

THE ILLNESS

Pascale Hall

Brighton College

I wait. The artificial light arresting but somehow reassuring, familiar. Staring straight ahead at a poster about annual flu vaccines, I feel the shadow of a twinge in my upper calf. *What could that mean?*

A doctor beckons with a comforting smile into a plain, official room. A room where important news is delivered. My symptoms? A list. Quite a list. Sometimes my vision is cloudy. These bruises, I keep getting them, and my joints ache with a dull pulsing. This patch here may be melanoma, I suggest. Thinking, *Fix me, please fix me.*

The doctor is reassuring. ‘One at a time. Don’t look so worried. We can do a blood test.’

Yes, I like blood tests.

She begins clicking at a keyboard. I cringe and brace myself. Her eyebrows shoot up. ‘Quite a database you have on here.’

I try to laugh but it comes out cracked.

‘Seven blood tests in the last five months.’

I wait, twisting the ends of my sleeves with my fists.

‘Well, nothing’s come up in the past but I’ll have a look.’ She sighs and takes my blood pressure, wrapping my arm tightly as we watch the numbers in silence. They are normal.

Not that blood pressure has anything to do with melanoma, I think.

She asks about my diet, her eyes narrowed. She asks about my sleep patterns, my concentration, my home life, her words slow and deliberate, her voice calm. I squirm against the fixed gaze. My words flood out. I explain about the silent tumour, the impending

heart attack. The curse flowing through my veins, something undetectable but screaming out, underpinning everything. She looks at me then turns to a cabinet. Flipping through her filing drawer, she says, carefully, casually, 'I am going to refer you to a different type of doctor.'

My heart skips as my brain finds root in the words I fear most. *Oncologist. Cardiologist.* Yet at the same time an odd sense of calm washes over me.

She finds what she's looking for, a clean white business card with neat black writing. The word 'Psychologist' jumps at me from across the desk.