

# Murdering Mrs Durance<sup>1</sup>

» THOMAS KENEALLY

It was said around the valley that both the Durance girls went off but just the one bothered to come back. People could not have said which one since the girls were both aloof and looked similar, dark and rather tall. There was confusion even in the local paper. And they weren't the sort of girls whose names got called across streets, girlfriend hallooing girlfriend in the excitement of Kempsey's big shopping days. Before the war it was the younger one – wasn't it? – who stayed at home with the parents. So the younger, wasn't it? The just a bit shorter one anyhow. That one had taken her mother Mrs Durance to visit the surgeon in Sydney. But what could those Macquarie Street doctors do?

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After a choppy night's passage down the coast aboard the *Currawong*, Mrs Durance had only fallen asleep off Broken Bay and then needed to be woken by a steward bearing tea – Sally being on deck at the time, for the experience of the approach to Port Jackson – as the steamer entered the Sydney Heads. Mother and daughter had time for a cup of tea at the Sydney wharf in Darling Harbour before Sally took her still exhausted to the specialist's rooms in Macquarie Street. After an examination by this eminent man she was sent from his office across Macquarie Street to Sydney Hospital for X-rays. Waiting for these to be developed and

read, she and Sally met up with Naomi, the other daughter, the one who was considered a bit flash – Macleay District Hospital not good enough for her – who'd been in Sydney a few years.

They went that afternoon together to a bang-up tea at Cahill's, when she and they did not know what the expert men who read the body's inner secrets from photographs were at that hour discovering. They knew she had understated her pain to them. They knew she was secretive about the scale of her bleeding and the urine coming out of the wrong opening.

That night, Naomi put them up in her little flat – Mama sharing Naomi's bed, Sally on the lounge. They could have all stayed at Mrs Durance's younger sister Willy's place at Randwick for Mrs Durance didn't want to share news of her problems with her sister as yet. Both Sally and Naomi would wake to hear their mother's choked-down groans. But unblunted ambition seemed to declare itself in the briskness Naomi put on her uniform and her scarlet cape the next morning to go to her duty at Royal Prince Alfred.

There had always been something larger than her beginnings written in Naomi Durance's gestures and her long bones. Her parents even knew it. She had left them for the city, but in so far as they were boastful, they boasted of her. Sally worked a mere three miles from home, across the river, at Macleay District. Merit in that, no one

ABOVE

North Head Cliffs,  
Sydney.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA  
COMMONS

denied, and loyalty. But it was news of Naomi that made eyes shine on the Durance farm.

So it was cervical cancer, the surgeon told Mrs Durance the next morning. There was no option of an operation, for it would be very long, painful and dangerous and could not hope to get all of the proliferating cancer. Surgical procedures were to be recommended chiefly in early stages. Whereas metastasis had already occurred as the X-rays showed. If she rested well and ate lots of fruit, he said, she could expect to live at least a year. She was a dairy-farmer's wife? Well, no more butter-churning, he said, and no early morning milking. He gave her a script for pain medicine, he told her. He would be writing to her doctor in the Macleay so that he could keep her comfortable.

You are fortunate to have two daughters who are registered nurses, he told her.

I am, she said, glowing with the pride but hollowed by pain.

She and Sally caught the regular outward journey of the *Currawong* home the next night. Naomi saw them off at Darling Harbour, in the shadow of those shameful slums of the Rocks from which bubonic plague had come boiling forth in their girlhoods and travelled north on *Currawong* by a rat nestled in a furniture case, bringing a small outbreak to Kempsey which killed a youth, a farmer's wife and a nursing sister in the Macleay District's plague ward. Naomi waited in their small cabin until the last call to go ashore and then stayed on the wharf to wave a futile handkerchief. She could have stood for one of those heartbreaking paintings of emigrant farewell.

She is so beautiful, isn't she Sal? asked Mrs Durance, leaning on the railing from pain rather than as a gesture of languid seafaring. She has a lot of grace, doesn't she?

As they reached on a black tide for Dawes Point, the handkerchief still waved, more luminous than Naomi's face. Bush people did that handkerchief-waving stuff and it gave them away as hayseeds, but worldly Naomi risked that tonight.

She had promised she'd come up as often as she could and help Sally out. But that she would remain a city woman was not questioned.

It was a brisk night, and Mrs Durance developed a cold on top of all else and again fell asleep late. Again Sally came on deck at dawn and looked out on the blue surge of the tide breaking on the yellow sand of Trial Bay and making enough water at the river bar to allow the *Currawong* to enter.

For six months Mrs Durance ate her fruit and

sat in sumps of sunlight on the veranda. But the cancer owned her by night. Sally still worked the day shift at Macleay District but now slept on call in the same room as her mother, her father having moved to a lean-to at the back of the homestead. Sally was to administer an eighth of a grain of morphine hypodermically when brave and reticent Mrs Durance confessed, one way or another, to agony. Naomi took her holidays and came home on a visit and gave her sister a break from the regimen. In between, Mr Durance paid Mrs Sorley's girl to sit with Mrs Durance by day and was attentive himself. But since Mr Sorley had been killed by a native cedar – which when cut slipped sideways rather than forward – the Sorley kids were ever ready for employment.

Sally noticed more clearly now that though her father and mother were souls of decency, Eric Durance moved about the bed as if he and his wife were acquaintances only. He seemed to fear he might be seen as an intruder. There had always been that distant courtesy between the parents. Sally knew they'd infected Naomi and her with it too. It might be one of the reasons Naomi had cleared out, in the hope that on a different stage she might have a different, franker soul.



BELOW

Prince Alfred Hospital.

SOURCE: MITCHELL LIBRARY, STATE LIBRARY OF NSW, CALL NO. GPO1 – 29070.



LEFT

Trial Bay, NSW.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Mrs Durance suffered so much night pain that she frequently told Sally she was praying to God for death. These were remarkable and dramatic things for Mrs Durance to say and – since she had always had contempt for overstatement – could be forced out of her only by the fiercest anguish. In the seventh month of it, Naomi came back from Sydney yet again to sit with her mother by day and share the night watch.

The second night Naomi was home, Sally slept

in her own room while Naomi took up post in the camp cot in Mrs Durance's room, a surface of canvas no blanket could soften. Naomi was meant to wake Sally at four so that she could take over, but did not come rapping on Sally's door till near-dawn. She was in a dress and boots, and her eyes looked smeared after gales of tears.

Mama's gone, she said. I'm sorry, Mama's gone. I ran over to the Sorley's and asked their boy to ride into town to get Dr Maddox.

NAOMI WAITED IN THEIR SMALL CABIN UNTIL THE LAST CALL TO GO ASHORE AND THEN STAYED ON THE WHARF TO WAVE A FUTILE HANDKERCHIEF

Sally stammered with a confused and bitter grief and went to go off at once down the hallway. Naomi took her shoulders and gazed at her, straight into her face. Naomi's eyes were full of that conspiracy which up to now had been hers alone. She had the eyes of a co-murderer. At that instant their shared mercy and their crime drew them together so utterly that they were no longer city and country nurses but twins once more of the same womb under one roof.

You didn't wake me for my shift, said Sally.

It wasn't necessary, Naomi asserted, frankly, with her gaze on her. She went before it was time to wake you.

Let me see her.

I washed her and laid her out.

Without me?

I wanted you to sleep. I burned her nightdresses and the rags she used and took all the tonics and pounded the bottles to dust. Especially that rhubarb concoction Mrs Sorley swore by.

There was indeed still a taint of smoke in the air.

She led her sister by the hand and they walked down the hallway to the plain room they had both been conceived in. Blackbutt made for dim corridors they loved and hated, that pulled them closer to home but which Naomi had proved to be also escape avenues.

There was her mother, grey-faced, prepared, serene, the girl she had been at some time visible again in these features delivered of pain.

Sally heard herself howl and went to her mother's body, kissing the face. The skin of the dead yielded differently. They were beyond pain but past affection too. She kissed the hand. It smelled of the scented soap Naomi washed her

corpse with. This too was proof of death. The living mother smelled of workaday Sunlight soap, of sand soap. She found herself on her knees, still caressing the hand, Naomi standing behind and above her. Naomi who always presumed to do things first. As it always had been, Sally did not know whether to hate her, to attack her eyes, or fall flat in gratitude and wonder. Standing with a purpose in mind, she noticed the hypodermic needle, the morphine solution they had made up

of pills actually prescribed by Dr Maddox, and the unused bottled tablets in case the old doctor wanted to inspect them or return them to stock.

She went to the dresser, was poleaxed with loss by the mother of pearl hairbrush with strands of her mother's hair in it. She knew the little drawer where her mother had her subdued pink lipstick and her beige face powder.

Yes, said Naomi, you should put some colour on her poor face.

It was a prayer – not an order – and Sally set to.

The stolen reserve of morphine she herself had put together to finish her mother had been in the towel and linen cupboard in the hallway. How had Naomi found it? You could bet the solution Naomi had made up and injected for mercy's sake had been poured out, and the spare illicit tablets Sally had filched from Macleay District consigned to fire with the rhubarb tonic. To Sally – putting rouge and colour into her mother's cheeks – it seemed knowledge grew between Naomi and herself without them looking at each other. Yesterday they had been near strangers. Now they were altered. A different kind of reserve was imposed on them, and the different intimacy.

Is Papa up? Sally asked. Does he know?

Not yet. I was frightened. Will we tell him in a moment? Perhaps let the poor fellow rest a few more minutes.

For he would need to do the milking even on the morning of his wife's death.

But she finds it hard to face him, Sally perceived. Naomi – who had tried to avoid the weight of home and its taint of illness – had really taken the weight now. She'd taken up station on the far side of the bed, across from where Sally on her

knees put reasonable Methodist colouration on the poor, released features. Naomi said, I didn't have any idea till I came home that it was as bad as that. Her pain was the whole world to her. She could see nothing but it. Well, not any longer.

Sally was engrossed with her mother.

It was easy, Mama, to steal what you needed. I cut out two pages from the drugs record book – former nurses who had managed the drugs register had done similar excisions because they did not approve of some missed or untidily written entry. Then for your dear sake I copied the dosages on fresh pages adding an extra dose of eighth of a grain morphine in this case and that, until I'd created a phantom two grains of morphine which I then fetched from the drugs cabinet and brought home to you. It's unlikely a doctor or matron will remember a specific morphine dose as months go by. But I don't care if they do.

She had kept the tablets hidden at the back of the bed linen in the hallway dresser. These two grains when mixed in solution and injected would bear away disease and the fuss of enduring all useless treatment. They would reach deep into the body and halt the mechanism of agony. And had now.

She kissed her mother's brow before gracing it with the powder. Eric Durance would be astonished by his wife's beauty in death.

Naomi declared, I gave her half a grain and we kissed and held hands though I had to be careful, a touch would break her bones. Then she went.

You were standing over her? said Sally.

They both knew how rare it was that a patient expired while the nurse was standing there to observe and hold a hand. The dead went almost secretly.

By good fortune, said Naomi without flinching but without bothering to look at her. By good fortune I was there.

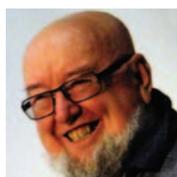
Again, Sally's astonishment that Naomi had done the right, fierce, loving and hard thing Sally had meant to do! Even in this she was not to be outshone, the half-mad Sally thought. But Naomi was there because she found the secret cache and took the burden of soothing her mother's breath down to nothing. A solemn loss and rejoicing were the day's order – Mama's freedom now from a world she had never since their babyhoods seemed accustomed to. As for her children, they must now get accustomed to something new. To new love and new hate and mutual shame.

The roads being firm just then, Dr Maddox arrived by motor at mid-morning. The town –

ignorant of medicine – loved him for his kindness and punctuality and a lack of airs in a place where a doctor could easily play the grand wizard.

But the hospital staff knew he was one of those tosspots who could carry it off well, that some unforgettable and disabling past event drove him to it. Though he performed surgery only when the other town doctors were not available, he was still a better surgeon than most country doctors when sober. It was peripheral things he was negligent at – paperwork, including death certificates. His method with the town at large was to hide it all behind an air of universal brotherhood and to breathe an impeccably mentholated breath over the sick beds of the shire. That Saturday morning Dr Maddox came to lower his face over Mrs Durance's dead one and to ask Naomi about the last injection and how many grains, and to accept what she said and then breathe, Good woman, good poor woman. Then to prepare a medical certificate – which he showed Naomi and Sally and which said Mrs Durance had died of cancer, nephritis and exinanition. There were in the valley many people Dr Maddox certified as dying of nephritis and exinanition. Nephritis and exinanition was the cited verdict all along both banks of the river and inland to the blue, wooded hills where the timber workers camped and always died of nephritis and exinanition unless a tree fell on them. Farmers who had taken poison to escape the bank had their death certificates compassionately marked by Maddox with that saving formula.

That morning of the death, over tea Sally made while keeping her eyes from straying to Naomi, Dr Maddox sat at the kitchen table and spoke for a while to her father – these were very much men's mutterings, half-embarrassed and platitudinous. Her listening father wore large mute features, the same he brought to his labours. His face had not yet crumbled in grief but somehow promised soon to do so.



THOMAS KENEALLY AO FAHA is a writer of fiction and history whose most recent works include *Three Famines*; *Australians: Eureka to the Diggers*; and the novel *The People's Train*.

1 'Murdering Mrs Durance' is the first chapter from Tom Keneally's forthcoming novel, titled *The Daughters of Mars*.