

CHAPTER 1.

I THOUGHT I HAD CANCER

So I thought I had cancer, just in time for Christmas. A few weeks before my kids unwrapped their presents under the tree, the dermatologist unwrapped me underneath the soul-killing fluorescent lights of his office park suite. I thought I had cancer, but I didn't really. I guess I should start the story there.

THE HAIRY MOLE IN THE MANGER

I and my wife, Ali, became preoccupied with the idea I might have cancer in November. For weeks, I was obsessed with an image of me in a stocking cap, knit by someone who couldn't bear the notion of a world without me in it, looking as stoic as a character in a Sylvia Plath poem.

I had this mole, you see, on my right shoulder.

It wasn't gross or anything. It was just large and discolored, and it had a few hairs growing out of it. "Suspicious," my former-premed spouse called it, and then she'd point at it and quote that line from Uncle Buck about finding a gutter rat to gnaw it off.

Ali had been after me for months to go to the doctor and get it checked out. But because I'm an idiot, instead of going to the doctor, I consulted WebMD, a website (I'm now convinced) that was designed by terrorists to frighten Westerners. If you haven't checked out WebMD already, *don't*. It's the most terrifying corner of the Internet you'll ever browse.

I consulted WebMD for a suspicious mole, and twelve hours later, I logged off in black despair, convinced that I suffered from IBS and TB, convinced as well that my kids have ADHD and maybe scoliosis to boot, and that I might as well preorder those little blue pills, because “that” is likely right around the corner for me as well.

To be honest, even though I spend two or three hours every day admiring myself in the mirror, I didn’t even notice the mole was there. I didn’t realize it was there until that summer when I took my shirt off at the pool and Ali threw up a little bit in her mouth.

Normally, me taking my shirt off at the pool is an Event (with a capital *E*), a moment that provokes jealousy among men, stirs aspiration among boys, and awakens fifty shades of Darwinian hunger in women. Like Bernini unveiling his *David*, normally me taking my shirt off at the pool is a siren call, overpowering all reason and volition and luring the primal attention of every female to be dashed against this rock.

But I digress.

The point is, when I took off my shirt at the pool that summer and saw my beloved wipe the vomit from the corner of her mouth, it got my attention. Ali got after me to go to the doctor. My youngest son, Gabriel, who tried to biopsy my mole for his new microscope, got after me. My mom, who is a nurse, got after me. And the voice in my head confirmed what WebMD and all the rest had told me.

But my personal philosophy has always been that if you wait long enough, the worst will always happen, so for months and months, I didn’t do anything about it. Then, one behind-closed-doors kind of night, Ali whispered across the pillow that she was never going to touch me again until I scheduled an appointment.

I called the doctor the next morning.

Of course, because I have health insurance, I couldn’t just call the dermatologist to schedule an appointment. No, that would make us communists. First I had to blow a morning and a copay

at the general practitioner in order to get a referral to the skin doctor.

The nurse at the general practitioner's office weighed me and, with a tollbooth worker's affect, took my blood pressure. Even though I told her I was just there for my mole, she insisted on typing my age into her tablet and asking me the questions that my age automatically generated.

First question: Have you experienced depression or thoughts of suicide in the past month? Her second question was "Have you noticed an increase in memory loss recently?"

"Not that I recall," I said.

Stone-faced, she moved on to her third question, asking for the date of my last prostate exam. "Uh, never," I stammered, and not sensing my sudden anxiety, she asked me when I'd had my last colonoscopy.

"Wait," I said, "I'm not old enough to need those things done, am I?"

"Just about," she replied.

"In that case, can we go back to the depression question?"

Ten days and three double-billing mistakes later, I went to the dermatologist, clutching my referral like a winning lotto ticket.

When I last went to the skin doc in 1994 as a puberty-stricken middle schooler, his office was one step above the guy who showed up at gym class and told you to turn your head and cough. This time around, it felt like something from the Capital in the *Hunger Games*.

I walked into the steel and glass, Steve Jobs-like office, where a receptionist with impossibly purple hair and a dress made of feathered, bedazzled boas handed me paperwork on a clipboard and told me to have a seat. "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth" was playing overheard while a flat-screen TV on the wall advertised the dermatologists' many services that do away with age, imperfection, and garden-variety ugliness. A slide advertising the office's newest service, eyebrow implants, slid horizontally across the plasma screen.

Judging from the model's face on the screen, eyebrow implants are a procedure designed to give septuagenarian Realtors Tom Selleck mustaches above their eyes. The next slide was a photo of the office itself, along with its staff, centered above a cursive catchphrase. Their mission statement: "Feel as perfect on the outside as you do on the inside."

As I filled out the paperwork, I wondered what sort of psychotic person came up with a slogan like that. I mean, if their goal was for me to appear on the outside how I normally feel about myself on the inside, then I'm already as ugly as I need to be.

Bruce Springsteen's "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" started to play as a door opened and a nurse, who looked a little like the supermodel Elizabeth Hurley, called for Mr. Michelle. Nurse Hurley led me through a maze of hallways to a room so antiseptically bright I half expected to be rendered into Soylent Green.

Inside the exam room, Liz handed me a hospital gown, instructed me to take off all my clothes, and promised that the doctor would be there in a few minutes.

"All my clothes?" I begged for clarification. "Yep, even your underpants," she said.

For some reason, Liz Hurley using the word *underpants* on me made me feel like a five-year-old boy whose mother makes him follow her into the ladies' room. She closed the door gently behind her as I unfolded the baby-blue gown.

Now, as a minister, I've spent a lot of time in hospitals, but at that point, I'd never been a patient. Most of the patients I had seen had been underneath sheets and blankets. Holding my own hospital gown in hand, I suddenly discovered that the correct way to wear it is not as self-evident as you might think. *Are you supposed to wear it open in the back, like cowboy chaps? Or should you wear it open in the front, like a bathrobe?*

"Or maybe," I pondered aloud, "you should take your particular ailment as a guide." Since my mole—the cause of my visit—was

on the front of my body, I reasoned, I should opt for the latter style. So there I sat, like The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*, sans White Russian in hand.

And I was naked.

If I was unsure about the correct way to wear the gown, I got my answer when the doctor knocked, entered, immediately snorted, and said, “Oh, my.”

“I wasn’t sure . . .,” I started to explain, but he waved me off. “It’s OK, not a problem. You won’t have it on for long anyway.” Words that proved to be more auspicious than temporal.

“Are you cold?” he asked, looking at me. “We can turn up the heat.”

“No, I’m fine.”

The doctor sat down on a round stool in front of a black computer, and I proceeded to give him my professional diagnosis based on my education from WebMD. He listened and rolled his eyes only once when I told him I suspected having MS in addition to cancer, and when I finished, he said, “Let’s have a look.”

So I showed him my mole, which—I’ll point out—was very easy to do, since I was sporting the gown like a smoking jacket.

He looked at it for a few moments, looked at it through a magnifying glass for a few moments more, and then, just as Rod Stewart started to sing out in the lobby “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” the doctor said, “I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. The hairs growing out of it just make it look worse than it is.”

Relieved, I started to get up to get ready to go, but the doctor said, “Not so fast. While you’re here, we should probably do a full body scan.”

“We?” I wondered to myself as he left and returned a moment later with Liz Hurley, who—I noticed—struggled to suppress a giggle when she saw me in the gown.

With Liz gawking, he proceeded to peel back my gown like it was cellophane on a side of beef, which is probably a good

analogy, because there's nothing quite like being naked, perched on top of butcher paper, clutching your bait and tackle, to make you feel like a piece of meat—that grayish, 50-percent-off, sell-by-today ground round.

The date-rapey Christmas song “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” started to play, which seemed appropriate, since they then both bent me in impossible positions as though I were a yoga instructor or Anthony Weiner on the phone. Bending and contorting me, they picked over my every freckle and blemish as if we were a family of lice-ridden mandrills.

“Anything suspicious *down there*?” he asked ominously.

“I hope to God not,” I said, but apparently invoking the Deity did not provide sufficient medical certainty for him, because he took his examination south, which was when he decided—for some reason—to ask me what I did for a living. Normally, when strangers ask me my profession, I lie and, invoking George Costanza, tell them I’m an architect. It helps avoid the awkward and endless conversations that the word *clergy* can conjure. But with no clothes on and even less dignity, there seemed to be little reason to pretend.

“I’m a minister,” I said.

“Really? What tradition? You’re obviously not a rabbi,” he said with a wink.

“I’m a Methodist minister,” I said.

“My grandmother was a Methodist,” he muttered.

Maybe it was because the whole situation was so impossibly awkward, but once I started talking, I found I couldn’t stop. You’d be amazed how interesting you can make denominational distinctions sound when you’re in the buff and being pawed over like a 4-H cow.

I could hear John (Cougar) Mellencamp’s “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” as the doctor finished and said in a measured tone, “You do have some moles on your back we should remove. Don’t worry; none of them look concerning.”

Then he ordered me to sit back down and lean forward as far

as I could, which I did, clutching the last corner of my gown against my loins. The doctor took a black sharpie and drew circles on my back, which struck me in the moment as not very scientific; meanwhile, Liz Hurley grabbed a digital camera off the supply counter.

Under normal circumstances, the combination of supermodel, a nurse's outfit, and a digital camera would pique my interest, but somehow I knew what was next.

She told me to lean forward again so she could snap some close-ups of my back, which she did with slow, shaming deliberation. Then (I can only assume to degrade me further) she actually showed me the close-ups of my back. Now it was my turn to throw up a little in my mouth.

"That's what I look like from behind? It's like a flesh-colored Rorschach test. I should call my wife and tell her I love her," I said.

She laughed and said, "The images are magnified, so don't worry. Trust me, everyone appears kind of ugly and gross when you get up that close for a look."

"And that's not even the ugliest part about me," I said.

She frowned. "Do you think there's something we missed?"

"No, no, you were thorough all right," I said. "I was just thinking of my soul."

"I guess that's your specialty, huh, Father?" Liz laughed. The doctor laughed, too. They thought I was joking. They both thought I was joking.

James Taylor was finishing his rendition of "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," singing the line that goes, "True man, yet very God, from sin and death he saves, and lightens every load," as I sat on the butcher paper and watched Liz load the snapshots of me onto the black computer. Watching each unflattering image first pixilate then load onto the screen in front of me, I thought again of that cursive catchphrase in the lobby and what rubbish it was: "Feel as perfect on the outside as you do on the inside." If you could get close up—all over—to me, not just looking at my skin

but living in my skin, living my life—and not just in my shoes but in my flesh—then you could come up with many more ugly, indicting pictures of me than a hairy mole.

The cold, incarnate truth is this: I'm even more pockmarked and blemished on the inside than I will ever appear on the outside.

On the inside, I'm impatient and petty. I'm judgmental and a liar. I'm angry and insecure and fearful and unforgiving and—and I'm just a normal guy. If you stripped me all the way down, not just of my clothes but of my pretense and prevarications, stripped off the costumes I wear and the roles I play right down to my soul, then you'd see how unsightly I really am.

I pretend.

I act like everything's all right when it's not. I pretend me and mine are happy when maybe we're not. I act like I've got my shit together even when it's falling apart all around me. I project strength when I feel weak, and I wear other people's projections of me like masks. I don't keep it real. I pretend. I play-act. I hide. Just like, I'll bet, you do.

You can get by with such bad but passable habits so long as nothing too terrible, in terms of challenges, comes your way. I had always gotten by before.

Over the speakers, I could make out Aretha Franklin belting out, "Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary," from the second verse of "What Child Is This?" As Aretha sang and Liz finished up with my snapshots, the doctor gave me a patently false promise about not feeling a thing just before he started to dig out my first mole with the finesse of a mobbed-up Italian barber from North Jersey.

"Sorry," he apologized. "Maybe it's not numb enough." With the gentleness of a cycloptic, differently abled butcher, the doctor removed the rest of my blemishes and finished up. "You should come back in a year, so we can do this again."

"I can't wait," I said as I started unfolding my street clothes.

Dressed, with my back looking like Clint Eastwood's in *Pale Rider*, I found my way back to the lobby.

Hearing Aretha overhead, seeing my snapshots on the computer screen, and thinking of my shame that morning and every unsightly truth it brought to mind, I thought of Saint Gregory of Nazainzus, the fourth-century mystic who taught that what it means to say "God was in Christ" is to say that all of our humanity is in the God who was in Christ.

All our humanity. Every bit of every one of us. It has to be.

Otherwise, as Gregory put it, "That which is not assumed is not healed." Those parts of humanity not taken on by God in Christ are not healed. Those embarrassing parts, those imperfect parts, those shameful and fearful and broken parts of us—if it's true that Christ comes to save *all*, then all those parts of us are in him; otherwise, they're not healed.

Every bit of every one of us is in him, Gregory said. So there's no need to hide. There's no need to wear masks or put on brave faces. Everything that scares us silly we can give over to Christ, because it's already in him. We're not perfect on the outside, and we don't need to pretend that we are on the inside, because every part of us is in him already.

It was a good nugget of wisdom to recall, because even though I'd just been given a clean bill of health from the dermatologist and, in truth, had never seriously feared I had cancer, what lay ahead of me was scarier than anything I'd read on WebMD.

I left the doctor's office silently thanking God to the sound of carolers singing, "Cast out our sins and enter in, Be born to us today," from "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

When I got home that night, I felt the first of what would be daily, doubled-over, distractingly painful stomachaches. I should've seen them coming. I'm not implying causality necessarily, but a God who works by empty tombs is a God who just loves surprises.