

OUR FAREWELL GIFT.

Her appearance was immaculate! A Persil-white, three-cornered lightly starched organdie veil concealed every strand of her grey hair. Her creaseless white uniform was regulation length. Her stockings and regulation Hall's lace up nurses' shoes were also white. She wore tortoise-shell rimmed spectacles, which repeatedly slipped half way down her nose allowing her sea green eyes to look over their rims to nail you with her penetrating gaze. Tall and slim, this lady carried herself well, due in part to the legacy of having served in the Women's Royal Australian Army Nursing Corp.

True, our Matron was strict. The hospital ran on military precision. But I hasten to add that she was also fair-minded, and we were eventually to discover that she had a great sense of humour. However, much was to happen before this became apparent.

Trainee Nurses quickly learned that the time to be on the alert was when she did her ward rounds. Like a galleon in full sail she would sweep along the corridor and into the ward, her experienced eyes scanning the scene for the slightest irregularity – an out of line bed wheel – a vase of half dead flowers – cigarette ash – or worst of all, a stain on a bedspread from one of the many lotions used in dressings. Hospital linen was spotless and must be kept so. Woe indeed to the careless nurse responsible for the stain.

With typical Aussie disrespect, we secretly nicknamed her "Whiskey." This came about because each Christmas when she was asked what she would like as a gift, she would nonchalantly reply, "Any old scotch will do."

Our Matron ran a tight ship, and even this ship has a cat. Predictably named Florence to her proud owner she was no ordinary cat. Florence was a smokey-white pedigreed Persian beauty

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with an aristocratic air as though conscious of the honour conferred by the name. Her bearing amusingly reflected that of her owner.

There were six of us completing our final year of General Nurse Training. We had journeyed three arduous but rewarding years together, playing out our roles between the polarities of life and death. The rigours of working and studying together while living under the one roof have welded us into a close knit group. In a few short weeks we would be sitting for our State Registration Examinations and this important period of our lives would be over. How could we mark this milestone? What should we do to declare that we had made it to the finishing line? What should be the nature of our farewell gift?

The word was passed around to congregate in Jan's room one afternoon when the majority of us were off duty, to pool our ideas. On the designated day, with our mugs of coffee, cigarettes, and much gaiety, we crowded into Jan's room. Willy Williams, a tall, lanky-legged larrikin with a quick wit, arrived last, having come straight off duty from the wards. She was outspoken as always and came straight to the point. "Don't any of you blighters think for one moment that I'm going to be part of organising something mushy or sentimental for old Whiskey! Not a chance! I'm all for doing something she will never forget!" The wicked glint in Willy's eye had us paying close attention to her as she flopped down on Jan's bed, heel toeing her shoes off and propping herself against a pillow. "And none of those tire old April Fools' Day tricks, although I must admit that short sheeting her bed and slipping a used bedpan into it was a good one. How was she to know that it was only coloured water?"

"OK Willy." said Helen, leading her on. "What monstrous thing do you have in mind?" And monstrous it was. "I'm thinking of tarring and feathering Florence and I'm talking about a cat not a nightingale." Rocking with laughter we wondered whether she could really be serious. She

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was! In our impertinence we referred to Florence as the little grey ghost Wee Casper. At that moment we imagined her no longer looking lofty and ethereal, but well and truly earth bound, tarred and feathered. Then Millie, the quiet intellectual one, realising that we were perfectly capable of doing this, stilled our mirth by averring that perhaps we should consider something more humane.

“Like what?” Questioned Willy.

“Well, like shaving its tail. After all, the fur would eventually grow back.” Millie’s idea had us in fits of laughter again, drowning out any further reasoning on Millie’s part. We pictured this fluffy feline, naked tail aloft, and strolling the hospital precincts oblivious to this indignity. One thing was certain her proud owner would not be amused.

Willy jumped off the bed and we came to order as she began again. “OK, OK, since it was my idea to humiliate Whisky’s cat, and since you are all too scared to proceed (and we all suspected that Willy herself had a soft centre), why don’t we just dye the.....thing!”

“Now that could really please Old Whiskey,” broke in Sue, “Given that she loves stains so much.”

There was an enthusiastic chorus of agreement. We figured that Florence would survive this treatment. Tarring and feathering she may not survive. Neither indeed may the perpetrators of the crime.

“Pur-fect!” Quipped Liz. “I could snig enough Mercurochrome from Outpatients Department to dye Florence a pretty red.”

“What! And risk being caught red handed!” Exclaimed Shirley.

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“Nah, triple dye’s the way to go. Make Florence a member of the elegant blue rinse set.” Put in Sue as she gathered up the empty cups.

“Have you considered a yellow makeover? One bottle of acriflavine would do it.” Mused Millie. At this point, all eyes turned to the master of mischief herself for the verdict. After all it had been her inspiration in the first place.

“There is only one dye worth using.” Responded Willy, folding her arms in a gesture of finality, “And that is gentian violet.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! A purple cat! A right royal purple cat!” The group was unanimous. Now it was time to put plans in place for the right day next week, when four of our six would be off duty. Florence the pampered Persian was accorded the privileges of royalty and was escorted around the hospital grounds by her dotting owner every morning. For the execution of the plan, we had to observe the cat’s ritual. Late afternoon was when she was allowed out alone. Excitement rose as each day we fine-tuned our plan.

The tea hour was over. The setting sun was casting long shadows across the garden. Matron and Casper the wee grey ghost were safe in the flat. From their vantage point, hidden by a large hydrangea, Sue and Willy had a clear view of the cat-flap on the door. It was almost dark when they heard the click and Casper emerged. Moments later she was gathered up, quite unaware that she had been ambushed, and purred contentedly in the arms of her captor. She felt so soft and cuddly that Sue had a fleeting prang of conscience. But there was no turning back now. The dye was cast – literally! Millie and Jan locked the door of the communal laundry behind the cat thieves. They were gowned and rubber gloved to avoid staining themselves. In readiness was a tub of warm water coloured deep purple. It was no easy matter to restrain the struggling,

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clawing, howling victim, but having come this far, there was determination to do a thorough job. Every square inch of the cat was coloured, whiskers and all. Fur saturated, her body now looked pathetically small. She was still protesting loudly she was briskly towelled dry and her fur brushed to a fluffy purple ball.

Oo-wah! What a sight! What had we done? We didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Should we make a bolt for the hills never to be seen or heard of again? Or should we just die laughing?

The deed was done. We all wished that the other two who were on duty had been there to share in the sport. Willy was nominated to return Florence while the others carefully removed all traces of their activities. With the now contentedly purring bundle under her arm, she stepped out into the darkness. All was quiet. This was the tricky bit. Willy's heart beat faster at the thought of coming face to face with Matron for it was a very real possibility. Feeling for the cat-flap she pushed Florence through it and beat a hasty retreat.

Fait accompli! But was that the end of the matter? That was the question...?

Over cups of tea we reviewed the situation. "You realise, don't you" giggled Sue, "That when Florence licks herself, she will have a purple tongue to match her coat." Our laughter subsided as we speculated about Matron's reaction.

Turning to Millie the intellectual one, we asked her what she thought. "Well, she'll know who did it and she'll be furious at first. All hell could break loose. But later on I think she will see the humour of it."

We hoped!

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We knew that she couldn't sack us – or could she? We were finalists due to sit for our registration exams, and surely the Hospital Board would not let her fire the lot of us – or would they? We hoped all the more.

There is always a silence before a storm. Hours were to go by in this eerie suspense until early next day when a very noticeable notice appeared on the Hospital Bulletin Board.

The Guilty parties responsible for the crime,

will report at my office at 9am tomorrow.

Failure to do so will mean that every nurse in the Nurses' Home

will be denied a late pass until they do.

Signed Matron

The entire hospital personnel read the Bulletin Board. Doctors, Nurses, Kitchen Staff, Domestic, and everyone wondered what it was all about.

Unfortunately, what Whiskey had to say to us as all six with hands behind backs stood to attention on her mat the next morning in unprintable.

The writer can however, assure you that had there been a firing squad outside, we would have been marched outside and shot.

The trade was over. She was having difficulty suppressing the smile that began to play around the corners of her mouth. It was then that we understood that Whiskey's thinking was light years ahead of ours.

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She knew that very soon the hospital would be abuzz with the conspiratorial whisper, “Did you hear that Matron has a purple pussy?”

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