

The Ride Home

by Richard Smallfield

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Another day in 1993 had ended. The outpatients' ward had emptied of all, save for myself and the charge nurse, who tidied and prepared for the following day in fatigued haste. The polished floors were vacant: the ward had drained its daily bustle into homes around the city.

I alone occupied a bed, having spent the day plugged into a drip. The other patients had, for one day, become a part of my life and I, a part of theirs. To share a day with them had been gratifying – for my preceding five years had been spent in bedridden solitude.

The building's silence seemed more than still – its shadowy corridors, punctuated by brightly-lit spaces, had lost their only life, which had come and gone during the day. A sterile, polished world smelling of antiseptic and efficiency was all that was left. I had watched the ward drain steadily at the end of the day, leaving only a row of empty beds around its walls. But the building was not yet sleeping: an occasional voice or the staccato echoes of hard-soled shoes echoed up the corridor.

The day's encounters replayed themselves in my mind: the old man next to me had been keen to talk.

'I went off to the war in my twenties ... it was a few years out of my life, but I had my health. I feel a bit sorry for myself getting sick now – but getting sick in your twenties ... it's you young ones I really feel sorry for,' he shook his head.

Leaving the confinement of my bed at home, I had felt a strong desire to meet others that day and, lying there as evening set in, I felt injected with warmth from the contact I had made with strangers through the day. The change of scene had been good, even if it might have been a tedious day for a healthier person. My gaze wandered idly about the ward and out into the darkened corridor, from which I anticipated the emergence of the ambulance attendants. Minutes stretched themselves out to fill the empty half-hour between my treatment's end and the arrival of the ride home.

Tonight I would be back in bed in my sister's old room, surrounded by the pink floral wallpaper I had eventually become desensitised to. I would again be faced by the walls that contrived to barricade not only my body, but also my mind – a few hours in the outside world had been like the restoration of sight to a blind man; it had been an oasis I had been glad to visit.

Having tried many treatments, nearly all of which had been unhelpful, any optimism I felt was cautious, at best – but everything had to be tried and I was grateful for this chance. After five years bedridden, indistinguishable days receded from sight behind and before me. Further ahead than the next day, I could not see.... My mind drifted off to the Miles Davis CD I had been listening to the day before, and to the ones I hoped to eventually acquire.

Desperation is not something that can be maintained indefinitely when one is chronically ill. The state of alarm that is experienced in the early days of an illness is a necessary defence mechanism: while the self-image and expectations are still those of the healthy self, the feeling of desperation to break free from the grip of illness is overwhelming. Every conceivable treatment is considered. That state of urgency cannot be maintained indefinitely, however: life must go on and if it cannot be as it was before, it must be whatever is possible within the confines of illness. Maintaining morale becomes as important as treatment or management of the condition; while still hoping for a better future and seeking improvement and solutions, resignation to the present and an acceptance that life may never again be as it was before, sets in. Desperation maintained forever will only destroy you anyway.

Voices alerted me to the entrance of the ward: a tall, vivacious woman in her early thirties with wavy blonde hair entered the ward, pulling a stretcher behind her. She was followed by the female ambulance driver.

'Hello, I'm Julie,' she smiled down at me.

'Hi, I'm Richard.'

'Can you get across onto the stretcher, or do you need help?'

'Could you help please?' The stretcher was jacked up and I was lifted across onto it and wheeled out into the corridor, the driver leading and Julie pushing.

Something – a recollection or a feeling – entered my mind like an arrow: suddenly I was back aboard the *Fair Star*, sailing to England as a six-year-old. I didn't know what had sparked this memory, but couldn't keep it to myself: 'I don't know why, but I travelled to England by ship in the early seventies, and something in this hospital reminds me of the ship.'

'*Ship's paint!*' Julie exclaimed.

'*Yes – that's it!*' I was amazed that she had made the connection. The corridor had obviously been recently painted, as fumes lingered.

'I went to England by ship too – what ship were you on?' she asked.

'The *Fair Star*.'

'*Same*.'

'*Really?* When did you go?'

'1970.'

'We went at the end of 1971,' I enthused.

'Which way?'

'Capetown – Suez was closed,' I replied.

'We went by Panama.'

'I can't believe this – where did you live in England?' I asked.

'Sussex.'

I shook my head in amazement – 'For real? *We* lived in Sussex – whereabouts were you living?'

'Bexhill.'

'Oh, right. We lived in a little village near Horsham.'

We wheeled through the corridors; it was dark and raining outside and as we passed a line of windows, the outside lights glittered in the rain-flecked glass.

'What do you remember about the ship?' she inquired.

'My first experience was a cyclone on the Tasman Sea. We were on the *Fair Sky* at that stage – we changed at Sydney to the *Fair Star* – I couldn't believe the size of the swells. You would be sitting in the lounge and see nothing but sea out the window one second, and the next second, nothing but sky – the waves looked as big as the ship. I remember lying on my mother's bunk and she said "don't you dare be sick on my bunk" – and seconds later, guess what happened?'

She laughed. 'What else do you remember?'

'The *Jungle Room* – was that the room with the curved mirrors in it? I remember standing in one of those rooms at the front of the ship and watching the bow crash into the waves as they broke over it.... Throwing quoits on the top deck ... the smell of bitumen or something up there.'

We reached the ambulance bay; the stretcher was wheeled up the ramp, into the vehicle and was clipped into the wall fitting. Julie sat on the stretcher opposite. The engine started and we moved away, turning right into the long, straight road that left the hospital.

'Give me more memories – keep them coming.'

'Um ... King Neptune.... They used to shoot clay ducks fired from the deck – we used to race to collect the empty cartridges.... Bingo.... Peering over the rail – it smelt of salt ... watching the sea glide past below.... The empty horizon ... watching sunsets, seeing shafts of sunlight stabbing through the clouds,' I paused; the ambulance hummed smoothly as it drove along. '... Standing in the stern, leaning against the rail, watching the propellers churning the water white and seeing the wake disappear into the distance....' A few moments later: 'Do you remember the dinner gong? I'll never forget that tune.' Julie smiled and indicated that she did; we drove on in silence for a few moments; I continued: 'One thing that sticks in my mind is coming into port and seeing people going about their daily business, whose lives seemed ... totally ... disconnected from mine.'

The ambulance stopped at the lights at the end of the road. They alone pierced the black, wet night.

'I admire people like you, who do jobs that achieve something worthwhile,' I said.

'Oh – this isn't my main job. During the day I sell medical equipment. What did you do before you got sick?'

'Law.'

'People like you must be so much stronger than the rest of us,' she said, as if there was nobility in my situation.

‘... When it first happens it is more than you can cope with, but then you ... have to adjust and live with it as best you can,’ I answered slowly.

The lights turned green.

‘How old were you when you went to England?’ I asked.

‘Twelve.’

‘I was six when we left and turned seven while we were there; my sister was twelve,’ I replied. ‘We lived in a tiny Elizabethan cottage – the walls were all uneven and it had low ceilings – my father was always banging his head on the beams.... It’s funny how strongly smells bring back memories – I think the strongest memory of our first place in Edenbridge is the smell of coal gas in the kitchen.’

‘What else do you remember?’

‘Walking home and getting up in the dark in winter ... the light was different – paler – greyer. What sticks in your mind?’

‘Bexhill is on the coast – we went for walks by the sea. It was a good age to go, because it is old enough for the memories to be clear – impressions are very strong at that age ... it will always be a special memory.’

Now the motorway rolled past. Out of the low back windows the illuminated road elapsed behind us; lights at the side of the motorway sparkled against the black sky. Our little haven seemed detached from the city that passed outside.

I was wrapped up in every minute of the ride. How often did I get out of the house? Never, except for medical purposes. What were the chances of my meeting someone out of the blue like this, with whom I got on so well and shared this early experience? She had the sparks of joy and enthusiasm that can be spotted a mile off. It was something I shared – not that it’s obvious when you can’t even stand up.

We missed my turn-off. Great – the journey would be lengthened by a few minutes. We finally left the motorway and turned into the shopping district.

‘Could I give you a ring sometime?’

‘Yes, I’d like that,’ she replied and wrote her number down for me.

A mile further on: ‘What music are you into?’

‘The golden oldies – Frank Sinatra...’

‘I’m totally into jazz – I’m a jazz maniac, but I like classical too – I used to be into the blues. I’m really into Miles Davis, and jazz guitar as well – I’d practice guitar all day if I could.’

The ambulance turned left into my street. I didn’t want the journey to end ... at least I had her phone number. The vehicle slowed as I pointed out my house; it mounted the footpath and stopped.

Inside. I was wheeled back into the pink room again – the same sickeningly familiar surroundings; my parents came into the room.

‘This is Julie – she went to England on the *Fair Star* too, at about the same time as us!’

Julie effervesced and they responded – old friends already.

Suddenly they were leaving. Passing the foot of my bed by the door, she gave me a cheeky smile and squeezed my foot.

‘Be good,’ she waved and was gone.

Quiet. Day’s end.

I lay and stared at the ceiling as my parents clattered plates in the kitchen. *Coronation Street* had finished; the issue of *Guitar Player* was where I had left it, with my diary, beside my bed. My guitar leant against the wall and my book of *Chords, Scales and Arpeggios* still lay on the windowsill, along with an empty mug. The wheelchair sat idle, opposite. In the front room the TV was chattering away to itself.... I lay there, trying to rest: having pushed myself all day, my body was tensed to cope with the extra exertion and wouldn’t relax again now that the trip had ended. The walls surrounded me; I turned off the bedside lamp and rolled over, contemplating the day’s events and the woman I had just met.

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Three weeks had passed since our meeting; I'd been too weakened to phone Julie, but was desperate to at least make contact and not let the acquaintance slip away. I could not talk without great strain and my brain was fogged, but I resolved to phone her, even if it was a bit beyond me...

The phone rang at the other end.

'Hello, Julie speaking.'

'Hi – it's Richard – from the ambulance.'

'*Hellooo*,' – the word was drawn out, her voice lowering and then seemingly rising two octaves over the second syllable; 'how are *you*?'

Speaking was a strain – I knew I didn't sound myself: 'Oh, about the same, thanks.'

'What have you been doing?'

'Not much ... um – I've ... not been up to doing much, unfortunately.' My brain was struggling to cope with even this reply. 'How about you?'

'I've just got back from the library.'

I strained my brain and voice to respond: 'One thing I've learned is the value of books – if you ever need to find out anything or have a problem, read a book – you can guarantee that someone has written a book on the subject.' I must have sounded stressed, for I wasn't up to talking. I recall little of the conversation, but hung up the phone feeling dissatisfied and wondering what she must have thought. (Had I sounded like a babbling idiot?) At least I had made contact, though – I'd had to phone her when I wasn't up to it, or not phone at all.

Two more weeks passed before I was strong enough to ring her again; I dialled The number had been disconnected.