

The Operating Theatre... early 1980s

... it is not a TV drama, it is not in New Zealand and not in my mind. This is reality. Port Moresby. I look at myself. Dressed in a green gown, too large for my frame and I cannot see my arms. Have they been amputated? I move them. They do not appear. Where are my hands? I move my left arm again. A small finger emerges followed by the rest of my hand. Out of the other sleeve a companion hand arrives. So, I am alive and well. Am I in a dream? Why am I in the green hospital gown standing in the corner of the operation theatre of Port Moresby Hospital?

My brain eventually works. I watch a patient being wheeled in prepared for an operation. It is Peggy. She smiles at me, I think. Can't see her too clearly and she looks worried. She is wrapped in a green gown. Standing beside her and putting on his gloves is the one Australian surgeon who works in this hospital.

Peggy knows him well. She works there too, training young local people who will work in clinics around the country. It's hard work she says. These assistants are by themselves in villages and small towns and have to do everything. I recall her story about how she wants her students to know about mixing medicines with water or anything by ratios. She shakes her head. Don't have a clue many of them. Four to one, two to one, three to one. It's guesswork with some of the people I teach and dangerous for the patients.

So, when the idea of teaching ratios comes around for the young medical assistants Peggy takes our fruit concentrate from the fridge at home. She goes to work at the hospital to teach young men and women who will work in the small clinics throughout the villages of Papua New Guinea. The juice is mixed with water in a correct ratio format and then drunk by the thirsty young men and women. No doubt... Peggy lectures then severely at this time. Enjoy your drinks and mix your medicines and water correctly for your patients. Their health is your concern.

I am now mentally back in the theatre. Physically too. I look at where my hands used to be. They are still there. The surgeon has a male assistant and no nurse. Where are the nurses? All operating theatres have nurses to hand surgeon a scalpel, swabs.... to swab again and to console the exhausted and worried patient before and after the operation. But there is not one nurse here. Why?

Green Man approaches me. I hear his voice. Peggy has had local anaesthetics. Several. She is dopey but conscious. He's talking to me now. Stand in the corner he growls...wolf like... and watch from there, he mutters. More of the same. Mutter. He snarls. I do not usually allow spectators in the theatre. There are two operating theatres, so I am working on two patients. More growls. Don't worry, if I disappear for a few minutes now and again. I will be back. Peggy knows you are here. That's what matters.

Lights come on and focus around Peggy. I watch the two men who are there for the surgery. Still no nurse. My eyes dim for a moment. I am worried. Is it tears? Just as well Peggy can't see me in closeup. The operating table. I think for a moment I am in a morgue. This time the

tears come as I see a terrible future. One of the green voices speaks. Move that light closer. Pass me the scalpel. I watch. The knife descends. I keep watching and feel sick. The surgeon cannot see my fear. He asked if I could cope with theatre processes. He meant blood and more blood. Of course.

He continues unaware of the emotional surgery going on in my heart. I feel I have been here a long time. There is a conversation going on. A sample of skin has been taken from Peggy. The surgeon moves to the other theatre to the other patient. The assistant nods to his boss, and he departs too. I am left alone with Peggy, but I am not allowed to go near her. I stand in the corner of the theatre. Her head is turned away from me. I assume she sleeps or rests. She has been injected with local anaesthetics to kill pain from the knife, but she should be awake. I wait for the return of the surgical team. If I was a large green grasshopper I would jump back and forth to the operating table to look at Peggy and smile.

A pause. The surgeon gives his assistant a sample of skin from Peggy and he goes out of the operating theatre in a hurry. The surgeon walks to the other operating theatre. I wait in the corner. It seems a long time. I wait and wait, musing about anything and everything, but mainly on Peggy as she lies there on the table. How have we come to this strange theatrical scene? She has only been in the country for a while. My new life partner and here she is on the operating table in a strange country.

I am in a dream state and wake to hear the surgeon calling me over to the operating table. I do nothing. He calls again. I go. His voice is sharp and annoyed. I need some help, he tells me. My assistant is not coming back. I am not told why. Give me that surgical...what is he saying? I look at him. He is pointing to the selection of silver steel operating tools on the bench beside him. I look aghast.

“Oh”, he grunts “you don’t know what I mean, do you?”

I do not have time to reply. Green Man points to a knife. I pick up a sharp scalpel. I watch as he digs into Peggy’s body. Blood. Not much really. I cannot help but think of Hamlet and Macbeth. Blood. It will have blood. What will? Oh. My dream shatters. Give me that second scalpel. He points again. I am awake and close to eternity. I watch and help Peggy. My thoughts. I am an assistant surgeon in Port Moresby public hospital. I am helping in Peggy’s skin cancer operation.

At last it is over. He does not even thank me. He grunts and gestures for me to get out of his theatre. I do and take off my green gown. A nurse passes me by with a strange look on her face. She exits and then re-enters the theatre. She moves silently towards Peggy. I close the theatre door behind me.

An hour later. I am alone with a cup of over-sweetened tea and thoughts. Peggy is beside me. She looks awful. Face colour and bandages. We drive quietly and slowly home in our small Datsun 120Y. At home it is time for bed, although the sun is still shining. Why? Peggy sleeps and so do I.

I have dreams about the operating theatre. Was I there? Days later Peggy goes for a checkup and all is well. We converse on the way home. Apparently, she says, the assistant took the sample of my skin to the laboratory and then he went home. He was not supposed to do that, but he did. That's why you were asked to help. Did you enjoy it?

I am perturbed. Did this operation happen or not?