

Christmas Eve

I drove past all the Christmas lit houses into a weatherboard suburb not far from the hum of the freeway. I pulled up outside Luke's home just before midnight, his worried mother was standing near the mailbox, waiting to shepherd me in. She was in her nightie and wringing her hands, "It has been terrible, he can't settle, I can't bear it", her tears spilling. Her anguish as plain as the night sky. "I will stay with him until he is okay" I promised, stepping over children's toys on the way into the house.

Luke's bedroom was at the back of the house and I was mindful of other sleeping children and his grandparents padding around quietly in the kitchen. There were many in this cast of Luke's dying play and his brain tumour had defined him and his family for the past few years.

He was sixteen but did not resemble a teenager. It was only his guitars and Miley Cyrus poster that revealed his adolescence. Too many seizures had left his mattress on the floor and there were sweat stained pillows lining the walls. He was so close to dying he could hardly talk, but he squeezed my hand "yes" when I asked him about pain. His swollen face had linen creases and his skin was clammy. One eye protruded grossly and his other eye was shut. He was unseeing now, but there was a faint smile of recognition. I gave him some analgesia and sedation and waited. I was use to waiting. It had become the

space between assessing and reassessing. It was time to take in the moment. I talked quietly to Luke's grandparents huddled around the formica kitchen table, dazed with grief for their grandson and his parents. His mother and I spoke in hushed tones back in the Luke's room about how much he had struggled. His dad came to the doorway and nodded towards me. We didn't need to speak, he had cried in my arms yesterday and had said all that was needed to be said. There was no taking shifts now, all the adults were on duty, everyone was awake. The intimacy and grace of being with Luke and his family was overwhelming me.

His mum and I had given Luke a wash and he looked beautiful in his fresh pyjamas and clean sheets and pillowcases. I chided myself privately how I wanted him to be clean and handsome and tidy. Luke had calmed and the candles we had lit started to fill the room with fragrance, their shadows dancing to Luke's favourite jazz on his iPod.

A part of me wanted to stay in this peaceful loving space, listening to Luke's gentle breathing. I knew he would die soon. But it was family time and they knew what to do and they knew how to love him.

I had said my goodbyes and packed my work bag and walked out through the living room. I was stunned for a moment. In front of me was the biggest Christmas tree I had ever seen. It was blinking coloured lights and planted in

the depth of Christmas presents. They all had Luke's name on them. I started to feel my emotion rise and had the choking thought that those presents will never be opened. It was not right for a child to die on Christmas day. I got into the car and turned the radio off which was playing Christmas carols. The Christmas lights lined the streets and a part of my heart stayed with Luke that night and what was left of me I took home.