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FIELD NOTES | FALL 2019

## Brandon's Last Doctor

By Lauren Gambill

When kids are dying in the hospital, everyone tries to make their room feel like home. The walls are covered in get well cards, curtains hang from the windows. Stepping into Brandon's room is like stepping out of the hospital. Almost.

Brandon has been dead for probably 15 minutes. I suspect, though, it has been much longer, since he last spoke, since he last smiled.

The room is dark, soft music plays. Flute maybe? "Brandon, Brandon, Brandon." Repeating his name in my head. Afraid that somehow I will walk into his room and forget. I place my palm under the hand sanitizer dispenser. I stare at the foam as it splashes on my palm and realize that this ritual is no longer necessary to protect his fragile body. There is an essential oil diffuser near the door. I inhale the calming lavender scent deeply and quietly, while slowly entering. I wonder who chose the oil for Brandon. "There is an oil for everything." Oils for beauty. Oils for balance. Oils for healing. Oils for dying.

Brandon lies curled up on his hospital bed. His body thin and pale, as though he is made of porcelain. His mother's body is draped over his. Her chest heaving in silent sobs. She pulls herself up, moving lower on the bed as I walk in. Brandon's stepfather sits on a chair pulled up nearby. He stands when I enter, awkwardly shifts his weight, acknowledges me with a nod and a half smile. Another woman, an aunt maybe, stands to the side. She nervously backs into the corner, clearing a path for me so wide in the tiny room that you would think I had arrived in a golf cart. I lay my hand on Brandon's mother's shoulder. I crouch on the floor beside his bed. Barely audible, I whisper, "Hi. I am the doctor working tonight." I move as slowly and as quietly as possible. Long careful pauses between each of my words. "I am so sorry." It still feels too fast.

I move my hands across his hospital bed and over his body as though there was a thick wall of honey surrounding him, slowing my every movement. I place my stethoscope on his chest the same way I've listened to thousands of patients before. I listen for what feels like an eternity. Where heartbeats should be, nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Brandon. Brandon. Brandon.

No one needs me here to pronounce this child dead. There is no question in anyone's mind. Still though, the family watches as I perform this ritual. As my eyes travel from his thin arms, his hairless scalp, his ulcerated lips, I feel certain he has suffered through every possible treatment. I wonder how many times these parents have watched a new doctor examine their son. Full of hope. Full of fear.

I am Brandon's last doctor.

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