

### The Red Door

When I saw my father tied to a hospital bed like a science experiment, I felt a shift in my priorities, and although my brother stood beside me, I suddenly felt completely alone. 2001 had already been an eventful year. I'd joined the band that would change my life, I'd turned 21 and realised it was time to grow up (still a work-in-progress), September 11 had slammed into the bedrock of the western consciousness, and a month later my father contracted peritonitis: a typically fatal illness.

Two days prior to dad winding up in the Intensive Care Unit at Epworth Hospital we had been talking up in the wards. He appeared to be recovering well from the surgery to remove a small abnormality in his bowel. Regular morphine hits were giving him the high spirits of a drunken clown, and for a serious and dignified man like my father this was a more priceless scenario than Visa could spin.

The following morning my step-mother, Chris, informed me that dad's health was declining. His temperature was high, he was nauseous, and he was becoming disorientated. His surgeon had no explanation. By lunchtime dad had his own team of doctors scratching their heads and furiously hypothesising the cause.

In the afternoon I was at home tuning my drum kit for a show that night at the DV8 night club. Across the room the TV played the fifteen thousandth repeat of the plane flying into the World Trade Centre. This followed with extracts from President Bush's typically hilarious fumbling patriotic speeches that always left serious questions about the man's grasp of the English language. Then BAM!, more plane-crash footage, just in case we'd missed it. Amid the tapping of drum skins and the now familiar sounds of panic and destruction, the phone rang. It was Chris.

“Your dad is going back in for surgery,” she says.

“Oh shit!” say I, as tower one collapses to dust on my TV screen.

The surgeons had decided that the likely explanation for dad’s condition was that something had gone wrong in the first surgery, but being surgeons it was naturally not their fault. Two major surgeries within three days of each other is a lot for anyone to deal with, even a strong, healthy man like my father. I was alarmed, to say the least.

I’m not sure what time it was when I saw my father that night. Maybe nine o’clock. It seemed irrelevant. Time stopped the moment I stepped foot over the threshold of the ICU. Most areas of a hospital close down to some extent at night. The patients sleep and the nurses sit behind desks trawling through paperwork until a time when they are needed. Doctors are nowhere to be found. But the ICU is active at all hours. At night it’s semi-dark. The work station in the center of the room is well lit, but the light stops at its perimeter. The rest of the unit is gently lit by the oozing green glow of the various exit signs around the room. Heart monitors beep monotonously at each bedside. Breathing machines force air into the lifeless lungs of people bathed in the shadow of death. Some will pull through. Some won’t.

As the nurse led my brother and me through the ICU I immediately became aware of the jammed wheel of time. There was no point in measuring seconds or minutes. The clock hands simply ceased to serve a purpose, like a depth pole in a dried up river bed. As we rounded a curtain we were confronted with a picture that didn’t make sense all at once. I recognised the man in the bed but the scene was too unreal or unfamiliar or impossible to comprehend cognitively. Behind a tangle of hoses and wires was the face of my father.

He looked anguished. His arms had been tied to the railing on each side of the bed to stop him tearing the tubes from his throat and nose. The doctors were forcing him into the blackness of a coma but he wasn't going quietly. That stoicism I knew so well had overtaken my father's base instincts.

My older brother, Nathan, and I had never been good at talking to each other. Growing up our idea of communication usually meant a fist fight. Being the younger brother and much smaller I rarely came off best. So I'd like to say that when we were presented with a scene like that where we were forced to be one hundred percent present, where we could not ignore the gravity of our shared experience that we were able to scale the walls of our monosyllabic history and communicate like normal people. It was never going to happen. All we could do was stand over the man who had raised us alone and fight to the death any emotion that dared try for physical expression of itself. It almost came as a relief when a vague, drunk version of consciousness snatched dad from his coma and brought him into conflict with his restraints. Nathan and I manned an arm each trying to pacify him, but even under heavy sedation he was stronger than the both of us, and as always, stubborn as hell.

"Stop it, dad!" growled Nathan, more out of fear than anger, I think.

We used our voices loaded with any words we could find to calm him, and he must have known we were there. His head fell back against the pillow and his arms back by his sides. We joked that we'd need tougher restraints. Then we went back to our silent observation. Eventually Nathan spoke up.

"He'll pull through. He's a tough old bugger."

I just nodded. I could hear the panic in his voice. The last thing my brother would ever

want me to know was that he was scared, and I'd never slight him by drawing attention to it. Standing there staring at my father, watching his chest rise and fall in a state of total and complete vulnerability, I felt the strangest calm wash through me. We had been told that his situation was bad. We had been told that for the next twelve hours he would be teetering on the very precipice between life and death. But I was calm. In hindsight I think it may have been a calmness that only comes with incomprehension verging on ignorance. Or perhaps a part of me knew I wasn't meant to lose my father that night. Whatever it was, I left the ICU after saying what, for all I knew, may have been my last goodbye. After leaving the hospital I drove my car to the city and played the DV8 gig. I never once mentioned to my band-mates a word about my father.

I arrived home that night around two in the morning. I was exhausted. After eating a sandwich and watching a taped episode of the Simpsons I eventually collapsed into bed, but I couldn't sleep. I lay there staring through the crack in the curtains at the stars above and thought about my father in that hospital bed. I wondered if he was still a citizen of planet Earth. I wondered what my life would be like without him. I wondered until my head hurt.

Dad survived through the night, but he was not improving. I made the hour long drive to the hospital and arrived at around 10AM. The journey through the labyrinth to the ICU was one I would become very familiar with. In through the Bridge Road entrance; left at the café with the typically bad but necessary hospital coffee; elevator to the second level; left, then right past reception; down the corridor; left; another elevator; up to the third floor; past the gurneys then hard left; up the corridor; the red double-doors on the right.

When I got there several family members were already standing outside the ICU. Only two immediate family members were allowed in the ICU at any one time, so there was a

constant line of sisters, brothers, sons, and Chris at the ICU door. Chris had immediately appointed herself the gatekeeper of the red door. No one was getting past without her consent. No one but Nathan and me.

Chris was there when I arrived. She'd slept in the ICU visitors' room down the hall. You could question her methods of protecting my father, but you couldn't question her devotion to him. I still try to keep that in mind on the odd occasion when she's going about the complicated business of being a pain in the arse.

I wanted to go in straight away. Two of my aunties were just coming out so I jumped the queue. The ICU is an incredibly sterile place. Before entering it is mandatory to kill every bit of bacteria on your hands with the sanitising gel in the pump bottle at the door. You don't step foot into that room without hospital-clean hands. Now knowing the procedures I headed straight in where I was met with the smiles from a few nurses. The kinds of smiles that say, "We reluctantly welcome you into our workspace." Apparently my family had been on a revolving-door roster of visitations since visiting hours started.

Dad looked more peaceful now. He was in a fully comatose state. He'd never looked so old. His skin was grey and looked brittle like paper. I noticed he had a tube coming out of his throat. Not out of his mouth: his throat. He also had a series of little round bags hanging off his abdomen. They were collecting a yellowy liquid that I assumed was puss. I didn't know if there was any point in talking to him. It seemed silly to talk to someone who was in a state of unconsciousness well beyond normal sleep. I'd heard that people in comas can hear to some extent, but it still didn't make much sense. Just then Chris came up behind me and stood on the other side of the bed.

"Kerard, Aidan's here," she said in her gentle but unnecessarily loud voice.

Chris is from one of those families that are completely unaware of the term *indoor voice*. “Say hello to your dad. He can hear you.”

I found that hard to believe. But on the off chance she was right I spoke.

“Hi, dad. How are you feeling?” I immediately regretted the question. What a stupid question to ask someone who is in a coma and as sick as they will ever be. Not to mention he couldn’t answer me.

“Just talk to him, love,” says Chris. “He needs to know you’re here, so just spend a minute with him and then we’ll go for a coffee and I’ll tell you what’s happening.”

I spoke to dad for a few more minutes. Chris went back to the red door so I didn’t feel quite so silly. I told him about the gig the night before. I told him that I was dropping out of TAFE and was surprised when he didn’t wake up just to choke me Homer Simpson style. I told him I didn’t like the course; that it wasn’t for me; that I had more important things to worry about at the time. I had no idea if he could hear me or if I may as well be talking to a garbage can on the street. The heart monitor maintained a solid tempo the whole time so I figured he hadn’t heard the part about me quitting TAFE.

Down in the café Chris and I sat at one of the dark timber tables stirring our respective hot beverages. She couldn’t have caffeine so she drank what my dad called “birdseed tea.” In reality it was chamomile. Other people sat around us presumably having similar conversations about their sick or dying loved ones. The coffee was terrible. It was that kind of coffee that makes you grimace with every sip like you’re drinking bad whiskey. It didn’t take long for Chris to start slapping me with facts about the human bowel and immune system, infection and antibiotics. I got the full run-down on dad’s condition.

A mistake the size of a pin head was all it took to land my father in a world of shit. When the surgeon removed a small portion of dad's bowel and sewed the ends back together, he left the tiniest hole in the join. When dad was given a glass of water in the hours following his first surgery he had experienced abdominal pain. That was the contents of his bowel leaching into his abdominal cavity and parading around his organs like a fucking marching band of bacteria. The result of such a surgical snafu is a massive infection of the peritoneum – the thin tissue that lines the abdominal wall and covers the organs. This, I learned that day, is what peritonitis is. If you are unfortunate to have your organs literally swimming in shit you are, as the surgeon who cocked up your surgery probably wouldn't say, potentially fucked!

I stared into the mud that inhabited the cup in front of me. There was a growing expectation for it to crawl out and go and start a business. But it stayed there, stagnant and undrinkable. It didn't matter though. The coffee was only there to facilitate a difficult conversation. Coffee has mediated many a hardship, softening the blow with its Earthy, dark, bitter state of disappointment.

Having a better understanding of what was happening inside my father's body made the whole production much more real. It brought credibility to an otherwise absurd narrative. That was until the narrative became a soap-opera that would rival any of television's over-acted hospital dramas. Things were already tense. They had been tense since day one and as the seriousness of dad's condition increased, so did the tension in the family. Dad's five sisters were alternating shifts to stand by the red door and battle the gatekeeper. My late grandfather called his five daughters the Mafia. Collectively they were (and still are) a terrifying quintet of intimidating, highly strung, occasionally hysterical, often unreasonable, frequently irrational feminine fury.

Consequently, when the Mafia – all strong willed women – encounter an equally strong

force such as Chris, it's best to hide behind something large and heavy. The tension alone could crush a man's ribcage like a Coke can. Adding high drama and emotion to such a volatile mix of personalities...let's just say you can still smell the friction burn in the corridors of Epworth. But the dynamic of this stand-off took an unpredictable turn on dad's third night in the ICU. My mother, former friend turned mortal enemy of Chris, had traveled to Melbourne from South Australia to be with my brother and I and to see our father. Chris was careful not to express her feelings about this anywhere near Nathan or I. But we heard all about it. There was plenty of "What the fuck is she doing here?" and "She's not going anywhere near my husband" (keep in mind they weren't married) and "I am not leaving this door as long as she's anywhere near this hospital". These impassioned cries rolled like fireballs down the corridor to the waiting room that Nathan and I were in.

This was when the Mafia dropped all to keep the peace for the benefit of their brother. Chris was carefully chaperoned out of the hospital by several sisters. They took her to Bridge road to find somewhere that was still serving coffee at 9PM. The remaining sisters escorted mum into the hospital via another entrance so that paths would not be crossed and the red door would not become the blood-red door.

Mum came to us in the waiting room first; another strong-willed woman thrown into the melting pot. Mum is a little more in control of her emotions than Chris. Though she can be overly dramatic, she is rarely hysterical. Chris is a fucking Shaolin master of hysteria.

Apart from my 21st birthday two months before, I hadn't seen mum in about a year, but one thing I could always count on was her consistency in swooping in at the eleventh hour of a crisis to make a grab for the Mother of the Year award. Nathan and I both have a sordid history with our mother. She left when we were both very young and had done some pretty terrible things to us, but more importantly, to our father. We knew she still

cared deeply for him, but she was too deep in her own rabbit hole to ever act accordingly.

Nathan and I greeted our mother with jealously guarded love and kept her at an emotional distance. This was a self-protective method we had both learned over the years of disappointment and crushed expectations. Nathan, being two years older, had been more aware of her wrong-doings and had refined his defenses to the point that they often became offenses. He had made a sport of tearing our mother's throat out with venomous, embittered words. It was a relationship built on explosive conflict.

Before entering the ICU mum had devastated a nurse who tried to tell her she could not go in because she was not immediate family. Mum was herself, a registered nurse and explained quite clearly that that man in the ICU was the father of her children and if anyone tried to stop her going in there would be a seriously complicated incident report to fill out. For a small lady she breathes a ferocious fire.

After succeeding in crushing the poor nurse's self-esteem she was permitted (begrudgingly) to enter the ward. Dad had been moved closer to the door, presumably because the staff were tired of the constant flow of traffic to and from his previous position on the far side of the room. The two person rule remained, so Nathan waited outside. The blinds were still open and the ambient green lighting of the ward was polluted by the orange glow of the street lights, which poured in like a bushfire sky from the city beyond the windows.

The next ten minutes were among the strangest of my life. My mother, despite her selfishness, her betrayal, dishonesty, and her tenacious skills of manipulation, has an amazing propensity for compassion. If I squinted hard enough I could almost imagine my parents were still married; that she was holding the hand of the man she was completely

devoted to. One might say that that was what I wanted to see, but to be honest, I can't think of anything more upsetting to the natural order than my parents being together. But in that moment I realised that, despite screwing him over at every turn, my mother did, in some way, still love my father.

After some time I opted to trade places with Nathan. I knew that even he, with his venomous tongue and animosity, would never make a scene in Intensive Care. We traded places at the red door. I have no idea what Nathan and mum spoke about, or even if they spoke at all. I went down the corridor to the ICU waiting room. It's a room that has obviously been set up for lengthy waits and nights devoid of sleep. I made a cup of instant coffee and planted myself on the couch. The television only ever seemed to be on ABC. That was fine by me though. I was developing a healthy loathing for commercial television.

At that time around fifty percent of any news program was devoted to what was not even yet known as 9/11 or September 11 or the September 11 Terrorist Attacks. The words "terror", "terrorism" and "terrorist" were systematically being enmeshed with words like "Muslim", "Islam", and "Middle Eastern". The ancient smell of the witch hunt was on the breeze. I sat with my scolding hot cup of Nescafe Blend 43 and watched footage of the suspiciously rapid and efficient cleanup of what was just being called "Ground Zero". The pride of the New York skyline was gone. The pride of the U.S nation had been pulverised to dust, altering the perception of immortality for all Americans. But amid the chaos and fear, the destruction and panic that was beginning to choke the confidence of the western world, life carried on. The billions of stories being played out on the planet carried on. Chris was in a café somewhere in Richmond drinking chamomile tea with the Mafia and possibly scratching "Die, bitch!" into the table with her car keys (I can only speculate on that); Nathan was holding his tongue in the presence of our unconscious father while our mother looked down with loving eyes on

the man she will always regret walking out on; dad remained in a dream state where the world that was moving around him was morphing in his mind into a Dali film; and then there was me, sitting alone in a waiting room, drinking bad coffee and watching the world change on a 32 inch screen, waiting for my father to wake up.

It was very early morning when dad did wake up three weeks later. The sunlight was just beginning to stroke the spring blossoms on the trees below the ICU windows. Dad had never seen the ICU. He had been unconscious as long as he'd been in there. His eyes struggled to focus on anything. His senses had gone unused for the longest time since the womb. His muscles had deteriorated. His round face had sunken and his ribs were showing. The time he had spent in a coma was nothing more than a patchwork of surrealist imagery. It would take him weeks to stitch reality back together in any meaningful way.

Chris remained by dad's bed-side until he left the hospital. The Mafia reluctantly accepted that they would have to stand by their brother on Chris's terms or not at all. And despite Chris's proven devotion to our father, Nathan still cannot find forgiveness for her "I'll scratch your eyes out" bedside manner. As for me, I took a very "Switzerland" approach to the whole thing. I figured that family members are people we are stuck with no matter what. And it's much easier to stay out of the bullshit than land face first in it.

Weeks, even months after dad walked out of Epworth the events that took place over his hospital bed were blissfully unknown to him. I think he preferred it that way.