

A Show

Monday morning. Freddie undresses and settles into her hospital bed. She lies back to watch the cabaret. A whisk of nurses, a shuffle of patients, a storm of doctors...there seems to be an endless supply.

Over her bedside table and through the curtains she sees the elderly woman whose bed is on her right. Her name is Dolly. Her *fate* is to be the furthest from the bathrooms Her *task* is, on her painful hobbling return, to carry her urine back for the nurses. Freddie is disconcerted to see that she is using the exact same measuring jug which she, Freddie, has in her kitchen. Would she ever be able to pour half a pint of chicken stock or four ounces of cooking oil in it again?

Every hour, the patient bears her trophy back slowly, holding it high. It always seems excessively full. Freddie wonders if the nurses really need to see it. If they need to know how much, can't Dolly tell them? It is a *measuring* jug, after all. Perhaps it is to give the patient a sense of purpose. A walk-on part this time. Perhaps a speaking part in another performance.

On Freddie's left is the illusionist. This one, whose name is May, is also stricken by her years. She has been *nil by mouth* all morning and is steadily climbing up the beanstalk into a world all her own. A world that *had* been her own, during the War. She spends the day putting on her coat and demanding to be let out of the garage. Freddie has long conversations with her, increasingly disturbed by the woman's pain, attempting to be an ally in a confusing, cruel world.

Whenever the spotlight falls on May, she rises angrily from her bed and whines her way, stage right, to the nurses' station.

"You never listen," she yells. "You're not listening to me. Why won't anyone listen to me."

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She turns to the audience. "You're all against me. Why won't you let me go home? I want my dinner."

"May, you can have some dinner here after your tests," soothes a nurse in her soft Irish voice.

"What tests? You're mad. Why won't you buggers let me go home? Why won't you listen to me? I want to go home."

In Freddie's opinion, this act goes on too long. It is repetitive and almost too sad to bear.

Monday afternoon. An interlude for lunch. Freddie is not allowed to eat, a drip is inserted into her wrist. She feels trapped by it. Will the audience please resume their seats.

Sighing, she lies back and closes her eyes.

She reaches back into Sunday. She is walking on Wanstead Flats, carefree, with her children, the sky growing heavy and bearing down upon them. Susannah is trailing behind with her daddy, moving inch by inch away from the glowing, bird studded lake. Freddie runs with small Flora, thudding slowly on the scraggy grass, dragging her just a little faster than the child can run. Flora's face is wide open with delight.

They trip somehow and roll over together, yelling, joyful. There is a growing turmoil from within her belly but Freddie shouts above its noise, lying flat on her back and holding Flora over her, gazing at her wonderful work of art. The toddler wriggles free and falls on her. They rock, entwined, together. The huge sky gathers around them, holding them tight.

Freddie wakes suddenly as the curtains are whooshed aside. Men in white coats stand around, looking at her.

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"Hello," says one. "I'm *something indistinguishable, what did he say, thinks Freddie...* shall we have another look at your tummy?"

Freddie holds fast to the blankets while cold fingers prod.

"Does it hurt here, or here, or here...?"

Yes, yes, OH YES.

"Sorry about that." He sits down on the chair next to the bed. "Well, you're presenting classic symptoms of appendicitis," he says soothingly. "But we can't rule out some gynaecological trouble as your test proved positive..."

Freddie stares at him dumbly. "What did you say?"

"Ah. You didn't know...?"

Freddie starts to talk, has trouble. She clears her throat. "Are you telling me that I'm pregnant?"

"It looks that way, yes."

He kindly takes Freddie's hand and presses it between his.

"I'm sorry if this is something of a shock."

Tears in Freddie's eyes. "I'm not pregnant."

He looks at her, more in sorrow than in anger. He carefully doesn't say what he is thinking, Freddie knows.

"We could do another test, if you like."

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And wait all day. And be forgotten. It's the interval and it's going on too long, too long.

But the test is done. The show drags on. Freddie reads, yawns, sleeps and watches characters appear and disappear around her. Some time later she is fetched by a long faced youth with a wheelchair. She is helped in and raced down endless corridors. He leaves her rather coldly outside a door labelled ULTRASOUND. She waits and waits in discomfort, even pain. It is gloomy and chilly in this - what is it, a corridor? It falls short of being a room; it is merely a space. You could not concentrate on it, there is nothing to see. You just long to be inside the door.

The longer Freddie waits, the more the Ultrasound room seems enchanted, the answer to her dreams. She almost cries out when someone emerges slowly from the gloom somewhere, walking down the corridor, *let me in, help me!* But the person just walks by on the other side.

At last the door opens and she is allowed in. The room is shining, light sparking from the gleaming machines at its heart. Someone hovers mightily over this treasure and breathes furious fire at the patient.

"Your bladder is not nearly full enough. You're wasting my time."

Freddie feels that this is the most terrible thing she has ever done.

"I'm sorry, it's this drip, it's so slow and they keep taking samples..."

But there is no interest in her faint whimperings. Freddie scuttles off into the undergrowth, warmed as she goes by the fiery blast behind.

Damn and blast it! Outside, in the daylight, Freddie is angry. She leaves the wheelchair behind and drags herself back to the ward.

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Once back in bed, she feels exhausted. She closes her eyes against the late afternoon sun.

A doctor appears.

"Not feeling well? I think it's time we whipped it out, don't you?"

Whipped what out?

Freddie sits up carefully in her bed and stares at him. He is very young.

She speaks her lines carefully. "I was told I was pregnant. I was told it may be ectopic."

"Oh, ah. Were you?" He consults his notes in a controlled panic.

"Am I pregnant, do you think?"

He looks at her blankly.

"From my notes, I mean." Does he think he can tell by staring at me? thinks Freddie.

"Well, there is a - there were some - ah, I think I should consult Mr - if you would bear with me. I won't be long."

She lies back and thinks about this possible blockage of her fallopian tubes.

There are too many long intervals in this show. Who is in charge?

She waits for hours. It grows dark. New shifts of nurses shrug themselves into their uniforms and the day's complaints. One of them gets everyone to wish happy birthday to a desperate looking woman in the corner. The woman smiles bravely, off and on, but she looks like she is dying. She looks like she knows she is dying.

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And in the next bed, May has her coat on. She is waiting for her sister who promised forty years ago to fetch her from the garage. "I don't understand it," whines May. "She never lets me down. Never." Then, viciously, "Wherever has that little slut got to?"

Freddie puts down her newspaper with a sigh. It seems that nothing is going to happen to her tonight. Tonight she will be haunted by the possibilities of life or death within her body.

May is raging at her again. Freddie draws the curtains around her bed for some peace. She settles down uneasily in her bed.

Then, unexpectedly, the curtains whisk open. Several pale faces hovering above white coats appear behind a swarthy suited person. Freddie sighs.

Send in the clowns.

<There (probably) is no (ectopic) pregnancy but there may be an (about to rupture) appendix. If there is a (pregnancy) we will be careful> <Please sign this consent>

It is late on Monday evening. Freddie is wheeled into the operating theatre. This is her big moment. She is the star of the show. Above her, huge lights wheel and glow. Knives gleam and scalpels flash.

But Freddie is not there. After one moment of heavenly communion with the anaesthetist she is once more roaming free on Wanstead Flats, dancing with her babies in the faltering sunlight of a late spring afternoon.