

The Last Day

Agatha stretched her navy blue cardigan around her pregnant belly and peered into the darkness. The bright lights of the busy intensive care unit reflected images of convalescing patients onto the glass as she pressed her face against the isolation room door. Wires, tubes and tapes covered the tiny package of flesh spread out on the white sheet. A shadow in the background fiddled with pumps, almost invisible in her dark scrubs, almost.

Agatha felt her phone buzz in her pocket. *Can't find the kids shoes. Any ideas?* She quickly typed as the shadow emerged from the gloom, *Sorry. Good luck!*

The chatter of morning handover breathed pinkness into the night nurse's long, tired face as she systematically recited Elijah's story. Every blood result, every breath, every wriggle. Agatha's own baby seemed to kick every time she said the name Elijah.

"Is this your last shift before maternity leave?" Asked the night nurse when she had finished with the formalities. Her voice lighter.

"Yep." Agatha rubbed her aching back. "So ready to be finished."

"Good luck." The women hugged. "Can't wait to meet the little package."

"Thanks." She smiled.

Agatha cracked the door open and slid inside. Two silent faces screamed into the darkness as the morning sun tried desperately to penetrate the blinds behind them. A spattering of successful rays landed on the back of Catherine's chair, her body limp within. In the chair beside her sat Leo, his body stiff, waiting, always waiting.

The ventilator pinged as Agatha introduced herself to the new parents. Leo's eyes darted back and forth across the room, like a meerkat, each alarm a potential threat. Catherine recited Elijah's story, this time the story was chaotic. She jumped through time, his birth, his illness, their pre-baby life. She spoke of his sleep patterns, the state of her nipples and their night time routine.

Again, Agatha felt the impatient buzz against her full belly. She peeked inside her pocket as she began to prepare Elijah's medications. The glow from the screen, a portal to another world. *I forgot about soccer and we have no washing powder. I'll eventually get the kids to school. Might make it to work by lunch time!* She quickly closed her pocket without replying.

Catherine stroked Elijah's floppy hand. She played with the rolls of fat at his wrist then kissed the parts of his cheeks popping out between the layers of brown tape. She closed her eyes. In Catherine's mind, Elijah had grown up so many times already. Every day since he was born she had imagined a new future for him. Yesterday he was a chef, like his Dad, the day before was his wedding.

Leo had barely thought more than two days into the future since Elijah's birth, partly because of sleep deprivation, partly because he feared the unknown. Leo closed his eyes and kissed Elijah's other cheek. Little translucent patches appeared on the white sheet as a sprinkling of tears escaped from his eyes.

The door eased open. The noise poured in from outside, like a thunderstorm rolling across the still summer sky. A doctor entered, the remnants of a hurried lunch in his beard, instant coffee on his breath. His head was bowed, his lips turned down. Leo stood to attention, was this what he was waiting for?

Agatha sat with the couple as the doctor spoke gently and precisely about Elijah and his condition. Each word seemed to hang in the stagnant air between them. Agatha wondered if they would remember this as the last moments before they were changed forever. A cloak that would hang heavy around their necks for the rest of their lives, a screen that they would now see everything through.

He answered all of their questions, despite the repetition. And after his profuse apologies he left. Catherine sat staring at her son, mouth open, as though every thought she had ever had was trying to get out at once. Leo sobbed and clung to his wife.

Agatha left and waited just outside the door. She watched the couple, who two days ago had a perfect life, just like hers. They were both standing now, kissing Elijah everywhere their lips would fit. Catherine started with his face and worked her way down, Leo his feet working his way towards his face.

“Please, please, please don’t die.” She heard Leo beg between kisses, a thin film of tears and snot covered his face.

Another buzz from Agatha’s pocket. *Please, please, please let there be no traffic. Something’s got to go my way today.* Her bowels wrung with guilt.

The blackened room throbbed with sadness. She imagined her own little boy’s freckly nose under all that tape, her little girls red curls wrapped amongst the lines and her new baby. Her new baby.

After kissing and begging and bargaining and disbelief, Agatha went into the room again.

“Would you like to hop into bed with him?” Asked Agatha. Her voice cutting through the thickness.

Catherine nodded her head without looking taking her eyes from her baby. She climbed on the bed as Agatha fiddled with tubes and lines and helped her get her arm under Elijah.

“What happens now?” Asked Leo rolling Elijah’s little finger gently in his.

“Well, when you’re ready.” Agatha sighed and thought about the inadequacy of the word ‘ready’. “We’ll take out as many of the lines as we can. We’ll take away the monitors and then we’ll take out the breathing tube.”

Leo nodded and bit his lip.

“It might take hours or minutes, we can’t really say, but then Elijah will die,” continued Agatha.

“Will he feel it?” Leo’s eyes stayed fixed on Elijah’s face.

“No. His brain is very damaged so lots of those pathways aren’t working, but we can give him medication if we think he’s having any pain.”

“When?” Catherine was able to squeeze a word out between sobs.

“When you think it’s time. Is there anyone you want to see him before he goes?”

“No. It’s just us.”

“Okay.” Agatha smiled. “You told me about your bedtime routine. Maybe we could do it then. Do your normal routine and then put him to bed one last time. It’s up to you.”

“I think that would be nice.” Leo squeezed Catherine’s hand.

“Okay.” She covered her face with her hand and sobbed.

“I’ll just grab a few things and you can hop in there too Leo.”

She left the room, her eyes taking a minute to adjust to life outside the cell. Her pocket buzzed again. *You wouldn’t believe the day I’m having. They just called from day care*

and the baby spewed so I've got to pick her up. She's fine. I bet they were just trying to feed her peas again. Agatha ducked into the pan room. *Poor baby. Kiss her from me.* She typed.

Agatha buzzed around the unit and set up a double bed for the family to lie together. Leo and Catherine spent the rest of the day kissing, stroking, squeezing Elijah. Occasionally one of them would shut their eyes and drift off, only seconds later jumping awake and weeping.

Agatha tended to alarms, fetched drinks and listened to whatever they wanted to tell her. And at about six in the evening she was summoned to assist with their bedtime routine.

First Catherine and Leo gave Elijah a bath. They whispered baby talk through tears as his slippery body flopped in his mother's arms. Then Leo lay him across the bed, squeezed cream into his hands and massaged his tolerant body. His perfect pink skin warm under his father's rough hands. Catherine squatted at his head and kissed him while Leo sung lullabies.

Agatha helped place Elijah into the middle of the double bed. She unhooked syringes filled with medication. She took down the monitoring, removed the line in his groin and helped his parents into bed with him. The same doctor they had spoken to earlier came in, spoke a few more hushed words, apologised again and pulled the breathing tube from his nose.

The doctor left the room, followed by Agatha, who assured them that she was just outside if they needed her. Less than an hour Elijah's breathing became irregular, his colour began to drain and around eighty years too early he was dead.

A while later Agatha cracked the door open. The sobbing had melted away to more of a weep as a few tiny purple markings appeared on Elijah's sallow checks.

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“He’s not even supposed to be born yet,” said Catherine as she traced the outline of his face with her index finger. “He was due next week, the eleventh.”

“He’s been through so much in his short life,” consoled Agatha. She rubbed her belly, the eleventh was the date her baby was due.

Leo and Catherine said good bye again and again then left the hospital. Instead of their baby in their hands they held information sheets on organising a funeral and suppressing lactation.

Agatha picked Elijah up onto her chest and lay a sheet out on the bed beneath. His lifeless feet dangled across her belly. She could feel her own baby kicking, only a few centimetres of flesh separating the infants. She put him down again and wrapped him.

She placed him in the pram and draped a blanket over the cover so that passers-by would think she was just pushing a sleeping baby, then wheeled him to the morgue. Her phone buzzed again.

I’ve had the worst day. Thought I’d never get the kids to bed! How’s your last day going? She thought for a moment. *Fine thanks.* She replied.

