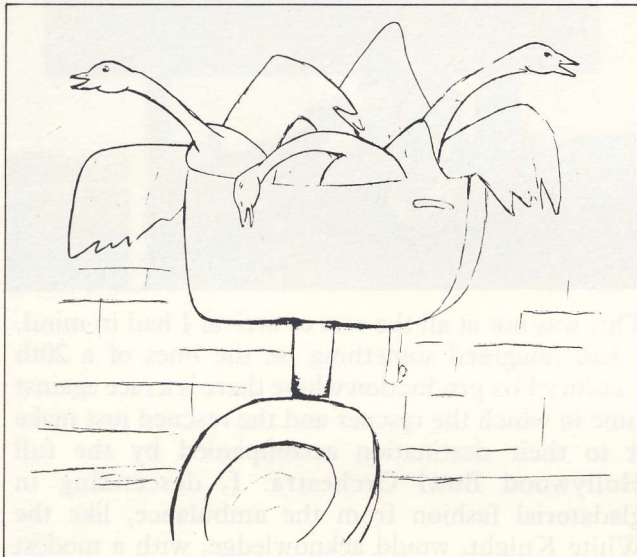


## A Flock of Swans in the Cistern

by Chris Ellis



I have a queasy stomach. This is an affliction you will not wish to know about, though it is of great concern to me. At the least motion on land, sea or air it starts to rotate on its axis. If the motion continues — even for a short while — I have to search out a small room where, according to other members of my family whose testimony I regard as exaggerated, I make a noise like “you’ve disturbed a flock of swans in the cistern, Dad”. Of all the maladies that the flesh is heir to, motion sickness is mankind’s quickest leveller. Those of us who suffer from it can imagine and describe what it is like to be strapped to the blade of a helicopter. We believe in the Holy Ghost, voluntary euthanasia and nausea ever-after.

My come uppance, in every sense of the phrase, came when I was a family doctor in a small town in the Natal Midlands. There was, on the outskirts of the town, one of those institutions where spotty youths from the central cities go on mountain adventure courses to have their acne converted into sunburn and their feet into blisters. It was one of those cold bath, laxative and prayer schools of the great outdoors. An excellently run summer course with experienced instructors and all the correct equipment.

On this particular day a teenage boy capsized his canoe, hitting his helmeted head on a rock underneath the water. Somehow he managed to struggle to the shore, stood up, staggered a few paces

and fell unconscious into the grass. I examined him in the back of a pickup outside my surgery. He was deeply unconscious in his soaking clothes. I lifted his arms up and they fell back like wet logs. His neck was surely broken. If he was going to live he would be paralysed. I admitted him to our local hospital. The air rescue unit from Natal Command in Durban were unable to help us, as evening was approaching and they were reluctant to fly at night, so the newly commissioned intensive care ambulance left Greys Hospital in Pietermaritzburg to collect him. He was then to be transported to the neurosurgical unit at Wentworth Hospital in Durban. It was a long wait. The time hung lonely on the second hand as the boy’s condition remained unchanged. He was still in a deep coma unresponding to all stimuli when through the hospital gates, like an enormous lit up bread van, swung the intensive care ambulance.

It stopped at the hospital entrance, opened and out stepped a pretty nursing sister like out of the wedding cake. She came with the unit, not like those advertisements for expensive cars where a model is hung, sylph like, over the bonnet to warm up the antifreeze but is not included in the price. This one was part of the deal, she smiled and showed us inside. It was like a showroom for microwave ovens; monitors, screens and equipment hummed, clicked or beeped at the touch of a switch. It was the medical equivalent of the Star Ship Enterprise.

We loaded him in and I unwillingly followed with an anticipatory feeling of an imminent intestinal insurrection. I had taken several varieties of anti-emetic which were starting to make me feel sleepy. I knew they wouldn’t work. We, who hold gastric conversations with airline paper bags and who hang over sea rails hurling insults at sea gulls are not convinced by the pharmacology of pills or strips behind ears or bands around our wrists. We are too far gone for them. They cannot reach our resistant psyches.

The ambulance had hardly driven out of the hospital gates when the subtle flavours of lunch, especially pudding, started to revisit. I assumed a vertiginous hue of white and a heavy dew on the upper lip. Even breakfast wanted out. Such was the spaciousness of the vehicle that it was possible to stand up and, somewhat carefully, walk up and down the aisle. I slowly paced up and down to see if it would help

to keep my ice cream neapolitan in its place. There were stretchers on either side of the aisle and a stairwell down to the back doors and at the back was a seat on a return spring which you pulled out of the wall.

I sat down and assumed the position of Rodin's vomiter, head in hand, contemplating the reversal in direction of food's natural digestive journey.

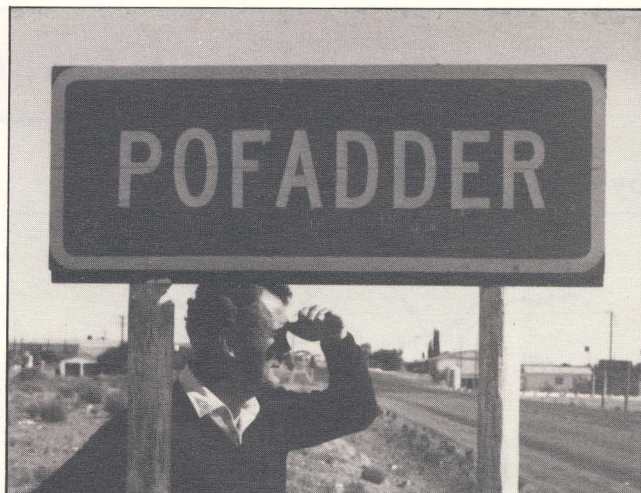
The illness of motion sickness is a strange one in that by some perverse logic of creation one gets brief respites. It's a wave motion that goes and returns to test the elasticity of the solar plexus. The subtlety of the build up has an almost mouth watering inevitability to it. Small waves inexorably leading to bigger waves and then on to the tidal. Somewhere along the way there is an annihilation of the spirit. Some of the finer reasons for living seem to blur.

I was doing a bit of blurring when something went wrong with the intravenous drip. I got up and fixed it. On returning I sat down but I had forgotten that the seat on the wall was on a spring. I sat through the air, falling down into the well at the back hitting my head on the doors and my right knee on the step. I lay there stunned like a recently landed mackerel in the bottom of a boat. My mouth slowly opened and closed and my eyes glazed over into a distant world. The pretty nurse, now with two patients, pulled me out and suggested I lie on the other stretcher.

Unfortunately I get worse when I lie down and besides, my self image, frail and helpless as it was, was not ready for further descent.

It was then that the boy started to move his hand. For several minutes the adsorption with myself was forgotten while I checked him over. He opened his eyes and spoke. The history becomes a bit jumbled in my mind after this. After the initial relief of the patient's improved health, mine began to deteriorate. He was now starting to speak and move freely as I began to submerge. I started some fairly productive oesophageal talking. Please God, I think I even promised to declare all my income tax next year if He would stop it. He didn't. I could hear the driver talking over the radio. "This is the ICU ambulance travelling to Wentworth Hospital, we will be making a diversion to Greys Hospital as the condition of our medical officer is deteriorating".

**Are you an  
Academy  
member?**



This was not at all the sort of arrival I had in mind. I had imagined something on the lines of a 20th Century Fox production where there is a race against time in which the rescuer and the rescued just make it to their destination accompanied by the full Hollywood Bowl Orchestra. I, descending in gladiatorial fashion from the ambulance, like the White Knight, would acknowledge, with a modest wave, the hurrahs of the town's people lining the streets.

There is a small patch of grass outside the casualty entrance of the old Greys Hospital where they gently laid me like a catherine wheel that's lost its fizz.

A feeling of professional pride made me refuse the casualty sister's invitation to lie on the bed inside. I just lay there thanking the celestial authorities that it was all over. Several moments later another ambulance came flashing into the casualty bay. I looked up to see its doors open and two drunks of heroic proportions fall out. Their legs functioned in the same fold of manner as mine as they were led in. Some inner sense of propriety wouldn't allow me to follow that act in. My ego sunk itself lower into the grass.

The pretty sister said goodbye to me and my ambulance left on its onward journey into the dark.

I never saw them again but heard that the boy was diagnosed as a severe concussion with spinal shock. He recovered uneventfully and was walking in two days. I did better than that. I was walking within two hours.

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