

PATRICIA ST JOHN

I NEEDED A  
NEIGHBOUR



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# I needed a neighbour

## 1

It was half past four on an April morning when Emma woke and looked up into a pearl blue sky flecked with rose and wondered how to face another day.

It was still blessedly cool; another hour and a half or so before the sun, like some blazing monster, would rise to scorch and wither the earth. She need not move yet, although Anne, the team leader, was already padding purposefully toward the corrugated enclosure that housed the shower. But Anne was always half an hour earlier than anyone else and half an hour too soon, so that need not worry Emma. The occupants of the other five beds scattered about on the cracked earth of the compound were fast asleep and it was quite quiet. April in England, thought Emma. At this time of the morning, the dawn chorus would be starting up. But there were no birds in this dry and thirsty land and no sign of spring.

There was something else at the back of her mind and, after a moment or two, she remembered. It was

her birthday. She had only arrived from England five days previously and she had not told anyone about her birthday, nor would there be any post for another ten days when someone would be coming down from the capital. A great wave of homesickness swept over her as she remembered birthdays past; the laughing girls in the nurses' home gathering round her cake; the vicarage in Devon and the presents on the breakfast table; foam of blossom in the garden, soft rain on springing grass or great stretches of sun-kissed dandelions; her mother... she swallowed hard, wiped her eyes and gazed round at the scattered beds, the thatched hut that was far too hot to sleep in, the corrugated iron shelters that concealed the shower and the hole in the ground, and pulled herself together. Everyone said she would get used to the heat in a few days; others had and she supposed she would too. In any case, it would be better today because there would be more to do. For today the first consignment of 20,000 refugees was due to arrive at the new camp.

The others were stirring so she got up and queued for the shower. Breakfast was a hasty meal of tea, bread and bananas but this would improve when stores came down from the capital. By five-thirty, Anne was rounding up her team like an anxious goatherd and telling them not for the first time that the lorries were due to arrive before sunrise. They packed into the jeep along with four or five African orderlies and then they were off, rattling through the sleeping village, over the bridge that spanned the

great dam and over the trackless drought-desert with the sunrise behind them. Stunted trees and the carcasses of dead animals were the only objects that broke the monotony of the landscape, unless you counted the strange mirages of green growth and pools of water that kept appearing on the horizon and faded as the jeep drew nearer.

A clatter and a shout made them all turn their heads in one direction. An open cattle truck, with about forty people clinging frantically to the bars or holding on to each other in the centre, careered past them. Anne gave an exclamation of indignation for the driver had no business to be driving at that speed, shaking the very bones of the sick and starving. The jeep accelerated in hot pursuit and lines of tents came into sight. The two vehicles arrived almost nose to tail and the team bundled out.

Well trained by Anne, they all knew exactly what to do. Some went into the great shelters and waited at their posts by the registration desk, the weighing machines, the medical or therapeutic centres. Anne and Emma, with a group of orderlies, hurried to the truck. As they lifted the bars at the back the travellers swarmed forward and a crowd of little children, hauntingly thin but happy to have arrived, scrambled down and started to shake hands excitedly with everyone in sight. Fathers followed to receive the packages and water pots that their wives handed down to them, and the old and the sick were helped out. Then a woman with frightened eyes handed a light bundle in a goatskin to Emma,

climbed out and stood beside her, looking up imploringly into her face.

Other trucks were arriving, swerving into line, disgorging their packed human cargo. About sixteen hundred travellers would arrive that morning, but Emma was suddenly only conscious of that pathetic, flickering little life in her arms. She turned to Anne.

'It's dying,' she said. 'Shall I take it straight away?'

'Yes, hurry,' replied Anne briefly. 'Clare's over at the feeding centre and she'll have everything laid out. Tell Catherine to come in your place, and send someone up to the Red Cross Department. They might produce a doctor.'

Emma hurried. Pushing her way through the bewildered new arrivals that were by now crowding round the milk cauldrons, she reached the feeding centre where Clare was teaching the orderlies, in preparation for the expected onslaught of very sick, dehydrated children. But she broke off when she saw the baby in Emma's arms and together they acted swiftly, passing a nasal tube and starting to inject the life-giving fluid into the tiny, wizened body.

'It's cold,' said Emma desperately. 'Isn't there something to wrap it in?'

'Yes, there's a box over there with some knitted clothes and blankets. Give it to me and take what you like.'

They dressed it in a striped rainbow-hued vest and wrapped it in a multicoloured blanket. Emma carried the incongruous little bundle to the doorway where the sun shone, a startling blob of colour in the midst

of those drab surroundings; brown earth, brown rags, brown bundles. But the mugs of milk were bright orange and the spears of light that pierced the palm leaf roof sparkled on specks of dust and made tiny pools of brightness on the floor. The place was beginning to fill up now with families of children who had been found to be drastically underweight. Exhausted mothers carrying babies with huge heads, swollen stomachs and stick-like limbs, slumped on the floor. Hope flickered in dark, hopeless eyes as the milk, gruel and high protein biscuits were distributed. And the day grew hotter and hotter.

Emma placed her baby in the arms of an orderly and moved from group to group, encouraging them to feed or passing catheters through the nostrils of those too weak to suck or chew. She knew not a word of the language but she tried to smile at the mute, lifted faces of the parents and a few smiled back. Some were too tired to cooperate and simply lay down on the rush mats to sleep, leaving their child, at last, to someone else's care.

The only doctor was busy elsewhere. The little families came and went on coming; the nurses and orderlies worked on and on but Emma's heart stayed with the brightly-clad, gasping little creature near the door. 'Please God, let it live,' she had cried as she handed it over, but now, moving from one starved, broken child to another, she wondered dully and rebelliously what purpose there could be in such existences. What had they to live for? Nevertheless,

she hurried back whenever she could to nurse the baby in the doorway.

It was hopeless; as fast as they injected the fluid into its wasted body, just as fast it flowed away. There were no nappies and water was strictly rationed. Emma took the soaking goatskin outside and laid it in the sun. With the temperature rising to 120 degrees it would dry in a few minutes.

She was holding the baby, gazing down at it, when it opened its mouth, gave a shuddering little breath, and died. Clare came over and they examined it together but there was no doubt about it at all. They turned to the mother who sat motionless, half asleep. They made signs, stripped it of its foreign finery, and laid it in her arms. She understood at once and started to wail softly. Then she stopped, and seemed to be pleading for something, pointing to her dead child.

Clare turned to the orderly. 'Ask her what she wants,' she said gently.

'She wants white cloth to wrap her baby for burial,' explained the orderly.

Clare went to search, but there was no white cloth, not so much as a handkerchief or a petticoat. Tissues, jeans and T-shirts were the order of the day. The mother wrapped the baby in a soiled rag and went away to her tent still wailing softly.

'White cloth!' exclaimed Clare. 'That's something we must see to before tomorrow.' But Emma wasn't listening; she had turned away, seeking a place to weep.