

Jane Downing

PRISONERS

He looks like a prisoner of Dachau, pacing the halls of inhumanity, evil a thing without, threatening him and his life. But the evil is within. Cancer, with a hushed voice. Cancer, without a cure. He paces up and down, powerless in pyjamas—even the healthy are made powerless with the stripping away of street clothes: remember Dachau—but for all his pacing, he cannot find a way out.

I have watched him in the Ward. No-one visits him. I watch him as I cannot watch my son who rarely paces, rarely moves from his bed.

I sit here every day. Meredith too, often visits. My son, surrounded by women.

She makes an elaborate show at the doors to the Ward, where we must all pause to cleanse our hands, to protect the patients from the contamination of the outside world—of the living. She moves in great swells: one rush to the sink, splashing of water and winking across to Rohan; regathering of bags and paraphernalia, the tide comes in and beaches on Rohan's bed. She kisses him.

I've never warmed to her. Meredith is superficial, too young, not at all the nice girl I imagined my son marrying. Not that he'll be marrying anyone, now. She talks such nonsense. Her voice is noise—surely we must soothe. Yet she continues to come at some stage of every day, I'll give her that. Eighteen and bursting with potentialities, each promising joy, yet she comes as her boyfriend's hair falls out, his breath sours, eyes sink, skin collapses to the bone as flesh is lost. This is not the flesh she seduced—did he seduce her?—it is dying. I have faced it. My son is dying. She still comes and kisses his cheek, ignores nostrils caked with blood, holds the hand pincushioned with needles, and refuses to acknowledge the obvious.

I have to move away from the hope she radiates. It is false.

While Rohan looks bewildered, the man looks embittered. The pacing is like that of a caged animal. He wants to be released. I hear him with the nurses—a bastard of demands and complaints. If there is dignity in dying he is not subscribing, and the nurses, in a revolving roster, have learned to ignore him. I don't think they are callous. They have limited resources, not to be squandered.

They do not meet my eyes. I am too much for them. The slanging matches at his bedside are the only honest exchanges on the Ward.

"Just take your medicine, Mr Knight," the day nurse snarls, after the same litany in a coax, a cajole, a viciously veiled threat. The same sequence I used on Rohan when he was six or seven. He was rarely sick and we never got into a routine of antibiotics and paracetamol. Each prescription was a battle in a new war. In the end we usually got it down his throat, and then he would cry, and say, "I'm so sorry Mummy", and it would all be okay.

My responsibility to medicate has now been stripped away. The nurse is here the nurturer. The doctor, on daily, hurried, visits, apports wisdom like the father. I am reduced. I have no role. When did I stop being mummy?

"Why do you keep reading that rubbish?" he says as I stare down at the carpark, floors below, miles away in the real world where others come and are free to go again.

My hackles rise at these first words Mr Knight directs at me. Reading at the sickbed is the role I've created. The "doing something" I need. But it isn't something I was prepared to defend to this stooped figure in striped pyjamas. Instead I hide behind literature, always my refuge.

"The English speaking world," I pronounce, from the blurb on the back cover, "is divided into those who have read "The Lord of the Rings" and those who are determined they are going to read it."

"You've forgotten the half who've never heard of it," his thin lips spit out.

Why has he stopped his pacing to speak to me? Why does he listen when I read? I watch. I know. Even Bert in the bed by the window, in a bed increasingly shrouded by a curtain that hardly muffles the death rattle, listens. He is an old Hobbit fan. He thanks me, doesn't harangue me.

"It's ridiculous. Elves and fairies and hobbits against Evil? Do you think we live in the Shire? Look outside. Is this lightness and goodness?"

I turn my back and look out: his face is too ugly to watch as he speaks. Compassion is difficult. We judge books by their covers and he may have been stripped to an old man's shuffle in felt slippers but his face evokes a grim Ringwraith. His eyes will spark red. My imagination is dangerous.

"We need more than fantasy against Evil," he says, ignoring me ignoring him.

There is a deep, slippery slope in his sigh. "Look at us all here." The corridor is moving with pyjama-ed characters trying to at least briefly escape their Wards. The entire fourth storey is without a happy ending.

"Evil killed over six million in the Concentration Camps," he growls. "Nothing stopped that."

I snap back to him. He has looked down the same corridor and seen the same image. I had not imagined this of him.

He knows he has my attention.

"Vietnam was Evil. How many did I kill?"

I don't want to know. I just want my son to enjoy the classics of our civilisation. Surely it is a comfort.

Mr Knight is brutal. "Nothing's going to help your son where he's going."

Time moves slowly in hospital. I wish it would move slower still.

There are the early morning rounds of feeding—by mouth and tube—the daily—more frequent if necessary—changing of bed linen. The new shift is energetic, efficient, can strip and change a bed in moments, with the patient rolled and turned and patted back into pillows. Washing, toileting, everything can be done without a foot from the bed. When we first arrived my son found this hugely embarrassing. The nurses joshed the boy. He tried to joke to hide the embarrassment. His body taken over by the disease within and all the ministering hands without. Now he is listless and it takes all his resources to even talk.

Meredith talks. She can't talk about the future anymore and falls back on a game of memory: I remember when. She remembers the time she was in hospital. Broken leg. She remembers the time she had a reaction to her first prawn, further back, the measles, scarlet fever. Her medical history will not make any medical journal. We are escorted through her childhood to a time she certainly can't remember. Her mother must be as garrulous, as intent on broadcasting the endearing moments in her child's life. We are in a playground and she has fallen off the top of the slide.

"And I've been brain damaged ever since," she giggles, saving me the thought.

Rohan stirs and squeezes her hand.

"I remember," he says. She is instantly silent. "I remember the playground. The one by the creek, just off that road, remember, the name ..."

They are excited in knowing the same playground when they were pre-schoolers. It gives their relationship a history beyond six months of prawn cocktails at the club, movies, back rows and back seats. Of bedside visits, and how much more?

"I remember," he continues, "Mum with bandaids every time I fell. And that stuff that stained my knees purple. You carried them in your bag, you knew me. I remember one day I was on the swing ..."

"The clown one?"

We all recognise it. You see them still, huge clown faces with a swing hanging off each ear. The swing went back and forth but also round and round, circling about the smiling clown's face.

"Yes, I was caught half on. The big boy on the opposite swing started it going and the seat was chasing me. I had to run. I couldn't get on and if I stopped I'd be flattened. So I ran round in front of it, getting dizzy, like now, and I knew I was going to fall and the ground was coming up ..."

"Oh you poor thing," mews Meredith.

"And then Mum grabbed me and swung me out of the way."

Mum saved him. Mum could make it better, and Mum could even stop it happening; then. I couldn't stand the implication. Why hadn't I grabbed him, this time? Why couldn't I make it better?

I have to lean myself against the corridor window to absorb coolness back into my cheeks.

He paces by. Mr Knight never passes the time of day. Nothing so trivial.

"Everyone has to die sometime," he mutters as he gets to me.

But why can't I die instead of Rohan?

I make pacts in my mind as I read. "The Lord of the Rings" is divided into three volumes, six books, one thousand three hundred and fifty three pages. If he lives through Part 1, it'll be okay.

I read even as he falls in and out of consciousness after surgery. He lives in several twilight worlds.

If I can get to the end of the fourth book we will be round the corner. The doctors come more often and interrupt. They change tack with the therapy.

If only we can get to the last book, we'll get to the Crack of Doom. We'll be able to throw the golden ring in to it and the world will go back to normal.

I turn the page.

Rohan's father comes to visit. He only ever did the bare minimum to support the emotional needs of his family—he doesn't like weakness, and what he sees as malingering. He thinks this will be the only visit he'll need to make.

He sits on my chair by the bed. Rohan's baldness has increased the resemblance. I haven't sat in the same room with him for years and can't start now so I exile myself to the corridor where Mr Knight is in his perpetual flight from his demons.

"You have no visitors?" I ask. He is without tact, I see no reason to employ it.

"I beat my wife, she won't let the kids near me," he states. I am taken aback. His sunken chest is a cage with no heart. Killing Vietnamese was one thing, this confession another: I have been a wife.

"She tried to understand something she couldn't. She wouldn't stop questioning me. If she wanted to understand war she should have gone and held the gun herself."

"That's no reason ..."

"So is it genetic the one your son's got? Hereditary? Something you handed down?"

I'm aghast. I never swear. "Fuck off" erupts from my molten core.

"I will soon enough." He is looking me straight in the eye, as no-one else will.

"Sorry, I'm so sorry." I have to appease but he tells me to save it. That Rohan needs it not him.

The cracks begin to appear. Meredith clutches a plastic bag to her chest and hurries to the bed. The bag is from BigW, the bottle within, from the Vatican. She is sprinkling my son with Holy Water.

I have put up with enough and as she rants about the Blood of Jesus and the Resurrection I lean on the buzzer. Stop it, stop it, stop it, I'm shouting as the nurses converge. I'll not touch her: I don't want to be contaminated by her irrationality. It's in her eyes, this faith in God, this crutch she is hobbling over my son with. This opium-drug. He's had enough drugs. My hand snatches the bottle and water—just water—spills over the sheets.

Then I look at him. His mouth is tight, stretched across a mask, eyes closed, shutting us out. And now I am furious. I want to shake him. Shake him and make him react. He has to tell her to shut up. To tell me to shut up. Anything. Just take an interest. It's his death.

I am made to go home and when I return Rohan is not in his bed. The Ward is empty as if the Secret Police came in the night and carried them all off. Fear grips me, a physical sensation that strangles my guts and uterus, but Bert is helped from the bathroom by a nurse and his wheeze breathes life back into the room.

"They've taken Rohan," the nurse says. She is unusually solicitous and shepherds me to the Nurses' Station. It has taken us all a while to get used to staff in street clothes, but even without a uniform I recognise her authority. The fear is tightening its grip again.

"Mr Knight is dead," she explains and I am flooded with relief. That the death is his and not my son's.

"Rohan has been taken for some more tests. He found Mr Knight this morning and may be a bit upset when he gets back. He will miss him, they have talked most evenings."

He never told me that. Neither of hem.

"Rohan found him ..."

"You said."

"Hanging in the bathroom. Mr Knight took his own life."

It doesn't surprise me. He wouldn't have liked anyone or anything taking it for him. I try to tell Rohan this, but he insists it's okay. He knows. He needs no reassurance. My kisses and band-aids and purple ointment are useless.

He is back in bed and we must go back to pretending everything is normal—that normal we had before the tests, never the normal of the world.

Waiting expands and fills every space.

Meredith, now even less a breath of fresh air than a blustery wind, keeps coming, but Jesus is not mentioned. I imagine it would be so much easier to believe—to have that crutch—but the only one to make a Second Coming is Rohan's father. I spend time pacing. The corridor is empty. It echoes silence. I miss Mr Knight: I must be the only person in the world who can say that. The rest of us continue to hide honesty from each other.

Someone has been moved quickly into Mr Knight's bed, and will be as quick into his grave. The new patient's wife sits by his side. She reads him the newspapers, as futile an activity as my own.

Meredith has the grace to ask how the hobbits are going on their quest.

The Crack of Doom is near.

Again the nurses lever me out. They want to persuade me my life has to go on regardless.

I'm surprised to register it is autumn outside. I usually leave in the dark, I don't usually look around, and now, without my witness, the seasons have changed. People in coats get on and off the bus. I watch their faces and cannot believe the world has been turning without a care. There is a clash of spoons on coffee cups along a popular strip of town. It is obscene.

I make my way out of town on foot. Without a decision I head toward the creek to the playground. A mother has braved the cool wind and has released her children onto the equipment. They scream. It is delight, not pain.

There is nowhere for me except beside Rohan.

Rohan is composed in his bed in a way a sentence cannot be on a page. I wash my hands slowly at the door. The water running down the drain is deafening.

One of the younger nurses grins at me as I make my way to the bed. She has met my eyes: she has smiled.

"They're talking about remission," he whispers. And with an energy he has not had for too long, he flings himself against me. My arms automatically hug him, hold him, rock him.

"Oh Mum, oh Mum, I don't want to die Mum, I don't." He sobs relief into my shoulder. And I can only cling to this small remission for us both.