



The Great Escape
from
Woodlands
Nursing
Home

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Prologue

THE ANAESTHETIST'S BREATH SMELLED OF INSTANT COFFEE and skipped meals. A dormant surgical mask hung beneath his chin as playfully, he invited her to count backwards with him.

Ten.

Nine.

They were on *eight* when she noticed the doctor's missing tooth. When performing the pre-operative checks, he'd asked her to open her mouth and peered in as if appraising an old horse. Perhaps she should have done the same. Surely if he were any good, he could afford to visit a dentist? Or was he so good, so in demand, that he couldn't spare the time?

Seven.

This whole thing was terribly inconvenient. The ladder had seemed sturdy enough when she tested it, shaking the uprights against the russet trunk of the old Angophora tree. It had hardly been used. She remembered her father buying it to evict a possum from the roof. She'd begged him to let it

stay. She didn't mind the scratching and the scuffling at night, she'd told him, found it a comfort even. But the following morning the bewildered creature was in the cage and sent off to be re-homed, or so she had been told. That was nearly eighty years ago. Things simply weren't built to last anymore. Ladders and hips alike. Both rotten and crumbling with age.

Six.

The bottom rung was mossy after several days of spring rain, and her leather-soled Oxford slid. Standing back on the damp leaf litter at the base of the tree, she took stock. The smell of petrol wafted through the broken fence slats as, out of view, the first of the chainsaws choked and stalled. She inhaled the cool, metallic fumes. She had to trust that the ladder would hold. Give it a second chance.

Five.

A cool breeze tickled up her forearm and her body drained away beneath her. A chainsaw whined in her ears, drowning out the gruff voices beyond the fence. Don't fall asleep, she willed herself. She had to stay awake. The birds were counting on her.

Four.

She pulled herself up, one rung at a time. Not much further now. But she was tiring, her arms trembling, legs leaden and unyielding. It was much colder up here, darker too.

Three.

Two.

As a small child, Hattie Bloom had dreamed of flying. She'd longed for the weightlessness of feathers, to fly out of her bedroom window and see the world as the birds did. To soar.

One.

‘It’s your age,’ the surgeon had explained before he pinned the splintered shards of her femur back together. ‘Your bones are thin and brittle. Like honeycomb.’

Hollow.

Like a bird’s.

1

Hattie

NEVER ONE TO DWELL ON THE PAST, HATTIE BLOOM HURRIED from hers – the last few days of it, at least – and headed for the waiting taxi. She wouldn't look back, determined to put the whole unfortunate episode behind her. There were only so many sing-alongs, only so many games of carpet bowls and bingo that a sane person could endure. Legs eleven? If only. She'd settle for two that actually worked.

The taxi driver held the small plastic bag of Hattie's belongings and her walking stick while she wrestled her unyielding limbs onto the back seat. He was in his fifties, she guessed, or perhaps forties after a hard life, and smelled strongly of onions. With his sweat-stained shirt and open-mouthed breathing, he wouldn't have been her first choice, but Hattie couldn't afford to be picky when it came to getaway drivers. This was, after all, her one and only chance to escape from Woodlands Nursing Home.

Back in the front he addressed her via the rear-view mirror. ‘Where to, love?’

She gave the address.

The driver started the meter. The little red numbers were already more than Hattie could afford, and they hadn’t gone anywhere yet. Unsure of the correct protocol for tipping at a nursing home, she’d left a pile of small change – all she had – on her bedside table before she left. With her wallet and pockets emptied she hoped the driver would accept a cheque at the other end.

When the driver asked Hattie if she would prefer the windows open or closed and her choice of radio station, she shrugged that she didn’t mind and pleaded silently for him to hurry. Her knotty fingers worried at the handle of the walking stick balanced across her lap. She risked a backwards glance as the taxi pulled out of the covered portico into the sun, past the ornamental fountain in the shape of a leaping fish and down the short driveway. So far, so good.

At the road, the taxi came to a halt waiting for a gap in the line of stationary traffic. From her bedroom window, Hattie had watched this daily procession of children to and from the nearby school. They walked scuffed-toed in ones and twos, or small untidy groups, staggering like turtles beneath their giant backpacks. A few rode bikes, but far too many were chauffeured to the drop-off point outside the main entrance. She had hoped to avoid the crush of traffic at this time of the morning, but an earlier sprinkling of rain had caused chaos and narrowed her window of opportunity. Dozens of parents fearing their delicate offspring might dissolve on the slightest contact with water now clogged Woodlands Road with their armour-plated people movers.

‘I’m in a terrible hurry,’ said Hattie now gripping the seatbelt like a lifeline.

‘Don’t tell me you’re running away?’ The driver grinned into the mirror as if he had all the time in the world, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music that sounded to Hattie’s ear like the cries of a wounded animal.

Running away? Hattie scoffed at the irony. Only yesterday had she been given official clearance to walk, let alone run.

‘I’ve been walking all my life without official clearance,’ she’d tried to protest in a three-way tussle with the nurse and the physiotherapist. What she lacked in physical strength, Hattie more than made up for in steely determination, and she’d managed to bargain her way out of a four-wheeled walking frame in favour of a single walking stick.

‘Can I have a wooden one?’

‘They don’t make wooden sticks anymore,’ the physio had replied wearily. So, Hattie made do with one made from stainless steel. Her fingers traced the cool lightweight metal and she had the sudden urge to twirl it like a drum major with a baton. It might come in handy as a weapon too, should the need arise. You could never be too careful in the suburbs.

The driver’s eyebrows twitched in the mirror waiting for an answer. Was he on to her?

‘I’ve been on a short convalescence.’ Shorter than planned. Plenty long enough.

‘So, you’re not escaping, then?’

‘No, no. Nothing like that. This is a nursing home, not a prison.’

This was sufficient reassurance to turn the driver’s frown into a crinkled grin. For a moment, Hattie worried he’d spotted the pyjamas under her coat.

It was true. Woodlands Nursing Home was not a prison. Technically, she was free to walk out the front door at any time. If she hadn't been doped up on morphine after the operation, she would have told the surgeon and the social worker where they could stick their 'respite' and discharged herself there and then. But things had snowballed.

The driver flicked idly between radio stations. Woodlands Road was in gridlock. A horn sounded, then another. Soon there was a cacophony of toots and beeps as somewhere out of sight, patience morphed into indignation. Hattie prayed the taxi driver was more restrained with his horn. The last thing she needed was to attract attention before they were even off the property. The meter ticked over, but by now Hattie was beyond worrying about the cost of her liberty.

'What's the hold-up?' Her mouth was so dry she could barely speak.

'Fender-bender in the kiss-and-drop zone,' said the driver with the nonchalance that suggested this wasn't an isolated incident.

Hattie's palms grew sweaty on the plastic handle of her walking stick. Pulling the seatbelt loose, she turned and looked back at the concrete building behind her. She counted the windows to the right of the portico until she found her room. Old Kent Road on the whimsical Monopoly-themed layout had been advertised as having a 'community view' – in reality this meant her room looked out onto the car park and the main road. The tiny silver lining was that she could watch the comings and goings from her window, which at least helped to alleviate the daily boredom. Nights were another matter. In the darkness, her window became a mirror reflecting the walls of the room that felt like a cell, and her

face, a nightly reminder that she was old and for the first time in her life totally dependent. Even with the curtains drawn, Hattie had lain awake staring at the textured ceiling tiles and the air-conditioning vents that kept the entire facility at a constant twenty-three degrees. There could be a second Ice Age outside and none of the residents of Woodlands Nursing Home would be any the wiser. Night after night she had wrestled with sleep; her body dodged it, sparred with it and punched it away whenever it came close. The harder she struggled towards unconsciousness, the harder it fought back. Sleep was as out of reach as the ocean bed, and like a diver without a weight belt, she simply couldn't sink deep enough to touch it.

When she had finally managed to drop off, she'd been woken by the click of her bedroom door and a torch shined into her eyes. She'd cried out in fear.

'Just checking to see if you're asleep,' the nurse had said. Long after the woman and her torch had retreated into the darkness, Hattie had lain wide awake, alert and vigilant to every sound and shadow. It was easy to see why authorities used sleep deprivation as a method of torture. The staff were only doing their jobs, naturally, but she'd had enough. If she ever wanted to sleep again, she needed to get home.

'Isn't there another route?'

Ominously, the taxi driver turned off the engine. 'Sorry, love,' he said. 'No one's going anywhere until this gets sorted out.' He pointed towards the melee where two women in matching figure-hugging sports wear and tight ponytails, spoke into their mobile phones, indifferent to the chaos they had caused.

Hattie picked at her thumb. She pulled loose shard after loose shard until she had a little pile of skin in her lap. If everything had gone according to plan she would be home by now. Once she'd made sure the Angophora tree was safe she could relax completely. Only when she saw with her own eyes the owls in their hollow would the nightmare be over.

She had been away from home too long. She had missed the familiar screech of the boisterous cockatoos and the kookaburras' cackle. She had missed the gentle *pock-pocking* of the frogs from their damp hollow at night and of course the *oh-woop* of her powerful owls. It was time to leave behind the plastic-wrapped mattress that puffed and sighed whenever she shifted position, surprisingly comfortable as it was. Beds, she was fairly sure, weren't meant to come with sound effects. She wouldn't miss the pillow; it made her feel as if she was being suffocated by a giant marshmallow.

Only a short taxi ride away, her own bed was waiting to welcome her home. She'd been conceived in that bed and then born in it. With Woodlands Nursing Home behind her, it was safe to assume she would one day die in it too. The idea of buying a new bed had never occurred to Hattie. Not that she could afford one. It wasn't so bad. The springs and what remained of the stuffing had settled around the contours of her body over the years. The mattress had moulded to her, and vice versa, her ageing spine was now curved and bed-shaped.

It was her pillow she missed most. Hattie couldn't wait to press her nose into the faded cotton pillowslip and inhale her own sleepy breath. Was there anything that smelled more of home than a pillow? If she listened too, ear against the feathers, she could still hear the echo of her mother's distinctive heartbeat.

The taxi was hot and stuffy in spite of the cool air blowing through the vents. All too conscious of her recent breakfast pushing up against her diaphragm, she took big gulps of air and clawed at the collar of her blouse. At the point she thought the smell of onions would claim her, the traffic started to flow once more. The wheels had barely moved when a hand slammed down hard on the taxi's roof, followed by shouting.

‘Stop!’

If she were a Hollywood fugitive, this would be the cue for screeching tyres and the big chase. She would clutch her improbably light suitcase – suitcases always appeared empty in the movies – and make her getaway, only for the authorities to capture her again later. But this wasn't the big screen and Hattie didn't have a suitcase, let alone anything to put inside one. She had a plastic bag containing a spare pair of donated pyjamas, slippers, dressing-gown, and the clothes she'd been wearing when the ambulance arrived to find her broken at the foot of the tree.

‘Mrs Bloom!’ A face appeared at the window, a hand now motioning for the driver to lower the window. ‘Where are you going?’

Hattie's door opened. Two smiling, uniformed women gestured for her to step out of the taxi and into a waiting wheelchair.

‘Now come along, Mrs Bloom,’ said one of the women, leaning in to undo the seatbelt. ‘Why don't you come back inside and have a nice cup of tea?’

‘But I need to get home.’ Hattie clung to the back of the driver's seat with strong pale fingers but somehow, gently and skilfully, the two women managed to extricate her from the taxi into the wheelchair. The driver was appeased with

a twenty but not before he'd mouthed a silent 'sorry' to Hattie. He was still standing, watching as the wheelchair headed back up the drive, past the ornamental fish. Hattie looked back and they exchanged a final wave as the morning sun bowed to the shade of the portico.

She hadn't noticed the sign over the entrance when she'd arrived: *Woodlands Nursing Home. Putting life in your years.*

As she slumped mute and resigned in the wheelchair, a high tide of pain returned to Hattie's hip. She'd run out of fight. For now. Her body might be a prisoner, but her mind and her spirit would remain free as long as she let them.

Instead of punishment or judgement, the women made breezy conversation as if nothing unusual had happened. 'The good news is you're still in plenty of time for carpet bowls, Mrs Bloom.'

'It's *Miss Bloom*,' Hattie protested. At least that was one shackle she had managed to avoid.