

APPLE BLOSSOM TIME

Elsie's committed suicide in the hospital bathroom. She bought the razor blade in the shop downstairs and by the time the nurse found her the water was as red as the body was white. The bathroom door's locked now, but Elsie's still inside and the nurses are whispering in corners when they don't think we can hear. They can't understand why she did it. She'd had her foot amputated, it's true, but that's no big deal. She was managing very well on her crutches and was due to have a prosthesis fitted this afternoon, but that's not going to happen now.

Dulcie and I know why she did it though. She found a small ulcer on her right heel this morning and she knew where that would lead. Elsie's seventy years old with no family to look after her and she didn't want to spend her last few years as a cripple in a nursing home.

Dulcie and I don't blame her. We've both considered suicide ourselves so we know the temptation. Dulcie's even tried it. She was brought in barely alive after swallowing a whole bottle of aspirins. The children found her when they came home from school and had the sense to call an ambulance. Dulcie loves her children, but the pain is stronger than the love. I understand that too. If I had children I think I'd sell them to the devil tomorrow in exchange for the pain-free life I fear I'll never have.

I have something Elsie and Dulcie don't have, though. I have the optimism of youth. I'm only twenty-three, with my whole life ahead of me as they say. So far I've wasted four months of it lying in a hospital bed, but things are bound to get better. I just have to get through this bit; this time when the pain makes me suck in my breath and refuse to exhale, when my body's at war with my mind and my mind refuses to accept what the doctors say. The operation was a success, they say, and if I'm still in pain it's because I find some psychological satisfaction in it.

I say psychology has a lot to answer for. Every day I'm winched into a warm pool to have my limbs manipulated until my mind accepts that I can do it for myself; every day I'm winched back into the cold air and the shivering starts fresh waves of pain rippling through me. By the time

I'm dried and returned to my bed I'm ready to commit suicide myself and I'm cursing Freud with every fibre of my being. No doubt the man had some basis for his theories but they're not right in my case. I think if I'm really mentally ill this is not the cure, but if I'm really mentally ill how would I know?

But I do know. Deep inside me dwells certainty, in a dark and quiet place where there's some sort of comfort. It's a selfish place with no room for other people. There it's just pain and me; there we fight every day, and so far I've won. Know your enemy, they say, and I certainly know this one. I study it carefully, noting the first signs, timing the build-up, concentrating on each swell of agony until I know the pattern it follows. Now I'm ready for it; I prepare my body for it, inhaling with each wave of pain, filling my lungs with it, breathing it out slowly. One day I'll be able to do it instinctively, like driving and holding a conversation; one day I'll be able to do it and talk at the same time; maybe one day I'll even be able to stand up and do it. But for now I just lie in that blackness and endure it.

Comfort's black too. She's one of the growing army of Caribbean nurses arriving in our hospitals. She's a middle-aged woman with a beautiful smile, not fat, but plump enough to justify her name, and there's a serenity and calmness about her that's very restful. I imagine her as a much-loved wife and mother in her real life outside the hospital, the sort of woman who should have a dozen children to sit in her lap and appreciate her home-cooked meals and home-spun wisdom. That Jamaican mother knew what she was doing when she named her baby Comfort.

Campbell's from Scotland and he's hoping to be promoted to sister soon, though I think they're going to have to find another description for him. I've been on his ward longer than any other patient and we've formed a kind of friendship. He's young and good-looking and the first male nurse I've ever met. They're a new phenomenon and a lot of the female patients are still wary of them, but I like it when Campbell turns me in the bed. He's stronger than the women and he lifts me more easily and doesn't drop me so hard. It's still a painful experience, but not quite as bad. He's kind too. Yesterday he came in on his day off to bring me a great armful of apple blossom he'd

cut from his garden. We can see the trees in blossom on the heath from here and he must have heard me wishing I could be outside to smell it. He brought his girlfriend with him to visit me and to make sure there was no hint of impropriety. It takes a special kind of person to do something like that on his day off.

Then there's Jenny, the student nurse. She's small and sturdy and nips round the ward in her sensible shoes, fetching bedpans, taking temperatures, lightening everyone's day with her happy smile and constant chatter. She watched my operation as part of her training and obviously enjoyed the experience, though it sounded quite off-putting when she described it to me.

"They used something like a tiny hammer and chisel and chipped away at the bone," she said. "If it wasn't for the blood it would have been a bit like watching a sculptor at work."

No wonder I felt so bruised afterwards, though I'd have described it more like being hit with a sledgehammer and then being expected to lie on the bruises. It's a good thing Jenny doesn't mind the blood though. She'll probably get the job of cleaning up the bathroom after they've moved the body. She gets all the rotten jobs, like scrubbing bedpans and wiping up vomit, but she doesn't seem to mind any of them, though I suspect she's not as unmoved as she seems to be at this moment. According to the porter she was the one who discovered the body and that can't have been nice. It must be a shock to lose a patient in that way, especially a patient who was doing so well in terms she understands. She's too young and healthy to be afraid of helpless old age and young enough to view this as a senseless death she should have prevented, but she's putting a professional face on it, making beds and washing patients as though she has nothing but the immediate job on her mind.

They'll close all the ward doors and pull down the blinds at the windows when they take the body out and they'll pretend we don't know what's happened, but it's difficult not to know everything in a place like this. There's a reason why the bathroom's closed for cleaning and we all know what it is. It just won't be mentioned when Elsie fails to return. Her bed will be wheeled out and we'll be left to assume she's moved to another ward, though everyone knows we'll assume no

such thing. None of us will sleep that well tonight, staff and patients alike. We'll all have a lot to think about and regret.

We're all learning to keep our problems to ourselves and keep smiling through the bad times, though I can't always manage it when I'm in that black place. Then I just ignore everyone, and they have the sense to ignore me. It's the best way. I've watched the nurses with the other patients who've come and gone. They don't like the ones who are full of complaints and self-pity. Those patients get professional treatment but they don't get the apple blossom. It's the same with visitors. They don't stay long when all they hear is complaints, but when Minnie comes and we laugh ourselves silly everyone wants to join in.

These are the things I remember each morning as I pin the smile on my face, take up my burden of pain and prepare to carry it through the day. These are the reasons I don't blame Elsie and Dulcie, or anyone else who makes a different decision. Every day's a choice, and one day I might make a different one myself.