

## Vacant Lots

By Laura-Anne White

It is the end of my night shift, around five in the morning. There is this woman walking by, gripping her IV pole with both hands, like it's the leader of a conga line. She has a nasogastric tube protruding from her nose. Her skin is a confusing pasty-yellow, yet flushed in random areas. Greasy, thinning hair is pulled into an unruly ponytail at the nape of her neck. She has six cartilage piercings that frame the edge of her right ear and trendy, wide-frame glasses. I don't know who she is, but decide her name is Erin.

In the commonplace of cancer on the unit where I work as a registered nurse, I occasionally realize I haven't really *looked* at them, at their faces. Our patients.' I see it every day, and it should not be shocking to me—but it always is. *This person looks dead. He (or she) is essentially a corpse.* And I feel sick and hopeless and somber.

Of course, I know how the truly deceased look. I have shut their eyelids gently with a gloved hand. I have pulled the sheet up over their expressionless faces. I have attempted to shut their gaping jaws. I have shuddered at how quickly their hands go cold, after dying, as I move them to the sides of their bodies.

But what I'm talking about is different; this is a living variety of death. These are bodies that have morphed and begun to insult themselves. They have become alien. The dark, perplexing final stanza of T.S. Eliot's "Preludes" comes to mind.

*Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;*

*The worlds revolve like ancient women*

*Gathering fuel in vacant lots.*

I imagine Erin in a circle of her friends, well-dressed and vibrant, sharing a story about the interaction she had with the man in the parking lot yesterday. How he was driving like an idiot and she told him so, then asked him if he wanted to get a beer. She is laughing, hard, and so are all of her friends. Her outfit is bold but minimal, and her jewelry simple. She has a tattoo of a whale between her shoulder blades. She puts too much sugar in her coffee and listens to talk radio. Her eyes sparkle when she talks, and the lines rimming them squinch in characteristically when she is thinking about what to say. She is vibrant.

Today her outfit matches every other patient's. Pale blue with ugly dark circles that contain some sort of pattern I've never looked at closely enough to accurately recall. She has the overstarched cotton bathrobe on over the gown to cover her rear end, which would otherwise be completely exposed.

And the look on her face. That look. Or maybe it's the absence of one that is so upsetting. Her eyes seem vacant to me. She should be scared, or mad, or crying. But instead she looks scary. Elsewhere. Dead.

The wheels on the IV pole rumble against the linoleum, one wheel halting angrily back and screeching in the process. And I wonder, what is concealed by her blankness? Is she suppressing emotions? Has her sense of feeling gone numb?

I feel angry for her. Angry that she is attached to tubes of unrecyclable plastic. Angry that she has cancer. Angry that she's so young and likely won't have the chance to get much older. Angry that she's not having a beer with the man who is an inconsiderate parker. I feel angry at anyone who has told her that "everything happens for a reason." I feel angry that the world can be so beautiful and so ugly at the same time.

Yet, over all the emotions that possess me—like compassion, and fear for her treatment outcome, and pride for how brave she is choosing to be—I feel sad. I feel overwhelmingly sad. I wonder secretly, *How do you keep going? Do you feel as dead as you look? Do you feel foolish wearing that gown? How are you up walking around? Why aren't you too depressed to get out of bed?*

These are the moments I realize how strong, how noble, how transcendent my patients are. My sadness is laced with gratitude, and I remember the unique opportunity I have here: to learn from people whose humility and courage far surpass my own.

The angry wheel on Erin's IV pole protests as she rounds the corner, leaving a smudge of black on the uneven floor. Her expression is unchanged. She maneuvers herself and her metal companion through the door of her room. She closes the door and pulls the curtain to cover the windows. The fluorescent light inside turns off. I look back towards my work station and close my eyes. My mind fabricates the alternate take to what I have just observed.

Erin sits in a comfortable chair at a dimly lit bar, thumbing a moonstone ring on her middle finger. Dark brown hair falls loosely across her shoulders, and her head is tilted slightly to the left. She looks up at her human companion with a smile as the music shifts, "I love this song."

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