

Chapter One

Remembrance

I think it frets the saints in heaven to see how many desolate creatures on the earth have learnt the simple dues of fellowship and social comfort in a hospital (Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

It is hard to imagine anyone enjoying a stay in hospital either as an out patient or confined to a bed, but somehow I always thought it profoundly unfair when I heard someone say they actually hated the place. All the same, I felt a distinct insecurity knowing one firmly held the balance of my life in its surgical glove and I was as helpless as a baby.

This was my second 'results' visit in a year. The first one culminated with the dreaded words: "I'm sorry Mr Hill but I'm afraid you have tested positive for prostate cancer." This time I had been called for the results of another kind of test, and although I had no particular reason I felt a feeling of dread that was hard to explain.

On this day I had been greeted by a receptionist in her late fifties whose approach was very professional. She ruined it by telling me her mother collected all my records! Then she followed up by telling me that Mr Lloyd the consultant was held up in traffic and there could be an hour's delay.

My attention had been caught by a little girl with plaits and the whitest face I had ever seen in my life. She and her mother were the only others apart from my wife Annie and I awaiting some fate or another.

The child was pretty and played with a small doll without moving her gaze from our direction. I wanted to say something friendly or paternal but instead thought if she would survive to have a life, marriage and children of her own. In comparison I thought I couldn't grumble if my news was bad. I'd had all of those things and a career that had made me rich and famous.

We all had to die of something I had told myself dozens of times, especially during that week.

Annie asked in barely a whisper if I was all right. I nodded and wondered why people rarely spoke normally in doctors' surgeries, dentists or hospital waiting rooms. She smiled and I thought what a bloody rock she had been and how lucky I was to have her.

Eventually Mr Rogerson the consultant arrived and invited me to sit down and make myself comfortable.

I was far from comfortable and gripped the arms of the chair waiting for the sentence. He said: "I'm pleased to see that you have a clean bill of health following your prostate operation of a year ago."

I recalled the test results on that occasion and the terrible words echoing in my ears made worse by the fact that my dear friend Bob Monkhouse had recently succumbed to it.

The reality for me was that it had been caught in time and routine micro surgery saw me back on stage within two weeks. I asked myself why I felt so badly about this one, after all I felt fine and the only reason I was here at all was because I had accompanied Annie for a blood test and the doctor decided to include me too.

"Well, as for this latest test, I'm afraid to have to tell you that you have a condition called Chronic Myeloid Leukaemia and...."

The rest of his words were drowned by the orchestra in my brain. I'd obviously done my last show. The fat lady was about to sing.

(as told to Graham Smith)