

Omphalocele

Prose

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She was the last patient as the day was drawing to a close. Although, it had been a short day on the pediatrics floor. I arrived around 2 p.m., and it was my first time here. The jungle mural wrapped around the halls for something fun to look at, but the dim lights made it hard to see the details. Occasionally kids would go on walks around the floor, taking laps with all of the animals. I imagined what that was like. With the lights on I am sure it was uplifting, but now it was eerie, like taking a walk around the moon.

We had seen a baby with pneumonia whose parents had brought him in from Fayetteville. There was little for us as students to say; he was on the up and should be discharged soon. I talked to them about the drive from here to there, which I had done many times for less severe circumstances. We had seen a high-school girl who wanted to get back to running track. She was pretty good, her mother said. The kid with cystic fibrosis was too tired to talk to us.

She was behind some door that we had not opened yet, the only room in the museum left to see. So we lined up outside with our instructor and barged in.

It was almost empty. Every room so far had been full of people and things and pull-out couches. Usually there were take-out containers and sweaters which served as tangible proof of love. I looked around for a purse, a wallet— a sign of a parent. There was none. The edges of the room looked tidy and untouched, just the way housekeeping had left it, except for the small bed in the middle where a little girl lay, covered in white hospital blankets and a few bright Fisher-Price toys.

She was two and asleep, recovering from an omphalocele repair. *At what age do kids usually get that repaired*, I made a mental note to look up later. She also had a tracheostomy with a ventilator blowing air into her lungs. It was amazing to me that she looked so peaceful— the vent was loud, and tubes ran in and out of her whole body. We hovered over her crib in silence. If she opened her eyes she would see us peering over in a circle like some alien abduction or the Brady Bunch.

“Are her parents here?” someone in the group asked. It was the question haunting the room.

“That’s a good question; let me see if her nurse knows anything,” our instructor replied. She stepped out of the room, and we all lifted our heads to glance at one another. She caught the nurse as she was walking past with linens for another room.

“Yeah, she’s been here for a week or so. Her parents can’t be here at the same time as one another. I think her mom is going to get here around 9 pm tonight,” she told us with a sympathetic frown. She held the white sheets close to her chest.

Our instructor gave us some information about the girl in a soft voice. “She is on step-down from the PICU. From her chart it looks like she is trach-dependent and just had that surgery. Let’s take a look at her incision and see how it’s doing.” Our heads lowered back to the young girl.

“You know, I think it’s odd that we’re allowed in here with a kid without their parents,” the guy next to me said. *That’s not quite it*, I thought, but I couldn’t fault him. I imagine we were all trying to place the discomfort in the air. Here she was, a two year old in a hospital bed, who at this moment had nothing in the world but sleep.

Our attending peeled back the girl’s blankets, revealing a large surgical bandage and more tubes draining it. I held my breath; surely this would wake her up. I waited. The tracheostomy blew. Her chest rose. Nothing. Her eyes stayed shut, eyelashes flush with her skin.

We talked more about her history and hospital stay. I don’t remember much of it now. I’m not sure how much attention I paid in the moment. Maybe I thought about the difference between an omphalocele and gastroschisis. I likely didn’t. It was probably the picture of this room, its loud silence and unnerving neatness that sat in the forefront of my mind. Its inherent emptiness although we were there. Eventually the clock turned to five and we started to fade towards the door. As I inched away with the group, my eyes flashed back to her.

No one had put the blankets back. Her abdomen was out to the air, falling and rising with each machine-assisted breath. We started to filter out of the room, but I was pierced with the thought, *Oh god, what if she’s cold?*

A stylized graphic of an eye, rendered in shades of gray. The eye is composed of a central circle, two curved lines for eyelids, and a horizontal line for the iris. The text is centered within the eye graphic.

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