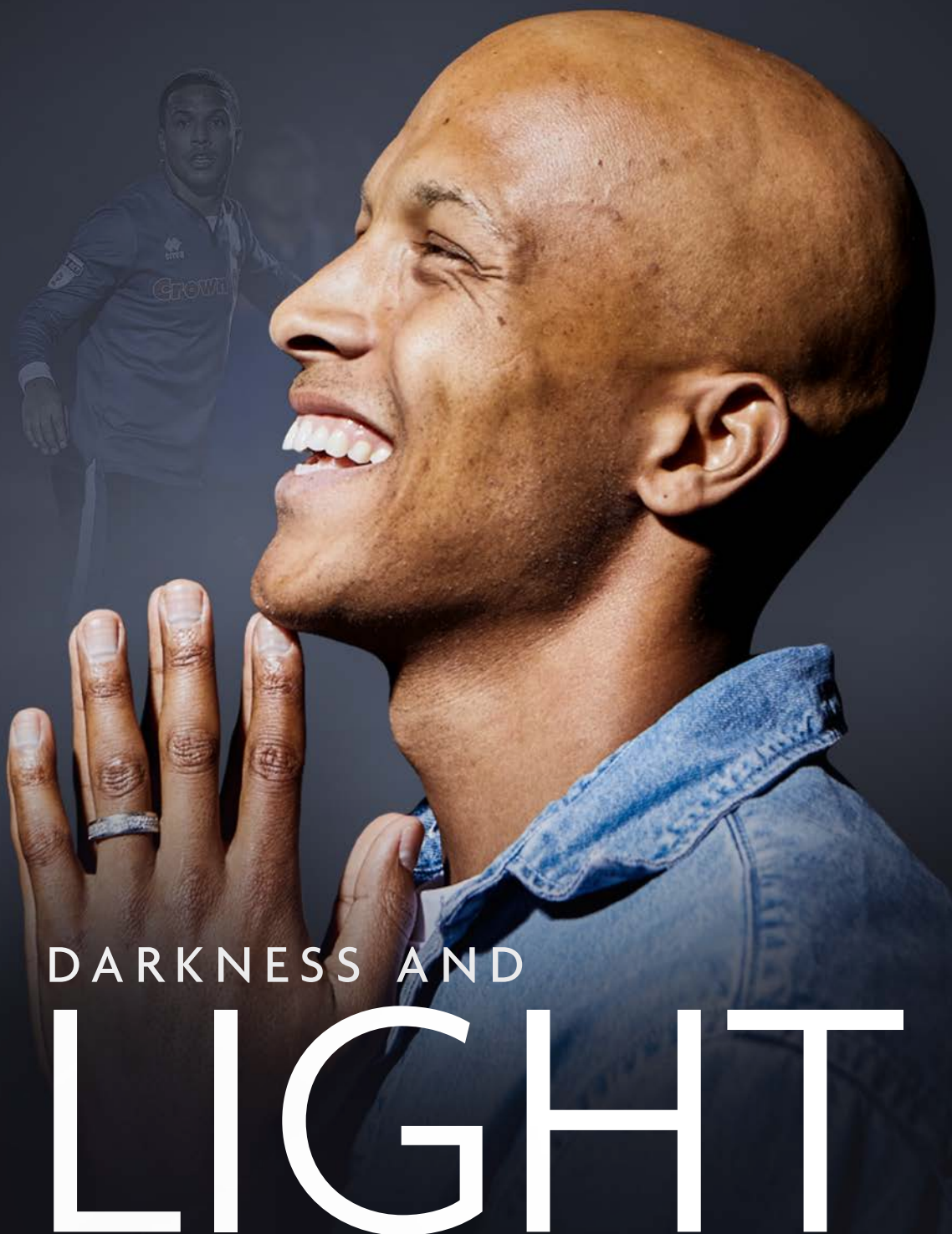


J O E T H O M P S O N  
W I T H A L E C F E N N



DARKNESS AND

LIGHT

MY STORY

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## Chapter 1

# The patient

**Y**OU always remember where you were when darkness clouds your world. It was a Friday night and I was propped up in bed scrolling through Twitter on my phone when the news broke. ‘Footballer diagnosed with cancer.’ I grabbed the TV remote and turned on Sky Sports, where the same message snaked its way across the yellow breaking news strap along the bottom of the screen.

Shit. My heart sank and my chest tightened. I turned the TV off, tossed the remote on the bed and sat in silence, alone with my thoughts. This time it wasn’t my life that was in danger, but the pain still cut deep. I should have been ecstatic – it was only four days since I’d found out I’d beaten cancer for the second time at the age of 28 – but instead I was filled with sadness. I needed to see him and knew he’d want to see me, too.

Three weeks later, I returned to Manchester’s Christie Hospital, the scene of my two battles with cancer. The sights and smells were the same: the walls were bleach white, a blur

of nurses walked up and down the wards tending to the sick, and the odour of antiseptic handwash filled my nostrils, sparking a thousand memories in my head. For once, I wasn't the patient; I was on the other side of the fence. I was a visitor who was there to try and help.

Wolves goalkeeper Carl Ikeme was rushed to hospital to begin emergency chemotherapy in July 2017 after a batch of routine blood tests during pre-season training revealed he was suffering from acute leukaemia. At 31, football may have saved his life, just as it did mine when I was diagnosed with cancer for the first time aged 24, after falling ill during two games in 2013.

We're both footballers, separated by just three years in age, but I wasn't there to talk about formations or dressing-room gossip. My outfit was tactical and so was my message. I wore my club tracksuit after undergoing a light 45-minute rehabilitation session at the hospital, at the start of my long road back to professional football. I wanted him to see with his own eyes that there was hope and that he could be in my shoes in a few months' time.

You wouldn't have guessed he was the one with cancer. Carl is a mountain of a man, 6ft 4in tall, covered in tattoos, and as broad as a barn door. The nurses did well to find a bed big enough to fit him in. Me? I didn't recognise myself in the mirror. I looked like shit. I'm 6ft 1in but weighed just ten stone, the same weight I was at 16. I lost two and a half stone while I underwent chemotherapy, which also stripped me of my hair, eyebrows and occasionally my dignity when hallucinations reduced me to a naked, quivering wreck.

That's what most people struggle to come to terms with – the slow, physical decline, dragging you down like quicksand. As a footballer, your body is your tool and you work with it every single day to try and become the perfect machine. For as long as I can remember, I've exercised five, six, or even seven days a week. I've eaten what I thought were all the right foods, stretched, shivered in ice baths, prioritised my sleep and rarely touched alcohol. I've done everything right. Those are the sacrifices you make to give yourself a chance in the modern game.

If Carl is anything like me, he probably thought he was invincible, too. Young footballers in the prime of their lives don't get life-threatening diseases, it just doesn't happen. Except, it does. Cancer doesn't discriminate. It doesn't just pick on the old and frail; it attacks children, babies, middle-aged mothers and fathers and even super-fit athletes. It has no respect for beauty, intelligence or love. It comes for whomever it wants, whenever it wants.

His mum wasn't visiting until an hour later, so we had time to have a chat between boys. 'How are you?' he asked me with a smile. 'I'm good,' I replied. 'It's me who should be asking you.' We soon realised we were very similar people. We're both from mixed-race families and come from a world where bravado provides a mask for weakness and much of the communication is delivered in the form of banter. Footballers are brilliant actors; when you first walk into a dressing room you are an outsider and your guard is high. You hide your insecurities at all times and, although you're part of a team, it can sometimes feel like it's every man for himself.

It's the same when you have cancer. You put on a show of strength to let everyone think that you're OK, so they don't worry, when inwardly your mind and body are screaming in pain. But when you're lying in a hospital bed on death's doorstep, there is no time for bullshit. You want the permission to show weakness and ask questions and you want the doctors to be brutally honest with you. I was sensitive to Carl's battle, but I promised to give him an uncensored version of my experiences so he was prepared for what was to come.

His family is his world. He has a wife, Saba, and a little girl, just like me, but his missus was also pregnant with their second child. I knew before I arrived, but it still caught me off guard. I didn't feel qualified to talk about that sort of stuff. He was worried the stress of his illness could trigger a premature labour, and even if it didn't, there was no guarantee he'd be well enough to be by his wife's side when she gave birth. He could also miss those first few months of her life when you bond with your baby.

I know this sounds cold, but I told him to be selfish in the months ahead. He's from Birmingham, but I urged him to base himself in Manchester for the duration of his treatment, even though it's an hour and a half away from his home, family and friends. Christie Hospital is a purpose-built facility for cancer patients, kitted out with the best facilities, technology and staff. I felt it would give him the best chance of winning his fight. Those who really cared about him would jump on a train or drive and make the effort to visit.

I'm convinced that having a small army of close-knit family and friends around me gave me the mental boost I

needed to beat cancer twice. The disease attacks the body, but it ravages the mind as well and that's the battle that people don't see on the outside. The treatment is draining, but moral support is like a tap, which fills up your mental reserves. The drip, drip, drip of visitors kept me positive during my lowest moments, even on the days when I didn't have the energy to mutter a response. There were times when my wife, Chantelle, my mum, Michelle, and brother, Reuben, kept me company while I drifted in and out of a medicated sleep.

Carl also had the support of the football world on his side, and I know how powerful that can be. It's a funny old business; team-mates, managers and coaches drift in and out of each other's lives when they move clubs, but as soon as something serious happens they rally round. I remember when I was first diagnosed with cancer I received messages from players I hadn't spoken to for years and others that I'd never even met. It's incredible how quickly people can get your phone number.

I had long conversations with former Aston Villa midfielder Stiliyan Petrov about his fight with leukaemia. His condition was different to mine, but he was still able to tell me how he felt at various stages of his treatment. Bryan Robson also got in touch. He beat mouth cancer in 2011, long after his playing days had finished, but his words were still of comfort. I couldn't believe 'Captain Marvel' knew my name, never mind that he was now talking to me like an old pal. Alan Stubbs, who beat testicular cancer twice, also picked up the phone to talk and offered to help me in any way that he could. My hope was that I'd provide the same beacon of hope for Carl.



The longest hours are those after the lights go out and the visitors are back at home tucked up in their beds. When you're alone in your own thoughts, your head can become a pretty disturbing place to be. When I was tossing and turning during the night, I started to overthink everything. I went over and over the briefest conversations I'd had with my doctor and nurses during the day. 'Was their tone of voice different?' 'Why did they look so serious when they came in?' 'Are they telling me the truth?' There are times when you think you're losing your mind.

You have to find every possible way of distracting yourself from thinking negative thoughts. I read books and had marathon sessions watching Netflix to keep myself entertained, and I told Carl to do the same. I found social media was a blessing and a curse. I enjoyed looking over old pictures of happier times on holiday with family and friends, but scrolling through Snapchat and Instagram and seeing those same people having fun and carrying on with their lives was torture to watch. The thought of my closest friends and family forgetting about me if I didn't survive was a scary one, but a very real one, too.

When you realise something is attacking you from the inside, overnight time becomes precious. Footballers are creatures of habit who crave routine. We like knowing exactly what we're doing and when we're doing it. Order provides calm and a sense of purpose. We're lost without it. During my treatment, every few hours nurses came in to take blood tests or change my chemotherapy bags. Everything was structured. But when that timeline was disturbed it knocked me out of

sync. If the nurse was due in at 9:00am and the clock ticked to 9:02am, I'd think, 'Why isn't she here?'

After my first diagnosis, I had to wait six weeks before I started chemo. I've had some bad weeks over the past few years, but they were up there with the worst of my life. I felt like a sitting duck being shot at. I wanted to know why nothing was being done when my symptoms were gradually getting worse and I'd just been told this disease could kill me. You have to trust the process and the experts who have dealt with thousands of patients just like you. But try telling that to a guy who has just read 50 articles on Google telling him he could be dead in six months.

The delay at least gave me the chance to prepare for what was ahead. I spent hours on the Internet looking for answers, just like you do when you're suffering from a cough or a cold. I wanted to find out if there was anything in my lifestyle that could've put me at a greater risk of developing cancer. Sadly, the disease is a faceless criminal that leaves behind very few fingerprints. Still, I made the decision that I would become vegan and start a plant-based diet. That meant cutting meat out of my diet for good. Something had made my body vulnerable to cancer, so I thought it was worth it, even though I didn't know if that was the cause.

Carl is a goalkeeper, so preparation is in his DNA. He'd been reading up on leukaemia and had a good grasp of the ins and outs of the disease. He was also considering becoming vegan and wanted to know how, as an athlete, he'd be able to get enough protein in his body and whether it would affect his performance. I explained that my diet now consisted of beans,

pulses, legumes and smoothies to make up for the shortfall, and how I felt energised because my body didn't have to digest meat every three or four hours. He's a switched-on guy, and I knew there were other more serious questions that he wanted to ask.

'So, what's chemotherapy like?' he said. He'd only just finished his first round of chemo, a first taste of the poison, so to speak, and hadn't yet felt its full side effects. There was no point beating around the bush. The truth is, it's hell. The worst thing is the cold feeling as it enters your veins via a drip. It's a hard sensation to describe, but I often compare it to thousands of ants crawling around inside of you. Instinctively your body wants to reject this alien invasion, but you have to keep reminding yourself that they are on your side. The violent sickness comes later. During both of my battles, even the slightest change in temperature would prompt me to throw up and send my weight plummeting.

Hallucinations are often another side effect. I had a few of them during my worst nights, when I imagined various creatures were stood at the end of my bed. I can laugh about it now, but at the time it was scary and I needed a nurse to reassure me I was normal and I wasn't losing my mind. Not all cancer patients have to undergo chemo but after careful consideration I felt it was the best course of treatment. If it meant Carl could live the rest of his life free of the disease, then it was more than worth it. Short-term pain can provide long-term gain.

For all my advice, I knew his battle was individual, as it is with every other cancer patient. Leukaemia and Hodgkin

Lymphoma, the cancer I suffered with, are two different forms of the same disease and we both had a unique, preset DNA, which would respond to it differently. Perhaps his mountainous frame would refuse to wilt under chemo and he may not suffer the same side effects that I did. His mindset would also be different. He'd have his own way of breaking down each minute and hour and overcoming the physical and mental hurdles ahead. One thing was for sure, I knew he was going to put up one hell of a fight.

Visiting time was nearly over when Carl's mother, Jackie, walked into the room to see her son. 'Are you ... that guy?' she asked. I knew what she was trying to say. I laughed and told her I was. She reminded me of my own mum; I knew both of them would have swapped positions with their sons to spare them pain. A nurse came in to change his chemo bags, so I said my goodbyes and left the room to give them some space. I told him I'd be back again to see him and he knew I was close by if he needed my help. His mum collared me outside and grilled me with questions out of earshot of her boy. I could tell she was frustrated and wanted to know what he was feeling so she could somehow help him to ease his pain.

I took a minute to ask her how she was because I know all too well that family and friends are also victims when loved ones are battling cancer. I saw first hand the stress it placed on Chantelle, visiting me every day and making me vegetarian meals, while running a home and a family business at the same time. I also remember the white hair that appeared on my daughter Lula's head. I'm convinced that was her body's reaction to bottling up the stress of seeing her dad in hospital.

The disease creates a ripple effect, which leaves very few people untouched.

But cancer doesn't always win and setbacks don't have to define you. I guess, in a nutshell, that's why I'm telling you my story. I had a life long before cancer came along, which had already tasted adversity. When I was a child, I watched my mum get beaten at the hands of my dad. She suffered with mental illness, while he began his descent into a dark world of drugs and crime. At the age of five, I was there when my younger brother, Reuben, was mowed down and dragged under the wheels of a car by a hit and run driver. We were still in primary school when mum was taken away to a mental hospital and our auntie took us to Manchester to start a new life up north.

It wasn't an easy childhood, but it steeled me for what lay ahead. I won the lottery the day I signed for Manchester United. It transformed me from the new kid at school to the king of the playground and provided me with the best sporting education in the world. When they released me just weeks before my GCSE exams, it broke my heart, but not my spirit. I vowed to prove them wrong and to make a career in the game. I hit the reset button and went back down the divisions to achieve my dreams. Impressive? My wife didn't think so when we met for the first time; she wasn't interested in being just another girl dating some 'dickhead' footballer.

Luckily, I convinced her that I wasn't that guy and together we created our own team, along with our daughter, Lula. My two girls were pillars of strength, alongside my mum and brother. Hope also came from other sources. During my first

battle with cancer, I shared my journey on the same ward as children as young as four years old. The second time, my teammates were Karl, Dave and Jonathan, three ordinary blokes from different walks of life, who stood by me in the trenches. When sleep was impossible, we talked long into the night about our loved ones and our experiences. Sometimes, we just sat there and laughed at how shit our situation was.

That brief laughter reminded me of being in a football dressing room again, and I made a silent promise to beat the odds and make another comeback. After spending 18 days in an isolation room undergoing a stem cell transplant, I emerged faster than any previous patient at Christie Hospital and returned home to embark upon the lonely road back to football. Those six months transforming a cancer-scarred, ten-stone body into a professional athlete were the hardest of my life, but step by step I climbed the mountain until I reached the summit. The view was beautiful but I still wanted more, and fate granted me a fairytale ending to an incredible script. This is my story ...