

Antonio's Miracle

Antonio was a lively child, a typical eight-year-old: never walking when he could run, never missing an opportunity to explore. "One day your long nose will get burnt!" shouted his exasperated mother. But since when did little boys ever listen to over-cautious parents?

The accident happened so quickly that nobody saw it. A bang, a scream. Antonio was writhing on the floor, blood pouring from a wound in his side. He had been playing with his father's loaded gun. The crimson blood quickly soaked his dirty shirt and muddied the brown earthen floor. His father snatched him up and ran through the bush with him to a small field clinic. By the time he arrived Antonio was subdued, although whimpering with pain at every jolt.

The clinic bandaged the wound but was unable to help further. The bullet was lodged deep in his liver. Distraught parents prayed for the miracle they feared would never come. Hour after interminable hour passed as Antonio's breathing grew more laboured. There was nothing they could do – they were a day's walk through the bush to the nearest hospital. There was no bus, no phone, no hope.

The sound of a Land Rover's chugging engine is not common in that part of the country, but Antonio's parents instantly recognised it. It was the sound of answered prayer. Some visiting aid workers had heard about the accident and had come to help. Cradled in his father's arms, Antonio was driven along the bumpy, unmade tracks that led to town. Every pothole made him wince, but he no longer had the energy to cry. The hospital was still an hour's drive away, and the need for speed had to be weighed against the increased discomfort. Antonio's father was visibly relieved as the flag with the familiar red cross came into view.

"I'm sorry, we can't do anything for him. The bullet is too deep for us to reach." The French doctor shrugged sympathetically, but his sad eyes showed that this was not the first child he had been unable to save. Shortage of medicine, of staff, equipment, is a story repeated all over Africa. "Perhaps the UN? They have good facilities, but it is over 200km."

Antonio's bandages were changed again, he was given a drip to prevent dehydration, and the makeshift ambulance set off again. The road was better, with tarmac in places, but all the bridges had been destroyed and there were many bomb craters. "How can a hospital not be able to help?" wailed the increasingly disconsolate father. There was no reply. Everyone was asking themselves the same question.

Still bleeding internally, Antonio was drifting into a coma. Still twenty miles to go. Ten miles. The sun was setting as a distinctive white personnel carrier appeared over the brow of a hill. It was flagged down, and the blue-helmeted lieutenant radioed ahead to warn his base. By the time Antonio's unconscious body was carried into the operating theatre, the surgeons were scrubbed up and ready.

Antonio's mother is still exasperated by her lively son. But she is thankful that he is still running around. The gun has gone. Antonio was lucky that day – you can't always expect a Land Rover to be there when you need it. Perhaps God heard their prayers after all.