Melting at One End, Bleeding at the Other

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Notes from a Refugee Camp

Chapter One

People tell me that a sixteen-year-old girl does not think about such serious things. I tell them, that a sixteen-year-old girl who has lived through the horrors of war, who has lost her father and brother to war, who has seen her mother go almost insane from the war . . . Such a girl no longer thinks about her new telephone and her pretty shoes. On the contrary, she wonders why the rest of the world does *not* think about weapons manufactured in a dozen different countries exploding in a neighborhood where yesterday, children were going to school.

It doesn't really matter what war I have fled. There are probably hundreds of sixteen-year-old girls in the world today, in a dozen different refugee camps, living in a tent that flaps in the wind, breathing dust that covers everything, and listening to the shouts and the wailing, day and night, as each new throng of exhausted refugees entering the camp bring their reports from the war zone.

I come from an ancient country, littered with the debris of civilizations. The books which I read in school about the history of Syria are a chronicle of battles and wars and occupations so numerous that no child could ever remember them all. So of course, one could wonder: How many sixteen-year-old girls were caught in a war, in a siege, in a massacre, over the centuries? How many young girls were slaughtered? How many older girls were sold into slavery?

My mother, brother and I traveled in the crowded back of a truck through the night from Aleppo to the border with Turkey. With the roar of artillery in the distance behind us, we were allowed to cross the border. Turkish troops directed us to a nearby refugee camp. We were registered and given a tent with UNHCR printed on the canvas: the good people of the United Nations are now taking care of me and the remainder of my family.

For how long will we be here? Until the war is over. And when will the war be over? Or perhaps the question should be, "When will the *wars*—plural, since people first gathered along the banks of the Euphrates River—be over?"

I read in one of my schoolbooks that agriculture first developed in the "fertile crescent". Civilizations flourished because people learned the art of irrigation. Early engineers channeled water from the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, through a growing network of farms. Once people had enough food, they turned their attention to other things, like commerce, architecture, a written language, mathematics, and a code of law.

Yes, great civilizations grew and flourished. Until, one by one, they were destroyed by some conquering army. Because, despite the flow of commerce, despite the magnificent temples and palaces, despite the poetry, despite the mathematics that

reached from coins in the marketplace to stars in the night sky, and despite even the code of law . . . men kept fighting their wars.

So now a girl of sixteen years, finding herself with a long stretch of empty time ahead of her, will try to answer a question that the generals and the warlords and the dictators over the centuries perhaps never considered.

The question is not: “How to best fight and win a war?”

The question is not: “Why do we keep fighting these insane wars?”

The question should be: “How do we get *beyond* these wars? So that the children can get on with the task of civilization.”

My name is Rashida. I was born in the Salaheddin district of the City of Aleppo, in northern Syria. Because of our magnificent ancient architecture, Aleppo has been declared a “World Heritage City”. It is now, increasingly, day by day, night by night, bomb craters and rubble.

My father is still in Aleppo, a member of the Free Syrian Army; he is perhaps alive, perhaps dead. My brother is also in Aleppo, a “video activist” in the streets with his little telephone camera, part of the “YouTube generation”. Ahmed is one of dozens of teenagers who are trying to show the world what is happening in our embattled country.

My mother did not want to flee Aleppo . . . until a helicopter gunship fired a missile at the apartment building next to ours and it collapsed, with hundreds of sleeping people inside. So she took her daughter and twelve-year-old son and joined the hysterical mob that was trying to get out of the city.

Now my mother, wrapped in a black *abaya* as she rocks with her eyes closed and moans in a corner of the tent, worries about Omar, her husband, worries about Ahmed, her fourteen-year-old journalist. She depends on me to fetch food when it is available, to fetch bottles of water when they are available, and to accompany her to the “sanitary station”.

My other job is to keep my little brother, Wasim, from leaving the camp so that he can go back to Aleppo and try to find his father and brother. Twelve years old, Wasim says that he is old enough to handle a Kalashnikov, or at least a telephone camera.

And so . . . this is just the right time and place, don’t you think, to consider the question, “How do we—how do *all* people—get beyond the madness of war?”

One thing about a refugee camp is that everyone is here. Muslims and Christians are standing in the same lines for water. Kurds who fled the American war in Iraq, and Syrian merchants who abandoned their shops in the *souk* in Aleppo, stand in the same lines for food. And in the long lines at the “sanitary station” stand people who a month ago were city people, village people, desert people.

We have as well “the Westerners” in our camp, European doctors and humanitarian administrators, with their clipboards and water bottles, and funny hats

against the heat of the Syrian sun. One woman I especially like: an Irish doctor who wears a blue scarf (United Nations blue) over her red hair as she goes from tent to tent, asking about the health of the family huddled inside. Through an interpreter—a student from the University of Aleppo—she asks about fevers, vomiting, diarrhea.

When the doctor visited our tent, my mother stared at the ground, her normally alert eyes absolutely dull. I said to the doctor, her blue eyes very alert, "My mother is a midwife. She has been trained in a clinic. She has brought many babies into the world. Perhaps she can help you in the camp."

When the doctor heard from the interpreter what I had said, she looked at me with gratitude, then she asked my mother for her name. My mother stared. I said, "Zainab. I am Rashida. We are tent number 827. When you need us, you call. I will bring my mother."

That was a week ago. My mother now knows the way to the medical tent. She spends more and more hours there every day. Doctor Flanagan, or "Doctor Rosie", as she asked us to call her, stopped this morning at our tent to tell me that my mother is "indispensible".

I had some English in school, but "indispensible" was a new word for me. I will teach it to my mother this evening.

A few days ago, I spoke with a Christian in our camp.

What sort of Christian would you like? We have Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Maronites, Nestorians, Chaldeans, Roman Catholics, and a scattering of different sorts of Protestants. (I could list as many different sorts of Muslims as well.)

The Christian with whom I spoke while waiting in a hot dusty line for bread was a Syrian Orthodox woman who taught economics at the university.

I asked her what Jesus had to say about children, especially children caught in a war.

She looked at me, wary, and yet she could understand why I might ask such a question. She invited me to her tent—after we had received our ration of bread and had taken care of our families—so that she could look through her Bible in search of a few particular verses.

I did later visit her in her tent, where she and her family welcomed me and shared their bread . . . but the verses which she found in her worn Bible came from a book in which men, grown men, were the important personages. Children were mentioned here and there, but it was the men, often in conflict with each other, who claimed the most attention.

Being the sort of girl that I am, I continued asking other people, Sunni and Shiites, and Alawis, and Ismailis and Druze, about children in their Koran, especially about

children caught in a war. I pretended to be a schoolgirl working on a project which I would present in class when the war was over and everything went back to normal again.

Rather than offer my meager findings, I would ask *you* to do the same. What is written in your Holy Book about children caught in a war? What is written about getting *beyond* these wars, other than the invocation, countless times, of the word “peace”?

Because, you see, as a girl growing up, I had often accompanied my mother in her work as a midwife. I witnessed those first moments of breathing and kicking and wailing. I saw the smile on the sweaty face of the exhausted mother. I watched the care in every move that my mother made with her knowing hands.

I had witnessed, again and again, the moment when the Creator gave us another extraordinary gift. And because of that, I now felt very strongly that this war spat in the face of the Creator.

Ahh, but the Creator created more than just people. When the rains came each year to the desert and flowers bloomed where before there had been only rock and sand: that too was a gift.

I had seen pictures in my schoolbooks of butterflies in a rainforest. Of the tallest trees in the world, growing in California. Of sea birds that gather by the thousands on an island to lay their eggs. Of reindeer, in a flock like our flocks of sheep, but in a world of snow.

I so much wanted to see those places, if ever I were able to travel outside of my Syria (other than to a refugee camp in Turkey). That was the reason I studied English in school: so that one day I might visit California, to look up at a tree that reached like a minaret toward heaven.

So I began to ask people in the line for water and in the line for bread, what *their* Holy Book said about the animals, and the flowers, and about the fish in the sea. And especially, what about the animals that were caught in a war?

You might think that a girl going to school in Aleppo would never have heard about pollution and this thing called “climate change”. But of course I had, if only because the Euphrates River comes from the snow in the mountains of Turkey, and if the snow melts—as the Earth grows warmer—our great river will slowly disappear. And remember, it was this river which nourished all of our civilizations.

So I began to ask people in the lines for water and bread what *their* Holy Book said about “climate change”. What did their verses say about the melting of the snow?

Rather than present my meager findings, I would ask *you* to do the same.

Of course, we all know what the Holy Books say about women. We have our place, we have our duties, and so be it.

You might, as you conduct your research, pursue this line of questioning as well: How long shall women suffer in these unrelenting wars? How long before they rise up and begin to write a *new* chapter of scripture? A new gospel of peace.

* * *

Those are the thoughts of a girl named Rashida, in a refugee camp just across the border from the war in Syria, in August, 2012.

Ma salaama. Go in peace.

Chapter Two

I awoke one night, after about two weeks in the refugee camp, with the deepest, most searing loneliness that I had ever felt. While the roof of the tent shook in the night wind, and while the incessant voices called and worried and wailed outside (many refugees arrived during the nights, when they were safer from snipers), I felt a loneliness that was greater than any love I had ever felt, greater than any joy I had ever felt. Greater, even, than my rage at this horrid war.

Was I lonely because I missed my brother and father? Yes.

Was I lonely because I missed my homeland, my modern city, my normal way of life? Yes.

Was I lonely because I missed my friends at school . . . which, in years past, had begun in the month of September, less than a week from now? Yes.

But it was far more than that. I felt as if all the blackness of the night sky, without the stars, had poured into my heart.

My brother, my mother and I lay on mattresses along three sides of our tent; only I was awake. The flaps of the fourth side of the tent were tied to keep the dust out, or at least some of the dust. The flaps shook and occasionally rumbled in the night wind.

The tent was dark, save for the faintest glow of light: the moon shone through the canvas. Earlier that evening, as I stood in line at the sanitary station, I had watched the moon rising over the hills of Turkey; it was pale apricot, almost full.

The loneliness that I felt . . . I wanted to weep, I wanted to sob.

It was not for something that I missed. It was for something . . . beyond the war, beyond this time of fear and worry and rage. It was for the life that I had not yet lived, and might never live, for war brought death at any moment.

The government planes—the Russian MiG's—that had bombed Aleppo and Idleb and Azaz—might they not bomb a refugee camp as well?

We could sometimes hear artillery to the south. What was a bit of canvas against an artillery shell?

Could a girl feel such loneliness for the life she had not yet lived?

I stood at the edge of my own grave, peering down into the blackness, while the ground slowly crumbled beneath my feet.

* * *

The following day, I searched for Doctor Rosie, the doctor from Ireland, because she was energetic, and capable, and from a world outside of Syria at war. I went with my mother to the medical tent, where my mother was immediately immersed in her work

with several infants born during the past few days. But Doctor Rose Flanagan, an English nurse told me, was already out on her rounds.

Walking up and down the "streets" of the camp and asking along the way, I found Doctor Rosie in a tent crowded with a large family and their sacks of potatoes. Doctor Rosie's interpreter was telling her that the family was from a farming village north of Aleppo, not far from the Turkish border, where they grew wheat and potatoes, and harvested olives from their trees. No one was sick, no one was hurt. The children were all well, though thirsty. Their village had suddenly been bombed by a lone warplane, and so they had fled.

Doctor Rosie asked questions, speaking not only to the two men but to the four women as well. Her interpreter, a young woman from the University of Aleppo, spoke to the men in Arabic, spoke to the women, then translated their answers into English for Doctor Rosie. Standing just inside the tent, I could understand only a portion of the English.

Doctor Rosie took notes on a clipboard. In her blue shirt and trousers, and blue scarf over her red hair, she brought the authority—and hope—of the United Nations to people who had left their ancient well and clean water and olive trees. Suddenly, I felt enormously heartened to be standing exactly here, in this tent with an Irish doctor, at this moment; the loneliness was gone.

When the interview was over, I stepped quickly out of the tent, then greeted Doctor Rosie in English as she too emerged from the tent flaps. "Doctor Rosie, I am Rashida, daughter of Zainab, who is helping you as a midwife. I want to help you too."

She recognized me and smiled faintly while her eyes squinted against the bright morning sun. "Can you take notes? Hala," she nodded toward her translator, "is giving me the gist of what they say, but I fear I am losing a part of even that in my own notes."

I offered, "As they speak, I shall take notes in Arabic. Then, afterwards, if you have questions, I could explain more fully to you what they have said."

"Then," she held out her pale white hand, the first hand of a Westerner which I ever shook, "I believe you may become as indispensible as your mother."

And so I began my career as a doctor's assistant, visiting two or three dozen tents every day, with my own clipboard and pads and multiple pens, writing the tent numbers and the names of the occupants, circling the names of those who needed medical care. Sicknesses, injuries, particular worries: my Arabic filled page after page.

Then at the medical tent, after a lunch of whatever the Turkish authorities were providing that day, Doctor Rosie would announce, "All right, team!", and the three of us would go to work. Rosie would go through her notes, tent by tent, often asking questions; Hala would translate into Arabic for me; I would respond, sometimes in Arabic through Hala (who often added her own information), and sometimes in English, if I knew the

words. In that manner, Doctor Rosie developed a deeper understanding of each family's needs, and thus wrote a new set of notes, far more detailed and professional.

And I, much to my delight, was learning English much more rapidly than I had ever learned it in school.

The loneliness still haunted me at night. But never again did I feel it as severely as that night when I had wanted to sob, to wail, for so much in life that I would never know, never do.

Because as I took my notes in Arabic, I listened to what the vicious war, the hideous war, had done to so many shattered families.

One morning, I took notes while in a tent with a dozen new arrivals: "unaccompanied children" who had lost their parents, lost their families, in the chaos when war had suddenly blasted into their villages. Someone had tossed them into the back of a truck, into a Chinese van, into a horse-drawn cart, and then they had ridden further from home than they had ever been before, to a border crossing, or to a hole in a barbed-wire fence.

Terrified, hungry, some of them sick, the unaccompanied children (now accompanied by two women—strangers—who stayed with them in the tent) barely whispered as they answered the doctor's questions. Some of them cried; some of them stared at us, unable to speak.

They wore simple shirts and dresses made by a village grandmother . . . as well as brightly colored T-shirts with pictures of Batman and Cinderella, and words of unintelligible English. Some of the girls wore scarves; some of the boys wore baseball caps, backwards.

I was becoming more than a doctor's assistant. I was becoming a journalist, taking notes as I listened to the voices, and witnessed the faces, of the victims of somebody else's war.

* * *

Then a most remarkable thing happened, made possible by our Turkish hosts.

Turkey is a land as ancient as Syria, yet also a land almost as modern as its European neighbors. Thus Turkey served as a bridge between centuries of conflict, and a future potentially as bright as the sun.

In September, when school should have started, we had a new kind of school. My brother Wasim first discovered it. He was playing football with a group of refugee boys—a Norwegian aid organization had donated some sports equipment—when the boys noticed a group of workers building some sort of framework about fifty meters from the fence around the refugee camp. Two days later, the workers were fastening silvery rectangles, about the size of windows, to the framework.

"Solar panels," guessed one of the boys, and he was right.

Within a week, several hundred panels had been installed, tilted so that they caught the sunshine from the southern sky.

By now, word had spread through the camp that the noisy generators would soon be replaced by silent sunshine. Our camp would be the first to have such "renewable energy": there were no such solar panels powering the refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan or Iraq. Turkey was going to show the world how a refugee camp *should* be powered, with a light bulb in every tent.

Near the frames with their solar panels, the men erected a metal building. One of the Turkish workers walked over to the fence and explained to people watching that the new structure would be a shed for the batteries.

The Turkish workers now laid a black cable across the rocky ground from the "solar panel array", as they called it, to the battery shed. Then they laid a second cable from the battery shed to a smaller shed which they built inside the fence at one end of the camp.

They spent a day drilling holes with a machine along our streets, then stood a wooden post five meters tall in each hole: the beginnings of our new "grid".

Everyone was outside of their tents now, watching. Though the war still ate at our hearts, something new had entered our lives. Something that promised . . . we were not sure what. The solar panels in the near distance, modern and clean and orderly, seemed to promise something intelligent.

The Turkish workers pulled long wires from wooden spools on trucks and strung them from pole to pole along our streets, while women wearing a black *niqab* over their faces, just below their eyes, looked up, watching them.

Small boxes were installed on some of the poles; thinner wires spread out like spokes, one to a tent, with a socket for a light bulb at the end of each wire. Our grid was almost ready.

The Turkish workers screwed hooks into the central wooden poles inside the tents, just below the canvas ceilings. They hung the sockets—still without light bulbs—from the hooks.

And then, no more than ten days after work had first begun on the solar panel array, the Turkish workers handed out modern light bulbs—with a short spiral of white glass—to the children, to the *children*—of the camp, one per tent. My twelve-year-old brother Wasim was one of the children.

The Turkish workers lifted each child up to the socket, then spoke with patient instructions until the little hands had managed to screw the light bulb into the socket. Then the children were lowered back to the ground and told, "Good work."

Apparently the Turkish electricians now tested one string of lights at the far end of the camp, for we heard a sudden cheer.

As the late afternoon sun, dusty yellow, descended toward the Turkish hills to the west, we were told, one and all, to go with our families inside our tents. The streets were

quickly deserted, save for the Turkish workers who were almost festive as they called back and forth with final instructions.

I stood with my mother and brother in our cluttered tent; the air was hot from the sun beating on the canvas all day. We should have been preparing our evening meal in the last of the daylight, but instead we stood in silence, expectant.

When our light bulb suddenly lit, filling the tent with wonderful light, I saw my mother smile for the first time in weeks. We joined the enormous cheer from the surrounding tents.

I felt that we had finally, even with our one light bulb, hit back at the war that had caused so much destruction and misery.

The transformation brought by light in the tents was unrelenting: something new every day, every evening.

Even that first evening, we could hear the voices of women singing as they prepared a dinner for their children. We heard an old man laugh as he told a story across the street. We were instructed by the Turks to turn our lights off two hours after sunset, so to conserve electricity in the batteries. We did not mind. We could still hear women singing the lullabies of their villages, of their religions, of their cultures, in the stillness—without generators—of the night.

Schools were organized in various tents, some during the days, some during the evenings. Those who could teach taught those who could learn. A growing peacefulness, a growing happiness, settled on the children of the camp. I studied English during the evenings with a Scottish nurse named Abby. My brother, never before any kind of a student, declared that he was going to become an "electrical engineer", and thus applied himself with unprecedented fervor to a daytime class in mathematics, and an evening class in "introductory electronics", taught by one of the Turkish workers who otherwise maintained our "grid".

But that was not all. The Turkish authorities had a further surprise. With the same smooth professionalism, they unloaded a variety of components from a dozen trucks, then assembled, in five locations around the outside of the camp, five wind turbines that would catch the winds which blew almost steadily, day and night.

The turbines soon stood on steel poles about thirty meters tall, held erect by four cables radiating from the top of the poles to heavy stakes pounded into the ground. Three white blades, each about five meters long, spun in the dusty blue sky. Electrical cables ran from each turbine to the battery shed. The entire operation, from the arrival of the trucks to the spinning of the blades, took four days.

Each tent now received, in addition to its light bulb socket, a different sort of socket with three sets of holes: where appliances might be plugged in. Fans were on their way

from France, we were told. Fans that would blow on our faces during the heat of the day, fans that would bring the cool air of evening into our tents.

Radios were coming from Germany. Computers were coming from America, for—another first among the refugee camps—an internet café.

All powered by the sun. All powered by the wind. While artillery rumbled to the south, and horror stories ran through the camp with each new wave of refugees.

Chapter Three

I was deep asleep when I felt someone touch my shoulder, waking me up. Opening my eyes, I saw Doctor Rosie's face, lit by the glow from a tiny flashlight which she used to look into people's mouths. She was kneeling beside me, wearing her blue scarf. Her other hand was on her satchel of medical supplies.

"Rashida, please come," she said, her voice soft, urgent.

I stood up from the mattress and slipped on my blue *abaya* (a woman in the camp had made it for me, from material as close to United Nations blue as we could find). I tied a blue *hijab* over my hair, then followed Doctor Rosie out through the tent flaps.

Lights had been strung on the poles along the streets, another blessing from the wind turbines. But brighter that night than the amber lamps was the moon, nearly full and high overhead, bone white. The moon lit Doctor Rosie's face as she told me, "Hala left with her family. You are my translator now. It seems we have a special problem in one of the tents."

And then she led me across the ever growing camp, following a maze of streets through the moonlit tents—some with UNHCR on the roof, some with a Turkish Red Crescent—toward a new neighborhood where we would find, as Doctor Rosie told me, "tent number 1506. The occupants arrived a couple of hours ago."

Now in the last week of September, the nights were getting colder. Through my thin shoes, I could feel the cold ground.

We found the tent, with a cluster of people—women and children, as always, women and children, and one old man—milling about in the street in front of it. The moon lit some of their faces as they watched us approach; other faces beneath the *hijab* were no more than sharp eyes lit by a streetlamp. The eyes were anxious. These people had fled from the war that night, had crossed the border somewhere in the moonlight, had found the camp, but they were still not settled.

A woman gestured with a hand reaching from her black *abaya* toward the tent. "They are inside."

The flap was untied. Rosie led me into the tent. In the glow of her tiny light, we saw a young woman crouching in a corner with a bundled infant in her arms. The woman looked up at us and clutched the infant more tightly. She was a year or two older than me, no more than that. She was terrified, angry, ferocious; no one was going to take away her child.

Doctor Rosie and I both knelt in front of the woman. I said softly to her, *"Salaam Alaikum."* Peace be with you.

"Alaikum Salaam," she whispered.

She stared at me, her young face dusty, her lips parched.

"Ask her," said Doctor Rosie, "if we may see the face of her child."

The child's head was covered with a fold of the blanket that wrapped around its body.

I asked the woman if we might see the face of her child. I explained that the person beside me was a doctor.

The woman stared at me, gave a fierce shake of her head.

"What is your child's name?" I asked.

After a moment, she told me, proclaiming with a proud whisper, "Nawal."

I said to Doctor Rosie, "The child's name is Nawal. A girl."

The woman now looked at the fair skinned doctor beside me, her eyes only briefly on Doctor Rosie's face before they fastened on the gold crucifix that Doctor Rosie wore in the open V of her blue shirt. Doctor Rosie, as I knew, was an Irish Catholic.

And the woman, as I now guessed, was not Muslim but Christian, perhaps Chaldean, perhaps Assyrian. I said to Doctor Rosie, "I think she may be Christian."

"Ahh," said the doctor, who had found her first clue. Speaking softly, she told the woman, "Jesus loves your baby."

The woman's eyes stared with fresh understanding; she had caught the word "Jesus".

I translated into Arabic the short sentence, "Jesus loves your baby," and saw a softening, a reaching, the beginning of an acceptance, in the woman's eyes.

Doctor Rosie said, "Jesus, the son of Mother Mary, loves all children."

I translated.

"Jesus is with your child tonight."

I translated.

Doctor Rosie reached out her pale white hands. The woman loosened her grip slightly. Rosie slipped the fold of the blanket away from the child's face.

The infant was dead, eyes closed, parched lips open.

Doctor Rosie looked at the woman and spoke from her kind Irish heart, "Jesus wants to take your little girl home."

I translated.

"We will wash your child. We will wrap her in clean linen. We will give her a Christian burial. Jesus will take her home."

Then Doctor Rosie held out her hands, palms up, ready to receive the child.

With enormous courage, and with a degree of peace in her eyes, the young woman slowly pulled the fold of the blanket back over her daughter's face, then relinquished the child into the doctor's hands.

Doctor Rosie's face, for the first time since I had known her, filled with an aching grief as she clutched the bundled child to her heart. "Sweet Jesus, be with us tonight."

Then she handed the child to me. I, who had received so many freshly born infants into my hands from my mother, the midwife. I, who washed those wailing infants, then bundled them in clean linen, while my mother attended to the medical needs of the

exhausted mothers. I, who had so many times felt the push of little hands, the kick of little feet, the flex of a living body.

I now received into my hands a child utterly limp, even a bit stiff, while Doctor Rosie touched the woman's face (to feel for a fever), then took her pulse. She opened her satchel, took out a plastic liter bottle of water enriched with electrolytes—such bottles came by the thousands from Sweden—and gave it to the woman with parched lips.

The woman unscrewed the blue cap and drank half the bottle before she paused.

Now Doctor Rosie stood, and I stood with the child. Doctor Rosie reached down, took the woman's hand, raised her up. She held the woman's hand as she led her out through the tent flaps into the moonlight. I followed.

The eyes of the clustered refugees watched us; they glanced at the child, stared at the woman. She must have been a stranger to them, someone who in the chaos of war became a part of their group as they fled toward the border.

As Doctor Rosie led the woman along the otherwise deserted street, the cluster of refugees, murmuring, disappeared into their tent.

I walked beside the woman so that she could see her daughter. She did not ask to hold her child again, though she looked often at the bundle in my arms. She had relinquished her little girl to Jesus.

Doctor Rosie began to sing softly, sending up to the moon the verses of what I guessed must be an Irish hymn. Her voice was filled with an aching strength, as we followed the empty lamp-lit streets toward a special tent, located near the medical tent, where bodies were taken to be washed before burial.

While Doctor Rosie and the woman waited outside, I entered the unmarked tent, where two men were wrapping the body of an adult laid on a table. I was not surprised that people were working at this late hour; some of the refugees who staggered into the camp were barely alive. A few died within hours of arriving. Bodies were promptly prepared for burial.

One of the men nodded toward another table: I was to put the child there.

As I placed the bundle on a wooden table built by camp carpenters, I told myself that this was better than buried alive beneath a collapsed apartment building hit by a bomb; better than burned alive in a targeted church; better than shot, child and mother together, by a sniper. Better than torn apart by shrapnel from an artillery shell, while waiting in a long line in the street for bread.

At least, here in the refugee camp, there was some degree of order. Some dignity. Some vestige of human decency.

I asked the men, "When should I return?"

One of them looked up from his work. "Come back in an hour. The grave will be ready as well."

“Shukran,” I said. Thank you.

When I entered the medical tent, I saw that Doctor Rosie was examining a new arrival . . . while the young mother, seated at a table nearby, ate a meal of bread, apricots and tea. I sat at the table with her, poured a cup of tea for myself, then told her, “I am Rashida.”

She looked at me; she had washed her face and hands. “I am Yaara.”

“Your daughter will be ready in an hour. The cemetery is just outside the camp fence. The moonlight, I think, will be very nice.”

She looked at me with gratitude. *“Na’m.”* Yes.

She offered me a piece of bread, then we drank our tea and watched Rosie as she listened with her stethoscope to an elderly woman’s heart.

When Yaara had finished her meal, I suggested, “Perhaps you would like a hot shower? The water is heated by the sun.”

“By the sun?”

“The water is stored in black plastic barrels on the roof of the shower. The sun shines on the barrels during the day. Even at night, the water is still warm. Sometimes, after working late with Doctor Rosie, I take a shower before I go to bed.”

Had she ever bathed with anything other than buckets of water from a well? I did not ask, but led her out of the medical tent to the nearby shower for women. (The men’s shower was at the opposite end of the camp.) I showed her the faucet, made sure she had a bar of soap.

“Take your time,” I said. “I will come back with a towel and fresh clothes.”

I would give her a choice: she could put on her old clothes, worn while she fled the war and while her child had died . . . or she could put on a new *abaya* from an aid organization in Turkey. She could choose what she wanted to wear to the funeral of her child.

And so, less than an hour later, the three of us, Yaara, Doctor Rosie and myself—and the little girl which I carried, wrapped in fresh white linen—entered a growing cemetery outside the camp fence. In the same manner that streets formed a grid among the tents, paths formed a grid among mounds of fresh earth. A boy who had just finished digging the grave led us in the moonlight to a short hole in the ground, a child’s grave. Yaara drew back with a cry, her hands covering her face.

“Yaara,” said Doctor Rosie, “take your daughter in your arms one last time.”

The young mother—far braver than I could ever be—lowered her hands from her face; tears gleaming in the moonlight trailed down her cheeks. She held out her hands toward me. I gave her the infant, wrapped in pale white, a tiny creature in a cocoon.

Yaara hugged her child and wailed, and I thought of the loneliness that had filled my heart like all the darkness of the night.

Doctor Rosie said a prayer, her fervent words mixing with Yaara's shrieks of grief as she called upon Jesus to take this child of war . . . home to a place of peace.

And then Doctor Rosie lifted her crucifix—a gold cross on a chain—over her head and, while Yaara watched, tucked it into the linen wrapped around the little girl.

"Shukran," said Yaara.

"Alaikum Salaam," said Doctor Rosie, patting her hand on the child.

She turned to the boy, who took the child from Yaara, placed it in a linen sling and lowered the pale white cocoon into the dark shadow at the bottom of the grave.

The loneliness . . . something in me *raged* against the loneliness. Against the bleak emptiness. And against the cruel, ugly stupidness of war.

The boy stood with his shovel beside a mound of earth, looking at Doctor Rosie. Should he wait, or should he begin to fill the grave?

"We go now," said Doctor Rosie, taking Yaara's hand.

We walked in silence through the cemetery, past graves with markers, past graves with nothing on the raw earth. Perhaps, when Yaara was ready, we would return to the grave with a cross, or a toy, or a desert flower, for her little girl.

At the medical tent, I said to Yaara, "You come home with me to my tent. You are my sister now."

She looked at me, too devastated to speak.

Doctor Rosie said, "Yes, I will have a mattress and blankets sent over."

And so the two of us walked together to tent 827, while artillery rumbled to the south.