

Four Days with Hadley.

Yesterday I thought you were well enough to go home. How could things go wrong so quickly?

When I first met you, you were too young to be in an adult hospital, but too old to be in a children's hospital. You were still at high school with your whole life ahead of you.

But the things you were learning had nothing to do with maths, geography or English. All of a sudden you are in a world full of doctors, nurses, chemotherapy, blood tests, and scans. But I had hope for you. This is a curable cancer, or so I thought.

Now 18 months later we meet again. Your parents remember me and I remember you. How can I forget a boy called Hadley?

You're still NOT old enough to vote and yet you are dying! Your mum recounts the last 18 months of your life, simply saying "he will go into coma and then he will go".

She says it like it's not really going to happen soon.

She tells me you had a dream. In your dream you have a tattoo. So it becomes her mission to make your dream come true, but the family has no money to pay for your

tattoo. Somehow, your mother Danielle pulls out all stops to get a tattoo artist to come into hospital to give you your tattoo. You must be the only person ever to have a tattoo while on a Morphine drip in hospital. Skillfully the skin artist works her magic without spilling a single drop of your blood while your many family members watch on. We all admire her artwork, a simple map of Australia with your name emblazoned through it.

With your dream fulfilled you take to your bed for the last time. You drift in and out of sleep surrounded by so many family members the generations just blend together. None of us knew this would be your last night on this earth.

With the new day comes a new plan. You are too sick to go home. Our goal now is to palliate and so you are moved to a quieter room away from my realm of acute cancer care. I help to ease your transition and watch as your family make a new nest for you. Now it is time for my colleagues to perform your end of life care, but they don't know you like I do.

Just a few hours later I am fully gowned, gloved, and masked tending to the new patient in your vacated room, when I hear the cries of anguish and grief. I know that

sound. I've heard it so many times before, but this time it is coupled with frantic emergency bells warning us there is a crisis somewhere on our ward. I excuse myself and rush to the sound of the bells.

As you drew your last breath your father's legs crumpled underneath him in shock. He has fainted but recovers quickly enough to wish the scene he is now confronted with was NOT real. I leave them to grieve your passing and walk away with my head bowed choking back tears.

My work goes on, but my colleagues wonder how they will ever convince your family to leave your body. A doctor is called to declare your passing, this will be the first time she signs a Death Certificate. She lacks confidence and is intimidated by all the family members. I am asked to request the family vacate the room to allow her to do her business. In a moment of solitude I place my hand on your pale waxy face and wonder why cancer has claimed one so young. The doctor talks quietly to you as she performs her duties, and thanks me for staying in the room.

Later in the corridor I embrace Danielle and tell her what a marvellous job she did making Harley's dying wish come true. I watch and shake my head as the whole family leave our ward for the last time.

The mortuary is no place for a teenage boy named Hadley.