

A Question of Cruelty.

That I got to work on time that day was in itself an achievement. The roads had become blocked by snow overnight and despite the valiant early morning efforts of the District Council, only one or two buses had made it through from Prescot. I managed to squeeze onto the last bus that was prepared to brave the icy conditions, and after a cold bone-shaking ride on the outer platform, I arrived at the gates of Rainhill Hospital. Even though I knew exactly where to go, it still took a good ten minutes for me to negotiate my way through the overnight snow and ice to the courtyard of Ward 11.

I was the first of the morning shift to arrive and the snow was heaped against the outer door of the lobby. It took a while for me to locate my pass- key, blowing on my freezing fingers in order to extricate the warm chain from the multi-layers of duffle coat, jacket, sweater and shirt. The door and lock, stiffened by ice, resisted my initial efforts to enter, and it was only after considerable heaving that I eventually burst through the door in a flurry of snow and curses.

Taking care to lock the door behind me, I located the staff lockers, and began the 'mid-winter disrobing ritual'. A copy of my name tag stared at me from the grey steel door of my allocated locker, causing me to smile momentarily. It would have been written in the duty book for the night shift :

3rd December 1966

Commencing six week roster:- B Stabb – 1st yr Student Nurse:- ISSUE LOCKER. Signed:

Collin Collins

Charge Nurse

I had completed 6 weeks PTS, worked for 2 weeks on one of the 'back' wards, (considered to be a cushy number and a good introduction for rookie students), a few weeks on night duty, and I was now 4 months into my three year training as a Psychiatric Nurse.

"Clockwork Collin" as his staff referred to him, was a Charge Nurse known for his obsession with routines, schedules, punctuality and order. I had heard of him from other staff on night duty. I knew for instance, that the four night staff presently upstairs, were locked in the dormitory with all 108 of their charges. When the day staff arrived, and the bathroom and change- room had been prepared, then and only then would the doors be opened, the entire population streaming down the stairs to the bathrooms on the main corridor below.

A thin mist began to rise from my jacket, and I hastily crammed it into my locker. Donning the proverbial 'white coat" I kicked the locker door shut, turning to head into the ward not wanting to be late...Steam was drifting up from beneath the inner door and I could hear the sound of running water coming from the bathrooms further up the main corridor. I unlocked the door and was enveloped in a cloud of moist warmth, not unpleasant as I was still cold from my journey and was yet to fully thaw out. I was not the first of the morning shift to arrive. Whoever it was had already started to fill the baths in preparation for the initial rush. There were eight baths in all, two rows of four, centrally situated on the tiled floor of the main bathroom. They were the deep enamelled baths of the period, different in that the tap-heads had been removed and replaced by two keys, which were to be held by the senior nurse on duty. The hot water came from the same huge coal- fired boilers, that pumped hot water around the hospital keeping the wards as warm as toast regardless of the weather. The water was close to boiling point at all times, and the absence of mixers meant that the temperature of the bath water was set by directly mixing from the cold and hot taps. The water pressure was tremendous and the water would literally roar from the taps filling them within seconds.

Benny, a staff nurse I knew from my spell on night-duty, met me at the bathroom door. "You're on linen sunshine, Better get started now before they come down". Being 'on linen' was a shitty job literally..... It meant that I and the other junior student were assigned to the changing-room, a long, narrow room off the main bathroom. Here the two of us would spend the next 1/2hour sorting the soiled night linen into two great skips, separating bed linen from nightwear, whilst doing our best to see that our charges were respectably dressed, the changing -room being the repository for all the wards' clothing. A huge trouser cupboard, a shirt cupboard, a vast bin full of assorted underwear. All sizes mixed together, the only commonality being the label, 'Ward 11 Rainhill Hospital' stamped indelibly on the collar or waistband of every garment.(in order to discourage the staff from nicking them it was once explained to me.)

The patients would enter naked,(towels having been placed in a laundry skip outside the bathroom), and those that were able would forage for clothes that fitted. Others, the vast majority, would just stand around waiting for us to tend to them.

But it was not yet 7-00 a.m. and I had a few minutes to attempt some form of preparation for the melee I knew would shortly ensue. Tommy Skellit, a student from my class arrived looking cold and anxious. Like me he had heard of Clockwork Collin and was petrified of being late. I smiled in greeting and relief, assuring him that it was not yet 7-00am, and together we began to devise some semblance of a system, socks in a skip in the far corner next to the shoe lockers which lined the wall, belts and braces separated from a mass tangle and hung on separate hooks.

Upstairs there was a metallic clang and scraping as the lid was removed from the laundry chute.

“One on the way!”

The echoing voice of one of the night staff floated across from the aperture in the far corner of the changing-room, followed instantly by the emergence of a large bag of soiled linen which had burst open, disgorging it's contents onto the tiled floor. The stench of stale urine and faeces slowly filled the changing room and with shared resignation we turned away from our tasks and began working on the laundry.

“Just the right sort of job for you two piss ants.!”

The tall handsome blond git leaning against the doorway, scowled at us as he twirled the bath keys around his finger.

Stephen Darling.

I'd heard that he worked in Ward 11, but had not expected to meet him on my first day here. I had known him at school when as a 6th form bully he had terrorised the likes of me, 4yrs his junior. Now a second year staff nurse, his reputation for teasing and provoking patients, and general nastiness to anybody his junior had preceded him. Tommy and I had been forewarned and neither of us rose to the bait. We continued with our work as he sauntered across to the laundry chute yelling up it,

“Baths are ready, send the bastards down!”

Sneering at us he muttered something else, aimed a kick at one of the laundry skips, and strode from the changing-room, disappearing into the warm mists of the main bathroom. Upstairs we could hear the dormitory doors being unlocked, then voices and footsteps as the population of ward 11 began to descend the stairwell, soon to emerge onto the main corridor.

We had managed to sort the last of the linen bags and were wheeling the two large skips out down the main corridor as the first of ward 11 reached the bottom of the stairs. A few wore pyjamas or nightshirts, but most were stark naked having lost their night attire to the upstairs linen bag . Some were noisy, muttering and shouting, others moved silently and mechanically, but all seemed possessed by an urgency as they hustled and bustled their way down the corridor and into the bathroom.

By the time we prepared the linen skips ready for the morning truck to collect, secured them in an alcove outside the ward, checked that the outer door was locked (both of us), and returned to the changing room, we were already well behind. At least a dozen naked men milling around, some still dripping wet, causing us to return to the linen skip in the bathroom and retrieve the driest looking towels. A few were foraging for clothes and my feeble attempts at order had already been destroyed, socks scattered all over the floor and a tangle of braces and trouser belts tripping me up as I rushed from one patient to the next. There was little time for conversation, no time to discover names, no interaction other than that aimed at finding underwear which was half-pie decent, fitting shirts and trousers, locating shoe lockers, and socks that matched, (a luxury as it turned out as most were paired regardless of colour or size).

Tommy was faring no better than I, and it soon became obvious that there were far more entering the changing room naked than there were leaving dressed. A shoe came flying through the air striking Tommy on the shoulder. Darling stood in the doorway. "Get a move on you lazy bastards! You'll have Clockwork on all of our backs! He disappeared back into the mists and we could hear him above the roar of the taps, screaming abuse. We both tried to work faster, getting caught up in the frenzy that seemed to be affecting staff and patients alike. Those leaving the changing room began to look distinctly more dishevelled; buttons left unfastened, clothes that didn't fit. In the bathroom the verbal abuse was now accompanied by the resounding slap of fist or boot on the helpless. No protest or retaliation, just the occasional grunt of pain and a silent conformity born of years of the same treatment. Darling had developed his own method of bathroom efficiency. This involved changing the bathwater every fifth or sixth patient.

"A bath" was little more than a sheep dip, the patient expected to fully immerse head and shoulders, and quickly jump out, at which time Darling would add an absurd slurp of disinfectant to the bathwater.

Those that hesitated, those who hung back waiting for the water to be changed, or those who were just slow getting out, copped it from Darling. Another tirade followed by a particularly loud clout and grunt of pain.

I cringed , caught Tommy's eye, and we instantly looked away from each other, not wanting to mutually acknowledge what we both knew to be happening. But this time another voice, deeper, louder.

"You cruel prick Darling"

"Leave the poor sod alone or I'll drown you in that bath.

Benny?

We both moved into the bathroom fascinated, momentarily forgetting our charges. Benny Simmons was a year junior to Darling but was senior in years being in his mid –thirties. Formerly a coal miner from Cronton he had been made redundant some 4yrs ago when the Colliery closed down. He was a short stocky man known for his affability and good humour. Quiet by nature, it was a surprise to see him now glaring at Darling from across the bathroom. Darling was leaning against the wall scowling back, and looking as though he was about to take up this challenge. Benny walked slowly and purposely towards him.....

".Oh.... Fuckin'ace!...Great!"

Tommy couldn't contain himself as he craned his neck over my shoulder, automatically stretching one leg so that his foot remained firmly planted to the floor of the changing room. (*One nurse must remain in the changing- room at ALL times. Collin Collins . Charge Nurse.*)

We both peered into the mists, determined not to miss anything. The harsh metallic rhythm of a night nurse running his pass key around the steel rim of the laundry chute upstairs, rose from the far corner behind us..

It was 7-30am, time for the night nurses to be relieved.

Darling was looking unsure of himself now, and had not moved from the wall. Benny had completed his trip and was now barely a foot away, still glaring at him.

"No more of it Darling" .

"No more".

His voice quiet now, his eyes still fixed on Darling's now decidedly sweaty countenance.

High Noon in the Bath Room.

Tommy and I remained transfixed.!

“You’d ...better go upstairs... and relieve Benny....” Said Darling, voice faltering as he struggled to maintain his arrogance.

Benny didn’t move for some time, just stood there staring at him, then very slowly, turning away, he headed for the stairwell.

“What are you two bastards looking at!!”

“Skellitt!”

“Get in here and help me with the fucking bathing!”

Darling was getting angry, and he began to strut round the bathroom, cursing as he realised the full extent of his humiliation. Tommy’s face fell and he swiftly headed for the bath furthest away from him. Darling turned on me, but too late. I had scurried back into the changing-room and was busily packing away dirty laundry, so his curses were lost to the humdrum of bathroom noise.

It was a good ten minutes or so later that I heard it. It didn’t suddenly intrude on my senses. I wasn’t startled into sudden action as one might expect. Rather it gradually crept into my awareness, as all the noise in the bathroom except for the roar of the taps, slowly faded into silence.

A single piercing constant scream.

An awful scream.

I ran into the bathroom banging the alarm on the wall as I did so. Tommy had somehow managed to loop a towel under the man’s shoulders and was in the process of hauling him from the bath onto the floor. Darling had stupidly plunged both arms into the bath in order to grab his ankles, (an action for which the bastard was later to receive much praise) .. He was now jumping up and down lost to his own distress. The rest of the men in the bathroom seemed frozen into a consensual indifference, standing on the spot or just mechanically continuing with their ablutions. It was a reaction to institutional violence that I was to see many times during my time at Rainhill.

I rushed to Tommy's side and turned off the hot water tap that was still roaring into the bath. Together we pulled the man away from the water now pooling on the floor. Benny arrived from upstairs, and grabbing a mop bucket, began to sluice the man with cold water from the adjacent bath.

His screaming and thrashing about was becoming more subdued, and was now replaced by violent shivering and loud laboured breathing. Bright red now, his body was blistering and swelling before our eyes, and I could feel the heat emanating from him.

More white coats were now arriving, the seniors from the day-room and Collin himself. Tommy and I were pushed aside and the man was manoeuvred onto a large white sheet, flecks of his blistering skin parting from him in the process. We were dispatched to the sick bay for a trolley and minutes later the whole entourage whisked off down the main corridor to ward 13, Darling, hands held aloft, moaning in their wake.

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Breakfast was not served until 9-15am in Ward 11 that day. This caused a disruption that was unprecedented, and it was not until the next morning that the ward timetable returned to normal. Clockwork Collin unfortunately took much longer to regain equilibrium, and he became an absolute torment to all and sundry during the course of the next few weeks. Romonovski (that was his name) took less than 20 minutes to die once he arrived in Ward 13. I heard later that some fool had attempted cardiac massage and had almost penetrated his chest.

Tommy told me exactly what had happened. Darling had left the taps in the bath-head, and a patient had filled it with hot water. Romonovski was one of the less dependent patients in Ward 11. Despite years of abuse and institutionalisation, he had managed to retain a modicum of dignity and pride. He had hung back, not wanting to bathe in the dirty bathwater of others. Seeing the bath being filled he had seized his opportunity, hesitating at the last minute to climb in as he noticed the rising clouds of steam. ("Nobody's fool old Romo", one of the senior staff had been heard to say.) But Darling saw time being wasted and had screamed at him to get in the bath. Automatically Romo obeyed, and so he died.

There was of course a Coroner's inquest into the death, and an internal enquiry. Darling and Tommy had to appear, and as both were new to such things it was necessary for them to be

coached by the more senior staff in exactly how to conduct themselves. They were very experienced in such matters and knew exactly how things should be said in court. I was required to make a written statement and received similar tuition. The results of the internal enquiry were taken into consideration, much being made of the selfless gallantry of Staff Nurse Darling, and there was mention of the occasional air- lock which seemed to plague the cold water plumbing system. The outcome was a verdict of accidental death.

There was the usual sequel to any such incident at Rainhill, and all staff involved were despatched to do a spell of night duty, Tommy and I included. This caused the story to die down as quickly as possible. Night- duty entailed 12 hour shifts, and by its very nature minimised the contact we had with each other. Rainhill was a massive institution comprising some 3,400 beds and the story of Romonovski's death was one of many such tales that soon became lost to hospital folk-lore.. For a while the tale was resurrected in the drunken story- telling that went on in the Hospital Social Club, but it was a poor story really, not lending itself to embellishment or humour, so eventually and inevitably the circumstances of Romonovski's death were forgotten.

I was 18yrs old then, no more than a boy, and I had born witness to violent death. Some memories are still vivid. Sitting in the staff toilet earlier that morning trying to contain my shaking, not wanting to be seen displaying such weakness. At lunch in the staff cafeteria , casually brushing at the debris stubbornly adhering to the leg of my trousers, gagging then as I realised it was the skin of Romonovski . That constant- pitched, piercing scream, that even now I can easily recall from memory.

Te Puke New Zealand December 1998.

Belinda Botting was in her early thirties and had spent most of her life in one of the IHC wards of Tokanui Hospital. In accordance with the philosophy of de-institutionalisation and like many others before her, she was returned to the bosom of the community, taking up residence in a house at Te Puke which she shared with others.

Unfortunately Belinda didn't get to enjoy her new found independence, didn't discover her optimal potential for a better quality of life, didn't emerge from the cocoon of institutional care into a brave new world, valued and understood by the community, and protected and nurtured by a caring public health service. A few days after she arrived, her young untrained Carer, left Belinda unsupervised in the bathroom whilst she attended to the needs of another resident. Belinda filled a bath with hot water and jumped in. She suffered severe burns and died a short time later from her injuries.

