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unforgettable encounters
during life's final
moments

The In-Between

Hadley Vlahos, RN

The
IN-BETWEEN

*Unforgettable
Encounters
During
Life's Final
Moments*

HADLEY VLAHOS, RN



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The stories in this book are based on my work as a hospice nurse. I've changed the names, identifying details, and medical information of all the patients and some other people mentioned in this book to protect their privacy. The goal of my book is to share the wisdom and impactful advice that my patients provided me.

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About the Author

Introduction

PEOPLE ARE OFTEN STARTLED WHEN they hear that I'm a hospice nurse. They ask me how I could do such difficult and sad work, day in and day out. While it's true that there are tough—and sometimes even devastating—moments in this line of work, there are many more beautiful ones. Moments of awe that make you stop and think about what it all means. Moments of deep love and the kind of wisdom that comes only from understanding that the end is near. So, while a lot of people might not understand why someone would choose to do my job, I consider myself lucky to be in hospice.

Hospice care occurs when people have been medically deemed to be near the end of life, and choose to stop treatment in a hospital or medical setting and, instead, spend those final days, weeks, or months in the comfort of their home, surrounded by loved ones. As a hospice nurse, I'm there to help guide both the patient and their loved ones through the process, and to keep the patient as comfortable and pain-free as possible. Hospice can last for up to six months, so in the process of this work, I get to know patients, their stories, their loved ones, and even their pets.

The stories in this book will share how inexplicable, powerful, and moving those moments leading from this life to whatever comes next (and I do believe there's *something* next) can be. I'm sharing these stories because there are so many misconceptions about both death and the process of dying. I get it. And I certainly don't have all of the answers, even though I've seen death enough times that I have a general idea of what to expect.

We don't tend to talk about hospice or death very much, but I know people are interested because I'm asked a lot of questions about it. Some people are generally curious about death and dying, while others have a specific reason to be interested in it, usually because they have a loved one in hospice, about to be in hospice, or who has been in hospice. Or maybe they're about to go into hospice themselves.

One of the questions I'm asked most frequently is how I became a hospice nurse in the first place. It's a natural question, especially for someone as young as I am—I turned thirty while I was writing this book, but I was twenty-four when I got started in the field, and way younger than everyone else I worked with. I still am. And my journey to becoming a hospice nurse certainly didn't follow a linear path. My childhood dream was to be a writer, and a nursing career never even crossed my mind when I started college. But looking back, I can trace how a series of events prepared me for this work.

For a lot of people, death can be a taboo or scary topic, but it wasn't in my family. My mom's parents were licensed embalmers and funeral directors, and my mom grew up at and around funeral homes and morgues. If you've seen the movie *My Girl*, then you understand what I'm talking about. It wasn't unusual for her to do her homework while bodies were being embalmed nearby.

Because of the family business, death was very literally a part of life, and so it wasn't unusual for dying and the topics surrounding it to become part of our dinnertime conversations. I grew up with the understanding that death was natural, and it felt normal to me, not scary or mysterious.

I was also raised with a fixed belief system about what happens *after* we die. I attended a private Episcopalian school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, until I was ten, at which point my family moved to Destin, Florida, and we continued attending an Episcopalian church there. My class spent every Wednesday morning in the large cathedral on campus, and everything we learned was centered around the Bible. Even in music class, we only sang worship songs. My family life also centered around the church. We went every Sunday morning, and regularly attended social events there as well.

I believed every word of what I was told. I believed in Heaven, I believed in Hell, I believed in the Ten Commandments and everything else I was taught to believe. I didn't question, I just believed, and I didn't think twice about it.

Then, at fifteen, the world as I knew it ended.

It was a typical Friday night in high school, and just like most Friday nights, I was standing on the metal bleachers watching a football game. I had more than face paint on my freckled cheeks and held my best friend Hannah's hand, screaming along to the drum line as it played our school's fight song. I watched the football sail through the air, and then drop into my friend Taylor's hands, which caused us to cheer even louder.

And then, in a flash, two players from the opposing team hit Taylor, pushing him down onto the grass, and ending the play. I watched as Taylor struggled to get up, and then, once on his feet, appeared to shake it off and run over to the sidelines.

"I don't think he's okay," Hannah said, squeezing my hand harder.

"What? No, he's fine!" I protested.

A few moments later, an ambulance arrived at the sidelines and I watched in confusion as Taylor was taken away.

"Hadley, something's wrong," Hannah said again.

"I'm sure he just broke a bone or something. We can write something *super* funny on his cast."

Hannah nodded, and we turned our attention back to the football game.

Later that night, we went back to her house for a sleepover. We stayed up way too late giggling, painting our nails, and applying face masks. At one point, Hannah's mom stuck her head in the door and firmly told us, "Bed, *now*." Hannah rolled her eyes, but we obliged.

The next morning, we woke up and pulled on our Soffe shorts and T-shirts to head out to the school car wash, still groggy from staying up too late the night before. When we arrived at the parking lot outside the church, I realized everyone was crying. I stopped and looked at my friends, perplexed.

“He died,” my friend Ashley said, looking up at Hannah and me through her tears.

“Who died?” I asked, still confused. I assumed it must be someone’s grandparent.

“Taylor Haugen,” she replied, choking out his name.

“He didn’t die,” I scoffed. “He’s fine. I just saw him yesterday. I texted him.”

I spun around and walked away from the group, already calling Taylor’s number so I could prove to everyone that they were reacting to a stupid rumor. The phone rang and rang and rang, until it finally went to voicemail. I hung up and called Taylor’s best friend, Chase, knowing he’d be able to clear things up. As soon as Chase answered, I said, “Everyone here is saying Taylor died. Please tell me what really happened. I know he didn’t die.”

Chase’s voice sounded oddly flat. “He died. Last night.”

I would later learn that Taylor’s liver had burst when he was hit by the opposing team members. While he might have appeared to be okay as he got up and walked to the sidelines, the reality was that he wasn’t okay at all. I didn’t understand why Taylor couldn’t be saved in the emergency surgery that was performed later that night. Isn’t that exactly what the medical profession was supposed to do? *Save* people? Especially young, strong, healthy people like Taylor.

For a long time, it didn’t feel real. Sure, I knew this type of stuff happened, but it happened to *other* people, not to my friends. It felt like a bad dream, incomprehensible and shocking every time I realized anew that Taylor was gone—when he didn’t walk me to fifth period, or show up for movie nights with our group of friends, or text me. [*]

Even after the initial shock had worn off, something in me changed after Taylor died. I had understood death, of course, but I understood death as something that happened at the end of life—not at the beginning. And not like this. For the next year, I was angry at everyone—at my friends who carried on with life like nothing had happened, at the football players who hit Taylor, and especially at the priest who preached about how loving God

was. I knew that a lot of people turned to their faith in times of loss, but I just couldn't. I had too many questions. Gone was the unquestioning belief that had shaped my early childhood; my faith was severely shaken. Now I wanted answers, so I asked anyone and everyone who would listen how God could allow pedophiles and murderers to exist on this earth, but take my good-hearted friend before he could live out his dreams. People at church tried to pacify me by saying that Taylor was in a better place. I rolled my eyes in response, while my mom pinched my arm, hissing at me to "be polite."

The summer after I graduated from high school, I moved three hours away to Tallahassee to attend Florida State University. There, I joined a sorority, where I learned up close and personal how the college had earned its reputation as a top party school. I had continued going to church after Taylor's death despite the fact that I no longer wholeheartedly believed, but not once during college did I step foot inside a church. After having grown up in a strict and religious environment, I was suddenly free. Here there were no rules, and I could do whatever I wanted. I was drinking most nights and struggling to find meaning and purpose in life. Going from a highly structured schedule to having complete freedom and ownership of my own life proved to be challenging for me. I felt too guilty to call my family and admit what I was doing, so I pretended everything was great whenever we talked.

At FSU, I was seeing someone in the way you do as a freshman in college. We were young and reckless—and I got pregnant at nineteen, the summer before my sophomore year. In the instant I saw that positive pregnancy test, everything changed, and all of the plans I'd had for my life were suddenly upended.

My mom was supportive of my decision to have the baby but, beyond her and my friend Hannah, who had stayed in Destin to attend community college, I felt alone and afraid. While the rest of my friends returned to school for their sophomore year in college, I remained in my childhood home, trying to figure out how I was going to support myself and my child. My world got very small. Even now, at thirty years old, I still look young,

so you can imagine the looks I got as a pregnant nineteen-year-old. It was easier to just not leave the house at all. People who had no vested interest in my situation had a lot of opinions, none of which were helpful or did anything in the way of alleviating my own fears and anxieties.

I WENT FROM BEING a normal college kid to a mother-to-be. I couldn't go back to FSU, and my plan to be a writer wasn't going to cut it to support both myself and a child. I needed to come up with a new plan—quickly.

And, with this, my life set off on a completely different trajectory than I had intended. I did some research and learned that nursing, which required only two years of schooling and paid about \$50,000 per year, was the best option for efficiently creating a scenario where I could support myself and my baby. Plus, the local community college offered a program. Pregnant and uncertain, I spent that summer and the next year taking the prerequisites to enter the nursing program, and the next fall I started my first semester of nursing school.

My son, Brody, was born on Christmas Eve in 2012. Those early years were a blur of hard work: trying to keep us afloat as I juggled raising my son, getting my nursing degree, and beginning a career. While those days were long and hard and intense, I proved to myself that I could do things I never would have believed myself capable of previously. I graduated on schedule in two years, with both a degree and a yearlong internship at a local hospital under my belt.

After graduation, I went on to work in immediate care for a few months, then a nursing home for almost a year. I would love to say that I was a wonderful, caring nurse right out of the gate but that's just not totally honest: I did my job and I went home. It wasn't until I worked hospice that my life truly began to change.

I made the jump to hospice six years ago and, looking back, I can see that I landed exactly where I was supposed to, doing exactly what I was supposed to do.

But, of course, there were a lot of twists and turns along the way, and a lot of stories that got me from where I began to where I am now.

I'm excited to share these stories with you. When I started working in hospice, I was still searching. I didn't know if I believed in a higher power, in something more. While I still don't have all of the answers, the one thing I can tell you for certain is that there are things that defy medical explanation, and that in between here and whatever comes next, there is something powerful and peaceful.

I've seen it with my own eyes, time and time again.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

* Taylor's parents established a nonprofit in his name, the Taylor Haugen Foundation, which started the #PledgetoProtect campaign and provides core guards for football players to prevent abdominal injuries. You can learn more at taylorhaugen.org.