

Charity Begins

A leopard has been watching me all morning. He is lying on a tree branch, very relaxed, paws hanging limply but his head is turned directly towards me and his eyes are focussed and alert. Not unfriendly, just alert. He is watching me at the shredder where I am choking the manic little teeth with wads of useless paper. I've had to resort to surgery with a green paper clip, trying to release the shredder mechanism from one of its regular spasms. It is switched off and unplugged but I still feel as though I am delicately picking the teeth of a crocodile.

There aren't actually any crocodiles in the wonderful bright corridor mural; there are leopards and their cubs playing under the tree. Further along there are fat round elephants, as chalky grey as battleships, smiling around their trunks. A family of buffalo, looking as grumpy as they always did on the old R100 bank notes, graze the green expanse; a giraffe nearly bangs his head on the ceiling as he looms over the store room doorway; an unbelievably charming nuclear family of lions sport beside the pool and a mother rhino and her baby are protected from harm by the double doors of the boardroom. Two grey herons are stalking across the greenest grass you've ever seen and a right-angular waterfall gushes exceptionally blue water into a river.

There's a lot to hold the attention of the leopard so I don't know why he is always staring in at me. People pass up and down the corridor all the time but the mural is largely unnoticed by the adults. They are more interested in the lunchtime hand-outs or they are in a state of confused anxiety in the face of the overwhelming environment of the hospital. The children for whom these cheery animals are intended, are usually in the wards, locked into oncology, TB, burns, ICU, dialysis. So it is up to me, in the admin office where I volunteer once a week, to admire the menagerie.

The smell of burning stew seeping down the corridor tells me that the kitchen has had a minor disaster but it makes a change from boiled onions and/or boiled fish that is often on the menu. The leopard, unimpressed by the smell of human food, continues to keep me under surveillance as I release the munching machine and start on the pile of paper again. Then he watches without comment as I update the database of donors for last month but I think I catch a glimmer of approval when I send the thank-you emails and postcards.

The pace in reception here at the office of the Friends of the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital is varied. There are periods when I don't have enough to do and hence get all excited when the phone rings, and flutter about like the static but forever flapping birds on the pale yellow sky with its flat blue clouds out there in the corridor. It's even more fun when people come in with their volunteer application forms and things can get very busy when a number of donors arrive at once, trailing children and toting boxes of clothing and toys. Sometimes they bring crisp, newly knitted jerseys and caps from gentle, arthritic fingers in retirement villages.

Sometimes the toys are brand new – one man asked for soft toys for his 80th birthday and brought in two huge bags of voluptuously cuddly pastel animals. Sometimes the toys are old and pre-loved nearly to death, handed over by virtuous and brave six-year-olds who watch uncertainly as their

erstwhile teddies and blankies are hauled off down the corridor to the storeroom. Parents and grandparents keep up a steady stream of encouraging platitudes but you can see that charity is a wrenching business when it is your beloved that is being so summarily disposed of.

It is a pity that the children can't go into the wards and see if their darlings are being cherished but it is nearly impossible to get into the wards – the play therapy volunteer application process is stringent and implacable, which is good. You can't let just anyone in with that most vulnerable category of humanity – a sick child. Perhaps that is what the leopard is all about, with his watchful and unblinking gaze.

Despite the onion/fish odour seeping down the corridor, I know that the free lunch canteen gets sandwiches from an upmarket food store and a savoury stew made by cooks who love and understand spices. This food is for the parents, who are often long-term support for their children and far from home. My heartstrings twist every day at the sight of those thin, far-too-young mothers and earnest, anxious fathers, trying to read complex hospital paperwork. Their children get the best of care from the hospital staff and the parents are helped to cope with their private terrors fears of the unknown by the Friends down here on the ground floor.

I hold my breath against the oozing onion smell and bend again to the clotted teeth on the shredder. The leopard watches me unblinkingly. We volunteers must band together...