

# Danse Macabre

Have you seen a children's ward before?

It's beautiful.

I love being here; I've spent so many days in my bed it feels like home.

Hi, my name is Joel, and I am six. I have a bad ball of cells in my right lung.

The left is fine, but the right stopped working. I was all ok, until two years ago when we went to see That Doc. She saw me in a&e and kept me in the hospital. The first few weeks were horrible.

Afterwards, I got used to the bloods, the chemo, the chirping sound of the infusion pump, the burning feeling in my skin where the radiation hit me.

At first, I liked the pictures on the walls, the colourful birds and smiling teddies. Then I realised the grown-ups lie. The docs told me a few more infusions and I would go home, the nurses told me one more blood test and I can almost pack my bag to go back to my own little bed but they lied. They didn't let me.

They looked more and more pale when they talked to me, and their smiles were fake. I hated it when their lips smiled but their eyes remained dead or even tearful. It scared the shit out of me. That's what the old cleaner said once when my pump went crazy and started to beep loudly. It scared the shit out of him.

My daddy lied, and my mommy lied, too.

They kept hurting me and they didn't let me go home.

Then one day I had an operation to remove the tumour. When they put the smelly mask on me, I thought it would be fine. When I woke up, I was just vomiting all over the place and my side hurt. But what scared me the most, was their fake smiles with their dead eyes. Even before they opened their mouth to lie to me I knew the operation failed.

New chemo with another unspeakable name, unspeakable because it sounded like some bad spells when they said it. And then more irradiation, my skin was now scarred.

I used to hate nursery and all I wanted to do was go back there. I missed my friends. I missed my enemies.

At least there were no more needles for a while because I had a central line. One of the nurses told me I will have a new medicine through that which only transformers get. I knew that's rubbish, I am a child, not a robot. She insisted I would have superpowers. I wanted her to shut up, and not to tell any more lies to me so I pretended I believed her.

The bigger the lie is, the more painful the therapy will be. The new chemo burned my chest and I couldn't even hold down fluid any more. Then one day they realised my other kidney shut down as well, so now I had dialysis through that big iv line in my chest. It was not bad at all compared with the chemo, so I was grateful when they said they would stop anything else until my kidney repaired itself.

And then one day they told me I could go home.

I had not seen my home for months by that time.

Everything looked weird. The neighbours, who were crying and giving me presents. My friends who were not allowed to play with me, because I was immunocompromised (another bad spell). Fake smiles, dead eyes. And my room felt cold and distant. Tidy. My toys were waiting for me, and how much I wanted to play with them when I was in the hospital but now they were meaningless, dead toys.

That was it.

I knew it was coming, still, when they took me back to the hospital I grabbed the doorframe and screamed. Screamed until it hurt everybody else as much as it hurt me. Screamed until I thought the teddies' eyes were popping out until the fake superhero bed linen would fill with the blood that I used to watch while on the machine. I wanted to scream until my mum and dad turned everything back to the beginning. They didn't.

They took me back.

In the hospital, I was given my old room. I laid down on the bed, turned towards the wall and didn't move. I didn't get up to play, nor to eat, then not even to go to the toilet.

Initially, it wasn't because I would have been too weak.

It was because it was over. The fake smiles and dead eyes got me back, a prisoner of their will. The lies started again and I couldn't care any more. I did not say a word when they put on the new chemo. I did not say a word to anybody.

I saw my mum's belly growing. I knew there was a new baby. The perfect one instead of me, the faulty one.

Nothing is working, and nothing should work. I am being sent back for being who I am. Into the children factory.

A children's ward is beautiful at Halloween.

The nurses decorate them with colourful art. Pumpkins, ghosts, and lots of orange and black cookies, cakes, that I can't eat any more. They don't fit through my feeding tube. Cute, tiny pictures of small tombs, crosses, weeping angels (that was spooky) and skeletons. Children skeletons. The same thing as what I will become soon. And the girl in the other room will be soon. And the boy in the next room to her... he became a skeleton last night I think.

I asked my mum to wheel me to the corridor to admire all those decorations. I hadn't asked for anything for months, so she was pleased. I couldn't stay long, because I was tired. Kayleh was tired, too. But we smiled at each other, we knew.

Then a few nights ago, I woke up and felt strong. I got up and walked to the corridor. It was easy and weird. I was walking barefoot, but my feet did not cause any noise as I was marching on the cold stones. I got to the sweet stand and I grabbed one of the carrot cakes, which to my great surprise I could eat. I ate so much, I tried all of them. I saw Kayleh walking through her room to join me, but then my ventilator started to beep and I had to run back to my cubicle before the grown-ups woke up.

The next day the same happened two more times during the day, I mean the beeps. I saw the doctors, the nurses, my mum and dad. They were crying, they said words like “DNAR” and “RESPECT”. I didn’t even look at them any more, I just let that machine inflate my lungs. One of the doctors asked my dad to join him for a coffee, and outside in his office when he thought no one hears it, he told my dad that they should switch off the machine and let me go.

That night, that was Halloween night. And we had the biggest party ever. I don’t remember falling asleep, but I remember waking up. Kayleh was standing next to my bed, and Seth at the door. Seth, from the room next to Kayleh’s.

As I got up and walked towards the decorations, I started to hear the music. Loud, booming music, happy music, in the middle of the night. I felt my legs moving, and dancing, in line with my new friends, to a choreography we never tried. And then we turned the corner, and there they were.

So many children!

They were in different dresses, some pyjamas looked like they were made a hundred years ago! Some children had no limbs as if they had an accident. There were babies, giggling and almost grown-up teenagers dancing with the skeletons and the shadows.

The weeping angel was standing in the middle, the children dancing around her happily, lighting up pumpkins and blowing out candles. I had

heard she was dangerous. I heard she could kill anyone, but I left my fears in that room behind me.

She looked at me, and I did not turn into a stone. I stood her gaze and she smiled.

Then all of a sudden everything went silent.

I heard the beep, the alarm of the ventilator coming from my cubicle. I saw doctors and nurses running to my room. Some of them passed by us as if our happy little danse macabre wasn't even happening.

I looked at the angel, and she looked at me as if asking whether I go back to my room, or whether I stay with them.

Whether I want to have fun with them forever, in the middle of the nights, in the dark, forlorn corridors of the monstrous hospital with all the other children, who died there.

I smiled.

The music started again, and that was my first ever real Halloween party.

If you look closely at a children's ward on Halloween night, you might still see us dancing.