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## **FROM *REACHING MITHYMNA: AMONG THE VOLUNTEERS AND REFUGEES ON LESVOS***

THE CAMP IS ALL BUT EMPTY THIS EVENING—my third shift as a volunteer and second here at OXY. For hours the volunteers have been gathering refugees into groups of sixty, issuing tickets, managing lines, filling seats, and waving as the buses rumble out of the parking lot onto the highway. Just one extended family will overnight here, in a shelter where last night hundreds of people slept. (On the day's final bus there were a few empty seats, but the rule is never to split up families to fill a bus.)

Besides the ten Syrians now sitting on straw mats and eating a meal prepared in the mobile kitchen by cooks I haven't yet seen, only a handful of volunteers are present. The camp would be silent if not for the chugging generator and the soundtrack being piped through a small but Napoleonically assertive Fender amp. Tonight the playlist is a medley of crooner tunes, "New York, New York," "Fly Me to the Moon," and now "Mack the Knife." Since the last bus' departure, the volume has been dialed lower. When the family bed down in their circus-sized tent, it will be turned off.

The sound of a large vehicle gear-grinding into the parking lot drowns out "Mack the Knife." The bus is arriving from the north, Mithymna, the beaches. A second bus shudders in behind it and for some reason its headlights—high beams?—are much brighter, as shocking and invasive as helicopter searchlights. The bus doors huff open and refugees emerge and stream downhill into the camp. Volunteers scramble to their stations: the men's and women's clothing tents and footwear tents, the canteen, the sleeping shelters. The camp is understaffed because—as on my first night—the word from certain "contacts" on the Turkish side was to expect no more arrivals until morning. So a number of volunteers have driven south to Moria to help out there overnight, while others have gone back into town for supper.

The remaining crew is instantly overwhelmed.

One of the rafts that just landed was repeatedly swamped and barely made it ashore, so its passengers are drenched to the skin. In front of the men's dry-clothing tent, under a string of light bulbs, men and boys are milling, some so cold they move with a spastic jerkiness, their teeth audibly chattering. No trace of the patient queues I've been seeing until now. Many of these people can't and won't wait. Behind fold-out tables at the front of the army tent, two volunteers—Klaus, a Buddhist in drawstring yoga pants and Biblical sandals, and I, on clothing detail for the first time—have braced for impact. There is no impact. Men simply flow past on either side of us. They're careful not to brush against us, meet our eyes, notice our raised palms, hear our pleas. Nothing aggressive in this incursion, their body language signals; nothing personal.

"Please, one at a time," Klaus keeps repeating in a sort of resigned sigh. I glance over my shoulder, thinking maybe a dozen refugees are behind us. The dim light bulbs dangling in the tent now show at least twice that number, rifling through the cardboard boxes and plastic bins, writhing out of their sodden things and hastily re-dressing. A teenager—balanced on one shivering leg—topples as he tries to wriggle into a pair of too-tight jeans. A skinny older man is pulling a second wool sweater down over a first. I walk toward him, saying, "Please, no, just one sweater!" Feeling invisible and inaudible, I'm surprised when he seems to understand me, removing the surplus sweater without protest.

From the women's clothing tent I hear Pilar in her heavy accent calling for the translator, Asim. Somebody yells back that he left an hour ago. Now Dieter and Oskar—the brusque, fussy German couple who usually supervise the men's tent—appear, towering above the crowd as they push toward us. They've returned from a restaurant in town to help. Dieter takes in the chaotic scene behind us. His Adam's apple bobs as if he has swallowed a golf ball. "You have not understood my instruction?" Spiked platinum hair, a rainbow patch on his coat shoulder. He directs a curt German phrase at the unprovocable Klaus—who nods mutely as if accepting a temple master's edict—while Oskar tells me coldly, "I think Omer will be needing you at the canteen now. We take over here."

Kanella, a stray dog who has made a home in the camp, yammers and growls from the door of the canteen hut. She is slender, skittish; floppy ears, cinnamon fur, white socks. "It's all good, girl," I call as I approach, though

from a canine viewpoint there can be little good in crowds of strangers encroaching on your territory day after day. The canteen may be the first secure food source and warm shelter she has known. Yesterday I saw her pacing the camp perimeter, mining it with drops of urine, a hormonal frontier invisible to us but real enough to any dog—and in fact chemically detectable. Which in a way makes it realer than any number of unmarked human borders, those figments that we kill for or risk our lives to cross.

“We will put her inside,” Omiros calls to me as the two of us converge on the canteen. “The refugees, I think they fear dogs.” His open leather trenchcoat flares behind him as he stalks along. His black boots crunch in the gravel. No one is sure of his real name, but the Greeks call him Omiros—Homer. He’s six-three and brawny, but—unlike Anglo-American alpha males, who hulk and lumber as if chronically stiff from the weight room—his movements are light, fluent as a soccer star’s or salsa dancer’s. Nor does he squint or harden his soft brown eyes when addressing you. Yet his sympathetic gaze is offset by more conventional male markers: a balding head shaved bare, a black goatee nattily groomed. Syrian on his father’s side, Spanish on his mother’s, he has the tragically dashing looks of an Othello, or—in that oxblood trenchcoat like a villain’s cape—the scene-seizing baddie in a film thriller. He would be the enemy with an anima and a backstory of deprivation: some galvanizing early grief. His order-restoring fall and death we would mourn more than we realize—though the film’s backers would realize it and commission his resurrection in a sequel.

“Steve,” he calls, “Stavro, come help me now!” Volunteers run past us, some toward the mobile kitchen, some returning from the supply room with thermal and wool blankets. Long shadows cast by the floodlights above the bus-loading lanes streak across the compound. The wind has risen and the high walls of the UNHCR tents ripple and snap. A sense of terrific animation fills the scene.

I follow Omiros behind the clothing tents, where another bus has just arrived, and we intercept a party descending toward us—Asim; a squat, bearded bus driver; and a heavy woman sprawled back in a wheelchair, her scarved head lolling. Asim and the driver are struggling to restrain the wheelchair on this grade. As we meet them, I realize the woman is unconscious.

“What is wrong with her?” Omer asks, raising his voice over the wind.

“We don’t know,” Asim says. “She disembarked from the raft, but then

on the bus . . .”

“What is ‘disembark’?” Omer asks.

“I must return,” the driver says in Greek. “Others are waiting.”

“I’ll go back, help Lindsay,” Asim mumbles. “I’ll stay here once we bring up the rest. Iraqis.” His lips barely move, like a ventriloquist’s. They say he has hardly slept in weeks.

Omer and I take the wheelchair, one handle each. We too struggle to restrain it and then—the slope levelling out—to push and steer it over the gravel. Finally we shove in through the door flaps of the military field-tent that serves as medical clinic. A single light bulb dangling by a cord sways over a table. A few unoccupied cots. A portable radiator, searing to the touch. The Médecins Sans Frontières nurse must be off helping somebody who has collapsed or grown hypothermic.

Omer and I consider trying to lift the bulky woman off the wheelchair onto a cot but decide it would be too difficult and risky. We leave her slumped in the chair, which we park and brake beside the radiator, in the corner farthest from the door flaps. “Wait with her,” he says. “Check her signals.”

“Her vital signs?”

“Her heart, her thermature.”

“I’m no paramedic,” I say.

“I will find the nurse, Stavro. Until the nurse comes, you are the nurse.”

He ducks and rushes out through the door flaps. I glance around. Under the table, a stack of folded grey wool blankets. I kneel and grab one, shake it open, drape it over the woman, up to her fleshy chin above the scarved part of her brown hijab. Her head has tipped back but remains stable, presumably supported by her sturdy neck. She is motionless, unresponsive. *The victim is unresponsive*. Mentally I hear the phrase; I hear dispatchers radioing the phrase on TV medical dramas; I know the phrase means, as often as not, dead. Her waxen lips are parted, but when I lean close I hear no breathing. I see no rise and fall of her bosom under the wool blanket. Something leaps to mind: a young undertaker at a bar in Detroit telling me that our eyes, not used to seeing unbreathing chests, will always project slight motion into the chests of the dead. I do the math, get a double negative: if she were dead, I would see movement; I see none, she must be alive.

Her round, plump face is unwrinkled, though she must be in her fifties, maybe older. Expression not pained or stricken but serene, as if she is at

home in her own bed, in dreamless sleep, somewhere back in Iraq before the wars. I hold my fingertips close to her lips. Is that a faint feathering of breath? I cup my hand over the pale band of brow showing under the edge of her hijab: no fever, no obvious chill. Could she be hypothermic and not chilled at the brow? I doubt it, but I'm not sure. I feel for her hand, fumbling under the edge of the blanket. This of course seems even more of a trespass than touching her face. I glance at the tent flaps, hoping to see the nurse push through, yet fearing I'll look like some pervert. And what if her family arrives? (Where is her family?) Some people, I've heard, feel titillated and licensed when left alone with an unconscious, helpless stranger. I feel scared shitless. I find her hand, soft but solid, larger than my own, and warm. Now I'm certain she can't be hypothermic. Hypothermic bodies siphon blood from the extremities to the core . . . don't they?

I lift her hand clear of the blanket and feel for the radial pulse under her sleeve. Her wrist is thick; I have to pinch hard. Still holding her hand, I crouch down beside the wheelchair. I locate the pulse, half-surprised to find it where I knew it should be. It seems steady, neither too heavy nor too faint. I check my watch. Hard to make out numbers in this light. Twenty-one beats in fifteen seconds? Still no response, but her signs seem okay.

There's nothing more for me to do except stay with her until the nurse returns. So I take up her hand again and simply hold it. "It's all right," I tell her. "Nurse will be here soon. You'll be all right." I assume that she can't hear me in her stupor and won't understand me if she can. I try to recall other moments in my life when I was thrust into a role of serious responsibility for which I felt unequipped. Maybe waking twenty years ago in a bed beside a wife and a four-hour-old daughter, the midwives gone home, the two of us improbably entrusted with this new life?

Over the next month, I and the other volunteers will repeatedly wake to find ourselves entirely unqualified but forced to act.

Greek was my mother's mother tongue, but not mine. Little by little now I am teaching myself, long after her death, as if the effort might span the chasm steadily widening between us. My limited grasp of Greek—overall the most difficult language I've tried to learn, including Japanese—is my lone qualification for volunteer work on Lesbos, besides a willingness to lend a hand however needed.

Her final decline and death of brain cancer, on a medical cot in my par-

ents' living room, was backlit at times by news channel reruns of the recent World Trade Center attacks. The sound on the television was turned down or off. That footage, when she could see it—fleeting, peripheral splashes merging with her delirium—must have seemed even more dreamlike than it did to everyone else. I would sit beside her cot or help my father in the attached kitchen while the videos looped like trauma flashbacks in a single sleepless brain. America's response was going to be severe, anyone could see that, although it was hard to predict exactly what form it would take and impossible to foresee the eventual fallout.

Sooner or later something is going to jar you out of your slumber, if only for an hour. The question is, what are you going to do when it happens?

Sitting beside her after her death on Christmas Day, I let my head sag forward and come to rest on her impossibly still bosom, the way some people press their brows to the cool earth in prayer. We remained like that for an hour or more, the room dimming into dusk. I heard my father enter, flick on a light, and fail to contain a violent, convulsive sob. Then, all but howling with grief, he fled the room.

The winds have died. Moonlight on the big-top shelters, the smaller tents, and the prefab huts. The midnight camp might be a travelling circus in the respite between evening performance and morning tear-down. With Omer and Asim I stand outside one of the shelters, its front flaps slightly open for air. The hum of space heaters and the sound of several hundred people's sleep-breathing fold into a drone as peaceful as collective chanting in a temple, mosque, or monastery.

Someone's loud, panicked blurting shatters the meditation. After a moment I ask, "What did he say? Do you know?"

Asim nods yes but doesn't translate. This is the first time I've seen him smoke. He exhales by coughing. His sunken eyes stare up at the moon. Omer says, "I wish I can understand. My father left when I was young. I wish I can speak some Arabic."

Now a girl's piercing scream, followed by the hushing of a mother, aunt, or grandmother. Muted singing in a minor key—a lullaby?

West beyond the canteen and the highway a causeway of moonlight links Lesvos and the Turkish coast. That shimmering span, ten kilometres wide, more or less marks the crossing. When all is well and the sea is calm (tonight it wasn't), when desert people not qualified to steer a vessel man-

age to steer one (tonight they couldn't), when the overpacked dinghies don't flood or founder (tonight they did), when the disposable clip-on two-stroke engines don't seize up or run out of fuel because human traffickers versed in the basic maths of capitalism don't bother with oil or enough gas for more than a direct crossing in textbook conditions (tonight they weren't)—when all goes well, it's a two-hour journey.

From up here, the passage looks safe and easy, straight across waters moon-mapped as benignly as in a child's picture book.

"I know it," Asim stammers—"the one she's singing. My boat carries sugar and milk and tea. And we'll drink together at dawn."