still would've been dismayed, naturally, but at least there would've been a compensatory silver lining where I got to build an extravagant bonfire at the end of the garden and laugh into the sky while every text book, notepad and colour-coded timetable turned to dust, on the very day everyone else in Year Eleven was locking their doors and putting on their comfiest knickers ready for weeks of revision hell.

But no.

It was just my luck that the holiday my parents had taken me on as a reward for the previous six months of exam and coursework horror had turned out to be a death sentence.

My parents had tried to give me a treat and ended up killing me. This was exactly typical of them.

I read the web page – www.diagnose-me.com – for probably the eighteenth time.

Severe skin ulceration

Particularly affecting the nose and mouth

Mutilation of the airways

Liver failure

Death

Death! Could they not have put it a bit more poetically? ‘Untimely demise’? ‘Sad passing’? Though I suppose that wouldn’t really have made it any better when it got down to it.

Just then, my three-year-old brother, Paddy, crashed into my bedroom wearing his Queen Elsa dress. As ever, he was dragging his toy giraffe behind him by its tail. My other brother, Ollie – actual age: nineteen, mental age: nine – had persuaded Paddy that an appropriate name for his treasured companion was Dick. This had led to a whole range of bizarre giraffe scenarios, including the time a Jehovah’s Witness had called around and Paddy had decided to push the giraffe’s face into her stomach and jubilantly shout, ‘I LOVE Dick!’

‘Made you a sandwich, Gracie!’ Paddy said, placing the plate on the end of my bed before sprinting back out.

‘Thanks,’ I mumbled, glancing over to see what weird combination of ingredients he’d assembled for me this time.

Paddy had two main interests in his young life:

Dressing as Disney princesses, with particular care

taken to the issue of female underwear. Mum and I both frequently found our knickers screwed up in balls at the bottom of Paddy's bed.

Sandwiches – specifically, making them for other people. In Paddy's world though, any three things piled on top of each other fulfilled the brief. Today's treat was a slice of ham, spread with lemon curd and topped with a raw lasagne sheet. I'd had worse, to be fair.

I got out of bed and went back over to the mirror (coughing all the way – no doubt due to my mutilated airway) to check for any fatal disease developments.

The severe ulceration was plain to see. My skin – from the corner of my mouth all the way to my nose – was so disturbingly blistered and pink that it would clearly only be a matter of days before my whole face started to flake off in chunks. Like cooked chicken falling off the bone is how I imagined it.

I might have been able to tell myself that this was OK – that I could wear a comedy mask or a Tesco bag on my head or maybe just pretend that having no face at all was some kind of feminist statement – if it hadn't been for my startlingly yellow arms and legs. Standing there in my pants and pyjama top, they looked exactly like overripe bananas dangling from my torso. And something I knew for certain was that if you turn yellow all of a sudden it means your liver is finished.

Mental Kenneth who used to live at number fifty-seven went yellow on account of him being a raging alcoholic.

He used to sit in a plastic chair on the pavement with a can of Strongbow in one hand and a cigarette in the other and sing 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' to the neighbourhood cats.

I remember the day Mental Kenneth went yellow because when we'd passed him in the street, Paddy, then a toddler in a pushchair, had screamed loudly and covered his face with his blanket. Mum hurried us off, told me that we shouldn't stare at Mental Kenneth and explained he'd only gone yellow because his liver had packed up from all the Strongbows. Since that day I've been well aware that if you go yellow it means your liver's done for and consequently you're not long for this world (Mental Kenneth died three weeks later).

So that was that. I had the full house of symptoms:

Ulcerated skin

Coughing (i.e. mutilated airways)

Liver failure

It was leishmaniasis. I had no idea how to say it out loud but it would probably kill me before the summer was over.

It was all incredibly shocking.

Urgent Emergency

Leishmaniasis is caused by a sand-fly bite. Sand-flies, I'd read, hung around rubbish and came from Southern Europe. I had just spent two weeks in Spain – undeniably the southerly end of Europe – in an apartment that overlooked four enormous rubbish bins swarming with all manner of insect wildlife. I was no expert on flies and I hadn't exactly got up close to have a look, but I would've put good money on at least one of them being a sand-fly.

You can see how the facts of the situation were inescapable. I didn't want to waste time on denial or hope. One thing about me is that I've always been a realist. Another thing about me is that I have the doctor's surgery saved as one of my speed dial options, for just this kind of eventuality. I decided to make use of this now.

'I need an urgent appointment,' I said as soon as the woman answered.

'Can I take your name and date of birth, please?'

If you asked me to describe the receptionist's tone at this point I would have had to say 'bored'. I'd kept my voice calm when I said 'urgent' because I didn't want to come

across as hysterical, but what kind of person hears of an urgent situation and doesn't at least adopt a grave tone and immediately ask what's wrong? But then I suppose doctor's receptionists are used to people phoning up and saying that every little runny nose is urgent so it isn't always easy to recognise those of us with a genuine life-or-death predicament to discuss.

I gave her my details. As I said my date of birth I got a sudden glimpse of the numbers of my tombstone:

Grace Georgina Dart
13th February 2001 – 15th August 2017
A waste of a beautiful talent

I didn't strictly know what the beautiful talent was but that's the point really, isn't it? If one's life is cruelly snatched away when it's only just beginning then how can anyone ever know what beautiful talents would lie forever undiscovered?

The bored receptionist was clearly still having issues grasping the concept of urgent because she said, 'Surgery closes at one on a Saturday. Looks like I can fit you in Monday though.'

You'd think I was making an appointment for a manicure or a palm reading. This was obviously the sad state of the NHS in these modern times. I wished that Mum and Dad had good jobs with private healthcare like Chloe Bright's parents. When she had to have a metal pin put in her ankle she went private and got a luxury room with a view of the sea and a TV where you could order any film you wanted

from a panel in the side of the bed. She told me that she'd ended up pulling out four of her stitches with her tweezers so she could stay in an extra night because *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy turned out to be longer than she realised.

'I just don't think Monday is soon enough,' I explained as calmly as I could manage. 'My condition may have deteriorated significantly by that point. In fact, I couldn't say for certain that I will still be alive.'

I could tell the receptionist needed some powerful language like this to jolt her into action.

'May I ask what the complaint is?'

I didn't really want to go into details with this woman when I had no idea of her medical credentials but I could see that this was the only way to get her to take me seriously. The only problem was, I still didn't know how to say leishmaniasis out loud.

'It's a rare tropical disease,' I told her. 'Usually fatal.'

'I see,' the receptionist said – staggeringly, still without any real alarm in her voice. 'If you're really concerned then your best bet might be to go to Accident and Emergency at the Royal Sussex.'

Emergency.

Finally, we were getting somewhere. Obviously I should've said 'emergency' not 'urgent' to start with. That was clearly the code word required to get through the system.

'Can you make me an appointment there?' I asked.

The receptionist laughed! She actually laughed. She sounded more tired than genuinely hysterical but still, there is a time and place for a wry chuckle and I did not think this

was it. I seriously wondered if I should spend ten minutes of the little time I had left writing a formal complaint to the Secretary for Health about this woman's attitude to the sickly and unfortunate.

'Doesn't work like that, I'm afraid,' she said. 'Just walk in. They'll see you when they can. You can expect a wait though.'

I said thank you to the receptionist (more than she deserved) and hung up.

A Leak

The hospital wasn't that far away. I could probably even have walked it if it wasn't for my failing health. But it was on the number seventeen bus route so that seemed the best option.

Of course, I did think about telling Mum and Dad or even Ollie about the grave situation to see if they would give me a lift but, believe it or not, without a rock-solid diagnosis in the form of a Near-to-Death Certificate from a fully qualified medical practitioner, I was concerned I may have trouble convincing them of the severity of my condition.

I knew that if I asked them to take me to A&E they would want to know why and that would more than likely lead to unhelpful, naïve and, frankly, disrespectful comments about whether I was quite sure it was 'as serious as all that', et cetera et cetera. It wouldn't matter if my arms and legs burst into flames. They would still insist that it was 'probably nothing' and suggest we 'wait and see' what happens. I could just imagine them all standing around my coffin in the church (closed, so as not to alarm mourners with my ulcerated and disintegrating face), Dad saying to

Mum, 'Still, it'll probably be OK. Let's just wait and see how it pans out.'

Anyway, I quite liked the idea of taking myself to hospital on the bus. I thought it made me sound gutsy and independent. I could see the story as a feature on the local news.

'Meet Grace, the brave teen with only months to live facing her fate with dignity and humour. Welcome to the show, Grace,' Jane Kirkwood would say. (She was always my favourite – kind eyes – so I'd pick her to do my interview). 'So first of all, tell us – is it true that when you discovered you were ill you quite calmly took yourself down to the hospital *on the bus*?'

'That's right, Jane,' I'd say with a brave smile. 'I didn't want to make a fuss. Mum and Dad were busy retiling the en suite. I knew I just had to get on with things.'

Then Jane and Duncan Walker (who I didn't like as much but did at least have nice hair) would look at each other and shake their heads as if to say, 'Blow me down, isn't this girl a marvel?'

I packed my bag with all the essentials you could expect to need for a trip to the hospital to collect a dismal diagnosis:

- Money for the bus (one-way). On the way back I thought I could show them my Near-to-Death Certificate and undoubtedly the fare would be waived.
- Raw broccoli to help counteract the toxins in my bloodstream.

- A bottle of wee (my own). I expected they would want a sample and I always have trouble performing on command.
- One of Mum's magazines as a little light reading material. I doubted I'd be able to concentrate on anything but there was an article in there about a woman who'd found out her internet boyfriend was actually her dad and it's always cheering to know there's someone in a worse situation than you.

When I got on the bus I quite deliberately said, 'Student single to the Royal Sussex Hospital, please.' I didn't really need to specify my destination, but I was thinking that perhaps the bus driver would take pity on me and at the very least give me a sympathetic and supportive smile. But no! Quite the reverse. He insisted on seeing my student card, which luckily I had, otherwise no doubt the miserable old git would've charged me for an adult ticket. I had half a mind to add him to the list of uncaring professionals I needed to formally complain about. I could put the letter in with the one to the Secretary for Health and ask him to pass it on to the Secretary for Transport.

I'd only been sitting down for a couple of minutes when I noticed the unmistakeable smell:

Wee.

At first, I didn't think anything of it – buses aren't exactly known for their hygiene standards – but then I noticed the woman next to me scrunching up her nose and edging away from me and I realised she thought the smell was coming from me.

And then I realised it *was* coming from me.

Coming from my bag, anyway. I reached inside and immediately felt how damp everything was. I took out my sample bottle and saw there was a tiny crack in the plastic. The bottle wasn't *full* of wee – I'm not a camel, for heaven's sake – but there was certainly enough in there that if I let it carry on leaking into my bag it was going to seriously ruin the lining. Not to mention the broccoli. And more worrying than that was the loss of the important sample. I was very anxious that nothing should delay my formal diagnosis.

I didn't have any choice. I had to hold the bottle in my lap, take off one of my socks and wrap it tightly around the plastic to try to stem the flow seeping out. I couldn't risk putting it back in my bag, even with the crack sealed, so I just had to sit there with one bare foot, holding a bottle of my own wee wrapped in a sock, like some kind of conceptual art exhibit.

The woman next to me got up and moved seats. I couldn't really blame her. I found myself looking forward to getting to the hospital – at least there I knew bodily fluids were better appreciated.

Planning

I've always been a fan of a plan. The future, after all, wasn't just going to take care of itself. Without a bit of planning, you were quite likely to rock up in a few years' time and be rather irritated that past-you hadn't bothered sorting things out properly.

My approach had always worked out quite well and had brought with it some not insignificant benefits.

For example, when we went camping at Clatterbury Ring in Year Nine, I was the only person who thought to carry a miniature fire extinguisher in my rucksack at all times. Gregory Short and a few of the others thought it was completely hilarious when they saw it, and called me Fireman Sam for the whole week, but it turned out not to be so silly when sparks from James Handley's campfire landed on Lily Colter's hair extensions and the whole lot went up like a flare. I was able to put my hand on my extinguisher at once and have the whole situation dealt with in a matter of seconds. It would have been a very different story if I hadn't brought it. It would also have been a very different story if Lily had been wearing her

hair extensions at the time, as she spent the rest of the evening tearfully telling us.

My future focus meant that I'd always got on quite well at school, despite being, as Mr Murray, my Year Seven maths teacher, put it, 'prone to neuroticism and lapses in logic'. This is because schools, as you might have noticed, are quite futurey places. I don't mean futuristic – Our Lady of Fatima High School probably hadn't had so much as a new netball bib since the 1970s – I just mean that the whole set-up is geared around what's coming up. You're probably familiar with the kind of thing:

Do your homework and do well in the lesson next week.

Do your revision and get a good grade in your exams next summer.

Do well in your exams and get a good life.

All that.

Schools, when you think about it, are just great big future-planning factories, and I had my future plan all worked out.

I would get good GCSEs – mostly As and 8s or 9s if all went as it should. Then I'd start A levels, and do my best with those too. I probably wouldn't get As but I'd try really hard for Bs. After this, I would go to university. I wouldn't get in to Oxford or Cambridge, I'm not unrealistic, but I'd aim as high as I could. Bristol, maybe if I put the work in, or maybe one of the London ones. After that, I would get an entry-level job, probably in London. Or perhaps I'd do

an internship or a training scheme. If I had to, I could work in a bar in the evening to earn enough money for rent and everything. I would wear a smart pencil skirt and shoes with a not-too-high heel and people would know they could rely on me to get the job done and they'd call me a rising star of the business world and I'd appear on lists on business blogs called things like '*Thirty under thirty: ones to watch*'. I wasn't sure what business I would be in exactly but that hardly seemed to matter. I would start drinking coffee out of cardboard cups and walk briskly through busy stations tutting at tourists and I would go for after-work cocktails on a Friday.

I had it all worked out.

Don't get me wrong, my meticulous planning didn't mean I always had an easy time of things. Years of intense focus meant I only really had one friend to speak of – Matilda 'Til' Romero – and even she would tell me I was annoying her at least nine times a day.

I also didn't always find the work easy. The last six months of Year Eleven had just about broken me, but as my form tutor Mrs Palmer liked to say, what I lacked in ability I made up for in organisation. Mum was outraged when she heard about that but I took it as the highest compliment. Anyway, I hadn't minded the extra maths study sessions, the early-morning revision club, spending every weekday night locked in my room with index cards and coloured highlighters and every Saturday afternoon in the library, because I had my eyes on the prize. The prize being a dazzling future of smart shoes and corporate networking.

But the uncomfortable truth was that, as I wheezed and coughed and dragged my luminous arms and legs through the wheelchair-sunbathers of the hospital car park, I suddenly didn't know if I had a future at all.

There I was, forced to confront the possibility that every minute of it – every underlined paragraph in my history text book, every French verb list stuck to the back of the toilet door, every text I'd sent saying I couldn't do something because I had to revise – could have been for nothing. I'd spent most of the last sixteen years setting myself up for a sparkling, successful life but maybe it was about to turn out that those sixteen years were it.

They *were* the life.

Immoral Support

‘Oh god!’ I found myself saying it out loud and making an old woman with one leg jump and nearly topple off her crutches.

I’d thought I’d had forever. Well, not forever and ever, obviously, but more time than I could imagine. I’d honestly believed if there was somewhere I wanted to see, I could see it. If there was something I wanted to learn, I had all the time in the world. There were billions of people out there and I assumed that by the time I was done on this planet, I would’ve met a good chunk of them. I’d always thought there was plenty of time for all of it.

But I’d been wrong.

I stopped outside the hospital entrance and leant against the wall. The summer sun was warm on my face but I was cold inside. Would this be my last summer, I wondered.

I suddenly needed someone to talk to. I’d wanted to be fearless and independent but I just wasn’t sure I was up to the role.

I took out my phone and dialled Til’s number.

‘Yeah?’

That was how Til always answered the phone. I don’t

think I'd ever actually heard her use the word 'hello'.

'Til, it's bad news.'

'Yeah, I know. It's rubbish, ain't it.'

That threw me. How could she already know? 'But I haven't told you what it is yet.'

'Yeah, but you said it was bad so I was trying to be sympathetic. You're always telling me I'm not sensitive enough. I'm trying my best.'

'Right, yeah. But, Til, listen. I might be dying.'

'How's that, then?'

'I have a disease. It's tropical. I've turned yellow. I'm at the hospital.'

'Are you wearing one of those paper dresses that shows your bum?'

'What? No. I haven't gone in yet. I'm going to have some tests. And then they might tell me I'm dying. I wanted you to know. As my best friend.'

'As your only friend.'

Why had I thought phoning Til was a good idea?

Til and I had been best friends – of sorts – since Year Eight. We'd been sat on neighbouring desks in science and as we both found the subject at once mind-numbing and incomprehensible, we spent most of each lesson having whispered conversations and sharing bags of Maltesers from the vending machine while Til sketched cartoons of our classmates and teachers on the inside of her folder.

I thought she'd hated me at first but after a year or so of her withering looks and weary sighs I realised that was just how she was.

‘I don’t hate anyone,’ she told me once. ‘I mean, they annoy me, sure. You annoy me, defo. But hate? It’s just too much effort for someone like me.’

‘What do you mean, someone like you?’

‘I’m apathetic,’ she said.

‘A pathetic what?’

‘No, apathetic. Chronically unenthusiastic. It means I just don’t care, basically.’

Til might not have cared about me, but she did at least hang around with me every lunchtime and most weekends when I wasn’t studying so she at least found me bearable. And I could be quite annoying so I was happy to settle for that for now.

‘You’re not actually dying, right?’ To be honest, I thought Til sounded more irritated than concerned, but maybe I was doing her a disservice.

‘I’m holding a bottle of wee and it’s leaked on me.’

She laughed. ‘Rank.’

‘I’m going in now. I’ll phone you after.’

‘Cool, sure thing.’ She hung up. I’d never heard Til say goodbye either.

Diagnosis

I went through the big glass doors and headed over to reception. On the bus on the way there, I had reasoned that as my main symptoms – my disintegrating face and my radioactive arms – were clearly on show, the receptionist would be quite likely to realise the urgency of the situation at once and fast-track me to some kind of tropical disease isolation chamber.

Once again though, I was let down.

‘How can I help you?’ the man on reception said with a smile.

I thought it was perfectly obvious that my body was seizing up before his very eyes, but I supposed he’d been trained that it wasn’t polite to comment on people’s afflictions, no matter how disturbing the scene.

‘I’m seriously ill,’ I told him.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ he said, as if he was a waiter and I’d complained about a hair in my soufflé. ‘What are the symptoms?’

I resisted the temptation to say, ‘Are you blind?’ and kept my voice calm and composed as I listed everything clearly.

‘My airways are mutilated, which is giving me a painful throat and persistent cough. My skin is ulcerated – as you can see – and my limbs are jaundiced – as you can also see.’ I indicated both ulcerations and jaundice in the manner of an air stewardess pointing out emergency exits. ‘I suspect the disease is tropical in origin.’

The receptionist frowned slightly. ‘Have you travelled recently?’

‘Yes.’ I told him. ‘Only two days ago I was in Alicante, Spain.’ Then I added, ‘Southern Europe,’ just to help him make the connection with the sand-flies, et cetera.

‘Yep,’ he said. ‘I know where Alicante is.’ He was being breezy, that’s what it was. Pleasant and smiley and *breezy*. I thought it was most inappropriate.

And then I was completely taken aback when, instead of paging the tropical specialist at once, he handed me a form and a pen and said, ‘You’ll need to register, then I’ll get someone to assess you.’

The form was completely mundane with all sorts of irrelevant, trivial questions that really did not seem like a good use of my remaining hours on this planet.

What’s my name, what’s my address, do I smoke, how many units of alcohol do I drink a week – all this. I was there about a serious medical matter, not to sign up for internet dating, for goodness’ sake. Yet another sign the NHS was falling apart, I thought to myself.

Once I’d filled in the form, the receptionist told me to take a seat as there would be a short wait. To my mind, a short wait is what you have while the kettle boils or while

an unwanted visitor gives up waiting for you to come to the front door and you can stop hiding behind the sofa. A short wait is minutes, not hours. And definitely not three hours and forty-seven minutes, which is the exact amount of time I spent sitting in a blue plastic chair trying not to pick my ulcerated face and clasping a sock that smelt of wee.

Anyway, I shan't go into the details of all the times I asked the receptionist how much longer it would be, only for him to say (i.e. lie) 'not long now', or the number of times I had to glare at the small child who kept rudely staring at my afflictions while I was minding my own business nibbling on my raw broccoli. What matters is that eventually, a nurse who introduced herself as Claudette, took me behind a curtain, sat me on a wheelie bed and told me she was going to do something called triage on me.

'Is that like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?' I asked. I didn't really fancy the idea of getting so intimate with Claudette so soon after we'd met but part of me was pleased that some drastic action was finally being taken.

'Oh, no,' she laughed. 'It's basically medical speak for "find out what's going on".'

'Well, I can tell you, if you like,' I said. 'I mean, if it would speed things up. They do say that patients know their own bodies best, after all.'

'OK, sure,' she said. 'Tell me what you're worried about.'

I don't know if it was the way she sat back in her chair looking all peaceful and ready to listen or if it was just the stress of the day finally getting on top of me but I suddenly came over like I was in therapy. I lay down on the wheelie

bed like it was a psychiatrist's couch and told her all about our family trip to Spain and the bins and the flies and my ulcerated face, my mutilated airways and my jaundiced skin that was undoubtedly a sign of my malfunctioning liver. Although I knew it was going slightly beyond her remit as a doctor of the body (and not of the mind) I told her what horrendous bad luck it was that I should be dying after my exams and not before.

‘The most infuriating part of it is that I don’t think I can even say for certain that I enjoyed the holiday! It’s very hard to just relax on demand, isn’t it? I’m sure you find the same, being an incredibly busy medical professional and everything. People like us can’t just flick a switch! I was lying on the lounge and looking at the sparkly sea and saying, “Aaaaah” and “Oh yes, this is the life” and doing all the things you’re supposed to do to relax but I just couldn’t get into it properly. I kept thinking of what I was going to do next or what I was going to do when I got home or trying to work out what I was going to say when the man with the gold teeth from up the beach tried to sell me a pair of fake Ray-Bans. In fact, I spent quite a lot of time trying to take the perfect photo of myself relaxing on the lounge so I could put it on Instagram and Snapchat to show everyone at home just how comprehensively I was relaxing, but by the time you’ve factored in showing them that you’re wearing a bikini but not showing them all your half-naked flesh, and demonstrating that the weather is glorious and tropical but without looking like a pink, sweaty mess, you can spend half a day just getting that one shot! Anyway, I digress. My

point is that, relaxing or not, I went on the holiday and that's how I've contracted this disease. I can't exactly pronounce the name of it but it begins with L and has lots of Ss in it. Probably if you just put sand-flies and mutilated airways and death into Google it will come right up.'

'Leishmaniasis,' Claudette said suddenly.

'Leash your what?'

'Leishmaniasis,' she said. 'What you're describing. You don't have it.'

'What? I – what? I do.' This was all moving too quickly for me. I had put a lot of time into researching my condition and I wasn't sure it was really this 'Claudette' character's place to be making sweeping statements like 'You don't have it'. Not without some careful examination, anyway.

She was shaking her head. 'Nope. You definitely don't. I've seen it a couple of times and that irritation on your face is not it.'

Suddenly I remembered the sample I was clutching. I felt she should at least test that.

'I brought urine,' I said, and thrust the bottle towards her, sodden sock and all.

'Goodness. How organised.' Claudette's nose crinkled very slightly as she took it from me and placed it on the desk in front her. Frankly I expected a higher tolerance from a nurse. Surely one of the reasons a person gets into medicine in the first place is because they have an insatiable curiosity about unsavoury substances.

'You should test it,' I prompted, although to be honest I thought that should be perfectly obvious.

‘I don’t need to,’ she said. She was still wearing that smile. Someone should tell her that smiling isn’t always polite, I thought. Maybe it was her idea of a good bedside manner but sometimes a bit of gravity is called for.

Then she took a little torch out of her pocket and said, ‘I’d just like to take a look at your throat, if you can open wide for me.’

Sure, I thought, as she went in. I hope you’re prepared to see some serious mutilation.

She had a little poke about with her torch and a metal stick thing and then she sat back in her chair.

‘OK,’ she said, typing a few things into her computer. ‘I’d say there are a few things going on here.’

Oh god, I thought. A few things. More than one tropical disease? Surely not.

‘You’ve got a little bit of inflammation in your throat. No more than a cold, I shouldn’t think. Drink lots of fluid and take paracetamol. The blistered area on your face is the herpes simplex virus. A cold sore, in other words.’

‘Herpes!’

If anything this was worse than a tropical disease.

I had a sex disease!

On my face!

People would think I had been . . . I don’t know. Rubbing my face in sex.

‘Herpes simplex,’ she said again. ‘A cold sore. It’s quite common. It’ll clear up on its own soon enough, or you can get some cream from the chemist.’

‘But, I haven’t been . . .’ I wasn’t sure how to put this.

‘Herpes is from sex and –’

Claudette laughed. ‘This is HSV-1. It’s different from genital herpes.’

Genitals! She said genitals. How had this happened? We were meant to be talking about my mutilated airways and now we were talking about genitals and sex diseases.

‘How would I have got it?’ I felt myself reaching up to cover the blisters with my hands. I was suddenly deeply ashamed of them, sitting there, all sex-diseased on my face.

Claudette shrugged. ‘Any contact with the virus. Kissing . . .’

I made a face. That was not something that had happened recently.

‘Sharing a cup with friends or family members . . .’

Great, I thought. So that was it. I’d caught it from sharing the toothpaste mug with Dad. I’d got a sex disease on my face from my dad.

I still felt there was a fairly major issue that Claudette seemed to be overlooking.

‘I’m still jaundiced,’ I said. ‘So my liver must be diseased. That’s my most serious symptom.’

Claudette frowned a little, then she came over and lifted up one of my arms. She ran her fingers over it then – weirdness beyond weirdness – she lifted it up and *smelt it*.

Suddenly I wasn’t sure if Claudette was a real nurse at all. First there was the squeamishness around a perfectly naturally (albeit slight leaky) urine sample, then she’d started talking about genitals, and now she was outright sniffing

my limbs! She was clearly one of those bizarre fetishists and had snuck into the hospital just to rub her nose on body parts and other such oddness.

‘Dihydroxyacetone,’ she said, letting my arm go again. ‘That’s what I think that is.’

I felt my eyes widen. ‘Is it terminal?’

Claudette laughed. ‘It’s not a disease. It’s a chemical. It’s what they put in fake tan to colour the skin. That biscuity smell is what happens when it reacts with the top layer of skin.’

I looked at my arms. ‘I haven’t used fake tan. I don’t. As a natural redhead, my colouring doesn’t carry a tan well. I prefer to stay fair. Like a delicate porcelain doll.’

Claudette frowned slightly. ‘Well, that’s what it smells like. And that would certainly explain your . . . vivid skin tone.’ She smiled in the way that people do when they’re trying not to smile, like their lips are being tugged upwards by tiny invisible threads. ‘I think you might be right when you say you don’t carry a tan well.’

‘Well, I haven’t used fake tan. It can’t be that. Unless someone has come into my bedroom in the night and fake tanned me without my consent, which is a very strange thing to do. Although nonetheless disturbing.’

‘What about moisturisers? Any other products that could contain dihydroxyacetone?’

I shook my head firmly. ‘No! I –’

Then I stopped myself. Due to a lack of funds, and a lack of inclination to walk all the way to Boots, I had for the past four days been sneaking Mum’s body lotion into my room after my shower in the morning.

‘Radiance,’ I said quietly.

‘Pardon me?’

I looked up at Claudette. I could feel my cheeks turning pink, which no doubt was setting off my yellow arms a treat. ‘It was called Radiance. But it just said it would give me a healthy glow!’

Claudette smiled again. She didn’t even try to hide it this time. ‘Well, it’s certainly a glow.’

‘So, just to confirm,’ I said. ‘What you’re saying is that I’m not in danger of an imminent and painful death?’

Claudette shook her head. ‘I shouldn’t think so. A cold sore and a cold, that’s all. They’ve probably struck at the same time because you were tired and run down after your exams.’

I felt very small indeed.

I thanked Claudette for her time and bolted through the hospital curtain before I could be diagnosed with any more sex diseases and before Claudette could smell any more of my limbs.

A Wake-Up

It was only when I got outside that the reality hit me:

The bad thing about being told you're not going to die from a tropical disease is that you feel quite silly. The good thing about it, though, is that you're not going to die.

I wasn't going to die. Not any time soon anyway.

I had to phone Til at once to tell her the good news.

'Yeah?'

'Til. I'm not going to die!'

'No? You get tested then? You give them your wee?'

'Yes. Well, sort of. I mean, I'm not *well*, obviously, but I'm not dying. That's the main thing.'

'How do you mean "not well"?'

'I have a bad throat. And a cold sore.'

'Didn't you say you'd turned yellow? What's that about?'

'Tell me, Til. Do you think it's ethical or sensible or legal for a company to just slip fake tan into a moisturiser without being quite explicit that that's what it is?'

Til was already laughing. 'No way. You did *not*.'

'It's actually not funny when you think about it.'

‘Tell me you have *not* just been to casualty to tell them your fake tan has gone wrong. That is too good.’

I ignored her. ‘I’m serious, Til. Think about it. They put a chemical in their product that changes people’s skin! Changing people’s skin colour without their consent is assault! Or vandalism. Vandalism of the skin! It’s not OK, anyway.’

Til just carried on laughing so I hung up on her to annoy her.


The bus wasn’t due to come for another twenty minutes so I decided to walk home. I turned off the busy main road and into the park. It would take ten minutes longer that way, but I didn’t care because suddenly, I wasn’t running out of time. I had all the time in the world!

I had been given a second chance!

Just five hours earlier I’d been thinking about all the things I’d never get to do – I’d never visit New York, never ride an elephant, never learn to play chess or speak Mandarin. I mean, some things I wasn’t that bothered about – chess always seemed a very dreary way to spend time – but the point was, it was up to me again. If I wanted to waste four hours shuffling little bits of wood around a chequered board with a bearded Russian then I could.

A whole day of thinking about how I’d spent most of the last six months – locked in my room in the dark, hunched over my desk, listening to music that sounded like whales having orgasms because it apparently ‘aided concentration’ – had been an alarming wake-up call.

I was only going to be sixteen once. I would be seventeen in a few months. And then a few months after that I’d be



eighteen. All these ages – my youth, my best years – weren't going to last long, and what the hell was I doing with them? I had voluntarily spent fifty per cent of being sixteen listening to whales having sex and doing other things that actively brought me displeasure.

What are you doing, Grace?

What are you doing with your life?