



PART THREE  
AMERICA

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# NOBODY THREW INSTRUMENTS ON THE FLOOR

I went to America at the beginning of 1978, leaving behind my sports car, my apartment, and my life in London—not to mention an ascendant career at the Brompton. Not long before I left, I was interviewed for a multi-institutional job as senior surgical registrar at the Brompton, the National Heart Hospital, and the London Chest Hospital. Competition for the job was intense. Of the many applicants, I was the youngest. At the end of the interview, after discussing my experience, I was asked about the rest of my life.

“What are your hobbies?”

I said I had none.

“Well, what do you do in your spare time?”

Again, I said I had none.

“Well, then, how to you relax?”

I said I relaxed in the OR.

I was offered the job.

But America beckoned. The future of heart transplantation was being born at Stanford, and I desperately wanted to be part of it. I took a deep breath and turned my back on what many heart surgeons would have considered the chance of a lifetime.

California reminded me of Rhodesia. After a decade in England, it was like coming home. The smells, the weather, the flowers were all familiar in a way the concrete gloom of London never could be. Shumway had sent a car to meet me at the airport, something that I was to learn later he rarely did. The driver, holding a sign with “Dr. Jamieson” on it, was waiting for me in baggage claim. We drove down Highway 101, and he dropped me at the Riviera Motor Lodge in Palo Alto. It had been a long trip, but I quickly showered and was soon hurrying across an immense parking lot—the hotel was next to a shopping center, something I’d had little experience with—in search of the Stanford hospital. When I got there and asked for directions to Shumway’s office, I was surprised that nobody seemed to know who he was.

I found Shumway in a nondescript wing of the hospital. I was excited to meet the hero of heart transplantation, who at fifty-four was in the prime of his career. He was dressed in scrubs. Shumway led me into his modest, uncarpeted office. There was a small desk and one chair in it. The room itself was barely big enough for the furniture. Shumway asked me to sit down and perched himself on the edge of the desk. As I would see in the coming months, Shumway never made a show of being an internationally acclaimed surgeon. He seemed to be content that nobody at Stanford paid him much attention. This only elevated my opinion of him.

We talked for a half hour. Shumway asked about Paneth,

the Brompton, and my expectations for the coming year at Stanford. I told him I wanted to do clinical work, and that I was mainly interested in heart surgery and transplantation.

“You’d better go see Patrick Rooney,” he said.

Rooney was Shumway’s chief resident. He was tall, wore glasses and had a broken nose. He’d been in the navy after medical school. After that he’d done a residency in cardiology before starting in general surgery and then cardiothoracic surgery at Stanford. He was older than most of the senior residents, always composed, and a great clinician. When Rooney wasn’t in the OR, he was always smoking a cigarette, carrying it in his left hand and holding a can of Coca-Cola in his right. I was delighted that he seemed to like me.

My fellowship stipend wasn’t enough to live on and cover my obligations in London. Somehow I’d have to stretch my meager resources. It began to sink in that I was starting over in more ways than one. Working with Paneth, I’d been doing heart surgery on my own. At Stanford I was the most junior person in Shumway’s group, and as far as they were concerned, a nobody. I would have to prove myself all over again.

I was also a stranger in a new country. Having rarely left the hospital in London for the past several years, I was ignorant about many things that are a routine part of daily life for people who don’t work nonstop. As soon as I could, I bought a secondhand bicycle to get around on. I read something about how you were supposed to have a license for a bike. So I set off to find one. After making some inquiries and getting a lot of funny looks, I was told that I might get a license at the fire station. The firemen were amused when I explained what I wanted. But they dug around and managed to find a bicycle license, which I purchased and dutifully attached to the bike, taking care to follow the instructions about affixing it to the wheel hub. I think it was the only bicycle license they had ever

issued. And I've never come across anyone else who had one. I soon learned that Britain is less keen about rules than America is, but in Britain you don't break those rules. America is awash in regulations, but many are ignored or winked at.

I found an apartment in East Palo Alto, the wrong side of the tracks. It was a poor area and generally regarded as unsafe at that time. The apartment was just one room on the ground floor of a flimsy-looking complex. I didn't think too much about it because I knew I'd stay at the hospital most of the time. When I did go home, I rode my bike each way, usually in the dark. It was a rainy year, and I'd get home or to work soaked through. In London I'd taken to wearing cowboy boots, and now found that everybody in Shumway's group did, but these would fill with water on the way, increasing my misery. I'd expected California to be hot and dry.

One night as I was riding home, I saw a garbage can by the curb that had a coat hanging out of it. I stopped. The coat was old and worn but serviceable. I put it on and went home. I kept it for many years, long after I could afford a new one, to remind me of the days when I couldn't.

I hadn't been at Stanford long when I arrived home one night to find my apartment door open. The place had been ransacked. As far I could tell, nothing was gone. I mentioned the incident to Shumway, telling him it was humiliating that at age thirty, having worked hard all my life, I had accumulated nothing worth stealing in even the poorest part of town. He laughed and said the burglars must have figured I was one of them and let me keep my things. On another night, I came home in the dark to find a bullet hole in the window. I dug the spent bullet out of the wall.

I learned how dangerous East Palo Alto was when we had a young boy from Belgium in for a heart transplant. His father had come with him, and while the boy was recovering after surgery,

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the father visited a bar in my neighborhood. He was accosted by a man with a gun demanding money. Things like that didn't happen in Belgium, and the father refused to turn over his wallet. The gunman shot him in the pelvis and took his money. The father was brought in to the emergency room at Stanford. His femoral artery and femoral vein were lacerated, and he was bleeding badly. We operated and saved his life. Unfortunately, his son had severe rejection and never left the hospital.

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