



The First Want

The winner of our short story competition, Ieva Cepaite, tells the tale of Emma, a hospital worker who develops a close relationship with one of the patients

It was quiet in the hospital. The clock on the wall ticked midnight. Emma raised her hand and gave the door a small nudge.

It swung open to reveal a small, clean, white-walled bathroom. There was one exactly like this one on every floor, in every ward. Well, not exactly like this one. This one had Hailie's picture tacked to the inner side of the door. Emma had been told that it was a picture of herself and Hailie. She knew that most of it was drawn with a purple pencil, Hailie's favourite colour.

Emma took two light steps forward and then she was in front of the mirror. She looked at her reflection, then at the picture on the wall and then back, focusing on the image of her own

eyes staring coldly back at her. They were eyes that had witnessed Hailie's first day at the hospital, had watched numerous tea parties with Mr. Thump and Ben the Bunny, had seen many children come and go, like ghosts.

They were blue, different shades of blue mixed with flecks of brown. Hailie's had been mostly brown. Light. Almost yellow. The nurses had said they were 'amber' and Emma made sure to remember the word.

Emma's blue eyes had always been described as cold and Hailie's were always 'warm'. She used to think that people meant their temperature, but one of the nurses told her it was how Hailie 'smiled with her eyes'. Emma hadn't

known what to do with that information. She only knew you had to smile with your lips. She spent the whole night trying to shape her eyelids into smiles. She could only know what she was made to know. New things only made sense to her if she could learn them and so many things were... difficult to learn.

Emma remembered well though. She remembered how Hailie would ignore her at first, how her eyes would gleam with tears and her face would twist up and turn several shades redder every time she came near. She remembered the first time Hailie willingly held out her hand and spoke to her instead of just running away.

She remembered every time Hailie

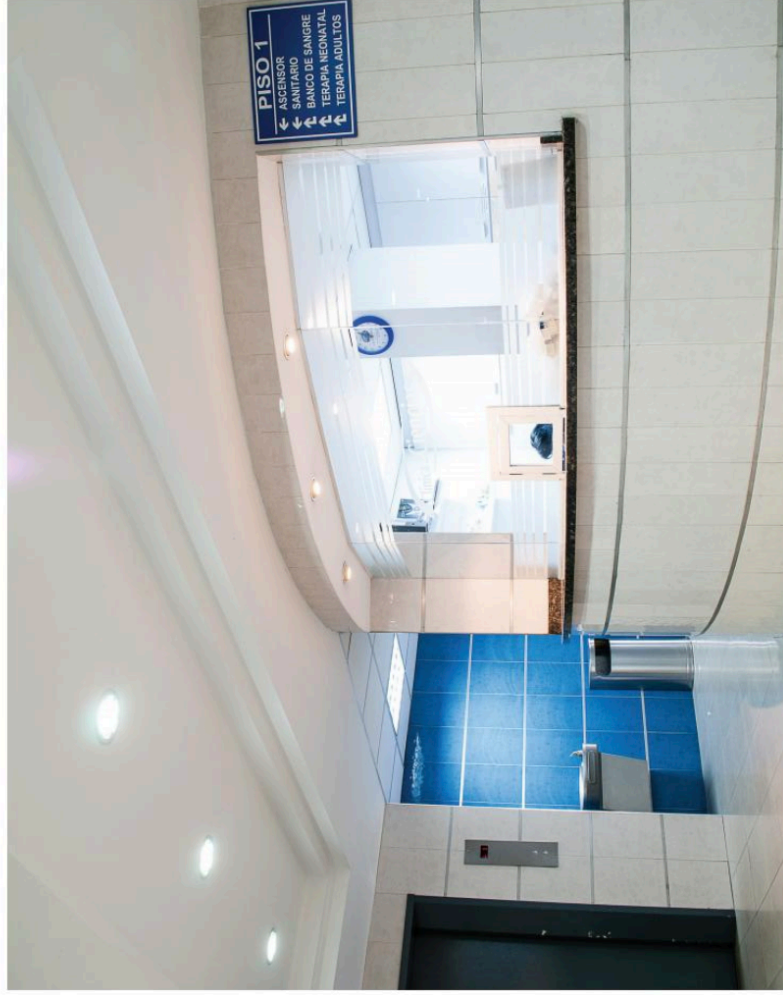


Image by Martha Dominguez de Gouveia courtesy of Unsplash



Image by Ani Kolleshi courtesy of Unsplash

had a coughing fit. There were more and more of them as time went by. Hailie used to run around in the playground a lot at first and Emma would sit on the bench to keep her company. After a while, Emma began to spend a lot more time sitting by Hailie's bed reading her stories instead. And while Hailie almost never cried in front of Emma anymore, she could hear her sniffing whenever she was out of the room to fetch something.

Then one day Hailie's eyes were cold too. So was her skin.

Emma could feel temperature. It was imperative for her to, since she had to know if one of the children had a fever or if something was dangerously hot to the touch. She knew that her own skin was cold, like the ceramic of the sink her hand gripped or the frame of Hailie's bed. A metal frame and a metal hand.

Hailie's eyes had turned cold and it made sense. It wasn't in Emma's programming to question things that made sense like that. Hailie had been very ill and the doctors had said that it would be inevitable, so there was nothing to investigate. Nothing to do except to tell the nurse and clean the room. Yet Emma had stopped. She had

stopped and she had looked at Hailie's eyes and she did not move for about an hour. The nurses found her like that but they didn't say anything because they noticed Hailie first. And then they all started crying.

Crying was important, because it showed Emma how someone felt. If someone cried it was usually clear that something was wrong and it needed to be fixed. Emma didn't know how to make the nurses stop crying. She didn't know how to fix Hailie.

Emma looked at her reflection and wanted to cry too. Wanting was strange. She had never 'wanted' before. There was always a clear set of things she had to do based on the circumstances of the children she was supposed to take care of. She could always trace back each action to its origin, could always report the reasoning of her own behaviour with precision.

There was no reason for her to cry. She did not need to 'feel', much less feel distress. If something was wrong she would set it right, or get one of the humans to do it. Emotion was not a thing you would program into a machine. It did

not have a clear set of rules or a purpose. Emotion was to be observed, not learned.

In the morning, nurse Jones found an E.M.A model in the third floor bathroom. The android had apparently been attempting to pour water from the sink onto her face with no immediately obvious explanation.

The incident caused some upset amongst staff members, but it was forgotten soon enough. A report was sent to the manufacturers. A follow-up exam turned up nothing of substance and the android was allowed to continue its duties.

The nurses noticed that afterward they often saw it sit in a particular chair in the Tuberculosis Ward for hours on end. It was strange, they said to each other as they strutted down the hallway, but harmless. They had children's tears to worry about and not nearly enough time to wonder about hunks of metal.

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