

CHAPTER ONE

IT'S kind of your worst fear when you're afraid of the doctor's office. You're scared that you'll go in and they will tell you that there's something wrong with you.

"I have some unwelcome news," the doctor said after hours of tests. I remember it like it was yesterday. There're some things you just don't forget.

There I sat, on the cold faux leather table of the corner exam room, high atop the hospital with unobstructed views of the Charles River and most of Cambridge. They had bounced me between the doctor I scheduled the appointment with and multiple other departments all day. It felt like I'd been there a week. After they'd completed all their tests and left me in the last room to go examine the results, I stared out into the misty air. It was raining, but only ever so slightly. It was more like fog than rain.

I hadn't been to a doctor in years, probably since I was a kid and my parents made me go. After about a year of having terrible headaches, my boss, Jim, told me I should get checked out. He wanted to make sure there was nothing wrong with me, since he relied so heavily on me at work.

The entire train ride to the hospital I was nervous and

thinking the worst. I knew that there would be something wrong with me. That's just how my mind was, always worrying that things would be the ultimate worst that they could possibly be.

Turns out, I was right.

It felt like they'd left me alone on that examining table in a gown for hours. It was probably a lot less than that, but your mind wonders when you're worried that you will get terrible news soon.

By the time the doctor came back into the room, I had completely zoned out. It took him a few taps on my shoulder before I snapped back to reality.

Standing before me, with my chart in his hand and his glasses dangling from the end of his nose, he said the one sentence that I feared I'd never be able to forget.

"The news isn't good," he began, "I'm afraid it's not very good at all."

I sat and listened for the next ten or so minutes while he told me all about how they could have operated if they caught it sooner. I sat and listened to how there was nothing that they could do at this point. I sat and listened as this doctor, whom I'd never met a day in my life before today, told me I had brain cancer and that I didn't have much longer to live.

CHAPTER TWO

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND," I remember saying, "just like that? There's nothing that can be done."

"I wish I could tell you we could just operate and you'll be fine," he said. "But the issue is that the tumor has attached itself to your brain stem. Normally the tumor is much higher in the brain and can be removed without affecting you."

"So because of where the tumor is, you can't remove it?" I asked.

"The chances are more likely that you would die on the operating table or we'd paralyze you for the rest of your life. The risk is so high, in fact, that I don't believe the hospital would let us do the surgery, even if we thought it was the best measure."

In that moment, that instant, I didn't know what else to say. I didn't know what else to do. How are you supposed to take the news that you're told you're going to die?

The doctor spent a few more minutes answering various questions I had for him before he left me so I could put my clothes back on.

As I got dressed, I kept looking out the window at the view. For some reason, I thought it might make me feel better. Or perhaps

my cancer ridden brain would try to convince me that jumping through the window would solve my problems.

“How long do I have?” I asked when he came back to see me out.

“It’s tough to say,” he answered. “I know that’s not what you want to hear. I wish I could tell you exactly how long you had. That way you could do all the things you wanted to do, see all the things you want to see. It’s not that easy, though, you understand?”

His question sort of left me hanging. I understood, yes, but that didn’t make the news any easier.

“Tomorrow? The next day? Can you even give me a ballpark?”

“I haven’t seen a tumor so advanced in many years. Neither has our head of Radiology. Normally we catch them sooner in regular checkups. It could be anywhere from 6 months to a year. Maybe more, maybe less.”

I remember it taking forever to put my coat on. I kept reaching for arm holes I knew were there, but missing.

He gave me strict instructions to try to stay as healthy as possible, eat right, exercise, don’t do drugs. The usual stuff that a doctor will tell you. But what was the point? I had an expiration date, so why bother taking care of myself?

Why bother doing well at things and trying to stay healthy if I’m going to die, anyway?

CHAPTER THREE

THE UBER from the hospital to the train station was slow. A lot slower than normal. The green line train I got on seemed to stay longer at every stop along the way than it usually did. The people all seemed to fly by in a blur while I sat motionless.

It felt like they all knew. Normally people crowd into the train and jam themselves into the all-too-small seats next to me. I'm elbow deep in someone else's paper or iPad and struggling to keep my personal space to myself. But not today. Today everyone seemed to either stand or sit across from me. Maybe it was because it was later than I was on the train or perhaps it was because they knew.

"Don't sit near the cancer guy!" they thought to themselves.

"It's contagious! Stay away!" mothers told their children.

That must have been it.

As they continued to whiz past me in a blur of colors and sounds, I heard the announcement we'd arrived at Park Street, which was where I'd get off and walk to my office.

I took my time getting up the various flights of stairs that led me out onto Boston Common. Even though I'd just been given the worst news I could think of, the Common still made me feel a bit better.

The immediate request for “spare change” when I exited the stairwell made me feel at home. That familiar smell of the air that Boston had to it flew into my nostrils, filling me with a sense of safety.

It wasn’t a lengthy walk from the train station to my office, but it felt like it took longer than it ever had before. Everything around me was just moving so quickly while I felt sluggish. No matter how much I told my brain to tell my legs to move faster, my brain just kept telling me to go fuck myself.

By the time I made it to my office, my legs felt like mud. I kept thinking I just needed to put one foot in front of the other. I kept telling myself that I had to get through that day, but then I’d call in sick.

“Hey Andy. How’d it go?” my boss, Jim, asked, popping his head in my office door.

“Sorry?” I replied.

“The doctor’s. Everything go okay?”

“Oh, that,” I said, looking down at my desk. “Yeah, went fine.”

The truth was that I did not know how to tell him. Jim had been my boss for the last four years. Before that he and I had worked together on several projects. I guess you could say that he was my friend.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell him. Not yet, at least. I needed some time to process things and grieve about my upcoming doom. Who should I tell first? Should I call my parents? My friends? Katelyn?

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY AM I telling you all of this? You don't know me. You definitely don't care what happens to me, I'm a stranger. I'm no one to you.

The truth is, I don't have many people in my life. I work a lot, most all the time. I tend to push those close to me away. I guess it's because I'm somewhat of a loner. I prefer to spend time by myself to being out with other people or in a group. I don't like bars or clubs, so I don't go to them.

I suppose some people would say I'm an asshole. I've not always been proud of my decisions in life. Especially now, looking back on some choices I've made, things I've said, feelings I've hurt.

Fuck. Did it take getting cancer to sit back and look at myself? Am I really that guy? Jesus, I'm having an internal monologue in my head right now like I'm on some sitcom. This isn't television, though, this is my life. Or what's left of it, at least.

Do you want to know me? I mean, really know me? I suppose if you picked this up and started skimming the first few bits, you're at least a little interested, right?

I'll give you the five minute summary, because that's all I have the energy for, okay?

I'm Andrew Costello, though people call me Andy. I say

people because as I mentioned above, I don't have friends or folks I'm close with. My Mom & Dad are Marcus and Diane, who raised me in a small town in Massachusetts, where I have spent all of my 28 years. I've traveled a lot for work and some for pleasure, but have always lived in Massachusetts, which is fine if you don't hate the cold and snow.

I live (and work) in "the city", as we call it. Downtown Boston. It's expensive, but convenient to get to and from work.

I work in tech, for a computer company. Which, if you ask my mom, means I can fix anything that plugs into a wall. And while I'm handy, that's sort of like saying "oh, you work in a shoe store? What's this fungus on my toe?" Same thing, right?

I'm single and have been for a while. My long-time girlfriend, Kate, and I broke up two years ago. Jesus, has it been two years already? It doesn't feel like it. She and I don't keep in touch anymore, which I hate. We didn't end things badly, no one got hurt (I think?) and there were no hard feelings — her words. We just drifted apart over time, which sucks because we met when we were literal kids in middle school.

You're probably wondering what I look like by this point, so you can picture me sitting here, huddled over my laptop, pecking away at keys trying not to let anyone in the office see me, just beginning to tell my story to anyone who wants to listen. But I won't tell you what I look like. For the sake of my story and my life, it doesn't matter. I look like however you see me in your head. I look like anyone else you know. I look like a person whose life just changed, and he has no idea what to do.

I look like I'm about to have a mental breakdown.

Why am I doing this? Why am I blabbering on into a Word document on my computer about all of this? I don't know. Honestly, I don't. I just feel like maybe, just maybe, it's something I **have** to do. Maybe it'll all make sense when it's done. Maybe this will journal my scientific discovery of a cure for cancer. Maybe this will document my inevitable demise. Maybe I'll give up even doing this in a week or two. Maybe I won't.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS easy to call in sick for the rest of that week. I hadn't planned it that way, at first, but once I called in the first day, the rest of the week just sort of zipped by in an unmemorable flash.

It's funny, when I think back on it now, I can still remember the exact tone of the doctor's voice when he told me I was going to die. I can see the dab of spit on the left corner of his mouth, the single drop of sweat forming at his hairline. I can still see him on the balls of his feet, ready to retreat in case I got hostile.

I stayed in bed Wednesday, all day. It's mostly a blur, but I think I got up once or twice to go to the bathroom. Even that felt like a waste of my time and effort.

I'm not sure if I made it look effortless that one day I had gone into work. I still sit around and wonder if Jim knew something was up. He must have when I didn't show up for the rest of the week.

I ordered Foodler for that entire week, eating whatever I wanted, not caring about my weight or health. If my body was attacking me, I would rebel with Chinese and fried foods.

I tried looking brain cancer up online, but couldn't find anything that made any sense to me. I guess the stuff I found and read only made sense if you were a doctor or working to become

one. The hundreds of articles I read just confused me more. Different types, different people saying someone diagnosed them, different prognosis, it was just all too much to take in. Between WebMD and Wikipedia, I'd fallen down a black hole of medical jargon that was completely over my head.

I wouldn't say I was wallowing in bed all day, but I was. I'm man enough to admit that I spent a good couple of hours crying, too.

I kept thinking to myself, "how do I deal with this?"

I kept wondering if there were some magical formula or some mystic thing you did to make yourself okay with the news that you would die.

Everyone knows they're going to die eventually, so I guess on some level you have to be okay with it, don't you?

I sat in the shower for an hour that afternoon. On the floor, weeping. There were so many questions I had, I didn't know what to do or where to start. Just as I was running out of hot water, I figured I should tell my parents. If no one else, they deserved to know.

CHAPTER SIX

I'M sure my Mom knew something was up when I called and asked if I could come by for dinner. I never did that, especially in the middle of the week when there wasn't a holiday anywhere in sight.

"Is everything okay?" she asked immediately.

"It's fine. Tomorrow night?"

"I think your father's working late tomorrow, let's do a late dinner. Is that okay?"

We settled on eight the next night, which had given me all day Thursday to not do anything. That's all I wanted to do at that point, anyway.

I could go on and on about what I did between that phone call and Friday night, but I literally did nothing. I laid in bed, stewed over how final my time on earth was and was miserable.

It was tough to drag myself out of bed to get ready but I knew I had to do it.

Before I was diagnosed I would have sat around and thought logically about how to break dreadful news to my parents. When Katelyn and I broke up, I knew exactly what I would say to them. My parents loved her so much, it was almost more sad for them that we broke up than either of us.

This time I had no plan. I had no idea what I would say when I got there. I just knew I had to tell them.

I had rented a car from Zipcar to head up to their house. Since I lived in the city, I had no need or desire to own my own car, especially when it was so easy to grab one from down the block. They lived in the suburbs just on the outskirts in a tiny town called Newton. I hadn't grown up there, though I sometimes wished I had. My parents moved there when I was in college. I always admired how quaint Newton was. Christmas time at my parents was my favorite time. All the houses in the neighborhood tried to outdo each other, making the neighborhood mostly visible from the Mass Pike.

When I got there, I sat in their driveway for a few minutes before going up, still trying to work out what I was going to say. I guess I must have sat there for too long because my Mom eventually opened the door and yelled to me to come in.

I nodded and shut the car off. I left the windows down since it was almost May and it was unusually warm for the end of April. I noticed the Goldenrod had bloomed along their walkway as I trudged toward the door. My Mom was still standing there, waiting. Her arms wrapped around her waist, holding her sweater closed around her.

She kissed me on the cheek when I got to the top of the small staircase and shut the door behind me.

"Take your shoes off, I just had the floors redone," my Dad called from the living room. He was watching the hockey game.

"Okay Dad," I called back.

My Mom took my jacket as I followed her into the living room where Dad was perched on the edge of his seat.

"Fucking Julien," he said pointing to the TV. "The Bs either are too good or they suck. Julien can't get the power play together."

I nodded and sat down in the vacant recliner, leaving just the small end table between us. Hockey was one of the few things my dad and I had in common. He loved football and baseball, too, but I never got into those. Hockey was always my sport, even though I was terrible at it when I played as a kid. He never held

that against me. Even when we lost by a half dozen, he always had a “we’ll get ‘em next time” attitude. He never called me a loser or picked on me for sucking.

I’d love to tell you that I was great at it and I played in the NHL, but this isn’t about lying to you.

On game nights, Mom knew better than to try to get Dad to eat at the table, so she brought us dinner after setting out the little tray tables they’d had since I was a kid. They wobbled a bit, but if you rested your elbows just right they didn’t topple over onto your lap.

I figured telling them their son was going to die wasn’t best done during intermission, especially during a game where the Bruins were losing to Montreal by 3 after the first period. I waited until the game had ended. I also figured that’d give me more time to think about what I was going to actually say.

We made small talk throughout the second and third periods where the Bruins mounted an almost miraculous comeback, but lost in overtime.

By the time the game had ended and Dad had stopped swearing, I had no choice to but tell them. I’d been there for over two hours and kept insisting that things were fine.

“You didn’t come over to watch the game,” Dad said. “What’s going on?”

“You’re right, I didn’t,” I started. “Something is up.”

“Did you and Katelyn get back together?” my Mom asked.

“Mom, it’s been years, give it a rest, okay? We didn’t love each other anymore.”

“I’m sorry, what is it?” Mom said.

I stood from the recliner and walked around to stand in front of them. This was the only way I could look at both of them at the same time due to the way their living room was laid out. I took my time pacing back and forth for a short bit before looking at them both.

“I went to the doctor’s Monday,” I started my story. “I’ve been having these terrible headaches. Over the last few months they’ve gotten worse and worse. I didn’t have a doctor because I haven’t been to one in so long, but I looked one up and saw him.”

I was pacing back and forth in front of the TV at this point so my Dad took the remote and turned it off. I think he could tell this was getting serious.

“After a while, he brought in a bunch of specialists. A neurologist, radiologist and some others I forget to run some tests,” I continued pacing, “and the news they came back with wasn’t good.”

It was at this point that my Dad reached over and took my Mom’s hand. I could tell they were nervous, so I just got on with it, to not delay the inevitable any further.

“I have a tumor that’s fused to my brain stem.”

That was the first time I’d said it aloud. The first time I’d really admitted it to myself. I had cancer.