

The doctor

I drive along Wellington Parade in East Melbourne, heading for Carlton and the coffee precinct. It is spring. I have a belly full of warm food and a yen for coffee. The sun shines through my car windows and all is very well with the world as my car seems to drive itself towards Carlton.

But the road ahead is blocked by a group of people, apparently squatting in a circle. A bicycle lies on the ground in their midst. The body of a cyclist lies next to it. The rear wheel of the bike turns slowly on its axle, but the man is quite still. These people might have been painted onto the roadscape.

I pull over and get out to investigate this still life. I approach the circle. The figures are women, all looking with concern and indecision towards the cyclist. Slowly they come into motion. Very slowly, the man sits up, cradling his left forearm in his right hand. He says, 'Get me a mobile phone ...' A female form rises from the tableau. She flits swiftly away and returns, bearing a phone.

The cyclist is a fair young man, lean, lightly muscled, probably good looking. But at this moment his face is very pale and pearls of sweat bead his forehead. He is injured: two bones, long and ugly, protrude through the soft tissues of his forearm, their ends jagged. The white bones, bloodless, naked, torn from their covering of flesh, are an affront, a violent challenge to the way things should be. I stare at those bones – there is the radius, there's the ulna – but their Latin names do not domesticate them or make them less shocking. All is not well with the world; I am shocked and an ancient fear grips me. I know I need to do something helpful, now!

I address the man: 'I am afraid your arm is broken.'

'I know that.' His reply is measured, assured.

I try again: 'Let me help you off the road onto the plantation. You don't want to get hit by a car.'

His right hand grips his shattered left forearm. He says, 'I can walk there myself.'

'Let me help you – I'm a doctor.'

'I can manage – I'm a doctor too.'

He crosses from the roadway to the plantation, wobbling slightly, then sits abruptly on the grass. He indicates the phone and says, 'You can dial triple zero and call an ambulance if you want to help.'

I call an ambulance. Then I retrieve his bike and put it into my car, and insert my card into his pocket so he can claim his bike when he's ready.

The injured man tells me that he is a surgeon. He has given some thought to his choice of orthopaedic colleague. He gives me a telephone number. 'I want to speak to him myself,' he says.

I dial, holding the phone close to the cyclist's ear. He speaks: 'Murray, it's James. I need you to reduce a couple of compound fractures for me ... this afternoon ... radius and ulna. They're a bit of a mess. They'll need some nails and a plate ... No I can't do it myself... *because I'm the patient – that's why!* I'm waiting for the ambulance. I'll see you soon.'

He rings off. Paler now, he lies down on the grass, and closes his eyes and waits.

I stand to one side, nonplussed. Then a similar scene, from another time, comes to me.

It is a Sunday afternoon in Leeton and I am alone in the house, reading. Dad is working in the shed and the others are out. There are sounds coming through the back door – a banging, a slamming, a thump, then silence. I look up from my book and listen. Now the sounds come again. My book is forgotten and I am on my feet, ready to flee from these heavy footsteps that thump towards me, now

closing on me. But it's Dad, running towards me, running with his head bent forward, one hand gripping the other.

'Bring the phone – quick!' Dad's voice is urgent, half a shout, half a grunt. The voice has an edge that I don't recognise. It frightens me. I return with the phone and offer it to Dad, but he is still gripping his wrist tightly. The muscles of his face are tight too; he is frowning and clenching his teeth. He looks angry.

'Put the phone on the floor,' says Dad.

I do so. Then I see the blood. It trails from the hall back through the kitchen and leads to the back door.

Abruptly, Dad sinks to his haunches, pale, looking inward, marshalling his strength. The great red blotches on the floor, the white of Dad's face, sap me. I stand, helpless. Dad grunts something: 'Howard– you can help me. Get me ... a clean tea-towel from the kitchen ...and a wooden spoon.'

I hear that unfamiliar something in Dad's speech. It frightens me more than the blood. And why is he asking for kitchen utensils? It doesn't make sense, but that edge of urgent command speaks clearly enough. I run, ransack kitchen drawers and return with the objects. Dad releases the wrist from his grasp and grabs the tea-towel. Rapidly he opens it then folds it lengthways into the shape of a stout bandage.

Blood, bright red, spurts in an arc from somewhere on Dad's hand. Surprised, I stand still, detached and fascinated. The fine stream squirts upwards from Dad's hand to the level of his heart, then outwards in a slow arc and splashes against my breast. Now my eyes turn to the source of the stream, a linear gash down his left wrist and the heel of his hand.

The flesh is laid open. The inside of Dad's hand is a valley; its white walls glisten moistly. On the valley floor a little red spring launches the blood. The white

astonishes me. I look and I cannot move. Dad's hand is cut open and his blood is everywhere. I don't know how he can bear the pain. I feel fear to the bone.

As suddenly as it started, the bleeding stops, then starts again, then stops. '*Damn ... and blast ... I've hit the artery!*' Dad is angry again, speaking in grunts and gasps as he inhales, wrestles with the bandage, holds his breath too long, then sucks in the next lungful of air, struggling all the while to apply pressure to the pulsating artery.

Dad wraps the bandage around his hand, keeping pressure on the palm. Then he grabs the wooden spoon and, in the moment of release, the white tea-towel reddens. Dad pokes the handle of the spoon between his skin and the bandage, then twists hard. With every turn of the spoon, the bandage tightens. The hand goes plum-coloured, then white, and the bleeding stops.

Now Dad speaks more normally. 'Darling, hold the phone near my ear.' I do so. Dad speaks again: 'Operator, please get me Leeton 29. Thank you ... Hello, Weekes? It's Myer. I'm glad you're home. I'm sorry to disturb your Sabbath, but there's an operation that I need you to do today ... I can't do the surgery myself – *I've done something stupid ... gashed my hand with a chisel ...* (that angry voice again) ... It's pretty deep. There's an arterial bleeder ... I've stopped the bleeding with a tourniquet. I don't know if there's any tendon damage ... if there is, we might never operate together again.'

Dad falls silent, listens intently, nods, then says, 'Thank you, Weekes. I'll be here, ready, as soon as you arrive. ...'

Now Dad asks the operator to connect him to the hospital. I hold the phone while he speaks to the head nurse and books the operation that his friend, Dr White, will perform on him. He turns to me: 'Put the telephone down, Howard.' I notice that Dad says *telephone* differently from other people. He says *tellyphone*.

'Thank you, Howard. Come and sit down here next to me.' He pulls me close against him. Dad's good arm is around me and the world is well again. Suddenly Dad lets out a deep sigh and lies down flat on the wooden floor. His face is wet and very white. Beneath the twisted tea-towel his injured hand is white. He doesn't move until Dr White arrives and takes him away in his car.

I sit and wait for Mum and the others to come home, then I tell them that Dad cut his hand and Dr White is making it better.

A few days after my aborted trip to Carlton, a letter arrives.

Dear Howard,

Thank you for caring for my bike. My arm is nailed, plated, plastered and in a sling. I won't be doing any surgery for at least three months. I hope I will be able to go back to operating in due course.

The night before my accident, I was sitting down to dinner with my partner. We were asking ourselves the question: How can I find a way of slowing down?

Thanks again,

James.

I show Dad the letter from James, then recount my memories of the chisel episode. Dad gives me the smile that says: 'Howard, you have an overactive imagination.' He can't see the connection.