

The hospital

The hospital again, and the echo of my reluctant feet through the long, empty corridors. I hated hospitals and hospital smells. I hated the bare boards that gleamed with newly applied polish, the dust-free window-sills, and the flashes of shiny chrome that snatched my distorted shape as we hurried past. I was a grubby five-year-old in an alien environment.

Sometimes I hated Dad for being sick and Mum for making me visit him. Mum only occasionally brought my younger sister and brother, Jill and Billy; my presence ensured no arguments. Mum was sick of arguments, sick and tired.

I sighed as we reached the end of the final corridor. The Doors were waiting for me again. Big, chunky doors with thick glass insets in the top. They swung on heavy brass hinges, and were covered in green linoleum. The linoleum had a swirl of white and the pattern reminded me of one of Mum's special rainbow cakes. She made them a cream colour with a swirl of pink and chocolate. I thought they were magic. There was no magic in The Doors, I knew what was behind them.

Sometimes, I pretended Dad wasn't really sick. I imagined that I'd walk through The Doors and he'd be smiling at me. 'Of course I'm not sick,' he'd say. 'Come and sit on my lap and talk

to me.’ And Mum would be there, laughing, and all of us would be happy.

Our entry into the ward never failed to be a major event. The men there had few visitors.

‘Well, *look* who’s here,’ they called.

‘I think she’s gotten taller, what do ya reckon, Tom?’

‘Fancy seeing you again, little girl.’ I knew they weren’t really surprised to see me; it was just a game they played.

After such an enthusiastic welcome, Mum would try and prompt me to talk. ‘Say hello, darling,’ she encouraged, as she gave me a quick dig in the back. My silences were embarrassing to Mum. She usually covered up for me by saying I was shy.

The men on the ward didn’t give up easily. ‘Come on, sweetie, come over here and talk to me,’ one old man coaxed as he held out a Fantail toffee. My feet were glued to the floor. This man reminded me of a ghost. His close-cropped hair stood straight up, like short, white strands of toothbrush nylon. His right leg was missing below the knee, and his loose skin reminded me of a plucked chicken.

Mum had confided that all these men were Old Soldiers. They all had missing arms or legs. Dad was the only one who was all there.

Dad was standing in his usual spot, by the side of his bed. He never came forward to greet us or called out like the other men did, and yet we belonged to him. His dressing-gown hung so loosely around his lanky body that he reminded me of the wire coat-hangers Mum had hanging in the hall cupboard. Just a frame, that was Dad. The heart had gone out of him years ago.

Once Mum finished having a little talk and joke with the

men, we moved over to Dad’s bed and then out onto the hospital verandah. The verandahs were the nicest place to sit; there were tables and chairs and you could look over the garden.

As Mum and Dad talked, I sniffed the air. It was a clear, blue spring day. I could smell the damp grass and feel the coolness of the breeze. It was such an optimistically beautiful day I felt like crying. Spring was always an emotional experience for me. It was for Nan, too. Only yesterday, she’d awakened me early to view her latest discovery.

‘Sally ... wake up ...’ Even as I dreamt, I wondered where that voice was coming from. It was faint, yet persistent, like the glow of a torch on a misty night. I didn’t want to wake up. I burrowed deeper under the mound of coats and blankets piled on top of me. I wrapped my hands around my feet in an attempt to warm them.

Every night I’d call out, ‘*Mum ... I’m freezing!!*’

‘Sally, you can’t possibly be.’ It was often her third trip to my bedside. She’d lift up the coat I’d pulled over my head and say, ‘If I put any more on you, you’ll suffocate. The others don’t want all these coats on them.’ I shared a bed with my brother Billy and my sister Jill. They never felt the cold.

Nan had only to add, ‘It’s a terrible thing to be cold, Glad,’ for Mum to acquiesce and pull out more coats hanging in the hall cupboard.

Now, sitting on the hospital verandah, I smiled as I remembered the way Nan had rocked my sleepy body back and forth in an attempt to wake me up. It took a few minutes, but I finally came up for air and murmured dopyly, ‘Nan, do ya have to wake me so early?’

‘Shhh, be quiet, you’ll wake the others. Don’t you remember? I said I’d wake you early so you could hear the bullfrog again, and the bird.’

The bullfrog and the bird — how could I have forgotten? For the whole week Dad had been in hospital, she’d talked of nothing else.

Nan encouraged me out by peeling back the layers on top of me. With sudden decision, I leapt from my bed and shivered my body into an old red jumper. Then, barefoot, I followed Nan out onto the back verandah.

‘Sit still on the steps,’ she told me. ‘And be very quiet.’ I was used to such warnings. I knew you never heard anything special unless you were very quiet.

The early morning was Nan’s favourite time of the day, when she always made some new discovery in the garden. A fat bobtail goanna, snake tracks, crickets with unusual feelers, myriads of creatures who had, for their own unique reasons, chosen our particular yard to reside in.

I’d heard the bullfrog yesterday; it was one of Nan’s favourite creatures. She dug up a smaller, motley brown frog as well, and, after I inspected it, she buried it back safe in the earth. I expected the bullfrog to be out again this morning; he’ll come out any minute, I thought.

I felt excited, but it wasn’t the thought of the bullfrog that excited me. This morning, I was waiting for the bird call. Nan called it her special bird; nobody had heard it but her. This morning, I was going to hear it, too.

‘Broak, Broak!’ The noise startled me. I smiled. That was the old bullfrog telling us he was broke again. I looked up at

the sky; it was a cool, hazy blue with the promise of coming warmth.

Still no bird. I squirmed impatiently. Nan poked her stick in the dirt and said, ‘It’ll be here soon.’ She spoke with certainty.

Suddenly, the yard filled with a high trilling sound. My eyes searched the trees. I couldn’t see that bird, but his call was there. The music stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Nan smiled at me, ‘Did you hear him? Did you hear the bird call?’

‘I heard him, Nan,’ I whispered in awe.

What a magical moment it had been. I sighed. I was with Dad now, and there was no room for magic in hospitals. I peered back at Mum and Dad. They both seemed nervous. I wondered how long I’d been day-dreaming. Mum reached over and patted Dad’s arm.

‘How are you feeling, dear?’

‘How do ya bloody well think!’ It was a stupid question; he never got any better.

Dad’s fingers began to curl and uncurl around the arms of his chair. He had slim hands for a man. I remembered someone saying once, ‘Your father’s a clever lad.’ Was that where I got my ability to draw from? I’d never seen Dad draw or paint, but I’d seen a letter he’d written once; it was beautiful. I knew he’d have trouble writing anything now — his hands never stopped shaking. Sometimes, I even had to light his cigarettes for him.

My gaze moved from his hands, up the long length of his arms, to his face. It dawned on me then that he’d lost more weight. Dad caught my gaze; he was paler and the hollows under his cheekbones were more defined. Only the familiar hazel eyes

were the same: confused, wet, and watching me.

‘I’m making you something,’ he said nervously. ‘I’ll go and get it.’ He disappeared into the ward and returned a few minutes later with a small, blue leather shoulderbag. There was maroon thonging all the way around, except for the last part of the strap, which wasn’t quite finished. As he laid it gently in my lap, Mum said brightly, ‘Isn’t Daddy clever to make that for you?’ I stared at the bag. Mum interrupted my thoughts with, ‘Don’t you like it?’

I was trapped. I mumbled a reluctant yes, and let my gaze slip from the bag to the large expanse of green grass nearby. I wanted to run and fling myself on the grass. I wanted to shout, ‘*No!* I don’t think Daddy’s clever. *Anyone* could have made this bag. *He* doesn’t think it’s clever either!’

By the time I turned back, Mum and Dad were both looking off into the distance.

The visitors’ bell rang unexpectedly. I wanted to leap up. Instead, I forced myself to sit still. I knew Mum wouldn’t like it if I appeared too eager. Finally, Mum rose, and while she gave Dad a cheery goodbye, I slowly prised myself from my chair.

As we walked into the ward, the men called out.

‘What? Leaving already?’

‘You weren’t here for long, little girl.’

They all made a great show of waving goodbye, and just as we passed through The Doors and into the empty corridor, a voice called, ‘We’ll be waiting for you next time, little girl.’

Strong, cool air blew through the window all the way home in the bus. I kept thinking, can a person be wrinkled inside? I had never heard adults talk about such a thing, but that’s how I felt,

as though my insides needed ironing. I pushed my face into the wind and felt it roar up my nostrils and down into my throat. I closed my eyes, relaxed and breathed out. And then, in a flash, I saw Dad’s face. Those sad, silent eyes. I hadn’t fooled him. He’d known what I’d been thinking.

Dad came home for a while a couple of weeks after that, and then, in the following January, 1957, Mum turned up on the doorstep with another baby. Her fourth. I was really cross with her. She showed me the white bundle and said, ‘Isn’t that a wonderful birthday present, Sally, to have your own little brother born on the same day as you?’ I was disgusted. Fancy getting that for your birthday. And I couldn’t understand Dad’s attitude at all. He actually seemed pleased David had arrived!