

My Other Life



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The Hole in the Hospital



I was in hospital when I saw the first hole.

I've spent quite a lot of time in hospital.

When I was quite young, I was diagnosed with severe asthma and if I get a bad attack, I often end up there. My mum says that we've had some "near brushes" which always makes me think of my old hairbrush, clogged up with tangles and dull, dead hair.

I can't remember properly the times I was unwell. My dad says I'm the bravest person he knows, but I don't know what he means by that.

My friend Rav says: “Mae, I think you’re the greatest. And your dad makes the best lunches.” I say: “Is that why you like me, because I have the best lunches – and I always give them to you?” He laughs and says: “Of course not,” but then he rubs his belly as he says it. I don’t think he even notices he’s doing it.

My asthma’s not a big deal. Not really. And it’s got better now I am older and understand what I need to do. I know that I have to take my medicine every day. And I know that I have to get help if I feel a tightening in my chest, or a wheeze in my breath. And I also know that,

unless I grow out of it, I will have to do this for the rest of my life.

I don't like being in hospital. It's always just a bit too hot for one thing. When I get home after being there, the first thing I do is open up my bedroom window, as wide as it can go, and I leave it like that, all night if Mum doesn't notice, so I can feel the breeze coming in and all around me. Sometimes, when I'm just dropping off to sleep, it makes me feel like I'm floating off my bed, the cold crisp air lifting me up, up and away.

But the very first time I saw the hole was when I was in hospital.

I'd caught some kind of chest infection and I was having difficulty breathing. My inhalers hadn't made it any better, so Mum said we should go there right away.

It had been a while since my last visit. Dad was away seeing Grandma for the night and so it was just Mum and me. She called an ambulance and though it came pretty quickly, I could tell she was getting worried; her large dark eyes glazed over with concern each time she looked at me.

As soon as I was in the ambulance, they started me on oxygen and when we arrived at the hospital we got taken to a small room with a large

window that looked down on the road below.

A nurse had just woken me to check my levels and, as she left, Mum asked me if I was feeling any better. I said I thought I was, although I could still feel the tightness in my chest. I looked away from her, towards the door that the nurse had just left through.

And that's when I saw it.

The hole.

It was just a tiny sliver of space, which for a few moments – there are no other words for it – opened up.

In the hole there were masses and masses of tiny black lines; loads and

loads of lines all muddled together like someone had taken a black pen to a piece of paper and scribbled and scribbled and scribbled, so there was almost no white left there at all.

“What is it?” I blurted out.

“What’s that?”

“Mae!” Mum reached for my hand. “Are you all right?”

“There, by the door!” I sat upright.

But as I pointed towards it, I could see the gap knit itself back together as though it had never existed. The black squiggles vanished completely. It was like there had been a tear in some fabric and now the two torn edges had been stitched back together, making it

as good as new. It was just an ordinary room again.

“What is it, Mae?” Mum looked worried and white, and turned towards the space that I was gesturing at, which now looked like just what it was: an empty space by a boring old hospital door.

“I thought I saw...” I started to say but I didn’t know how to explain it, so I lay back again, feeling completely exhausted, like I could sleep for a hundred years if anyone would let me.

“I’ll get the nurse,” Mum said, sweeping my fringe away and holding her hand to my forehead.