

# SAD

When Matt finally arrived at the village he was at first shocked. Under the current circumstances maybe he should have expected it, but the mess and disorganization still caught him off guard. A small African village like Kikwit is never as neat as a small European town, but its state today was a lot worse than usual.

In the air was a sense of restrained panic. This was understandable – Matt had the same feeling himself. He wanted to turn around, to leave this place - to flee away to safety. Still he had to find Sarah, and he wouldn't let his fears take charge over his mind.

The village was very small, and Matt had no trouble finding the temporary hospital area set up by the WHO. There were five large green military style tents, grouped together in a ring.

Matt stopped the jeep and ran into the first of the tents. Looking around quickly he couldn't see Sarah. "Watoto?" he shouted to one of the busy nurses.

The nurse looked at Matt and stopped for a second, "huko" she said and pointed toward one of the other tents. The children were over there.

Entering that tent, Matt had to shield his emotions. Kids were lying here - dying here - in these narrow, rugged beds.

"Mzungu mtoto?" All he managed was a low whisper and nobody noticed him. It didn't matter - he had already seen Sarah.

She was lying in one of the beds along the far wall, looking very out of place being so white and so pale among all the other children. She was awake, trying to get the attention of the closest nurse. She wasn't succeeding. Her tiny, hoarse voice could not be heard over the racket. She was crying...

Matt walked up to her and looked at her. She was little for her seven years, but now she looked even smaller. Her eyes were red and sunken in. To think it was only little more than a day since they had been home together, with no idea of the awfulness to come. She looked like she'd been sick for ages.

Maybe it was fatigue from the sickness, maybe the effects of the medicine, or maybe just the confusion of the place – it took her a few seconds to recognize him.

“Daddy?” she whispered... Tears were now streaming down her cheeks, mixing with blood, “daddy! I want to go home!”

Matt’s heart broke and he lifted her up to keep her from seeing his own tears that he no longer could hold. “I know... I know, baby, I know... We will go home. Everything will be alright!”

He knew it must be his imagination, but she felt like she had lost half her weight – sobbing on his shoulder she felt so light...

The sheet she was wrapped in was red from blood. He didn’t know if it was just her blood and maybe he didn’t want to know. He wasn’t thinking clearly – he felt lightheaded, almost ready to faint. He knew he wanted to take her away from there - from that dirty tent, from those other sick children and busy nurses. But he didn’t know where to go, he didn’t know what to do, he didn’t know how to save his own child.

“Wewe!” someone shouted from behind when he took a few steps away from the bed. Of course he knew he wasn’t supposed to take Sarah away from the hospital, he knew that he was doing wrong, he knew it was bad for him to even be there, exposing himself.

He spun around, in his frustration forgetting his Swahili, “I need to get out... we need to get out!” The black nurse was eyeing him harshly. He felt so powerless, even defeated. “Please...?” he pleaded as he kept walking backwards.

“Maabade, alisaidia,” she shouted toward a man walking by the door. The man took one look at the scene and realized what was going on - he started towards Matt and Sarah.

With sweat running down his forehead, Matt dashed for the opposite door. Dehydrated as he was, the door seemed just a square of brilliant light, but he knew it was the way out. Out of the tent he was blinded by the sun, but kept at it, racing over the grass like a drunkard.

Halfway to his car he tripped over a tuft in the grass, but had enough awareness and balance to spin around and take the fall for Sarah. Sarah fell to the side as Matt tumbled a few feet further down the slight incline in the hill.

Still half-blinded, Matt sat up and squinted at his surroundings. He saw the nurse and the big black man. The nurse had picked Sarah up and was picking dirt from her face. The man was staring at Matt.

“Please...” said Matt again. He started to rise, but he was dizzy and couldn’t really focus. He stumbled to his knees. With what strength he had left he stood up and started towards Sarah.

Oh, he was tired. He wanted this to be over, he wanted to be home in his bed, he would have given anything just to be able to lie down and sleep. It felt like a world of weight on his shoulders. Every step he took required an enormous effort - a strength that he really didn't have. The world was wavering before his eyes, and he again lost his balance and tripped forward. With arms outstretched his limp body fell inches from the nurse's feet. Matt had passed out.

Of course he had been through a lot. Of course the events that he had been through would tire any man. Of course he had the right to be completely and utterly exhausted. But what he hadn't realized was that it wasn't his ventures that made him fatigued. It wasn't just the African heat that made him wet from sweat. It wasn't the flying dust that caused the itching in his throat. And it wasn't someone else's blood that was oozing from his nose and eyes – it was his own.

Matt had gotten exposed. Matt was sick.

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