

BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS

A MEMOIR OF A LIFE
INTERRUPTED

BOOK
CLUB
KIT



SULEIKA JAOUAD

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

When the life you'd planned is shattered, how do you begin anew?

In the summer of 2015, I found myself huddled on my kitchen floor smoking a cigarette, a hospital bracelet still circling my wrist. After almost four years of treatment for leukemia, I'd been declared cancer free and discharged from the hospital. Done with the "cut, poison, burn" part of the disease, I sat dazed and alone in the rubble, unsure how to move forward. I'd spent the better half of my twenties working tirelessly toward a single goal—survival. And now that I'd survived, I realized I had no idea how to live.

"It took me a long time to be able to say I was a cancer patient," I wrote in **one of the final installments** of my *New York Times* column, "Life, Interrupted." "Then, for a long time, I was only that: A cancer patient. Now that I'm done with my treatment, I'm struggling to figure out who I am."

This question blossomed into a quest: a 15,000-mile road trip across America that led me to the doorsteps of dozens of strangers who'd replied to my column with their own stories of reckonings and resurrections. And it was that road trip, and the harrowing years leading up to it, that inspired the idea for this book.

Between Two Kingdoms is the book I would have wanted to read when I was emerging from treatment. In it, I wanted to shatter the false mythologies of recovery and the omerta of silence that enshrouds the realities of survivorship. I wanted to build a bridge, both for myself and others, between the no longer and the not yet. While I was writing it, I kept a Post-it Note above my desk that said: "if you want to write a good book, write what you don't want others to know about you. If you want to write a great book, write what you don't want to know about yourself."

This book is for anyone who has had their life interrupted, whether it's by the ripcord of a diagnosis, or some other kind of trauma or heartbreak that has brought them to the floor. My greatest hope is that this book will feel like a friend of sorts, and that it might provide solace to those who are lost in the wilderness of a life transition and attempting to find their way forward.

Suleika Jaouad

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After her diagnosis, Suleika finds that many people—from friends to healthcare providers—don't know how to react or say the "right" thing to a cancer patient. Her friend Jake rushes off the phone, and a nurse tells Suleika about another young patient who'd been around her age when she died. What do you think would have been more helpful for Suleika to hear from these people? How did these passages make you think differently about empathy and the way you can support people going through something difficult? How have *you* been supported while going through something difficult?
2. "When you are facing the possibility of imminent death, people treat you differently," Suleika writes. "All of this attention can feel like you are being memorialized while you are still alive." What was it like for Suleika to be mourned like this before she was gone? Do you fault her friends and family for acting this way, or do you think it's a human impulse? How, if at all, does Suleika try to avoid this trap of pre-memorializing with her group of cancer friends?
3. How does Suleika's writing help her throughout her treatment? How does it hurt her?
4. Suleika writes about the pressure to be a model patient, "to be someone who suffers well, to act with heroism, and to put on a stoic facade all the time." Why do you think we put these expectations on cancer patients? Who do you think this performance is actually for?
5. The book's title comes from a Susan Sontag passage: "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place." Have you used your "kingdom of the sick" passport yet? What was it like there, and what did you learn about yourself? What are the benefits of experiencing this "other" place?
6. What does Suleika's breakup with Will represent for her? What does her relationship with Jon come to represent?
7. Suleika feels a strange sadness at the end of her treatment, even feeling bereft at the loss of her port. Discuss this sadness. How does it subvert our expectations of what survival and healing are like?
8. Eventually, Suleika realizes that she can't wait until she's "well enough" to start living again. What sparks this realization for her? When have you wanted to wait until you were "enough" of something—rich enough, thin enough, well enough? How can we learn to embrace where we are at present? What do we lose by constantly striving, without satisfaction?
9. Even though Suleika knows exactly what her friend Max needs from her when her cancer returns, she can't bring herself to be there for him right away. "Right now, my impulse is self-preservation," she writes. "The thought of more heartbreak makes me want to cut myself off from the world." When do we need to prioritize our friends? When do we need to prioritize ourselves? How can we learn to tell the difference?
10. Which of the stops, and people, on Suleika's road trip stayed with you the most? Why? What did she learn from that particular person? What did you learn?

SULEIKA'S ROAD TRIP PLAYLIST

1. "Everyday People" by Sly & The Family Stone
2. "Born to Be Wild" by Wilson Pickett
3. "Route 66" by Chuck Berry
4. "Let the Good Times Roll" by Ray Charles
5. "Air Mail Special" by Ella Fitzgerald and the Ray Charles Singers
6. "The Music Is the Magic" by Abbey Lincoln
7. "Road Life (Live)" by Mulgrew Miller and the Mulgrew Miller Trio
8. "A Love Bizarre" by Sheila E.
9. "Drive My Car" by The Beatles
10. "Starting Over" by Chris Stapleton

Listen to the full playlist on Spotify at <https://bit.ly/2LwjAVW>.

