

## The Children's Ward

by MaryPat Campbell

Elsa turned off the cooker, turned off the taps in the sink, at least she thought she did, but she wasn't sure. She checked again. She had turned them off, but ten minutes later she wasn't sure, and checked for a second and then a third time. As she lay in bed that night, she wondered if she'd remembered to switch off the gas fire, and the lights in the living room. She got up to check, everything was fine but then back in bed, fifteen minutes later, she could not remember.

Round and round Elsa went.

She didn't often say anything about her constant forgetting, checking and re-checking. But one day, when I could see Elsa was particularly agitated at work, I asked her why she endlessly had to check and double-check. She replied, "I can't explain why I do these things, I just have to somehow."

Last Monday we were in the canteen on our early morning break, enjoying a cuppa and the relative peace. Elsa however, looked anything but peaceful, and I commented on how frazzled she looked.

"Sometimes I go back to check on something, but then I forget what I'm supposed to be checking for. So I have to wait until I get this itchy feeling at the back of my neck, as if I've lost something important. And when I suddenly remember the thing I've forgotten, then I have to go and check that it's there, or that I've remembered to do it."

Elsa's voice trailed off as she looked around vaguely, I imagined, for whatever it was that she thought she'd lost. As if she just might find it in the canteen somewhere, among the teapots and sandwiches, the boiler and the canteen staff busy making sure we nursing staff were well looked after.

Elsa is my main friend at work, we're both nurses in the Children's ward at the hospital. She was brought up by her Auntie Fran in Glasgow. Elsa's mum, Auntie Fran's sister was an alcoholic and so away with the fairies she was never there to look after Elsa, and her dad somehow never showed up, not even for Elsa's Christening, when she was named after her grandmother Elizabeth. Elsa eventually became another one of Auntie Fran and Uncle Stuart's sizeable family of three girls and two boys. Elsa was the youngest.

Her new family absorbed her into itself without too much fuss. She shared a room with two of her cousins Buddy and Fran junior. They got along reasonably well. Everyone was so busy with just getting by day to day that no one really stopped to think much about Elsa. She had a new family now, didn't she? She had a roof over her head, three meals a day and lots of cousins to play and squabble with.

When Elsa grew up she moved away from Glasgow and her adoptive family. She trained as a nurse and came up to London to work in the Children's Ward of this hospital, which is when I first met her about eight years ago. The children always ask for her when they feel frightened or homesick. Elsa always knows how to comfort them, not because of anything she does or says, but just by being herself and alert to their particular distress.

Elsa continues to check things on a daily basis, even now that she is well into her fifties. She continues to forget sometimes what she is supposed to remember to check on, while at the same time she continues to be available to the children on the ward who feel their own losses deeply, even if, like Elsa, they don't quite know what it is they have lost.