

IN BED FOURTEEN

On the stretcher lies a man, or at least the semblance of a man who has existed for the past 93 years. 'You know he's dying don't you', remarks the doctor as he folds his arms across his green scrubs. My colleague and I exchange a brief glance - yes, we know. He is clearly dying right before our eyes. We can see it in his pallor, that sunken, waxy, yellow skin, taut across the prominent bones of an emaciated body. As if the flesh has almost disconnected from the fading organs beneath it. His eyes are closed, already he's withdrawn from the outside world, retreating to another place. We watch his shallow breathing as the lungs gulp air, desperately trying to service a tired heart. They falter. Spluttering he starts again.

There's no private room. He lies in the open cubicle of bed 14, fast tracked from his flannel pyjamas into a white hospital gown. Electrodes stick to the spindly white hairs of his chest, where every rib protrudes. The cardiac monitor captures his frantic heartbeat, as every coloured waveform sets off a new alarm. We silence its futile concern. Gently we tape our tubes to his liver-spotted skin, and place soft pillows beneath limbs

already cold to touch. We talk to him throughout, covering his damp body with a single sheet. He doesn't flinch. We watch his breathing slow.

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Around me the emergency department is a whirlpool of patients. Amidst the bright lights and red ringing phones, teams of nurses and doctors are all trying to solve the multiplying puzzles presented to them. As the waiting room begins to overflow, ambulances gridlock and beds bearing grey, curly grandmas double park in the corridors. Seizures occur and children arrive with lacerations, burns, fractures and fevers. I see foreign objects in places they don't belong or sometimes gaps where things should. It could be the beginning or the end as patients are ventilated, hydrated and defibrillated. A hundred different realities squeeze into aligning cubicles, where grief and laughter, tears and anger synchronously reside.

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We turn from bed fourteen to attend a line up of new patients. There are young men and anxious mothers, fallen cyclists and broken surfers, the elderly and the homeless. We treat everything from strokes to swollen feet, severed arteries to stubbed toes, burst appendixes to chest pain, neck pain, ear pain, phantom pain.....

The hours spill by as we fill jars and tubes with colourful samples. We prime bags of fluids, mix vials of powder and inject multiple drugs into multiple veins. I chase lost medications, call absent relatives and sign pages of paperwork. There are x-rays and ECG's to attend, band aids to stick and beds to make. The minutes are replaced with millimoles and micrograms. As my computer

crashes for the fourth time that morning, the emergency buzzer sounds in bay five. I discard both the machine and all hope of coffee.

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As I catch my breath, I see my elderly patient calm in the centre of it all. Inside his body the scales have tipped, the balance changed. A visible warmth is reaching out from deep inside, and his skin turning slowly pink. Somehow he's re-entering the human realm. His face glows fresh with life, and the cold body that existed moments ago is once again inhabited by a radiant life force. His eyes open and he meets my gaze, with a spark of something more than just lucidity. He smiles, and gently nods. Thank you.

Family members arrive, to find our patient sitting up and brightly sipping orange juice. Oblivious to the metamorphosis that has taken place, they take a seat and chat about the parking fees. The doctor in the green scrubs greets an altogether more energetic character in bed 14. He laughs and shakes the patients hand, sees me smile and shakes his head. A path has changed.

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It's only later when I'm processing my day that I realise the magic of what I've seen, of the connections that have been made. A shift in body and a shift in space, the physiological and the metaphysical - both amaze me. Both are phenomenal... I wonder did he come back to say goodbye or to fulfil one last purpose? Did he go home again, or did he deteriorate and die later that day? I don't know. You don't find out. And that wondering is filled as quickly as the empty blue-screened cubicle with my next patient.

To whom I'll give myself completely, and then just as willingly
let them go.