

DRIPPING TAP.....

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Drip, drip, drip was the sound that I was to hear all night long. Although that awful sound annoyed me initially, I would later find comfort in the predictability of its continuous beat and the knowledge that it was to be my only companion in the long hours that lay ahead of me. That first night was very, very drawn out and, oh so bleak! As I lay there in the darkness I was overwhelmed with my helplessness, I vowed there and then never to feel that vulnerable again. The 'comfort' and darkness of my tiny room emphasised for me that it was the 'enemy' that was outside, and it was the 'enemy' who had made these terrible decisions knowing I couldn't answer back. I was to be taught a lesson for my bad behaviour. Too bad if what she was doing to me distressed me so terribly, for I "needed to realise I was disturbing other people." A bit of simple psychology or even just a gentle talk would be all that was needed to change my behaviour, but seemingly not so according to her!

I had continued to ring my buzzer incessantly as it was my only means of communicating. I rang it because I needed to feel some sort of reassurance and contact with other 'normal' people, in my condition I felt so totally isolated from other people and the world. My body was going through so many changes and I was feeling extremely frightened, exposed and vulnerable. These emotions were dramatically heightened for me because it appeared that nobody could be bothered to inform me about what was happening to me, what I should expect, and even if I would survive! Just being with and close to able bodied people was so important, it helped me to feel 'normal' again, seeing them, hearing them, having them near me gave me much needed reassurance.

Several weeks before the above events unfolded I had suddenly succumbed to a mystery illness and had been admitted to the emergency section of a major hospital in Melbourne. I was slowly improving but the days and then the weeks that followed were much the same. I was now able to do some therapy although it was very tedious and exhausting – it had become my only focus in life.

However, on this one particular day I did something that I would later come to deeply regret and would lead to these series of repercussions. Dinnertime had just finished and medication was being handed out to various patients. I didn't need any so I guess I was feeling a bit left out and decided I would get the nurses' attention by ringing my buzzer while they were still in the room. Bad move! This action caused some real aggression and I was left feeling like the naughty child. I thought the venomous words were punishment enough, but this particular nurse had other plans. She decided, after a heated discussion with her work partner, that I should spend the night in the bathroom. So I was wheeled out on my bed not knowing where I was going, passing sleeping patients, empty corridors, white washed walls until finally we reached a large, imposing door that I remember making me feel very uncomfortable at the time. I was told as I was wheeled into that room that this was to be my abode for the night and I was left feeling like a fearful, small child in dread of their punishment. I thought of all the times I had punished children in my previous life as a schoolteacher, and I hoped they had never been made to feel the fear and vulnerability I was now feeling because of my actions.

During the long, awful night with its empty hours my only companion was the endless dripping of the tap interrupted with the occasional visits of the night nurse checking if I was okay. I looked forward to her popping her head in, as I didn't feel so isolated. I'm sure she was happy with me sidelined away, her shift was running smoothly, no disruptions, everything was fine and yet she didn't seem to sense let alone display any empathy for the terrible distress I was enduring. She must have realised I was unable to speak, my mystery illness had left me 'defenseless' and disabled so I was unable to verbalize my needs let alone my feelings. I'm sure the look on my face said it all and she had the nerve to pat me on the back and tell me everything would be okay! I sensed her relief now that her shift was nearly over and there were no hiccups to report, I had been eliminated from the equation.

Nobody knew of my banishment as I was quietly returned to my room while everybody slept in the early hours of the morning, well and truly before the next change of shift. The other less senior nurse was so apologetic and this gave me comfort, she had told her boss she strongly disagreed with her but it had been to no avail. It was such a relief to be wheeled back to my room with its white washed walls as I passed the other patients hooked up to complicated medical equipment. How so very pleased I was to be back with other people, no matter how sick they were. And little did these people know about the night I had endured, they must have been surprised I was so quiet now and I hardly ever rang my buzzer.

That awful night in the bathroom had become so deeply embedded in my memory. It had left me forever fearful that it might happen again so I always made sure I was on my best behaviour whenever any nurse was near to me on her shift. But fear can make the mind work in strange ways and I was amazed at how my imagination became so creative during that ordeal. Although my body was helpless I imagined myself doing incredible things. Like running down the corridor and shouting for help, AND being rescued. I also imagined there was a fire in the hospital and all the patients in the hospital were evacuated – except for the girl in the bathroom! And I saw the headlines in the daily newspaper, 'Girl dies in hospital fire'. No way was I going to die in a bathroom of all places so my imagination kicked in and I visualised myself banging on the door, yelling till I was seriously hoarse and my presence became known. It was the familiarity of my room and seeing the other patients that reassured me that it was only my imagination playing tricks when I heard a tap dripping. Later my imagination really sky rocketed when I imagined I was under a waterfall with huge droplets of water falling on my face. These became 'wonderful' thoughts and were interrupted by the occasional visits of a night nurse (in fact I never saw that awful night nurse again) while making visits to the other patients in the room. When I saw the image of the nurse I was transported back to that horrible night and the dripping tap. How I 'enjoyed' being back!

What a model patient I had now become. The day nurses actually told me I should ring the buzzer for any little thing within reason, and of course little did they know how much trouble it had got me into with 'that nurse'. I did realise later that the noise of my buzzer would have been very distracting. But as a mature adult who had been working in a responsible job as a teacher with everything life had to offer ahead of me, for my life in the space of a second to be suddenly and absolutely transformed, to be left disabled and made speechless and on the death's door, (as I learnt later on) and for me to be literally shoved away in a cold and foreign bathroom over night to be taught a lesson in a very demeaning way – it was such a humiliating, fearful and totally disturbing experience.

Perhaps this incident did have a positive effect on me as any future problems I faced during my recovery seemed minor in comparison and were tackled head on without hesitation. No way was I ever going to feel that helpless or vulnerable again. I would become a very gutsy and willing patient. One who responded well to positive reinforcement and one who would try everything put in front of her to help in her recovery. I became one determined lady and perhaps the actions of the night nurse contributed to my eventual steadfast determination. I am reminded of a song that says 'from little things big things grow.' This is the way I learnt to deal with my sudden contracting of encephalitis - that nurse's actions may be considered 'little' in the scheme of things but my growth is continuous and BIG.....