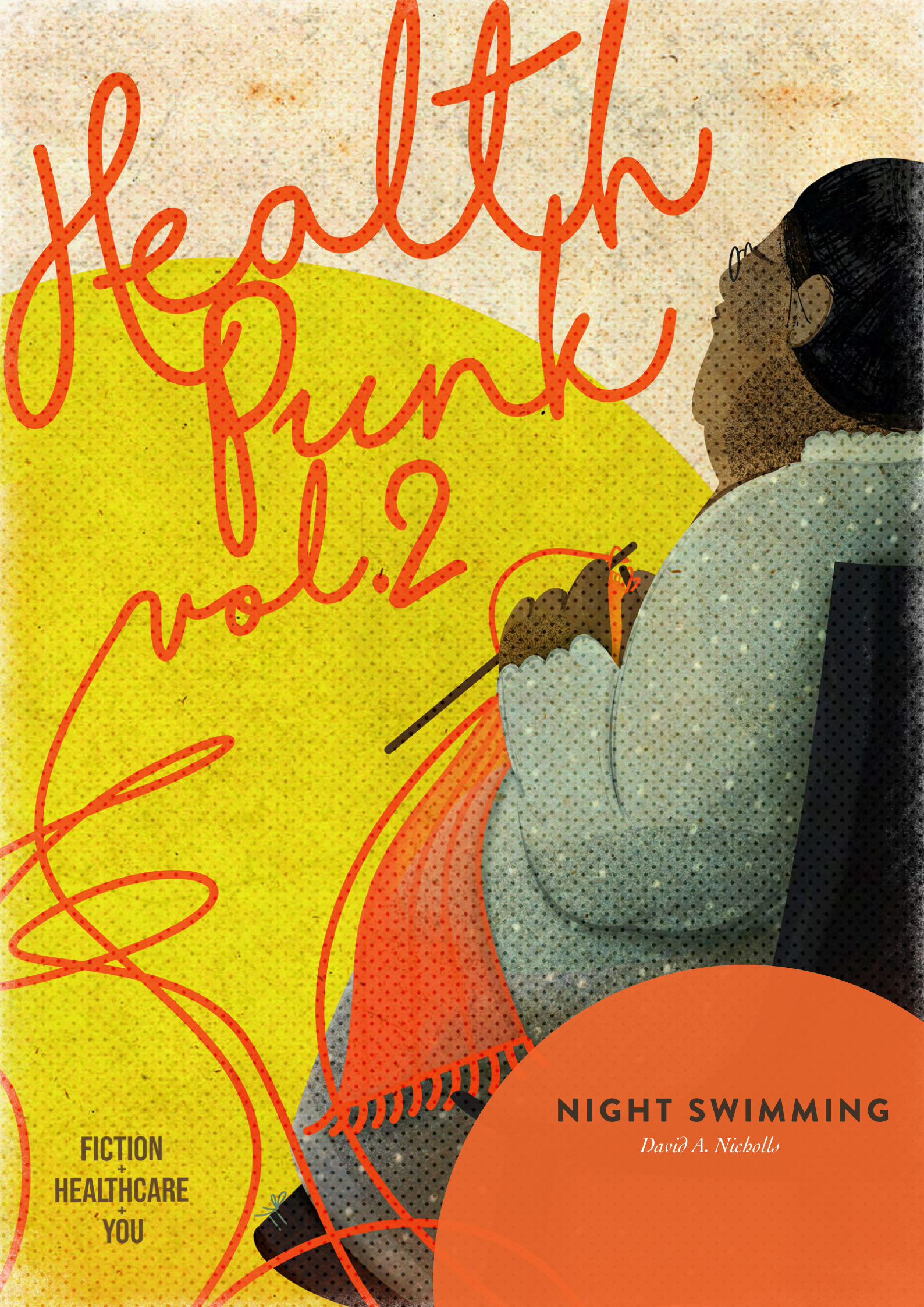
Health Punk vol.2



FICTION + HEALTHCARE + YOU

NIGHT SWIMMING

David A. Nicholls

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By David A. Nicholls

It took me four days to reach Sallar.

Even travelling during the day, when all of the office workers are asleep and the streets hum with the sound of the misting turbines, your progress is slowed by the fractious meanderings of the street sweepers, delivery drones, and maintenance trucks.

But as you leave the city, the noise lessens, the air clears, and the sun pours down.

It baked for four days while I walked and hitched my way through the parched countryside. But as I approached Sallar the colours changed with the landscape. There were yellows, greens, and reds. I could hear birdsong and water running. And there were date palms, lemon trees, and umbrella-shaped acacias everywhere.

I'd come to see a friend, but also to see this place that Ku had told me so much about. Sallar was a collection of earth huts and cob houses spread out over a long flat-bottomed valley as lush as an oasis.

Everyone who lived there seemed to glow like a freshly picked peach. And you could tell, even under their sun hats and boubous, that they were fit and strong.

The valley drained like a bath into a large pond, and different gardens fanned out along the valley floor. There were reed beds with water birds, soft green rice fields, food crops sheltering in the shade of the acacia trees, and fields of bananas, persimmons, and almonds.

The work of tending the gardens was done at night when the air was cool, so the day began at sunset as people slowly made their way to the pond and talked about the night ahead.

"Before you do anything else, you'll need to meet Moyo," Ku said. "Moyo runs the gardens, and she'll show you around."

Moyo wasn't hard to miss. Dressed head to toe in yellow and gold, she glowed in the moonlight.

"Ku tells me you're staying with us for a few weeks," she said, taking my

hands and turning them over. "They're too soft. But we'll soon sort that out." And then that cheeky smile that I came to know so well.

And so we got to work. Night after night, tending, pruning, planting, and harvesting. And as the sky began to glow with the early morning sun, we would return to the pool to eat, doze, and pack the stores with our night's harvest.

It was on one of those early mornings that Ku told me that they'd all been waiting for me to arrive.

"We need your help, Dee. You've seen Moyo struggling to get around. She needs an operation, and we've all chipped in to get it done, but it's so expensive these days, and we didn't have enough for the whole package. We need someone to show us how to do the rehab with her afterwards. Can you help?"

"Of course," I said. "Whatever you need."

So, that morning, Moyo made her decision and the RSC was booked.

It arrived within the hour. Shiny chrome and tinted glass.

All Moyo had to do now was to decide when she wanted the op.

At 10 o'clock that night, she opened the door at the back of the shiny cabin that doubled as the autonomous Remote Surgical Centre, and gingerly stepped inside.

Because everything from intubation to implant was done by computer now, Moyo's operation was smooth sailing. The surgical 'brain' took the images, checked Moyo's bloods, screened her medical notes, and monitored her recovery, while the robot arms cut and closed with the precision of, well, a robot.

Four hours later, she was sitting up in bed, complaining that we still hadn't finished the olive harvest.

The next night, we took Moyo down to the pool. It was a festival night, and there was food and wine and music and dance. Ezster had made Fesenjan for everyone, and I showed her two children how to massage beeswax and buchu flowers into Moyo's legs.

I showed Ku and her son Faddey how to build Moyo's muscles back up after years of pain, and cautioned her to watch for tree roots and soft ground. We bathed in the pool when the wound healed, and we hung lights in the trees over the obstacle course I'd built for her in the bush.

We knew she was getting better when she started supervising the work we were doing digging the new swales up on the hillside. It's not an easy climb up there, but she was

determined to see it done properly, and I think, secretly, she wanted to show us she was strong again.

I stayed in Sallar for six weeks. And in that time I met an elderly man who couldn't remember his daughter's name, a woman who's arm hurt so much she could no longer wield her axe, a boy who couldn't breathe, and a little girl with stiff, painful legs.

I tried to help them all as much as I could and, in return, they gave me food, a soft bed, and starlight like you've never seen.

I learnt that you sometimes have to be tough with a lemon tree, and that some plants just need patience. I learnt that there's no beginning or end to healthcare, and that one woman's sweet is another man's bitter.

Towards the end of my stay, Rab asked if I could help a friend of his along the valley. She was a weaver, but was struggling to work now because of constant neck pain.

So, two nights later, I said my goodbyes, and headed off down the valley, with harder hands, for sure, but also a much softer feeling about my place in the world.

I'll go back to the city, for sure. But I've found a place here that gives me everything I need: the hospitality of good friends, cool air and the gentle night breeze, and the give-and-take of helping and being helped.

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