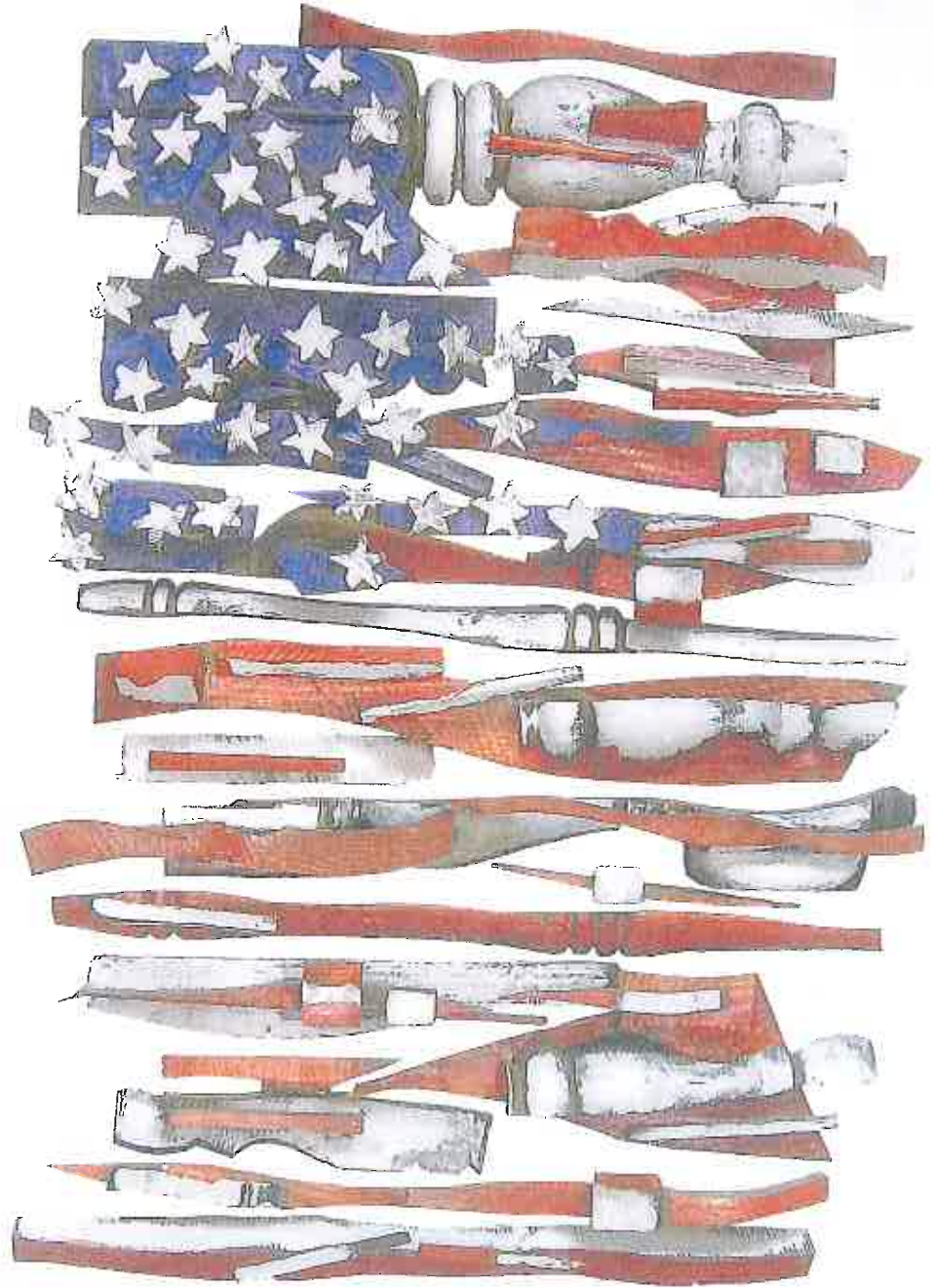


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WE ARE CAUSING A COMMOTION

As the University celebrates the 75th anniversary of its nursing program, a nurse's tale.

by Sallie Tisdale '83

From the clinic we can just see a tiny silhouette on top of the black line of hills across the green valley. That is the bell tower of St. Elizabeth's, John tells us. John was born here. He went to school at St. Elizabeth's, against his father's will, when all the other children were working in the fields. It is a short walk to the church, he says. But I don't want to go to church. Sunday is our only day off, and only in the morning. But I go; we all go, wearing the cleanest of our clothes. We set out under grey skies, walking along the highway, single-file on the slim shoulder. Trucks roar by, scattering pebbles and exhaust. Then John leads us off the road, down a faint path through the valley up and up and down and up for almost three miles.

Two thousand people live along these Ugandan trails. Their village is not a collection of houses but this confounding maze of red clay trails — a network miles long, winding through fields of coffee plants and mango trees, banana palms and small patches of cabbage and potatoes. Many villagers have never been to the nearest town; some have never seen the highway, or met a stranger.

The fields and trees are spindly, the sticky soil thick with tufts of grass. Everything is green; green is riotous here. We pass mud-wattled huts of red-clay brick behind stick fences, shaded by jackfruit trees, and a few larger cement-block houses. The track splits again and again, winding away into the wetlands and up the hills. In front of every house is a child or two or five, tending a few chickens or sitting on the ground with an old woman shelling nuts. Everyone freezes when they see us, this strange sight — mzungu on the trail. We wave, startling

them. Many smile or shyly wave back. A few women rise, come to the edge of the path, and kneel, bowing their heads as we pass.

We walk, up and down. Twice we step carefully over rivers of fire ants crossing the path. A parrot squawks in a field of anemic corn. A pair of doves floats by like a stray thought. We pass a burned pile of garbage; they are common here, sour and simmering, and they are ruled by marabou storks. The storks are Uganda's vultures, giant eerie birds that fly arched in the shape of a giant raised eyebrow; their call is deep and pure and unexpected.

Gradually we gather attendants — out of the trees, silently, the children come, grinning and nervous. A few are heading to church, like us; others are tagging along, thrilled by novelty. A girl slyly slips her hand into mine, staring up at me wordlessly.

Every other day we are in the clinic. How can it be otherwise? Our patients walk miles, wait many hours, even overnight. The system, such as it is, teeters on the edge of collapse half the time, ten doctors and nurses and assistants, five interpreters, a hundred and more patients a day, in a single cement room — the days are hot and dry and clear and filled with a dysphonic orchestra of voices overlapping each other, heavy and rhythmic, sibilant and vowel-laden voices in several languages. Trucks blow by on the highway, blaring horns to scatter the weary pedestrians trying to cross. Almost all the time a baby is squalling. In a second of sudden silence, I hear the splash as a bucket of waste-water is thrown out the door.

Every day near twilight, when the

clinic closes, the children come to visit. Of the two thousand people in this region, half are children. They shyly sidle up to us, laughing with fear and excitement. The younger ones skip from foot to foot, speechless, or scream in delight when we notice them. A few toddlers burst into tears in their siblings' arms. They are handsome and dusty, wearing mismatched clothes — school uniforms, cotton dresses with lace, skirts and shorts and shirts pinned together at the sleeves. Many girls wear costume jewelry, pearl necklaces and gold clip-on earrings, and the boys have saint medals around their necks.

John has been collecting donations of shoes, sent by friends of the clinic who live in the United States. Until last year, no one in the village had shoes. Now about half of them do — glorious shoes — skinny little girls in high-top Chuck Taylors and clodhopper boots, boys in pink Crocs and penny loafers.

I bow at the waist and say *oli otya*, which means how are you, and they are so surprised that many burst out laughing. The little ones slip nearer, step by step, eventually stroking my leg, reaching for my hand, reaching up to be held. If I sit down for a moment, I become the nucleus of a complicated atom, children stuck on every surface. Most of them are orphans, truly or virtually, parents gone to drugs or AIDS or illness or, just as deadly as far as the children are concerned, the city, from which many people never return. Like their parents and grandparents, they have beautiful skin, a continuum from black to milky coffee, warm and dry. They wear their hair very short so I can see their perfectly shaped heads and

PHOTOS: DAVID ROBINSON

big eyes and big teeth and I feel lumpy and ragged in their midst.

In the brief equatorial twilight, we take turns showering from a plastic bag hung in a dim corner. We play soccer, which they know well, and new games — Frisbee and tic-tac-toe. Kate brought *National Geographic*s and Jerrie brought maps. Levi made drums out of empty jerrycans and then taught them Maori warrior dances, stomping and sticking out his tongue. I make the older girls practice English and tell them to stay in school. Jeff sits at the table and teaches arithmetic to a rapt crowd of little boys. One day, I demonstrated the hula, and three adolescent girls fell down on the ground and rolled around laughing their heads off, the way you only ever hear about people falling down on the ground and rolling around, laughing their heads off.

The clinic is maddening and wildly amusing and heartbreaking all at once. The young adults — they are few — have “private” complaints and sad stories. The grandparents are many — bent and wrinkled and loquacious and dramatic. Many have never seen a white person before; John tells me some have never seen even a picture of a white person before, but they know why we are here.

I sit on the edge of one of the few chairs, facing them one at a time, using a narrow bench as my table. They complain of “locomotion under the skin” and “headaches for fifteen years.” Some say they are a hundred and twenty years old. Many complain of “paralyzed limbs,” which they demonstrate by swinging said limbs and slapping themselves.

“I think this maybe is not right?” says my interpreter, Joseph, puzzled. “But that is what they are saying.”

I don’t always need Joseph or Ronnie or Hudson to help me. The moans and sighs are so expressive. One word, a sound, *eehhhh*, is as vivid as a story, subtle and intimate. *Eehhhh* — to say so many things. To say to me, “How can I explain this very complicated story?” and “What more can you need to know than this?” And to say to each other, “I am not sure I can believe the strange thing this woman is saying,” and “surely this white lady is kidding me,” and sometimes, I think, *eehhhh*, to say “I think this *mzungu* is out of her mind.”

They complain of muscle and joint pain, stomach pain, chest pain; they have fevers and gonorrhoea and rashes and swollen feet and swollen breasts and high blood pressure and bladder infections. We can help a few, and do

little for many of them, nothing for some. We write in their little notebooks and listen to chests and give out many little wax paper bags with vitamins and Tums, and many bottles of cough syrup, and we soak feet and clean ears and make wrist braces out of tongue depressors and white cotton bandages.

“As for her,” says Joseph of the tiny grandmother showing me her hugely swollen knee, “her joints pain her.”

One day, two huge crowned cranes swoop into the sweet potato field and step delicately along, their ochre feathered crowns bobbing. Marty, one of the doctors, is a serious birder; he drops his stethoscope and runs for his camera. (The interpreters call him “the professor,” because he has a beard.) The crowned crane is the national bird, common as jackfruit here. The ladies in their stiff dresses with the high peaked shoulders and turbans watch him go, hiding their smiles. He is mad, of course.

On Sunday mornings, the clinic is closed. We walk with John, along the trail he once walked twice a day, for years, because he had “a hunger for learning.” We reach the crest and suddenly the church appears, much larger than I expected — a grand, faded stone building, surrounded by low stone buildings, atop this world of sapped clay soil and profligate green. Village children mill on the tough metal filings racing to a magnet. I show several kids how to use my binoculars and they take turns staring not into the distance, but at each other giggling, examining ears and eyes and the tips of fingers.

The first service is just ending, and a languid line of adults is walking out into the morning. The men are tall and lean and wear white shirts and dark pants. The women wear bright, stiff long dresses. They look at us, with our child attendants. A few of the men saunter over to John, who is one of the important men in the village now, to shake his hand and exchange a few words. I know he is making excuses for us, the *mzungu* who mean well but make mistakes.

Almost five hundred children live at St. Elizabeth’s. And there they are — a winding line six abreast, coming up the other side of the hill, in immaculate navy-blue uniforms, paced by several small nuns in habits. When they see us, the steady line suddenly stumbles, and they walk sideways, slowly, staring.

“We are causing a commotion!” says John. “Better come.”

He leads us into the cavernous nave of the church, a stone room filled

with short roughly-built pews. We sit in the back rows; ahead is a sea of black hair and a distant altar. The room is dim, lit only by the day drifting in high narrow windows and the doors thrown wide. I hear a rustle like a great flock of bats waking, as one by one every child turns to stare — a wave of rustling and head turning and elbowing, shifting and sliding and whispering, one row after another turning to look and passing the news along. I raise my finger to my lips, *shhhhh*, and they duck their heads and giggle and stare.

A choir starts, far away near the altar, a chorus of plain children’s voices like dawn birds, thin and fine. After awhile, Levi, who has a digital recorder, gets up; he bends at the waist, hunkered down, and sneaks up the aisle the way only a large handsome bald white man among several hundred small black children can sneak.

Nothing else happens. The children sing. We wait. Jerrie eventually gets up and goes to sit across the aisle with a child she recognizes from the clinic. Soon she is surrounded, children on all sides, both her hands held by several others. She is in a bubble of children and Levi has disappeared and I stick out my tongue at the boy who has turned completely around and is kneeling in front of me, agog.

We wait for half an hour, then an hour. The tired choir is still singing, plowing doggedly on under the watchful eyes of the nuns.

Finally, John slips away for a few minutes and then comes back.

“We go!” he whispers. “The priest is not coming, I am not thinking so!” It seems odd to me that a priest would forget, but we are going.

John says, “Leave a few at a time, please. Or the children will follow.”

When it is my turn, I duck, embarrassed to be seen leaving church. But it has been an hour. And the priest forgot. So I crouch and scramble out the big doors into the light and head down the steps to the grass. Suddenly a wave of children breaks around my legs. I look back, and they are pouring out of the church all at once, out every door, bursting into the light — hundreds of children in every manner of dress, and every one is shouting and every one is laughing, and every one is running toward us and around us and on and on. □

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