

*Lycanthropy
— and —
Other Chronic
Illnesses*

Kristen O'Neal



QUIRK BOOKS
PHILADELPHIA

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Summary: Forced to leave Stanford's pre-med program after contracting Lyme disease, Priya finds solace in an online chronic-illness support group and with best friend Brigid, whose own illness may be more unique than Priya suspected.

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**For anyone who doesn't
feel at home in their body**



Ticks don't actually have teeth. I looked it up afterward, scrolling through photos with that same kind of sick fascination of watching someone pop a pimple. They've got this horrible ridged capitulum that opens up into three parts like the monster from *Stranger Things*, sinks into your skin, and holds on just long enough to derail the course of your entire life.

I don't know what time it is when I wake up. This time last year, I would have known the second I heard my alarm trilling: 7:30 a.m. on a Monday, enough time to hit snooze once, slip out of bed, turn on the coffee pot my roommate and I weren't allowed to have in our dorm, and get ready to leave for Bio at 8:40. Enough time to sit and drink it, knees to my chest, as she slept, scrolling through my email or my blog. I was a well-oiled machine. I was pre-med at Stanford and I had made it out of New Jersey. I was ready for anything.

It must have happened when I was home for the summer, trudging through the tall grass with my high school friends, cutting across a field to get to town. Or maybe it was down by the Amtrak tracks with the climbing plants as Jadie roped me into "acting" for one of her film projects. I don't know. I'll never know. The only thing I know is that when I got back to California last fall, I got sick. Really sick.

I don't set an alarm anymore. I know I've slept too long—my internal clock won't wake me when it's supposed to. It's sluggish now, constantly running low on battery, and so am I.

I take a quick inventory, staring up at the same crack in my ceiling that I've stared up at since I was five years old. My head is stuffed with

cotton. I feel heavy, like something is pinning me to the mattress. And my joints *hurt*, a throbbing pain that will only get worse as I move. It feels like a handful of fevers scattered around my body, a dozen hungry black-hole stomachs—my left knuckles, my ankle, my knee, my hips, my wrist.

Sometimes it feels like coals being stoked hotter and hotter until I can't move. Sometimes it feels like a fist clenched tight, tight, tight, until I think that my bones are going to break. Sometimes it feels like each segment of my body is floating away from the others like Pangea, a strange, electric humming that separates all of my bones.

Sometimes it doesn't feel like anything at all. Sometimes it just hurts.

Today will be okay, probably. But when the weather's about to change, I can roll over and feel every point where my bones connect to each other. Last week I landed wrong when I walked down the steps to the car, and my swollen knee remembers this as well as I do.

I hear my door creak open before it's pulled shut again with a soft *click*. I don't make a sound.

"Let me just check if she needs anything," comes my mom's voice. She doesn't know how to whisper, so her version of a hushed tone cuts right through the door. "She hasn't been to church with us in so long."

My dad replies in Tamil, mostly. "Let the girl sleep. She needs to rest. You talked with the doctor yourself, didn't you?"

"And what does he know?" I can *see* my mom waving her hand. Then, a little louder: "Priya—"

My dad shushes her. "You are shouting—"

"I am *not* shouting, you are—"

"I'll stay back in case she needs me. Okay?"

There's a pause. Then, my dad's voice again: "She's going to be just fine."

My mom's: "We should be going to church as a family."

"We will, I promise."

"Okay."

The door opens again, and I let my eyes close. I hear my mom pad over to my bed, sit on the side. She smooths back my hair and kisses me on the forehead, gentler than she usually is with me.

I think about pretending I'm still asleep, but a soft-edged affection tugs at my heart and I pretend, instead, that she's woken me up.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Pretty good,” I lie. It’s worth it for the grin that makes its way across her face, and she pats me on the cheek.

“Don’t tell your father I woke you up,” she says. “He’ll get mad at me.”

I smile back at her. “Have fun at church.”

“I always put you in the prayer requests,” she says. I know it’s meant to be comforting, but the thought of everyone talking about me and my illness makes me want to stay in the house forever and never show my face in public again.

“Say hello to God for me,” I joke. Her face turns severe.

“Say hello yourself!” she says. “You’re being silly. Okay, go back to sleep. Don’t tell your father.”

“I won’t.”

I mean to wake up then, to pull open my closet and put on something other than sweatpants. I mean to go downstairs and eat breakfast with my dad, or maybe even flag down my mom and brother and sister, tell them I’m coming to church with them after all. But instead my eyes close, and I’m pulled back under before I even reach over and click the Tumblr app on my phone.

It takes me a few seconds to realize that the buzzing is coming from my bedside table, but I’m not quick enough. My phone shimmies its way off the table and falls to the floor with a *thud* that’s muffled by the thin, yellowing carpet. I pull it up by the charger like the world’s worst fisherman.

bigforkhands sent you a message, the screen says, right underneath 11:53, February 2. I try to be gracious with myself, but seeing the time still shoots a spike of adrenaline right through me. *You’ve wasted your day*, says a voice in my head. *What’s a day when you’ve wasted the whole year?* says another.

The phone buzzes again. I should be rolling my eyes, but instead, I feel a smile spreading across my face. I open up my messages, scrolling up to the top.



bigforkhands:

| hey did you know that during one of the battles in the civil war a bunch of soldiers just started.

| uh. glowing in the dark

| like

| they were stuck in the mud for like two days and they looked down and were like "oh cool, sweet, my wounds are glowing blue"

| thisisfine.jpg

| and

| AND!!!!!!

| the soldiers with glowing wounds actually got better faster than the other ones??

bigforkhands:

| listen some teens DID solve this mystery (as teens always do) and they found out that all these factors came together to make these nasty nasty wounds the perfect home for this bioluminescent bacteria

| which... somehow heals you? idk I haven't quite figured that part out

| you're the scientist, you tell me, doc

| anyway

| could you IMAGINE. what that would be like with this like, 19th century nothing knowledge

| like. god. what must they have been thinking was happening to them?

bigforkhands:

| ok I read more and they called it "angel's glow" which fucking slaps

| it must have looked like a miracle, huh. like. i can't even imagine what that would be like. emotionally i mean.

| do people still believe in miracles? do you?

bigforkhands:

| priya wake up

Before I can even finish reading, my phone buzzes again, and I scroll down to type out a quick message.





paranormaldetective:

| Brigid!!!

bigforkhands:

| oh sweet you're up

| rise and shine, sweet cheeks

paranormaldetective:

| HATED that.

bigforkhands:

| stop using periods at the end of your sentences dude

| you sound ilke a serial killer

| you gotta be cool and fun... how do you spell lazye faire

paranormaldetective:

| Yeah I think that was right

bigforkhands:

| :)))

paranormaldetective:

| Okay, let me scroll back up.

bigforkhands:

| NO PERIODS!!!

| coincidentally that also describes my body

paranormaldetective:

| Are you okay

bigforkhands:

| absolutely not, thank you for asking

I scroll back up. She's sent me a post that reads, "Send Your Followers a Box of Toads to Demonstrate Your Undying Affection." Under this, there's another message from Brigid:

bigforkhands:

| hey what's your address

| for no particular reason

paranormaldetective:

| Brigid you LITERALLY just sent me a post threatening to mail me toads



bigforkhands:

| i don't know what you're talking about

paranormaldetective:

| Mmhmm.

bigforkhands:

| was it a threat or a promise

paranormaldetective:

| I'm not giving you my address

bigforkhands:

| ughhh you're always so much cagier on the internet than
| i am

| it's like you actually learned the lesson you were
| supposed to learn instead of telling strangers your name
| and a bunch of information about yourself and also your
| deepest darkest secrets

paranormaldetective:

| Consider it an honor that you know my name

bigforkhands:

| oh i do, trust me

| okay, I'll give you MY address

paranormaldetective:

| Knock yourself out!

| Not literally please

bigforkhands:

| too late

This is exactly the way that Brigid and I became . . . well, friends. At first that was just the word I used to explain our conversations to my parents—*one of my friends was telling me about this. No, you don't know her, she goes to another school.* I was lying, in more ways than one; even though we messaged every day, *friend* didn't seem like the right word for someone on the other side of a computer screen, someone made up of pixels and words and images, whose blog description said "i'm bridge, i'm 20, and i'm not sure what's happening here either." It didn't seem like the right word until, suddenly, it was.