

BUSH HOSPITAL

If maps told the truth, Bush Hospital would not exist. It would not sit at the bottom of Happy Valley, between the mountains of hope and despair, and a little to the southwest of the red savannah. In fact, according to one map, *Vasco da Gama's Route Map Of The African Bush*, Happy Valley itself did not exist, and the savannah nomads did not flock there to trade livestock for grain during the famine.

But maps lied and, to the grateful people of Happy Valley, none of whom had ever heard of Vasco da Gama or of his famous map, Bush Hospital was as real as rain. It was a huge, white structure sitting amid ancient thorn trees at the bottom of the valley surrounded by a barbed wire fence that had long ago despaired of keeping the hyenas out.

From the collapsed perimeter fence, a single telephone wire sagged its way across four black poles, dipped down along an overgrown driveway and terminated at the white building. Both ends of the wire dangled in the air at the start and finish of its short journey from the building to the gate. The other part of this monstrous lie sat in the matron's office, squatting like a big, black toad among the dusty files on her desk.

The telephone had preceded the solar generator that powered it into oblivion by a whole decade. A grand, but stillborn, idea, the project had perished almost

immediately, when thieves stole the entire thirty miles of copper wiring that had brought it from the highway to Bush Hospital, just days before its inauguration. However, this fact did not deter the good matrons from exploiting the idea, to impress visitors and to calm down hysterical patients, by calling non-existent doctors in Nairobi.

“I’m dying, matron,” the patients would cry.

“Not on my watch,” she would tell them. “I’m calling Doctor Singh right now.”

She would pick up the dead phone with a flourish and dial any number. Then she would talk and talk until the sedative took effect, or until the patient got used to the pain and stopped whining. There had never been a Doctor Singh at the hospital. In fact, there had not been any doctor at all for several years. But, perhaps due to their respect for authority and partly due to their unshakable faith in miracles and witchcraft, no one had ever asked who Doctor Singh was, or why the telephone line terminated at the first pole outside the maternity ward.

There were two matrons at Bush Hospital. One worked the day shift and the other worked the night shift. They ran the hospital together, persevering and trusting that, one day, the Ministry would remember and send them a doctor. The last doctor had left Bush Hospital at night, to fetch supplies from Nairobi, and vanished without a trace.

One rumour said that he had lost his way in the *Out*

World, and turned into a marauding hyena. Another rumour suggested that he had been beheaded by the *Out Worlders*, and some even claimed to have seen his spirit driving around the savannah in blind circles looking for his head. Yet another rumour said that his two years at Bush Hospital had cured him of his love for humanity, and that he had found a new career as a rhino poacher.

“Can’t say I blame him,” observed the Night Matron, handing the admissions register to the Day Matron.

The Night Matron did not live in Happy Valley. Thoroughly fed up with the inhabitants’ preoccupation with witchcraft, she had chosen to live at a nomad camp over the hills, bordering the *Out World*, where her husband was the chief butcher. She had a few days off from work and intended to go even farther away from Bush Hospital and visit her daughter who was a nurse in Nairobi.

“If you see our doctor ...” said the Day Matron.

“I’ll drag him back by the ear,” laughed the Night Matron.

The day the doctor left with their solar battery, the Day Matron had bet he would not be coming back any day soon. She had found him talking to himself on several occasions and, on one occasion, thought she heard dry, manly sobs from his private office. He had also taken to sipping surgical spirits with the ambulance rider, something that may not have had anything to do with his despair over Happy Valley and its superstitions.

“At least make him return our battery,” said the Day

Matron.

Their diesel generator had died the night before, right in the middle of a delivery, and left the Night Matron juggling babies in the dark. There was no diesel to run it, and the Government vehicle would not be coming by with supplies for at least two weeks.

“I’ll tell him,” said the Night Matron.

The handing over procedure was simple enough. There was just one key to an empty medicine cabinet to hand over, a ragged admissions register and a ward full of new mothers, all of them in a reasonably happy state. That done, the matrons exchanged a bit of gossip and a joke or two.

“How many men does it take to castrate a bull?” asked the Night Matron.

“All of them,” laughed the Day Matron, “and one old woman to hold down the bull.”

They had a good laugh at that one. Then the Night Matron picked up her bags, wished the Day Matron good luck and left. She stopped at the reception to bid the nurses farewell, then walked out into the July fog. She stopped by the entrance to adjust to the change.

To the right of the entrance was an overgrown car park lined with whitewashed stones and marked with signboards. Bush Hospital had not had a resident doctor for a long time. The matrons had never had cars to park, and all of Happy Valley came on foot. Still there was reserved parking for doctors, matrons, visitors and ambulances. All the reserved parking spaces were

vacant and overgrown, except for the space reserved for Ambulances Only. Parked in the space was a battered, old bicycle with a metal stretcher welded across the back seat and covered with a blanket.

She met the cyclist halfway up the rise, emerging from the fog like a lost soul.

“Good morning?” she called out cheerfully.

The man was pushing his bicycle downhill, having decided against testing his brakes on the slope. He stopped, startled, and said, “Yes?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling encouragingly.

In her long career as a midwife, she had seen enough of men to cause her to despair. She had seen brave men flee when their women went into labour. She had seen men, big, strong men, tremble like cowards and faint at the sight of a newborn baby. Why, just the night before, she had seen a white man pass out under her delivery table while his wife was giving birth on top of it. She must remember to tell the Day Matron about it. They would have a good laugh about it too, no doubt.

“How many strong men does it take to assist one weak woman deliver a baby?”

“All of them and one frail, old woman to nurse the men back to their feet.”

“Don’t fear,” she now said to the cyclist. “You’ll be just fine.”

“Yes?” He sounded unconvinced.

She gave him a big, jolly laugh and nodded encouragingly.

She had nothing against men. In fact, she had one of her own who could slaughter and skin a big bull all by himself and yet he could not hold a small baby. No, not her, she had nothing against men.

“Have a good day then,” she said to the cyclist.

“Yes,” he said uncertainly.

She smiled and went on her way trying to think kind thoughts about men.

What saddened her most was how, when they brought their wives to give birth, the men came with bowed heads, as if they were ashamed of what they had done, and asked for help as if they didn't expect to get any. And how a few days later, when their wives had delivered and it was almost safe to be a man again, they tiptoed to the nursery to view their handiwork walking on eggshells and ready to run for it. And how, later still, they beat on their chests and crowed about their sons and about their own virility.

The cyclist was not a first time father, but you couldn't tell by looking at him. His apprehension and insecurity stemmed not from his fear of babies, which was no more than normal for a Happy Valley man, but from a threat greater than that of a newborn life.

Walking ever slower, he proceeded down the hill and parked his bicycle in the visitors' space. He could have left it anywhere in the vast driveway, but the matrons were strict about such things.

As he approached the entrance, he paused to puzzle over the presence of tyre marks on the dust in front of

the main entrance. The weeds were broken, and the grass rolled, in a way to suggest that a vehicle had passed there not too long ago.

It was cool and dark inside the building, permeated by an unfriendly chill that reeked of women and babies. The reception room was deserted but for two barefoot fathers conversing in low voices on a bench by the wall. The receptionist glanced up, when the cyclist ventured in looking sad and weary, and asked, "Name?"

"Tomei," he said.

"Tomei?"

"Toma."

"Tomei Toma?"

"Toma Tomei."

The nurse looked in her register, shook her head.

"There's no Toma Tomei here," she told him.

"I am Toma Tomei," the cyclist said, speaking slowly so she would understand.

"Why didn't you say so?" she scolded. "What's your wife's name?"

"Grace."

"Grace Toma?"

"Grace Tomei."

She perused the register, paused significantly then announced, "We have no such woman here."

"I brought her myself," Tomei informed. "Last night."

"Last night?"

"Late."

"Late last night?" The nurse pushed the register to

one side. “Why didn’t you say so?”

She disappeared into the matron’s office. Tomei waited. The barefoot men sitting on the bench glanced his way and lowered their voices. There was no doubt in his mind that they were talking about him. The nurse was talking and laughing with another woman in the office next door and he knew that they were laughing about him too. She was gone a long while.

“Your wife gave birth last night,” she said when she returned.

“A boy?”

“What difference does it make?” she asked.

Life and death, but he could not expect her to understand such a thing.

“Have you been here before?” she asked him.

He had been there nine times before and, each time, left a lesser man.

“You know where to go then,” she said to him.

How could he ever forget? He had come just as hopeful as today and left disappointed. But what he remembered the most was the sense of failure, the cold and crushing monster dragging him into the pit of despair.

She saw his hesitation, smiled encouragingly and said, pointing, “That way is the nursery. Follow the arrows.”

He found the strength to lift his feet, one after the other, and drag them down the corridor, following the arrows as ordered.