

The Day of the Surgical Colloquium Hosted by the Far East Rand Hospital

Gill Schierhout

THREE MONTHS AGO I lost my hand in a mining accident. Doctor sewed it on again. Now here I am at this Medical Conference, a marvel, picking up cotton reels, tying bits of string. Doctor is saying something, pointing to pictures of my X-rays that are projected up on a big white screen, like the Drive-In.

Strange seeing the stump of your wrist bloated up to 20 times its usual size, projected up there on the wall. I don't recall giving anyone permission to take that picture. There's no doubt it's my limb though. See, the same tattoo as on my forearm; the ink has sunk deep, its pinpricks of blue show up like the pores of a giant orange up there on the wall. I consider whether or not to roll up my sleeves so that at least in the tea-break the audience can see it's me – but then I'd have to take my jacket off and Doreen made me promise to keep it on. I just sit, waiting, like in church. Big holes of sweat are forming under my armpits.

Doctors are here from all over: Jo'burg General, Helen Joseph, Bloem, Chris Hani Baragwanath, everywhere, man. You can tell from the labels they've pinned to their coats.

Must be a good lens on that doctor's camera to take pictures like these. I wouldn't mind a better camera myself. One day I'd like to set up a dark room in the house, do the developing, play tricks with the light, put heads on bodies that do not match. I've seen this in the photographic magazines in the Hospital Waiting Room. I imagine Doreen as a twin. I could do with two wives – I'd let them grimace at one another, identical in blackened tooth, across the picture.

Every week Doreen does the crossword from the Sunday papers, and then she posts it off. They put all the entries into a hat and the first correct one to be drawn

wins a lot of cash. She's never won the crosswords, to my knowledge, but she says it keeps her mind active. Recently she's taken to doing Sudoku too, but there's no cash prize there, it's just the challenge.

'If someone else can do it, so can I,' she says.

A severed hand is quite popular, it seems, but all the fuss over me is going to stop if I lose my head. No one wants to know you then. Like Geezer – he was an average sort of bloke, until the day he and his team were trapped underground for 26 days. He was the sole survivor. The pillars were mined too thin and the roof collapsed. Now he walks around with sticks in his hair, talking to himself. It depends on where you mine and how deep you go as to the size the pillars have to be. Under this hospital for example, it's all mined. There's more stress here; the vibrations, the tonnage of the trucks on the main road, the expansion and contraction. And the safety factor is higher – you can't take out too much of the pillars.

Perhaps one day Geezer'll come right, wake up and comb his hair. Doreen thinks so. She leaves him pots of food sometimes, out on the front step. He comes carefully, like an animal not yet tamed. I tell her not to waste. She just scowls, her face screwed tighter than the cloth she uses to wipe the washed floor dry. A colony lives off that man. The day he dies he'll decompose faster than a rotten cabbage. Every mine has its idiot.

From where I am sitting, I can see the sign stuck on the door of this room, hand-written, big easy letters.

'Conference Room. Surgical Colloquium.'

A big red arrow points inside.

The Doc is showing a picture of my hand – how it was before he sewed it on again. The hand is carefully laid out in its plastic bag on a wide strip of tissue paper; it looks as big as a corpse up there on the wall. It reminds me of a picture of Doreen that I have somewhere at home: she is in the garden, standing in front of last year's mielies. I had put her there to show the height of the crop that we planted beside the house. Man, they towered above her, and she's a tall woman, big-boned too, tallest maize plants you'll ever see. I remember picking up that picture not too long ago and noticing for the first time how her face was all creased up against the sun. She looked middle-aged, and quite worn out, standing there in a yellow Sunday dress and matching hat. A wife can seem so much part of a man. Thinking of that picture now, I have a curious feeling, like something is missing – a phantom pain. There is a sharp tick ticking sound. I look up. It is just the Colloquium sign flapping in a sudden gusty breeze.

Doctor has taken out a small torch now. He's using it to point to the pictures on the wall. The pin-prick torch beam hovers above the thin pale tendons – they

hang from the severed wrist like roots off a turnip. One of the Doctors is blowing his nose on a large handkerchief, a frown across his brow. He turns his head briefly to face the window. Then he looks again at the slide show up on the wall. I remember what someone once told me, that a man tried to lip-print a thousand cows – each lip print was examined and found to be different from every other one. It is the same with humans; we are all made different, it is only our Culture and Education that makes us appear the same.

A new picture is flashed up now, a cross-ways view through my bones. Doctor drones on. That's such a clean cut through my hand. That 80-kg rock splintered from the face had an edge sharper than the blade of a knife. Doreen and I, we've got one child, a boy, there's another kid on the way and each day, she doesn't know if I'm going to come home again after the shift. I don't know how she does it. I don't know how she doesn't crack.

It's a gloomy afternoon here with most of the curtains closed.

I went underground the day I turned 16. Mining wasn't my first choice. I wanted to be a fitter and turner, but there were no positions. You can earn twice as much underground as on the surface, that's why I've stuck it out this long. Sometimes I stand at the main station and look up at the square of daylight, and, at night, sometimes see the stars. The square of light is 300 metres up; stars much higher. There is a longing I have, a longing built in for sunlight. Perhaps it is every miner's dream to own a farm.

When I met Doreen I was 19, just got my blasting certificate. She had passed her Matric and soon after she got a good job in bookbinding. I was working at Daunhauser, Natal. There we worked 11¾ hours a day, some regulation not allowing us to work 12 hours every day. Saturday was half-day, we worked only 9 hours, got drunk Saturday night, slept late on Sunday and back to work on Monday. Pay Day or nearest Friday we hired a car and went to Dundee where the shops stayed open until 9 at night. Used to go to Danhauser station to check on passengers or just to see the trains come in and out. After working underground for a few years I'd saved enough to buy a motorcycle. Doreen liked riding pillion, the faster the better. Until the day I lost my hand.

I didn't expect Doctor to sew my hand on again. But after he did, I taught the hand to do everything it used to: buttons and zips and folding papers, and building up the strength by squeezing rubber balls. By now I can do almost anything, even tie knots in pieces of string.

First thing I saw was the blood in fountains. I yelled out. Twin fountains gushing from inexhaustible veins, coursing from rivers that will never run dry. I tried to stop the fountain, pressing as close to the source as I could. My hand came right off; it was hanging by a bit of skin. And then it fell. I picked it up and called

my mates; one led in front to stop me falling down the stope, one came behind to push a bit. I was holding the left hand with the right, using the hand to squash the blood, stop it shooting up to the roof, stop it shooting, but whatever I did, it flooded. I passed the First Aid station, swore, wouldn't let anyone touch me, passed the second medical depot at the top, swore, no one to touch me until I got to the hospital. Passed out, then came around the next day. I've been here before, 133 broken bones and counting. I am no stranger at the Far East Rand Hospital.

'Just keep breathing,' Doreen once told me.

At that time I was lying in hospital with a broken collar bone and four crushed ribs.

'Just keep breathing Frank. One day things will come right.'

And that's the longest speech I've ever heard her say. Doreen's not the sort to waste her words (only our food, on Geezer). But something else happened Underground that day – it took weeks before I realised it. They are always going on about safety at the mine. A miner tests each working place every day, and uses chalk to write the date on the hanging wall. Only then is the team allowed in that area to work. I've always been a Leftie. And after Doctor sewed my left hand on again, I taught the muscles to work as good as new. But something else changed for me, something I never would have expected. I can no longer write. Not left or right or toes or mouth. The muscles are here, the brain pumps out its thoughts, but whatever it is that takes the words from the brain to the hand to form the letters has gone.

I must have been sleeping or something when Doctor Morar walked in. I saw him first from the back. He was facing away from me, attending to the bloke in the bed opposite. Doctor is a big man, tall, bald as an egg, so that when he turned around and came towards me, I was surprised how young he looked, young, but tired.

'I want the dough, Doc,' I said, pointing with my good hand to the other one laid out on the plastic and crushed ice beside me. 'I won't beg for it, but I am telling you I want a way to get out. I'll try something new – anything on the surface.'

I had in mind to live a healthy sort of a life in the light with plenty of fresh air. Surely the loss of a hand is worth a living wage for a miner?

But when it finally came to do the paperwork required by the Compensation Board, Doc changed his mind. He was so pleased with his work in sewing my hand back on again, that he refused to sign. Back to work with me.

My name is down for the early shift, clocking in at 4am to water the stopes before the team comes in at 6. Then I'll be ahead of the boys, hitting the hanging for loose pieces of rock, sounding it for blisters or bad hanging – loose pieces must be barred down and every place made safe. Yet that day it happened there was no

warning – we'd worked in that stope for two weeks already, it just cracked.

The storm is breaking now, the beautiful Jo'burg downpour of fresh angled rain sounding on the roof outside. The rain bounces on the tarmac, and the sky has broken open and the rain falls in torrents on the roof of the hall and already the gutters are overflowing, the rain spilling over their sides like sand.

I watch the back of Doctor's head from this strange angle. He'd talked me into it, how fine it would be to be on stage. The skull is made up of 29 different bones, the Occupational Therapist had once told me. Meanwhile, the hand only has 24. He's got a cheek this Doctor, showing me off like some prize bull. Sure, my hand works again, good as new. I can wield a hammer, flip a switch, pronate and supinate the wrist with the best of them, tie knots in pieces of string. Yes, it's true he sewed my hand back on again. My fingers close around the ball of string waiting here in my jacket pocket. With the rain, come sheets of lightning, and more and more rain and lightning, and it's suddenly fresh and cool. Doctor carries on with his lecture, as if nothing at all has happened.

It was the hardest thing I've ever done to get out of that stope. There was no oxygen, man, on top of the hand hanging by a bit of string, and the blood. You breathe, and there was nothing there, it's like breathing cotton wool, breathing nothing. Perhaps it was the shock that day I lost my hand, the loss of blood, something in my brain has gone.

I don't think I ever passed Standard Six. I'm not like Doreen, she's very clever. But it still feels peculiar to be unable to write. No doing. Do any of these Doctors have any idea what it's like? To have rising up inside you the things you need to get down: the shopping, the list of stuff you need to remember to do, the parts to buy, the date on the hanging wall, but no way to put it down? A bit of my brain must have died there in the shaft with no oxygen. It was horrible.

Some of them down in the audience are nodding and smiling now. I wasn't paying attention. Doctor must have been talking about me. I must get ready to do my demonstration. The sweat is cooling through my suit at the armpits. I didn't expect to sweat today, not out here on the surface where things are easy, not here in this place. Miners sweat a lot on account of the atmosphere; we pour the sweat from our boots after the shift. I have a little competition going between the left and right boot, to see which is holding more. It's a part of your brain that actually forms the letters, isn't it? I must focus on the string, not worry about the letters.

Doctor is tugging at my suit jacket. He takes my elbow as if to steer me like an old woman, towards the podium. I am supposed to walk now to the table and do my show. I pull myself together.

'I'm no invalid.' I say.

Still he walks with me to the table then pats me on the shoulder. Some of them

nod and smile again. The water on the iron roof is making such a racket I can't hear my own thoughts in here. I'm supposed to show them how I can tie knots in pieces of string: a figure-of-eight; reef knot; granny knot; slippery hitch – any knot you like. And then I'm supposed to pick up cotton reels and do some knitting. The Occupational Therapist made me do it every afternoon in the hospital,

'To strengthen the 24 muscles you have in your hand. Doctor's orders,' she said.

I thought she was quite keen on me the way she carried on. And then I'm supposed to show them the splints they made me; each finger with its own sling and spring.

'How do you feel about your hand, Frank?' Doctor beams from his teeth.

'Talk to the audience,' he instructs.

When my voice comes through the microphone, it's full of breath like fuzz.

'Do you think you can work again?' Doctor asks.

He takes his hand from my shoulder and leaves me there in the centre of the stage. He is sitting down now, arms folded across his stomach. This is piss-easy, man. I see it clear as anything. It's peaceful really now, with the rain on the roof, and all these clever men smiling and listening to me, the world is almost sweet.

When I speak, it is only to try to make the tremble in my voice shut up, it is only to try to make the breath steady up, that I begin to talk. I hold the microphone just as I saw the Doctor hold it, just right, and I blow into it, and I smile.

'What is happening today is not about the compensation, fair is fair, I got my hand back, I can't have the cash.'

I look across the audience, sitting there, some with pens poised to take notes.

'Some other time,' I say, just to keep talking, just to keep my voice from losing itself to the shudder of the ground beneath us. 'Some other time I will tell you what happened the day I lost my hand, what it was like. It's nothing really, accidents happen all the time below the surface. I know you've come here to see me tie bits of string.'

I want to tell them that I can no longer write. I want to tell them how I have tried, sitting up at night with Doreen and the crossword and a pen, crying in rage, night after night, I want to tell them what it's like. But I am afraid that if I start to blubber, the weeping will never stop.

I take a breath. I put my hand in my pocket to pull out the string for the show. There is a pen here too. Just a piece of paraphernalia that the mine gives out for free, along with a handful of condoms in your pay packet. It has a slogan printed on the side:

'AIDS is Real. Time to Change.'

I carefully place the pen and the string on the podium beside the mike. I take

the ball of string and cut the first length. The Doctor's camera zooms in on my hand. Up behind me, a live video of the hand has commenced, projected up there on the wall so that everyone can see exactly how my muscles move. I tie the first knot and the audience applauds. I nod. Nice and slow, I cut myself a second length of string. I am doing just fine. Then the storm breaks – lightning sheets across the faces in front of me and the picture of my hand behind me dissolves altogether into a grey-black wall. The remaining breath is squeezed out of the projector and its lights in a final hum. The audience begin to murmur and scrape their chairs. In a few minutes the storm will be over – what will be left is the sound of the rain on the roof, and the drip, drip, drip of those inadequate gutters on the paving.

No point in carrying on with this if they can't see what I'm doing. If I ever have a chance to build myself a house I'll give generous gutters, proper generous gutters that hold the water and that flow into a rainwater tank. And I'll build the house so it faces North with a good sunroom too, for Doreen to warm up on those late winter afternoons when we get old. She's always had poor circulation, such cold hands and feet.

I look up and see that the Doctor is waving the hand-function spring-thing in front of my face – the contraption they made, just for me, to get my hand to work again. Okay, I have forgotten to do that part of the demonstration.

'Sorry about the power,' he says to the audience. Without the help of the microphone, the Doctor's voice is a little lone cry at the edge of the world.

'Before we wrap up, I would like to demonstrate how the resistance experienced both in flexion and extension at the metacarpal joints...'

I watch him as if through a gauze, a safety net. I shake my head. Instead of taking the hand-function contraption he is trying to put on me, I pull my hand away. I pick up the AIDS pen and hold it out to him.

'You keep this Doc, you may as well have it,' I say. You've done a good job here, on my hand Doc. Congratulations.'

The Doctor reaches out as if to take the pen, to shut me up, and send me on my way so that everyone can applaud him.

'Give the brave man a hand.'

But I have something to say. My voice comes out much louder than I expect it to, a flood of anger shooting the words out of my body.

'I can't write with this hand he's put on me. I cannot even sign my name. What do you think of that? Is there anything more that medical science can do for me now?'

I push over the stupid little podium. And in the clatter, I give the table a kick for good measure. I brace myself to step down and lay a fist across a face or two. I look at the short fat one from Helen Joseph, and the one next to him with his

stethoscope tucked in his pocket. No, I must back down. I must give them a chance. I must stay calm. I return shaking to my small seat on the stage. Every mine has its idiot.

I count three slow drips from the gutters and then the twittering from the audience begins.

'He's a miner,' someone shouts. 'Why does a miner need to write?'

'Hear, hear...'

'And anyway, use the other hand,' another voice calls from the back of the hall. 'He has another hand.'

'Come to my clinic on Tuesday, I'll sort you out.'

A gust of laughter sweeps through the room.

Outside, Doctor finds me. He gives me a bit of cash, as a 'thank you' and offers me a lift. He says it has to be quick because he needs to get back to the Conference Dinner.

'I like some fresh air,' I say. 'I've never seen such a lot of jerks in one place in all my life.'

I step carefully across the world all heavy with damp, the rain all stopped now. The leaves on the trees are so laden that a breeze or bump sends another shower beneath. I take off my jacket as I walk and sling it over the back of my shoulder. The Doc's Thank You is burning a hole in my pocket. The Queen's Hotel is on my way home. A broken bottle is lying near the gutter at the hotel entrance. I could kill someone with that bottle. I think of those Doctors' faces in front of me, and Doctor Morar droning on and on. He reminds me of a bulldog I used to have. Her name was Sally. I had to shoot her because she wouldn't let go of a black kid in the street, I felt bad about that, really bad – about shooting the dog, and about the kid – police made me do it. I turn into the Bar to wash the taste of the mine from my mouth.

Sometimes because of the brandy, Doreen and I have our differences of opinion, but I've never hit her. Well, since losing my hand, to be honest I've come pretty close. I'm sorry about it though, she knows I'm sorry. I know I haven't really been myself since this business.

Our house comes into view. A figure is swinging back and forth on the gate. It's our boy, nine years old, way past his bedtime. His bare feet are hooked in through the chicken wire. He calls from down the street.

'Where's my mother?'

As I come closer I see his eyes are swollen. He is trying to hide his tears through anger and grumbling. And his clothes are drenched through as if he's stood here through several storms. Water drips from his chin, his nose.

'What took you so long? I'm hungry, dad, I'm starved. Mom's gone.'

‘Where is your mother?’

Ray follows me indoors like a dog. The golden liquid slides me through the house. (They say that skin is waterproof, but the scalp, so thickly imbued with oil, must be the most watertight of all, to stop the falling rain).

There is her absence – a bottle of shampoo missing from the bathroom shelf, her yellow Sunday dress gone from its hanger, a space on the shelf where a picture used to stand – Ray, last Christmas holding the pellet gun we gave him. The crossword puzzle sits unfinished in Doreen’s top drawer. Beside it, her small folded umbrella. There is no note.

A little later I hear a scraping at the door, like an animal wanting to come in. I tell Geezer to bugger off. He scatters like seed into the dark wet night.

After Ray is in bed, hugging his pellet gun, I check again. I turn the house upside down but there is no note. A wife is supposed to leave a note, that’s how they do it in the movies.

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