

CHAPTER SIX

Graft Versus Host

The rash that Angela noticed quickly spread all over Jimmy's back and stomach. It was a deep red rash that began to blister in several spots. Dr. Fitzpatrick also detected an appearance of white spots on Jimmy's tongue and bumps on the inside of his mouth. A new battery of tests was conducted, and the preliminary thinking was that Jimmy had developed graft versus host disease. This is what the Maccombers had feared the most, and with good reason.

On day 170, nearly six full months after the bone marrow transplant, Jimmy had the worst night of his life. It began just after midnight when Jimmy began taking very rapid, shallow breaths. He wasn't getting enough oxygen. As his oxygen saturation plunged, his breathing rate accelerated. When Jimmy became quite pale and his eyes rolled back in his head, Glenn and Eileen, who hadn't left the hospital in two days, thought it might be time to call a priest.

Jimmy was close to blacking out when the night nurse gave him a high dose of Iloprost, which dilated Jimmy's blood vessels, allowing for increased blood flow. Jimmy's oxygen saturation levels came back quickly, and it appeared the worst was over. Jimmy had a few milder incidents the next day, and that's when his lab results showed elevated liver enzymes, and a confirmed diagnosis of GVHD.

Jimmy's GVHD was considered chronic because it occurred more than 100 days after the bone marrow transplant. Before 100 days, GVHD is considered acute. Both varieties are a common complication of bone marrow transplants in which the T-cells in the donor's bone marrow begin to attack the host's tissues and organs. That's part of the danger. The other, more serious part is that GVHD increases the risk of infection. It is the infections that are most often the cause of death for post bone marrow transplant patients. In one respect, Jimmy was fortunate. Because he developed GVHD nearly six months into his treatment, his blood counts were up, and he was stronger than most patients who had to wage war with GVHD.

Jimmy's new list of problems and conditions included dry, stinging eyes, because his tear ducts were compromised. He was unable to secrete enough saliva to lubricate his esophagus, so swallowing and eating were more difficult. He had a burning sensation in his mouth when he ate acidic foods or brushed his teeth. He was jaundice. He had heartburn. He had it all!

And so the drugs started flowing through his veins at a hastened pace.

"My good friends prednisone and cyclosporine will help me through this," Jimmy told his parents. "And they've brought along a new guy called ozothioprine."

Glenn and Eileen tried to smile.

"Those drugs are supposed to suppress your immune system," Dr. Fitzpatrick added. "Meanwhile, we've got you on Bactrim and penicillin to help ward off infections. And just so you're prepared, Jimmy, you're probably going to continue these immunosuppressive drugs for about two more years. We can beat this thing, but we are

definitely in it for the long haul.”

“And remember what Dr. Fitzpatrick told you, honey,” Eileen demanded. “The most important thing is that you realize your immune system is not working correctly. So anything you’re feeling, fever, dry mouth, cramps, anything, you let somebody know right away.”

“She’s right, Jimmy. Everything going on inside your body right now is very serious stuff. That’s why we’re not sending you home for a while. Get comfortable and crank up the radio.”

“Get comfortable?” Jimmy said incredulously. “Doc, I haven’t been comfortable in over two years.”

They all nodded in agreement. They knew it was true.

The next day things got even worse for Jimmy. The Red Sox traded Nomar Garciaparra to the Chicago Cubs.

“Sports Overtime” Show Open, August 2, 2004

Announcer: Welcome to “Sports Overtime” where we’ll be saying “adios” to Nomar Garcia-later.”

The Terminator from *The Terminator*: Hasta la vista, baby!

Announcer: That’s right. Theo Epstein has cured cancer, at least in the Red Sox clubhouse by dumping Nomar Gone-see-aparra on to the unsuspecting Cubbies, the Sox getting rid of some dead weight at the trading deadline.

Ace Ventura from *Ace Ventura*: I have exorcised the demons! This house is clear!

Announcer: In case you haven’t heard, thanks for crawling out from under your rock and joining civilization once again. The Red Sox traded Nomar Garciaparra this weekend. Nomar was the face of the organization, you know, the face with the nose he borrowed from Witchy-Poo on H.R. Puffenstuff. Nomar, we hardly knew ye! But don’t let the door hit you on the way out!

Freddy Benson from *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*: Wow! Wow Wow Wow! All I can say is Wow!

Announcer: But that’s only the beginning of this little soap opera. Soon after the trade, Red Sox CEO Larry Lucchino and Nomar got into a war of words. And we’re wondering who’s shooting it straight, and whose pants are on fire.

Fletcher from *Liar, Liar*: AND THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE!

Announcer: You’re all free to decide for yourselves who you’re going to believe, and whether trading Nomar was a good move or just plain CRAZY!

Rodney Dangerfield: My psychiatrist told me I was crazy and I said I want a second opinion. He said okay, you're ugly, too.

Announcer: So what do the big fellas on "Sports Overtime" think about all this? Well, stick around to find out. Bob Halloran and Fred "Freddie the Fredderman" Safreed are coming right up with your sports info-tainment on a silver platter.

Judge Stevens from *Liar, Liar*: It is only out of sheer morbid curiosity that I am allowing this freak show to continue.

Halloran: You know what? All I can say is 'Wow', too.

Safreed: I see your 'wow', and raise you a 'Holy Schnikies'.

Halloran: That really took some stones. I gotta hand it to Theo Epstein. Until now, most of his moves have been relatively safe. I mean, it doesn't take a whole lot of brains or guts to go out and sign guys like Keith Foulke and Curt Schilling. But trading Nomar? That's a ballsy thing to do.

Safreed: The man's got plums, and I say good riddance to Nomar.

"How many words do you men have for testicles?" Eileen thought while Jimmy pretended he was sleeping.

Safreed: Nomar was dead to me a month ago when he didn't bother to play in that Yankee game. This is a pure case of addition by subtraction. You get rid of the guy who's killing you in the clubhouse, and you pick up a couple of guys who can hopefully fit in.

Halloran: I think Theo said it best in his press conference over the weekend. Basically, he was left with the choice of having a combination of Nomar and Ricky Gutierrez at shortstop, because you never know when Nomar can play...

Safreed: And he threatened to go on the disabled list. Don't forget that weasely thing he did.

Halloran: We'll get into that in a minute. But Theo's got the Nomar slash Ricky shortstop combo, or he can pencil Orlando Cabrera's name in at shortstop for the next 60 some odd games. And I think, given that choice. It's probably better to try to upgrade your defense. Even if both Cabrera and the first baseman they got, Doug Mientkiewicz, are both hitting under .250 this year.

Jimmy stirred when Eileen wiped his forehead. He was still running a low grade fever, but at least his rash wasn't getting any worse. She appreciated moments like this, when Jimmy was just waking up, because it meant he wouldn't have to deal with the awful side effects of his new meds. And she wouldn't have to bear witness to it. It had been a rough

couple of days as the doctors searched for the right combination of drugs, and Jimmy's mind and body reacted to each test run.

Safreed: They can do without the offense from Nomar, because they've still got plenty of guys who can hit. Plus, you saw what Cabrera did in his first at-bat with the Red Sox. POW! A home run! He'll be fine. If he can hit .275 and play a gold glove shortstop, I say Nomar won't even be missed.

"I miss him."

Halloran: But would you say the Red Sox are better today than they were before the trade?

Safreed: I think they're better without Nomar. I don't care if they traded him for a bag of balls. And besides, they can't be any worse than they were. How long could they keep playing .500 ball without the front office doing something to try to shake things up?

Halloran: Oh, they shook things up all right. And let's get to the phone calls to find out how the Nomar trade is playing in Red Sox Nation. Bryan from Adams, good to hear from you again.

"Mom, can you dial the number for me?"

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

"Yeah. Let's hope I get on before they come in here with that Thalidomide. That one knocks me out."

Bryan: Thanks guys. Wow! You guys said it. This is just unbelievable. The guy's here for seven years, putting up some Hall of Fame type numbers, and then POOF, he's just gone!

Halloran: Good trade or bad trade, Bryan. What do you say?

Bryan: I don't know. I always liked Nomar, so it cuts like a knife. But it feels so right at the same time. Maybe it's a good trade, since Nomar really didn't want to be here anyway. I'm just not convinced they got as much talent in return as they should have.

Safreed: Everybody knows Nomar's damaged goods and that he's in the final year of his contract. I'm sure the Red Sox got the maximum they could. Nomar's stock just isn't very high right now.

Halloran: Earl from Warren, did Theo screw this one up, or what?

Earl: Well, far be it from me to judge, but it doesn't look like good business to me. And it certainly doesn't strike me as a particularly gutsy trade.

Halloran: How can you say that? They traded the face of the franchise in the middle of a

pennant race. This would be like trading Ted Williams or Carl Yastrzemski! This was as bold a move as you're ever going to see.

Earl: Not if you look at all the evidence put before you.

Halloran: Like what?

Earl: First, Nomar is injured. Second, Nomar is leaving the Red Sox at the end of the season. Third, Nomar's defense has been below average, and that's being kind. And fourth, Nomar's had a bad attitude ever since spring training. So, how much guts does it take to get rid of a problem that by most accounts was only going to get worse? Theo only did what he had to do. That's why he tried so hard to do it. And that's why he made the trade despite getting so little in return.

Safreed: Yeah, but when you say he got so little in return, it's like you're finding Theo guilty of making a bad trade. And I'd say the jury's still out on that.

Earl: Certainly. We might not know if it's a good trade or a bad trade until the Red Sox are home watching the Cubs play in the post-season.

Halloran: Which could happen. And that brings me back to Theo's stones. He knows there's a chance this trade will backfire. He's taking a huge risk. First, it could be a public relations nightmare based on how the fans react initially. And it could get a lot worse if the Red Sox go in the tank, and the Cubs go on to win the World Series. But Theo made the deal anyway, and that's...

Earl: But Bob, don't you see? The fact that he made the deal ANYWAY means that he knew he HAD to make it. That doesn't take terrific courage. In fact, it's just bad business. He traded his commodity when it was at its lowest. Consider; Theo almost traded Nomar during the spring for Magglio Ordonez, a 40-home run hitter. Now, all he can get is a light-hitting shortstop and a guy who won't even crack the line-up? You call it ballsy. I call it trading from weakness.

*Jimmy was able to get out of bed and make his way over to the computer by the window. He remained overly sensitive to sunlight, so the shade was almost always drawn, as it was now. He began surfing for information about the trade while the phone stayed tucked between his left shoulder and ear.
"Fred's starting to get mad," he said.*

Safreed: Earl, you're an idiot! Hang up the phone and go back to burying your head in the sand. You obviously haven't been watching what's been going on all season. Nomar's been a cancer in that clubhouse, and an average player at best. So, don't talk to me, either of you guys, about whether this move was ballsy or not! It had to be done. It got done. And Nomar can kiss my lily-white derriere on his way out of town.

Halloran: As if he didn't already want to leave badly enough. Now he's got that offer to

motivate him. But I don't think anybody's really gotten to the main point of this story yet. And that's that Nomar apparently told the Red Sox that he might have to go on the disabled list in August.

Safreed: Not 'might have to'. He said he'd PROBABLY have to, which I think adds a little more certainty.

Halloran: Yes, absolutely. Probably is much more certain than 'might'.

Safreed: And that whole Larry Lucchino phone conversation just ticks me off to no end. I mean, how could...

Halloran: Well, hold on a minute, Fred. Let's explain that before we get into it. In case, people hadn't heard. Larry Lucchino, the Red Sox President, has come out and said that he called Nomar right after the trade, basically to wish him well. And in the course of that conversation, Lucchino asked Nomar how his foot was, and according to Lucchino, Nomar said, 'It's fine now.'

Safreed: Yeah, it's fine NOW, meaning if I were still with the Red Sox, it wouldn't be fine. But since I'm going to the Cubs, I've just had a miraculous recovery.

"That's not what it means at all. I can't believe they're giving Nomar the Bledsoe Treatment," Jimmy said, referring to talk radio's incessant insults of the Patriots former quarterback.

Halloran: That's certainly the insinuation. And keep in mind, this was apparently just a few days after Nomar had told the Red Sox that he'd PROBABLY, O.K. Fred? -- that he'd probably have to go on the disabled list and miss a few more weeks of the season. And now he says he's fine. Hard to think of anything sleazier than that -- if it's true.

Safreed: Of course, it's true. Nomar as much as said it was, but he tried to say he was being sarcastic. Yeah, right!

Halloran: Now, that was sarcastic. Rafer's in Johnson, Rhode Island, and he's next on "Sports Overtime".

Rafer: You guys are making a miscalculation of Olympic proportions. I can't believe you're taking Lucchino's side in this.

Halloran: They both gave the same account of the story. Nobody's denying that Nomar said his foot is fine now. It's just a matter of interpretation. And you're free to interpret it any way you want, just like we are.

Rafer: Sure, and isn't it convenient that you would interpret it in favor of the man who you have to deal with on a regular basis?

Safreed: That's got nothing to do with it. It has everything to do with watching the way Nomar acted for the past few months and being able to deduce that the guy has been trying to stick it to the Red Sox ever since they tried to trade him.

Rafer: Well, that's a bit off track as far as how I wanted to approach this. You see, Lucchino's the one who revealed the particulars of a private phone conversation first, right?

Safreed: So?

"So – everything! This is the point I was gonna make. Go get 'em, Rafer!"
Eileen loved to watch Jimmy's enthusiasm. It had become more and more infrequent, because of the various complications he'd had to endure. She fought back a tear, but it was a happy one.

Rafer: Well, first, don't you think that's a crappy thing for Lucchino to do, especially when his only intention would be to make Nomar look bad. And secondly, why would he want to make Nomar look bad? Because he knows the trade is a bad one. Therefore, he has to make it look like Nomar's a bad guy, that he can't be trusted, that he was lying about how hurt he was, and that he didn't really want to try to help the team win.

Halloran: Well, if those were Lucchino's intentions, he succeeded. Because regardless of how the story got out; it's out. And Nomar said what he said.

Rafer: Of course he did. And I love the fact that Nomar didn't deny it. He told the identical story, almost word for word. The only difference was the tone. Nomar says that a guy he doesn't much like, and who just traded him, called him up. Nomar was being very short with him, because he didn't really want this guy calling him. And then when Lucchino asks him about his foot, he says 'It's fine' as a way to brush him off and end the conversation.

Safreed: But he didn't just say 'It's fine'. He said 'It's fine, NOW!' That's a huge difference. It's fine NOW that I don't have to play for you anymore. That's the proof you need to know that Nomar was a malingerer.

Rafer: Nomar denies saying 'It's fine now'. He says he told Lucchino it bothers him, but it's fine. Take a moment to read the quotes. Anyway, nice talking to you guys. I gotta run.

Halloran: Good stuff so far. You told the last guy to hang up, and this guy hangs up on you. Nice to see you haven't lost your charm.

Safreed: Charm schmarm. Who's next?

Halloran: Well, let's take a look at a couple of e-mails. This one's from Larry in Johnson, Rhode Island. 'I can't believe how stupid Red Sox management is. They traded

away one of the best shortstops in the American League for an obvious scrub who's also a free agent at the end of the year. Their big problems are in the bullpen. This was a very dumb move by Theo and he'll wind up paying for it. The 2004 season is down the tubes. The Red Sox are not going to the World Series with this team of losers.'

"They can still win it," Eileen said hopefully. Jimmy nodded while his eyes tried to focus on the computer screen. It was becoming increasingly difficult, because he could feel his headache returning.

Safreed: Put down a 'no' for that one. Here's a 'yes' vote from some lady in Avon, Connecticut. 'I think the Red Sox made a great trade. Nomar wasn't going to sign with the Red Sox anyway. And now we have a younger and healthier gold glove shortstop and someone who can actually play first base. How can this be a bad trade?' Then she points out that the Red Sox also got Dave Roberts in a separate deal to give them some speed off the bench.

Halloran: And here are the quotes Rafer was talking about. This is Nomar's side of the story. He says: "I was being sarcastic. I'd just gotten traded. He said, 'What do you mean, it's great?' I said, 'It bothers me, but it's fine. Yeah, it bothers me, but I'm fine.' I never said, 'I'm fine now.'" Then he goes on: "I was talking to my parents. Do you think I really wanted to talk to him right now? He was the last person I wanted to talk to, to be honest with you." I gotta tell you, Fred, that all sounds plausible.

Safreed: Too much time is being spent on this 'he said, he said' garbage. The guy's gone, and I'm glad he's gone.

Halloran: But listen to this, and this is where maybe a couple of these phone callers might be right about Lucchino. Lucchino was asked if he thought Nomar was being sarcastic, and he said: 'I'm not going to go there. That calls for too much speculation on my part.'

Safreed: Which basically hangs Nomar out to dry, I know. So, there you have it. Lucchino threw Nomar under the bus. Big whoop! What's any of this have to do with whether the Red Sox are better today than they were two days ago?

Halloran: I just find it interesting, that's all. Maybe Jimmy does as well. Jimmy, how goes it?

Jimmy: Oh, I'm fine NOW.

Halloran: Ha-ha. Yeah, I guess we're all fine now. I guess we have to be fine anyway. The deal is done, and we'll just have to live it.

Jimmy: Or suffer through it, as the case may be.

Halloran: Fan of the trade, Jimmy? Or not so much?

Jimmy: Well, it's all about winning the World Series. Mr. Epstein said it again this weekend. The Red Sox are going for it all this year, and I for one sure hope it happens this year. I can't wait much longer.

Halloran: None of us can. And that's probably the first time Theo's ever been called MISTER Epstein.

Jimmy: Well, Theo said he didn't think the team was good enough to win the World Series, especially the way they were playing defense. So, they picked up two real good defensive players.

Safreed: And they got rid of Nomar. So, they've got that going for them.

Jimmy: But this wasn't really about getting rid of Nomar the way you like to think it is, Fred.

Halloran: Uh-oh. He's coming after you, Fred.

Safreed: I can handle it.

Jimmy: It's just that you think this is about Nomar being a bad guy in the clubhouse. But it's really about not wanting to go into September and October never knowing if you're going to have Nomar in the line-up or Ricky Gutierrez.

Halloran: Right. It's about not knowing if you have a great player at shortstop, or 75 percent of a great player, or if you have Gutierrez who's probably a below average player.

Jimmy: That's what I think. For instance, I don't think Mr. Epstein makes this deal if Pokey Reese is 100 percent healthy. Pokey could give them the great defense that Cabrera is supposed to on the days that Nomar can't play. So, I think they could have gone with Nomar and Pokey, but not Nomar and Ricky.

Halloran: Might be some truth to that.

Safreed: Well, then Jimmy, O smart one! Explain to me why the Cubs would make this deal. You see, I think the Cubs are expecting Nomar to play just about every day and that he'll have a great attitude just because he's out of Boston. He's got no reason to stick it to them, and plenty of motivation now as he enters free agency. He'll be auditioning, and the Cubs will benefit. But if it's more about his health and availability, as you say it is, why would the Cubs take on a guy who might be on his way to the disabled list?

Jimmy: Because before the deal they had Alex Gonzalez as their shortstop for the next 60 games of a pennant race. Now, they've got Nomar for probably 40 of those games. They're better off. And maybe the Red Sox are better, too.

Halloran: The kid's been boning up on the box scores and reading the papers, Fred.

Safreed: Ah, the kid's still living in his little kid dream world. Theo made this move to cure cancer, plain and simple.

Jimmy: Now, who's living in a dream world?

Halloran: Jimmy, it's always a pleasure. Have you got anything else for us today?

Jimmy: Nope. Just that I hope the Red Sox start playing better. It's a shame for them to be wasting so much potential. They've got a great team, but they haven't been playing great. And not everyone gets opportunities like they have this year. They should take advantage of the time they have.

Halloran: And that's all the time we have. Back after this.