

MY PLACE

SALLY MORGAN



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Some of the personal names included in this book have been changed, or only first names included, to protect the privacy of those concerned.

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THE HOSPITAL

The hospital again, and the echo of my reluctant feet through the long, empty corridors. I hated hospitals and hospital smells. I hated the bare boards that gleamed with newly applied polish, the dust-free window-sills, and the flashes of shiny chrome that snatched my distorted shape as we hurried past. I was a grubby five-year-old in an alien environment.

Sometimes I hated Dad for being sick and Mum for making me visit him. Mum only occasionally brought my younger sister and brother, Jill and Billy; my presence ensured no arguments. Mum was sick of arguments, sick and tired.

I sighed as we reached the end of the final corridor. The Doors were waiting for me again. Big, chunky doors with thick glass insets in the top. They swung on heavy brass hinges, and were covered in green linoleum. The linoleum had a swirl of white and the pattern reminded me of one of Mum's special rainbow cakes. She made them a cream

colour with a swirl of pink and chocolate. I thought they were magic. There was no magic in The Doors, I knew what was behind them.

Sometimes, I pretended Dad wasn't really sick. I imagined that I'd walk through The Doors and he'd be smiling at me. 'Of course I'm not sick,' he'd say. 'Come and sit on my lap and talk to me.' And Mum would be there, laughing, and all of us would be happy.

Our entry into the ward never failed to be a major event. The men there had few visitors.

'Well, *look* who's here,' they called.

'I think she's gotten taller, what do ya reckon, Tom?'

'Fancy seeing you again, little girl.' I knew they weren't really surprised to see me; it was just a game they played.

After such an enthusiastic welcome, Mum would try and prompt me to talk. 'Say hello, darling,' she encouraged, as she gave me a quick dig in the back. My silences were embarrassing to Mum. She usually covered up for me by saying I was shy.

The men on the ward didn't give up easily. 'Come on, sweetie, come over here and talk to me,' one old man coaxed as he held out a Fantail toffee. My feet were glued to the floor. This man reminded me of a ghost. His close-cropped hair stood straight up, like short, white strands of toothbrush nylon. His right leg was missing below the knee, and his loose skin reminded me of a plucked chicken.

Mum had confided that all these men were Old Soldiers. They all had missing arms or legs. Dad was the only one who was all there.

Dad was standing in his usual spot, by the side of his bed. He never came forward to greet us or called out like the other men did, and yet we belonged to him. His dressing-gown hung so loosely around his lanky body that he reminded me of the wire coat-hangers Mum had hanging in the hall cupboard. Just a frame, that was Dad. The heart had gone out of him years ago.

Once Mum finished having a little talk and joke with the men, we moved over to Dad's bed and then out onto the hospital verandah. The verandahs were the nicest place to sit; there were tables and chairs and you could look over the garden.

As Mum and Dad talked, I sniffed the air. It was a clear, blue spring day. I could smell the damp grass and feel the coolness of the breeze. It was such an optimistically beautiful day I felt like crying. Spring was always an emotional experience for me. It was for Nan, too. Only yesterday, she'd awakened me early to view her latest discovery.

'Sally ... wake up ...' Even as I dreamt, I wondered where that voice was coming from. It was faint, yet persistent, like the glow of a torch on a misty night. I didn't want to wake up. I burrowed deeper under the mound of coats and blankets piled on top of me. I wrapped my hands around my feet in an attempt to warm them.

Every night I'd call out, '*Mum ... I'm freezing!!*'

'Sally, you can't possibly be.' It was often her third trip to my bedside. She'd lift up the coat I'd pulled over my head and say, 'If I put any more on you, you'll suffocate. The others don't want all these coats on them.' I shared a bed with my brother Billy and my sister Jill. They never felt the cold.

Nan had only to add, 'It's a terrible thing to be cold, Glad,' for Mum to acquiesce and pull out more coats hanging in the hall cupboard.

Now, sitting on the hospital verandah, I smiled as I remembered the way Nan had rocked my sleepy body back and forth in an attempt to wake me up. It took a few minutes, but I finally came up for air and murmured dopyly, 'Nan, do ya have to wake me so early?'

'Shhh, be quiet, you'll wake the others. Don't you remember? I said I'd wake you early so you could hear the bullfrog again, and the bird.'

The bullfrog and the bird — how could I have forgotten? For the whole week Dad had been in hospital, she'd talked of nothing else.

Nan encouraged me out by peeling back the layers on top of me. With sudden decision, I leapt from my bed and shivered my body into an old red jumper. Then, barefoot, I followed Nan out onto the back verandah.

'Sit still on the steps,' she told me. 'And be very quiet.' I was used to such warnings. I knew you never heard anything special unless you were very quiet.

The early morning was Nan's favourite time of the day, when she always made some new discovery in the garden. A fat bobtail goanna, snake tracks, crickets with unusual feelers, myriads of creatures who had, for their own unique reasons, chosen our particular yard to reside in.

I'd heard the bullfrog yesterday; it was one of Nan's favourite creatures. She dug up a smaller, motley brown frog as well, and, after I inspected it, she buried it back safe in the earth. I expected the bullfrog to be out again this

morning; he'll come out any minute, I thought.

I felt excited, but it wasn't the thought of the bullfrog that excited me. This morning, I was waiting for the bird call. Nan called it her special bird; nobody had heard it but her. This morning, I was going to hear it, too.

'Broak, Broak!' The noise startled me. I smiled. That was the old bullfrog telling us he was broke again. I looked up at the sky; it was a cool, hazy blue with the promise of coming warmth.

Still no bird. I squirmed impatiently. Nan poked her stick in the dirt and said, 'It'll be here soon.' She spoke with certainty.

Suddenly, the yard filled with a high trilling sound. My eyes searched the trees. I couldn't see that bird, but his call was there. The music stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Nan smiled at me, 'Did you hear him? Did you hear the bird call?'

'I heard him, Nan,' I whispered in awe.

What a magical moment it had been. I sighed. I was with Dad now, and there was no room for magic in hospitals. I peered back at Mum and Dad. They both seemed nervous. I wondered how long I'd been day-dreaming. Mum reached over and patted Dad's arm.

'How are you feeling, dear?'

'How do ya bloody well think!' It was a stupid question; he never got any better.

Dad's fingers began to curl and uncurl around the arms of his chair. He had slim hands for a man. I remembered someone saying once, 'Your father's a clever lad.' Was that where I got my ability to draw from? I'd never seen Dad

draw or paint, but I'd seen a letter he'd written once; it was beautiful. I knew he'd have trouble writing anything now—his hands never stopped shaking. Sometimes, I even had to light his cigarettes for him.

My gaze moved from his hands, up the long length of his arms, to his face. It dawned on me then that he'd lost more weight. Dad caught my gaze; he was paler and the hollows under his cheekbones were more defined. Only the familiar hazel eyes were the same: confused, wet, and watching me.

'I'm making you something,' he said nervously. 'I'll go and get it.' He disappeared into the ward and returned a few minutes later with a small, blue leather shoulderbag. There was maroon thonging all the way around, except for the last part of the strap, which wasn't quite finished. As he laid it gently in my lap, Mum said brightly, 'Isn't Daddy clever to make that for you?' I stared at the bag. Mum interrupted my thoughts with, 'Don't you like it?'

I was trapped. I mumbled a reluctant yes, and let my gaze slip from the bag to the large expanse of green grass nearby. I wanted to run and fling myself on the grass. I wanted to shout, '*No!* I don't think Daddy's clever. *Anyone* could have made this bag. *He* doesn't think it's clever either!'

By the time I turned back, Mum and Dad were both looking off into the distance.

The visitors' bell rang unexpectedly. I wanted to leap up. Instead, I forced myself to sit still. I knew Mum wouldn't like it if I appeared too eager. Finally, Mum rose, and while she gave Dad a cheery goodbye, I slowly prised myself from my chair.

As we walked into the ward, the men called out.

‘What? Leaving already?’

‘You weren’t here for long, little girl.’

They all made a great show of waving goodbye, and just as we passed through The Doors and into the empty corridor, a voice called, ‘We’ll be waiting for you next time, little girl.’

Strong, cool air blew through the window all the way home in the bus. I kept thinking, can a person be wrinkled inside? I had never heard adults talk about such a thing, but that’s how I felt, as though my insides needed ironing. I pushed my face into the wind and felt it roar up my nostrils and down into my throat. I closed my eyes, relaxed and breathed out. And then, in a flash, I saw Dad’s face. Those sad, silent eyes. I hadn’t fooled him. He’d known what I’d been thinking.

Dad came home for a while a couple of weeks after that, and then, in the following January, 1957, Mum turned up on the doorstep with another baby. Her fourth. I was really cross with her. She showed me the white bundle and said, ‘Isn’t that a wonderful birthday present, Sally, to have your own little brother born on the same day as you?’ I was disgusted. Fancy getting that for your birthday. And I couldn’t understand Dad’s attitude at all. He actually seemed pleased David had arrived!

THE FACTORY

Mum chattered cheerfully as she led me down the bitumen path, through the main entrance to the grey weatherboard and asbestos buildings. One look and I was convinced that, like The Hospital, it was a place dedicated to taking the spirit out of life.

After touring the toilets, we sat down on the bottom step of the verandah. I was certain Mum would never leave me in such a dreadful place, so I sat patiently, waiting for her to take me home.

‘Have you got your sandwich and toiletbag?’ she asked nervously when she realised I was staring at her.

‘Yeah.’

Then, looking off into the distance, Mum said brightly, ‘I’m sure you’re going to love it here.’

Alarm bells. I knew that tone of voice. It was the one she always used whenever she spoke about Dad getting better. I knew there was no hope.

‘You’re gunna leave me here, aren’t ya?’

Mum smiled guiltily. 'You'll love it here. Look at all the kids the same age as you. You'll make friends. All children have to go to school someday. You're growing up.'

'So what?'

'So, when you turn six, you have to go to school, that's the law. I couldn't keep you home, even if I wanted to. Now don't be silly, Sally. I'll stay with you till the bell goes.'

'What bell?'

'Oh ... they ring a bell when it's time for you to line up to go into your class. And later on, they ring a bell when it's time for you to leave.'

'So I'm gunna spend all day listenin' for bells?'

'Sally,' Mum reasoned in an exasperated kind of way, 'don't be like that. You'll learn here, and they'll teach you how to add up. You love stories, don't you? They'll tell you stories.'

Just then, a tall, middle-aged lady, with hair the colour and shape of macaroni, emerged from the first classroom in the block.

'May I have your attention please?' she said loudly. Everyone immediately stopped talking. 'My name is Miss Glazberg. The bell will be going shortly,' the tall lady informed the mothers, 'and when that happens I want you to instruct your children to line up in a straight line on the playground. I hope you heard that too, children, I will be checking to see who is the straightest. And I would appreciate it if the mothers would all move off quickly and quietly after the children have lined up. That way, I will have plenty of time to settle them down and get to know them.'

I glared at Mum. 'I'll come with you to the line,' she whispered.

The bell rang suddenly, loudly, terrifyingly. I clutched Mum's arm.

Slowly, she led me to where the other children were beginning to gather. She removed my hands from her arm but I grabbed onto the skirt of her dress. Some of the other mothers began moving off as instructed, waving as they went. One little boy in front of me started to cry. Suddenly, I wanted to cry, too.

'Come now, we can't have this,' said Miss Glazberg as she freed Mum's dress from my clutches. I kept my eyes down and grabbed onto another part of Mum.

'I have to go now, dear,' Mum said desperately.

Miss Glazberg wrenched my fingers from around Mum's thigh and said, 'Say goodbye to your mother.' It was too late; Mum had turned and fled to the safety of the verandah.

'*Mum!*' I screamed as she hobbled off. 'Come back!'

Despite the urgings of Miss Glazberg to follow the rest of the children inside, I stood firmly rooted to the playground, screaming and clutching for security my plastic toiletbag and a Vegemite sandwich.

By the beginning of second term at school, I had learnt to read, and was the best reader in my class. Reading opened up new horizons for me, but it also created a hunger that school couldn't satisfy. Miss Glazberg could see no reason for me to have a new book when the rest of the children in my class were still struggling with the old one. Every day

I endured the same old adventures of Nip and Fluff, and every day I found my eyes drawn to the back of the class where a small library was kept.

I pestered Mum so much about my reading that she finally dug up the courage to ask my teacher if I could have a new book. It was very brave of her. I felt quite proud, as I knew she hated approaching my teacher about anything.

‘I’m sorry, darling,’ Mum told me that night. ‘Your teacher said you’ll be getting a new book in Grade Two.’

There weren’t many books at our house, but there were plenty of old newspapers, and I started trying to read those. One day, I found Dad’s plumbing manuals in a box in the laundry. I could work out some of the pictures, but the words were too difficult.

Towards the end of second term, Miss Glazberg told us there was going to be a night when all the parents came to school and looked at our work. Then, instead of our usual sheets of butcher’s paper, she passed out clean, white rectangles that were flat on one side and shiny on the other. I gazed in awe at my paper; it was beautiful and crying out for a beautiful picture.

‘Now children, I want you all to do your very best. It has to be a picture of your mother and father, and only the very best ones will be chosen for display on Parents’ Night.’

There was no doubt in my mind that mine would be one of the chosen few. With great concentration and determination, I pored over my page, crayoning and detailing my parents. Suddenly, a hand tapped my shoulder and Miss Glazberg said, ‘Let me see yours, Sally.’ I sat back in my chair.

‘Ooh, goodness me!’ she muttered as she patted her heart. ‘Oh no, dear, not like that. Definitely not like that!’

Before I could stop her, she picked up my page and walked quickly to her desk. I watched in dismay as my big-bosomed, large-nippled mother and well-equipped father disappeared with a scrunch into her personal bin. I was hurt and embarrassed. The children around me snickered. It hadn’t occurred to me you were meant to draw your parents with their clothes on.

By the beginning of third term, I had developed an active dislike of school. I was bored and lonely. Even though the other children talked to me, I found it difficult to respond.

I was allowed certain privileges now I was at school. The best one was being allowed to stay up later than the others and share Dad’s tea. He loved seafood. He had a drinking mate with a boat, and if there was a good catch, crayfish came our way. Fleshy, white crayfish and tomato dipped in vinegar was Dad’s favourite meal.

I knew some of Dad’s tastes were a legacy of the war. That particular one was from the time Italian partisans had sheltered him from the Germans. Dad had told me about his friends Guiseppe and Maria, and their daughter Edema. He’d taught me to sing the Communist anthem in Italian. I thought I was very clever being able to sing in another language.

We had some good times, then. Some nights, Dad would hide chocolates in the deep pockets of his overalls and we were allowed to fish them out. Sometimes, he’d

laugh and joke, and when he swore, we knew he didn't really mean it.

Dad slipped in and out of our lives. He was often in hospital for periods of a few days to a month or so, and the longest he was at home at one time was about three months; usually it was a lot less. When he first came home from hospital, he would be so doped up with drugs he wasn't able to communicate much. Then, he would seem to be all right for a while, but would rapidly deteriorate. He stayed in his room, drinking heavily, and didn't mix with us at all. And soon, he was back in hospital again.

Dad was a plumber by trade, but, when he was at home, he was often out of work. Every time he returned from hospital, he had to try to find another job. Mum provided the only steady income from various part-time jobs, mostly cleaning.

When Dad was happy, I wanted him to be like that forever, but there was always the war. Just when things seemed to be looking up, it would intrude and overwhelm us. The war had never ended for Dad. He lived with it day and night. There were things in his head that wouldn't go away.

Part of the reason I was so unhappy at school was probably because I was worrying about what was happening at home. Sometimes, I was so tired I just wanted to lay my head on my desk and sleep. I only slept well at night when Dad was in hospital; there were no arguments then.

I kept a vigil when Mum and Dad argued; so did Nan. I made a secret pact with myself. Awake, I was my parents' guardian angel; asleep, my power was gone. I was worried

that, one night, something terrible might happen and I wouldn't be awake to stop it.

Some nights I'd try and understand what they were arguing about; but, after a while, their voices became indistinguishable from one another, merging into angry abandon. It was then I resorted to my pillow. I pulled it down tightly over my head and tried to drown out the noise.

I was grateful Dad didn't belt Mum. Although, one night, he did push her and she fell. I squatted on the kitchen floor and peered around the door jamb to see what had happened. Mum just lay in a crumpled heap. I peered up at Dad; he was so tall he seemed to go on forever. He ran his hand back through his hair, looked down on me, and groaned. Swearing under his breath, he pushed roughly past Nan and staggered out to his room on the back verandah. I felt sorry for Dad — he hated himself.

Nan hurried into the hall and hovered over Mum, making sympathetic noises. Not words, just noises. I guess that's how I remember Nan all those early years — hovering, waiting for something to happen.