

## Shed Your Skin

"I collect snakes and lizards" his mum told me with mischief and challenge in her voice. "Thanks for letting us know, we just ask that all pets be restrained when we visit" I said in my best palliative care intake nurse voice. We kept talking until her tears came and she told me how wrong it was that her 30 year old son Tom was dying, and how her heart ached, and how she hated lupus, and how she was cranky at God and how she stopped work and how she had good friends but she went to bed with fear in her guts and woke up terrified and how she couldn't eat and how she forgot to pay the electricity bill and what will she do when he is gone? I just listened.

The next time we spoke was another distressed phone call, this time because Tom had pain and his mum couldn't contact the community nurses. I said I would come. I was mentoring a student nurse and I talked her through Tom's file on the drive to his house. I expected that we would give him some analgesia and continue on our way. It was a sunny crisp spring morning and the grass was still dew kissed when we walked to the door.

When we walked in I saw Tom sitting upright on the lounge, his eyes were rolling back, he was groaning a terrible sound. His mum was holding him up in a desperate hug and she looked frightened. I introduced myself and the student nurse and sat on the coffee table facing his mum and holding Tom's knees. His hands and fingers were necrotic and taped and his skin was peeling from his throat and face, he was beyond gaunt, a skeleton sheathed in peeling skin. His rattly breathing heralded death and he tried to smile hello. Tom said he had pain everywhere and I gave him an injection which settled him quickly. He managed to whisper "thank you".

As Tom eased and his breathing became quieter and even, we supported him with pillows on the lounge and went into the kitchen. His mum smiled nervously and said "Cuppa tea lovey?" The student nurse looked to me for permission and I knew that Tom was dying and

he would be more comfortable in bed. We sat down and I said to his mum "This is so sad, but Tom is deteriorating quickly, I think he is going to die soon" His mum nodded, holding my gaze, tears welling. "We need to let his girlfriend know" His mum kept nodding but her tears were spilling. I touched her and she fell into my arms – we hugged silently and I saw the student nurse wipe her own tears away. "We will need help lifting him to his room – is there anyone who can help?" His mum told me there were two paramedics next door (*thank God I thought*) and they were happy to come. I planned the lift and moved furniture so we could get through the hallway. We had prepared his bed and pillows and at the count of three we lifted Tom gently like we were carrying human gossamer.

It was going really well until we came into the hallway and saw the snake skin. It was a brown speckled grey colour, curling at the edges and about 10 foot long. I was froze for a second and the student nurse looked wild eyed like she was going to scream. I calmly just said "OK, we are nearly there" trying to hide my terror as we lowered Tom gently on to his St George Illawarra doona cover and foam mattress. The neighbours left as his girlfriend arrived running into the room, crying and holding his painful hands and stroking his peeling face. "I love you Tom, you have made my life so happy". I had to look away, holding my breath, the moment too sacred to see. His girlfriend had brought him a necklace with one side "together" and the other "forever". She was crying and shaking so much she couldn't unclasp it to put it around his neck and she started wailing. The student nurse stepped forward and undid the clasp and put the necklace gently around Tom's neck It was such an act of grace. His girlfriend caressed him and murmured her love while holding him close. We left her be.

His mum had made us milky tea and we talked quietly around the kitchen table about Tom stories and the kind of son he was. They were best buddies and had travelled the world together. His mum had sat with him all night and they had talked about what he wanted when he died and she felt able to honour his wishes. His mum knew what to do when he died and said she would ring me when she was ready. She had relaxed and her exhaustion

was released. We hugged goodbye and our eyes said more than our words could.

As we drove away I asked the student nurse "Are you OK? That was a big visit" I could tell she was shaken as I often am by the significance and intimacy we share with patients and families. She just looked at me and said "That was beautiful. It has changed me forever. That is what nursing is all about". I nodded. She went on to say, "I feel really moved by what we were just a part of". I nodded and said "Well, it was pretty intense". The student nurse looked at me and her tears were close again "But we could care for him and be part of a loving experience and still be nurses". I could feel my own emotion rise up then and just said, "Yes, but did you see where the snake went?" And we both burst out laughing.