

A Fruit-Picking Accident.

Ambulance Report

- Fall – between six and nine feet
- Cervical stabilization
- Possible peripheral fractures

Cervical Spine X-ray

- Fracture/Dislocation C4-5.

We didn't see her like that. She was five-foot one of thin wiry, body that looked very small in a hospital bed. She had grey-white hair stained by the iodine-soaked pads around her skull traction. An oddly alien look was created by these brown blobs sprouting silver tongs which connected through pulleys to inelegant sandbags.

Her lightly-leathered face had smiled more often than it had frowned, deep creases running away from eyes and mouth. Her record said that she was ninety-one but she admitted that this could have been wrong. Her birth-date *may have been adjusted to put her on the right side of the blanket*. She was too old now *to think of such malarky*.

The helicopter extraction and plane evacuation trip to Sydney had been her first such rides. *Quite exciting, but you can't see much lying flat*. She worried now that she was a very long way from home.

Not that there was much left at home, anymore. She lived in the farmhouse of her youth with one unmarried son. Other children and grandchildren visited *when they could*. Disappointment in her voice informed us that when they could was not often. She was proud of her resilience, using gnarled hands to illustrate stories from a colourful life; the type of life that was fading from the Australian bush.

But occasionally the same hands plucked at the sheets and worried her bedjacket strings. She first confided in a 'pink lady' and then to others. She was scheduled for some risky surgery and wanted to see her son; but she didn't really want to see him and suspected that he would not come. The fruit-picking accident, after all, was *entirely his fault*.

Surgery could not wait for him. The internal fixation replaced external traction, allowing her greater movement, so physiotherapy could start in earnest. She was often exhausted, becoming smaller as she curled to sleep. Older 'pink ladies' made a point of visiting as most of the patients in the ward were *the young daredevils*. Even *caring young nurses* had little in common with her age.

The accident occurred when she was picking fruit for cooking. She wanted to please her son with baking and/or jam. Besides, *it was time and it is a crime to leave fruit to rot on a tree; attracting insects and vermin* is antisocial behaviour.

Her son had, of course, forbidden such an endeavour. He would get a man to do the job. He would ring tomorrow. O.K., today when he came back from the bank. *Unnecessary extravagances* had never been part of her life. Fruit-picking had. So with ladder and burlap bag, she started. *I'm going well, I'll do the whole tree, only a little more, a short stretch.*

The moist ground had actually been quite comfortable and supporting, if a little cold. It was certainly better fitting than the helicopter trolley. Her son had been mostly concerned but couldn't resist one or two "Oh, Mum" comments. "Why didn't you wait?" *Till when*, she countered, *and at what cost?* "Not as great a cost as this" he screamed as helicopter blades whirred, but she thought the helicopter was free, *so what was he talking about.*

Everyone sympathised, even the young nurses knew that people of this Great Depression generation were frugal to the point of self-denial. And every woman understood the futility of asking a man to do something today. Everyone grew to dislike this procrastinating son.

A room had been organised in hospital quarters. The son, having arranged management of the farmhouse and animals, was coming by train from the far south coast and then by bus to our coastal hospital. However, he went to his room for a rest before visiting, confirming his status as an uncaring son.

He is crouched but still taller than her; the hue of sun-ravaged skin is the same. Green-brown eyes settle deeply in a drawn face. He comes slowly, one careful 'armcrutch-step-armcrutch-close' step at a time. The black rubber handgrips are spidered by knobbled fingers. He wears velcroed shirts, sleeves and shoes.

It is too easy to forget that the sons on ninety-one-yr-old women are seventy-yr-old men, who fought at least one war. This son also fought auto-immune disease ravaging his joints. His tree-climbing, fruit-picking days were long gone. Let's charitably agree that his mother's expectations were based in a positive memory of her son at his best. Let's not imagine her as demanding, difficult or recklessly head strong.

Weeks later, they walk out together; a very rare sight from this ward. Soft, dark soil has been important in this outcome. *A lovely man from Rotary* has come to get them. *They may stop overnight on the way home*, so she doesn't overtire. A crowd of staff collects to see them off. She waves a little, hugs some and beats her son down the hallway.