

LIFE'S UNCOMFORTABLE TAPESTRY

By Pam Pointer

I didn't realise she was a druggie until I saw her arms. It had been the only table left, in those far off - but not quite 'Brief Encounter' - days when main line stations had old-fashioned cafes with tables and chairs. It was my first day in my first job. Nobody had told me where I could get lunch in the hospital and I was too shy to ask, so there I was, in my lunch hour, balancing a plate of tired sandwiches and a lukewarm cup of tea, looking for a spare chair at the station. I asked the girl if it was OK to join her. She shrugged, which I interpreted as, "Do as you like," so I sat down. We didn't speak. When I was halfway through my sandwich she rummaged in her bag for a needle, her hands shaking. I looked the other way. Afterwards she got up. I watched her go. I hadn't known what to do, what to say, so did nothing, and said nothing. And didn't finish my sandwich.

This defining, uncomfortable, moment - a shocking smack in the face to a middle-class respectable upbringing - provided the opening notes for the rich, if sometimes discordant, symphony that was to follow as I went to work each day. There was the cider kid (a kid only in size; he must have been all of fifty) who jubilantly did leap-frogs over the bollards in the middle of the street and hurled insults at people who stared; Paddy, who wandered into the hospital every few days to ask for money then swore in his alcohol-fuelled exaggerated Irish brogue when it was refused, who turned his nose up at the substitute sandwiches - but took them anyway. Then there were the babies. Every now and again I would be put into a taxi, handed a white-blanketed bundle and be driven to an adoption agency, where I handed over the tiny person to nuns or social workers.

With drama aplenty in streets, wards and operating theatres, there was still time for romance to blossom between doctors and nurses despite the invisible signs that hung in every corridor, on every office wall, in every ward: "Matron Rules OK." She didn't witness the mischief, flour bombs and mayhem of rag days and rugby days. Such light-relief moments were the antidote to, and escapism from, the less thrilling realities of life in the inner city.

Life's poor tapestry, woven with the threads of down-trodden people whose faces, clothes, manners (or lack of them) would make uncomfortable viewing

if hung on the wall of one of society's more salubrious dwellings. What was said about that man who left the riches of heaven for a life of poverty on earth...? Despised, disfigured, marred, rejected, nothing attractive about him, no one cared about his fate... But he cared very much about the fate of others.

My defining moment of difference and diffidence, multiplied over centuries, in all cultures, all over the world; a moment that carries the continual and continuing challenge to care. Like he did.