

# Chapter 1

## Gabriel

I am dying: it's a beautiful word. Like the long slow sigh of a cello: *dying*. But the sound of it is the only beautiful thing about it.

Several times a week I must be cleaned. Water comes to me on a sponge. I must lift my arms, shift my heels, lower my flaming eyes. I must smell pink, antiseptic. I'm removed from my place while the bedsheets are changed and set to sag in a wheelchair. I am proffered a pan, and the sight of it shames me; at other times I can't call for it fast enough. My food comes mashed, raised on a spoon; spillage will dapple my lap. I am addressed as if an idiot, cooed over as though a child. I'm woken when I wish to sleep, told to sleep when I'd prefer to be awake. I am poked, prodded, pinched and flensed, I'm needled and wheedled and cajoled. My existence is nothing but a series of humiliations, what little life is left to me can hardly be called my own. All of this, this horror, just to say, 'He's dying.'

I hear the words blow like dust through town. From where I lie, in this lean white room, I hear them spoken under awnings, murmured over counters, delivered as knowing statements across gates. *It won't be long now. They say he's dying.*

The say he's fragile, his skin sugar-white; they say he must be handled like a delicate crown of thorns. They're saying he's as weightless as the skeleton of a crow.

Breathing is an undertaking: it takes minutes to sigh. My ribcage is the hull of a wrecked and submerged ship. My arms, thin as adders, are leaden as dropped boughs. The mattress, my closest friend, has been carved by the knots of my unfleshed bones into a landscape of dents. The soul might rise, but the body pulls down, accepting the inevitable, returning to where it began.

This is where I began: I am dying in my childhood home. Beyond the window straggles the only world I know and wish to know; I was born and grew up in this few-thousand town. There is nothing about its weft and fold that isn't familiar to me. I know the cracks in the footpaths – I have stepped on them a thousand times. I know the product on the shelves and the reflection in the glass – I have seen myself there, left imprints of my hands. I've felt summer's sahara heat and seen autumn's bedraggled blooms; I've kicked black crickets from my toes and fed wood to a hissing fire. I know which gate tilts in the wind, I know what's cropped in which field. I have known the exact moment when every calf and child was born. From here, on the bed, where I see only panelled walls and a haze of curtain which ushers in the breeze, I can distinguish and put a name to every rooster's cry. The breeze brings to me the scent of sawdust, diesel, feathers, chicken soup. They say that smell is the last thing to fade, so I sniff about while I can.

It is as easy for me to die here, in the bedroom of my childhood home, as it would be to die anywhere. The procession of needlers and pinchers knows where to find me. The word on the street agrees, says, 'it's better he's home, it's comforting there.' My aunt takes care of me from day to day; she sleeps in the neighbouring room. I'll not pretend her task is enviable. The chronically ill make