

"I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE HOMELESS"

Frank never intended to become homeless. Even before he came home from the War in 1945 he had planned to take up one of those loans that the Government was offering to returned servicemen. Perhaps he would buy a block of land or even a small farm somewhere in the outer suburbs and put up a pre-fab fibro house. Joan was waiting for him and her letters had made bearable the trek through snake infested jungles: Sarawak, Tarakan, Guadalcanal. These were the names of places that had once been familiar to him personally but were now only recognised from banners in the Anzac Day march.

Joan didn't wait. When the troop ship berthed at Woolloomooloo, Frank scanned the crowd for her cherubic face framed with auburn hair caught up in the latest style known as a victory roll. He found it amusing that a hairstyle should be named after the end of World War 2. While his mate, Robbo, carried a picture of the 1940s pin-up girl, Betty Grable, "The Forces' Sweetheart" she was called, Frank had secreted Joan's photograph in the top pocket of his khaki shirt. Whenever he needed to remind himself of why he was fighting and for whom, the photo was close enough to be discretely slipped out for a quick kiss.

Frank felt a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go over to the Bells for a beer", Robbo said, pointing to the hotel opposite the wharf. A couple of schooners barely touched the sides. The two men avoided discussing the world they had recently left behind and one they felt obliged to forget. They had little else in common but thought a safe topic of conversation might be what they intended to do now that they had been demobbed. As Frank related his plans to marry Joan and get a War Service Loan, he could feel his future slipping away. He was only half listening to Robbo who was becoming excited about drawing on the skills he had learnt in the army to become an engineer.

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The opportunity to call home had passed. The queue outside the red telephone box curled around the corner into Bourke Street while more soldiers filled the pub to shout another round. "Time, gentlemen. Please!" called the barmaid as six o'clock approached.

Walking across the Domain to catch the tram in Pitt Street, Frank felt in a dream as opposed to the nightmare he had been living for the past six years: he wasn't quite sure which one he would wake from. With the fruit from the Moreton Bay fig trees squelching under his army boots, Frank enjoyed the smug anticipation of his mother's surprise on his arrival at the semi-detached house in Marrickville.

He didn't mind having to bunk down in the sleep-out next to the front verandah. After all, as his mother wasn't expecting him she could hardly turf out the young lodger who was renting Frank's room for 5 shillings a week. This wasn't the only surprise. His mother had been charged with the responsibility for breaking the news that Joan was going to marry an American. "Overpaid, over-sexed and over here" she had laughed in an attempt to reduce the gravity of her announcement.

As Frank lay on the sagging mattress, he contemplated life without Joan. He rolled another cigarette and concluded that the best solution would be to go bush. There was always plenty of work around the shearing sheds, and besides, he could drive a truck and probably a tractor if he had to. He might even go to Broken Hill to work in the mines or make his fortune in opals at Lightning Ridge. He might be itinerant but he wouldn't be homeless.

Time passes quickly when you're moving around, thought Frank. Although he never forgot Joan, he stopped thinking about her. When his mother died and he returned to Sydney, he decided to not quite settle down, but at least have a go at it. Having inherited 200 pounds from his mother's estate, Frank rented a nice

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little flat at Randwick not too far from the race course where he could have a flutter or put a bet on with the local SP bookie if he didn't want to leave the pub. Frank learnt quickly that money doesn't go very far when you have a few friends who will help you spend it. He went to the Repat Hospital to visit his old mate, Robbo, whose dreams about becoming an engineer were swallowed by up by what they called "shell shock". "Poor bugger," thought Frank. "Fancy having to spend the rest of your life like a dribbling idiot in this place. There but for the grace of God..."

It must have been around 1965. The money had run out and Frank's job prospects were waning. Home became a room in a three storey terrace house at Kings Cross, in a wide street shaded by plane trees. The camaraderie with his co-tenants reminded him of the army and one of them suggested that he register with the Waterside Workers' Federation. Every evening he would press his little red transistor radio to his ear to hear if his number was called for a shift the following day, as often it was. He even heard the great American baritone, Paul Robeson, sing at a wharfies' stop work meeting at the Sydney Town Hall.

As a returned serviceman, he was entitled to a pension, and although he thought that bludging off the government was a pretty low act, he applied. When his foot became red and then ulcerated, Frank thought it must have been because of his jungle experience during the War. After all, these feet had seen some action especially on the Kokoda Track. The doctor mentioned something about diabetes and smoking but it didn't make much sense. When his foot became black as if it had been charred in a fire, that really was a worry. He tried to ignore the shrivelled toes but they reminded him of their necrotic state with every step. As he soaked his foot in methylated spirits he joked to himself that he would be better off drinking the stuff. When the pain and smell could be endured no longer, Frank packed a few belongings in his brown Gladstone bag and went to the

hospital across the Domain that he could see from his window. On the following day, he underwent a below knee amputation of his left leg.

George, Frank's neighbour, came to tell him that their landlady had packed his belongings into a paper bag marked "Return to Spastic Centre" and put it out for the collection. She couldn't keep Frank's room indefinitely when there was no rent coming in. Besides, a developer had bought the row of terrace houses that perched high on the ridge above the Woolloomooloo wharves where Frank had returned from the War twenty years before and where, in the intervening years, he had worked.

A Pink Lady from the hospital auxiliary fitted him out in a shirt, sports coat and trousers. He would have preferred a suit, but then, he didn't want to look like some pox-doctor's clerk. In the clothes cupboard on the ward he found a hat like the one he used to wear – a pork-pie number with a butterfly's wing in the band. Probably left behind by a former patient, he mused, as he quickly dismissed the idea that the previous owner might be dead.

He took his RSL badge from his battered wallet where it lived behind Joan's girlish photo and slipped it into the button hole on his lapel. The addition of the badge made the coat feel less second-hand. He folded up the left leg of the trousers as he had seen men collecting for the Civilian Maimed and Limbless Association and secured the hem with safety pins kindly provided by the charge nurse, Sister Braithwaite, from the bandage bag that hung behind the treatment room door. He always called her "Sister" and knew that she had seen active service during the war, *his* war, because of the large, starched triangular veil she wore.

Frank was familiar with the bag and the bandages it contained. To make himself feel useful and also to give the nurses a hand, Frank liked to untangle the

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bandages fresh from the laundry, roll them up and fasten them with those safety pins. Under Nurse Beazely's patient guidance, he had even learnt to do the tricky bandage for his stump, a procedure which forced him to accept the loss of his leg and the disability that resulted. "Come on Stumpy", he'd say, "time to get dressed."

Although he was old enough to be her father, Frank never called Nurse Beazely by her first name, always "Nurse". However, he knew that her first name was Jenny because that's what the young men who shared his four-bed bay in the orthopaedic ward called her. One of the young men, Brian, was a bikie with "LOVE" and "HATE" tattooed across the knuckles of each hand and a shock of black Brylcreemed hair curling over his forehead. "Lucky to be alive," Brian had said as he described the motor bike accident that had left him with a fractured pelvis and a compound fractures of his tibia and fibula. The other room-mate was Mike, a paraplegic, who was in a wheel-chair when he wasn't in bed but always wore dark glasses even at night. After he fell asleep Jenny used to remove them and put them in his locker drawer from where he would retrieve them before the day staff came on duty the next morning. Mike claimed to have been a rock singer but none of the other patients believed him. One day, out of Frank's little red transistor, came the thumping beat of a rock song accompanied by a voice belting out, "*I'm a big time operator*". "That's me", shouted Mike. "That's me!" "Yeah, right," sneered Brian, unimpressed. "Go on, pull the other leg," laughed Frank. "That's the only one I've got."

Mastering crutches was not as difficult as Frank had anticipated, and he was eager to please the young physiotherapist with her short uniform and green ribbon around her pony-tail. Something about her reminded him of Joan, although it would have been a long time since Joan had looked like that. It would have been easy just to stay in bed or in the grey vinyl armchair adjacent, but

Frank was determined to use his crutches properly and not let his disability be an excuse for sympathy or helplessness.

Nurse Beazley had picked up an early edition of Saturday's *Sydney Morning Herald* on her way to work on Friday night as Frank had asked her. He had been granted a leave pass for the following day and wanted to get an early start on finding somewhere new to live. He ignored the column marked Flats to Let and went straight to Apartments, Board and Residence. The subtle difference between the columns was only discernible to someone for whom flat-hunting was not a novelty. An advertisement for "One bed, kitchenette, share bath. \$10.50 p/w" caught his eye. "Clean gent only. Non-smoker". He met the first criterion and, having promised himself to give up cigarettes, met the second. After all, the doctor had told him that he would lose his other leg if he didn't.

During the night, Nurse Beazley had cobbled together some ingredients for a couple of sandwiches: devon, cheese and tomato on white Tip Top bread. She wrapped them in greaseproof paper, included a left-over apple and an orange, and put them in one of the brown paper bags reserved for attaching to patients' lockers. Before she went off duty, she gave Frank his provisions as if he were going on an excursion and wished him luck. As Frank tucked the paper bag into his pocket, he regretted not asking the physiotherapist to tape some padding on the wooden handgrips of his crutches.

Balancing on one leg in the telephone box was difficult as Frank folded the page of the newspaper into a manageable square and counted out the coins for the calls. He rejected any premises that were upstairs, and those that rejected him when he mentioned his disability. One woman told him in no uncertain terms, "We don't take cripples." Houses in Paddington and Darlinghurst that once comprised several flatettes were now being returned to their former glory as

family homes for the newly wealthy, thereby reducing the availability of accommodation for people such as Frank.

Having exhausted the day's possibilities of finding somewhere to live, Frank made his way to the familiar Bell's Hotel in Woolloomooloo. As he passed the Matthew Talbot Hostel a man sitting on the footpath outside called out, "Got a smoke, mate?" Tossing him a cigarette, Frank thought about the other poor homeless bastards who stayed there.

Jenny Beazely came off duty at 7am, and after breakfast, headed to the beach. Although she had worked in the hospital's recently opened melanoma unit, she was oblivious to the risks of lying under the hot summer sun to acquire the tan so desirable of young Australian women at that time. Even the prickliness of her starched uniform on her sunburnt back was not a deterrent. Jenny coated herself in coconut oil and fell asleep before she had finished reading her copy of Vogue magazine with a photo of the English model, Twiggy, on the cover. Just in time, she woke up to catch the bus back to the Nurses' Home before her absence was noted, having missed the midday curfew.

When Nurse Beazely came on duty that night she was keen to hear about Frank's success with his flat-hunting. She flicked her torch up and around the ward in a cursory check on the lumpy shapes in the beds with their folded blue and white bedspreads. Brian and Mike were sound asleep and she rinsed the glasses on their lockers to remove any traces of the Bacardi rum that had enhanced their sedation. But Frank's bed was as freshly made as she had left it that morning, and his brown Gladstone bag was still beside his locker.

With the ward in darkness, the light in the corridor silhouetted the stooped figure at the door, leaning on crutches, pork-pie hat askew.

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"Come into the day room, Frank, and I'll make you a cup of tea", Nurse Beazely said as she intercepted him before he entered the ward.

"Sorry, love" said Frank, as he took a deep breath. "I didn't have much luck gettin' a flat so I had a few beers with some old diggers".

As he sank into the grey vinyl arm chair, Frank looked at his red, blistered hands. He had not cried in a long time, not even over Joan, and never in front of a woman. But tonight he quietly sobbed: "You know, love? I never thought I'd be homeless."