

## **I'm his mother**

It was the day after Gladys fell in the duck pond. She had struggled to the door on two sticks, obviously in more pain than usual, but her sense of humour had not the slightest dent in it. Sitting carefully in her raised armchair she prepared to recount the events of the previous afternoon.

'But first come through and see my new chair.'

As she led me slowly through her tiny kitchen and out to the wooden shed in the yard I asked, 'What happened then?' but Gladys simply replied, 'I felt such a fool.' She was going to be sitting comfortably again before she would tell the story, in case she missed some detail. I mentally blocked off the rest of my planned afternoon visits.

Gladys let me undo the padlock and swing back the shed door. There inside was a shiny red electric chair. Before she could tell me I could see by its tight fit in the shed the chair was much larger than her previous one.

'Jimmy cleaned it up for me,' she said. 'It was a bit of a mess, but mostly round the wheels where it caught up the pond weed. Fortunately it didn't go right over.' She laughed. 'You know the ducks weren't bothered at all. They tucked into the weed as though I'd gone in purposely to get it for them.'

Back in the sitting room I heard how Gladys, in defiance of her daughter's strict orders, had gone out to try her new chair. It was only a short ride to the park. The chair was more powerful, heavier and faster than the one she had traded in. A rapid acceleration to avoid two sparring dogs took her off the path and panic braking slewed the chair so that it slid gently into the muddy shallows among some surprised ducks.

'It was really quite graceful the way we went down,' Gladys mused. I listened to the next episode telling of a dramatic rescue by a young knight in white trainers, jeans and a long pigtail. With so much detail to hear I had time to take in again the familiar surroundings, and Gladys's portrait gallery. That's what she called the wall opposite me. It was covered with photographs of her family. Five children, thirteen grandchildren and four great grandchildren, plus a host of other young faces of those she had fostered through the years.

Her family was Gladys' life. Most of them called sometime each week and she would always be thinking up some reason for having a party for the young ones. With nearly forty birthdays between them that was not difficult. In the middle of the gallery and a little larger than the others was her faded picture of her son, Ned.

I knew Ned's story well now. As well as it was possible to know. Gladys was always pleased to talk about him, mainly because her own family refused to listen. They had disowned Ned a long time ago. He was the eldest by several years and had not formed very close relationships with his siblings.

Gladys thought that not having a father around in his formative years and him being a loner had caused him to go off the rails. He had been bright at school, but she was forever having to see the head teacher about his attitudes and behaviour. He had just left school when he got into company with a troublesome group and was caught breaking and entering. Gladys had spent many hours visiting him, just as she had given of herself through the previous years, knowing the others felt he had far more attention than them.

It had seemed a good thing when Ned decided to join the merchant navy and start a new life for himself. Gladys had been distraught when he did go away, but persuaded herself it was the only way for him to start afresh and make something of his life.

Ned wrote one letter in the next five years. Just a note from Singapore on an air letter with no return address. Some years later she had asked the Salvation Army to trace Ned for her. From them she learned that he had settled in Australia and was married with two children. Reading between the lines it seemed that he had spent some of the intervening time in prison, but they did not give more details. There was a latest address and Gladys full of hope, wrote a long letter enclosing family photographs. No letter came back.

Every night Gladys prayed for her son. Every day she thought about him and hurt for him. The longing to see him and his family was always with her. The rest of the family told her to forget him. Susan was specially bitter against her brother and hated him for what he had done. Gladys felt sure Susan knew things she was not telling her. Roger, the youngest, had always been jealous of Ned for the attention his mother gave him, and refused to talk about him.

Gladys put down the knitting which had occupied her during the telling of the duck pond saga and tearfully said what she always did when we talked about Ned. 'How can I forget? If my boy walked through that door today I would welcome him with open arms. Wherever he is and whatever he's done I'm his mother.'