

DELIVERING THE GOODS

The team leader turns, leans from the front towards the three of us on the vehicle's back seat and says, 'It's an *'up there and back'* day today, ok? It's far, it'll be a push.' He taps his pen on his clipboard, 'You all know what you gotta get, right?' The others grunt.

The photographer, next to me, twists on the seat to ask, 'You alright in the middle, your long legs an' all?' I nod, close my eyes. Sahel journeys are all tediously the same: a palette of beige-brown, beige and more beige, tracks across sand flats that stretch forever, wind-blasted palm trees, the occasional gully we dip into where the jeep lurches and rattles over rocky ground, where startled black-bearded goats scamper off to peer at us from behind scrubby, squat bushes.

Hours later, after we've hit the 'real' desert: smooth, dun-hued dunes through which the jeep sways and skids as it churns onward, we arrive at the distribution centre. It's low-built, a white-painted building set amidst a huddle of huts, a couple of shipping containers dumped beside it. The sign says 'CLINIC' so nearby there must be some kind of settlement.

Only one expat staffer is manning this outpost, just a very young guy working with a locally-recruited medic and a few helpers.

We're shown into the storage shed by the young guy. Checking supplies, it's the usual: stacks of cartons, heaps of sacks, everything sealed with yellow tape and stamped with the bright blue of our UN agency's logo.

'Is this food enough?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know?'

The staffer's voice whines, 'I don't *know* – today they are so many already.'

We make it worse for him, the team leader's laugh like the croak of crow, 'If you think this crowd you got is many, well, don't look now, mate – *lots* more coming.'

'Yes,' someone else chimes in, 'on that last stretch we pushed past a whole throng of them – not in good shape.'

I'd seen in the jeep mirror how the face of our local driver tightened at the sight of them. His people, *in extremis*. First there had been the ones who'd lain down to gasp out a final surrender to the desert. Next the stragglers, the staggering ones. Then we caught up with the mass.

How many? Difficult to estimate: one hundred, two, three. Doggedly advancing, the men's hunched shoulders leaning into their journey, the women coming slower, babies swaddled on their backs, older children clutched by the hand, or tottering along behind, one thumb sucked, the other hand clinging to a trailing corner of their mother's wrap. Our driver slowed right down to negotiate a way through. As we lurched past the ones close up against the jeep's windows kept their swathed heads averted.

The windowless hut is stifling. The young staffer fists the sweat off his forehead, swipes his hand over his cheeks and says, 'Look, you don't have to worry – I got the message from HQ. I know what you're here for. You'll get your coverage. We can make it work ok, I think. We'll reduce the ration of milk powder. The canned fish should be enough. No maize oil hand-out, though.'

From outside, the noise, a sort of humming intonation like an angry beehive, is getting louder. I hear intermittent shouting. It's nearing midday and in an unshaded compound a mass of hungry people waits. I don't even know if there's a water supply in place for them – I somehow doubt it. They've most likely been there a long time – they can't like how the crowd keeps increasing as newcomers arrive.

On our way towards the main building I touch the staffer's arm and ask, 'You'll set up a system, won't you? Some sort of queue?'

He nods and makes to move on but then he clears his throat and says, 'You know it's not always straightforward.'

I grin. Keeping it as light as I can I say, 'Hey, yes – but *you* know how tricky it'll be to get the shots and the video otherwise. And then me...' To make sure he registers my notebook, I waggle it up and down. 'Me – well, I need to get my testimonies.' Setting up my interviews can take time, and ideally, I like a bit of space to conduct them in – for both of those I need his help. So, it's not a question when I say next, 'You'll cooperate?'

He'd like to get angry but grudges the energy it would take. Instead, he says dully, 'Yeah, **OK** – but you've seen them for yourself. They're desperate – no proper harvest for years and now the rains failed and the animals dead. It's famine.'

He sees my face. 'The *f* word, yeah – not allowed to use that, am I?' His chin juts, 'But what else is it, then? *Community hunger*' – that's what HQ would prefer, huh? Well ha, bloody ha...' Animated now, he wags a finger, 'Whole families on the move, walking days to get here. With nothing, *nothing*. The little kids...and as for the babies ...'

I look down, so as not to see his cheeks redden or his hand raise to swipe at his eyes. And to ensure he doesn't catch *my* expression. He sighs, 'We'll just do what we can,' and moves off, breaking into a half run as he rounds the building's corner.

More noise now, like a tide rising, ebbing, rising again to a roar, a wave rolling in, readying to crash down on the beach. Above it a lone voice rises higher in lament, '*Ayeeeeee, ayeeee, ooooooh wa wa ... ooh wa wa wa, ooooooh wa waaaaa.*' It's shrill and unsettling and I feel it prickle at the back of my neck, notch up my tension.

But I have to admit it, it's good too – a good choice to come here, however rough and difficult a time we'll have of it. Yes, it's *great*, in fact. When it's as desperate as this we're guaranteed great pictures. I'll have my choice of harrowing testimony. Put those things together and we'll have a real show.

Take the young staffer, he's perfect for zooming in on: hollowed-out face, red-rimmed eyes. *Yes*, the ideal spokesperson to put in front of our prime-time tv audiences in Europe and America. The commentary will write itself: '*Gruelling relief operation in remote African region, exhausted aid worker battles on.*'

The coverage sufficiently distressing, the news bulletin which shows it might just wrest a moment or two's attention from those audiences of ours. Audiences who'll be sated on their Easter weekend chocolate cream eggs and lamb roast. Soporific, slouched on their couches in front of the box, waiting for the afternoon's game to begin. Super-easy prey they'll be for our agency's fundraisers – if quick enough to get in and tap their wallets after our piece is broadcast.

Assembled, we all watch the team leader open the door giving on to the compound, all watch him balk at what he sees, 'Uh-oh, oh no...' Quickly he shuts the door. '*Phew-eee.*' He turns to face us, 'Wow, that out there is going to take some handling.' He admonishes us, 'Now team, watch yourselves. Hear me good, all of you: I'm counting on you not letting this get too chaotic.'

Out we file on to the steps. Seeing the packed compound below we immediately realise this *is* going to be too chaotic. The young staffer holds a megaphone to his mouth. His other arm, raised over his head, slices back and forth. Whatever he's signalling is ignored. The rudimentary line into which he's attempted to form the crowd ruptures before our eyes, all order disintegrating into contorted, shoving, elbowing, writhing women's bodies.

I squint into the blinding sunlight, the women's wraps striking me with their riot of strident colours: yellow, scarlet, cobalt blue, acid green, shrieking pink, reminding me of a Matisse painting. Outlined black against the background of blazing light, the angular forms, curved shapes, polka dots and joyous, blowsy flowers make a scene you'd want to dash off with a thickly-loaded brush and heighten with strokes of rich, crumbly oil pastel, were circumstances different.

Circumstances? – ours are more than rough and difficult, they're *ferocious*: the heat, of course, and the *dust*, gritty red dust swirling in front of our eyes, coating our lashes, invading our nostrils. And the *noise*, the uproar of cackling voices, vying against an undertow of children's bleating and wailing, the thud of stamping feet – and that megaphone, tinnily blaring its repeated instruction, 'Line up, line up'

The table for distribution is under siege. Reaching it, each fierce-faced woman leans forward and gives a name before turning to prod with bony fingers at one of the helpers scooping the rations of milk powder. Shuffling as near as she can, bending down, knees akimbo, she jabs at him, scowling and muttering, trying to nudge his arm to get more.

Our team has plenty to do: the videographer getting long shots, the photographer kneeling, leaning in, lens pointing at a squatting toddler. His face, contorted, is pressed against his camera, his visible eye screwed-up in concentration. The child's eyes, by contrast, are vacant. I watch its face split wide but hear no sound come from its mouth. A yellowish trickle of diarrhoea stains the sand beneath its scrawny bottom.

The mother crouched beside her child pulls its shrunken frame against her, wraps a thin cloth around its ribcage and bats limply at the flies encircling them. While my question is relayed to her by an interpreter, I pull out a pen and notice how bubbles of pearlised sweat pop and break on the back of my hand. Slick-fingered, I note the answer: '*Girl, 3 years, Miriam.*' I get the details: the crisis, the loss and fear, the trek, the despair – the first story of so many similar to follow.

Is my sigh that loud? Something makes the photographer look over. He grimaces and shrugs, 'Well, no one said we'd find a picnic in the park out here, did they?'

At the end, the food isn't enough, despite the last sack being turned upside down, shaken, shaken again, and beaten with a stick. Children crowd forward to crouch in the sand by the table, scratching at the ground, picking up a granule of

milk powder here, one there, stuffing their hands in their mouths and sucking their fingers.

The compound has gone quiet now, the women who remain wait in silence. Stony-eyed, their gaze is fixed on the helpers, registering their every move as they pick up their record books and go back inside, the door slamming shut behind them.

We are all heads down, hands busy, packing our equipment. I stuff my notebook into my bag and swig from a bottle of lukewarm water. Not *our* problem, ladies, that you're too many, the supply line's failed, you're out of luck.

For us, reportage achieved, we're done and dusted. Relieved at being able to plead deadlines that must be met, we're primed for our usual unceremonious leave-taking. All that remains is a quick scribble in the visitors' book. I'm instructed, 'Go do it – you're the writer. But get a move on.'

I write names, date, brief message in the young staffer's office, aware of him watching me. 'Drained' does not describe him – he's as used up and wrung out as the damp tee shirt on his back. 'Mission accomplished, back off to the city is it now?' he asks, his voice sounding like a box snapping shut. I'll never know what comfort he might have got from me lying to him that things here will soon get better. Reaching for the door handle, he makes me a mock-bow, 'Bye then.'

The hall I step into is buzzing with noise and it's jammed. It's the women from outside. Breaching the door they saw closed in their anxious, hungry faces, they've pushed inside. The air is foetid, the exit door away at the hall's far end. All I want now is to reach that door, get out and go. To reach it there's no alternative but to thrust myself into the milling throng.

I edge forward, pushing, but gently. When I'm nearly there, trying one more time to slip myself sideways between two women, that's when I feel it, the pinch. '*Oww*.' A sharp pinch on the thin skin of my left wrist. '*Oww*' – I try wrenching my hand away but can't.

A gaunt face is being thrust forward into mine by the pincher, a tall woman who has stepped in so that my way is blocked. She steps closer. I'm compelled to lock eyes with hers: dark eyes, the whites yellowish, the gaze fierce, demanding. Only then does she release my wrist and use her hand to flip back the cloth covering what she has in the crook of her arm. With one finger she points at it.

My teeth clench – I know what’s there. My mind screams, ‘*Ayeeeeee* – don’t look’. But I have to – I look and I see that if any life is left in the wasted, crumpled thing revealed, it can be but its last clinging, futile few moments. The tiny body is a girl’s, greenish-yellow, the face a wizened rictus of closed eyes and bared gums, two thin strands of wet black hair plastering her forehead.

I gulp and gasp out, ‘*I’m not a doctor.*’

This mother has seen the white vehicle, the blue logos, the urgent gesticulations, the concern in the white faces asking questions. She’s reasoned our team has come with *relief*, with what is needed to save her daughter’s life. Even as, trapped, I feel panic stir in the pit of my stomach, even as I want to fend her off with my hands, I’m aware of this woman’s right to accost me. And accuse me.

How do I explain we bring *nothing* to alleviate her anguish, how tell her the truth: that we arrived with empty hands, came here only for what we can take away? That now we’re going?

The door bangs open, I can see the jeep. ‘Come *on* ...’ the team leader is shouting, ‘... or we’ll never make it before curfew.’ This time, hands up in front of my face, I use my shoulder and just barge through. Tumbling down the steps, I clamber into the vehicle as the engine revs up to a roar. *Clunk*, the door thuds closed and instantly the icy air raises goose pimples on my forearms.

Accelerating away, we’re quizzed, ‘OK team, did we get everything? The close-ups: anxious faces, clawing hands etc?’

‘We’re good, chief,’ the photographer says. ‘All good. I’ll be cropping right in for a tight focus on the drama.’

‘And our logos, you got them clearly in view?’

‘It’s all alright, chief. You can relax.’ Turning his face so only I can hear he mutters, ‘If not, can always strip in stuff from another location, can’t I? – who’d know anyway?’

The leader looks across at me, ‘You’re quiet – today’s been heavy, huh? Get a good kip in now, why don’t you? Four hours at least before we’re back, isn’t that right, driver?’

I close my eyes but the photographer’s shoulder nudges mine, ‘Hey, what’s with the biro?’

I look at my right hand. Clenched. The pen I’m holding is clutched so tightly my nails are digging into my palm, my knuckles have become hillocks of striated red and my thumbnail is blue-white. I don’t answer, twisting to face the window where over to the right the setting sun flickers orange along the rim of a

dune. I'm looking – but I *see* nothing except a face, that baby girl's, a green-yellow face, the one I'll never be allowed to forget.

I've never had a baby to hold to my breast and feed. Once in Dorset I suckled an Easter lamb, one rejected by its mother. I sat by the Aga and hugged it in a blanket, pushing the warm bottle in its mouth. Through the little creature's silk-soft curly coat I could feel the pulsation of its very life force as, eyes closed, tiny tongue flicking in and out through black lips around the red rubber teat, that lamb pulled and pulled and pulled the milk down its gullet.

Hunched over, now I want to rock and moan. Rock back and forth like the Jews do at the Wailing Wall, reciting the prayers that ignite the light of their souls so their bodies sway like candle flames in the breeze. And moan like that lone voice we heard back there, '*Ooh wa, ooh waaaa, ooh waaa.*'

But I must sit still, must clench my teeth, must ignore the pain in my hands, the one still clutched, throbbing now, around the pen, the other with its raised red welt at the wrist. I will the others not to look at me, *not* to ask. I needn't worry: conversation turns swiftly to day's end, the anticipation of coming comforts.

'Any ideas where to eat tonight?'

'Beer for me first – God, I swear I could down a dozen right now.'

'Hasn't today been the sweatiest ever, guys – yeah? What day is it today anyway? Friday, is it?'

I blurt out, 'Good Friday. *It's Good Friday, Passiontide.*'

My voice must sound odd because the videographer says, 'Oh.' He leans forward so he can look across at me. He's frowning – can it be with embarrassment? – and says 'Oh,' again and, 'Um, sorry, a Catholic, are you?'

Whatever he thinks he is apologising for, there's no need. Sure, I went to Sunday School, sang hymns from my dark red *Ancient and Modern* book at every morning Assembly – with that education, you can't avoid familiarity with the Bible's stories in a way that never leaves you. But that's different from religion influencing you. Frankly, I'd be hard put to recall the last time anything to do with religion gave me a moment's pause in the helter-skelter way I've lived my life.

I'm often in a church or cathedral when in Europe – but for an altarpiece, a sculpted font, to marvel at a mosaic floor. For art, for beauty. Easter was the last time, in fact, Easter last year, my visit to Venice.

And oh well, yes – remembering Venice now, I have to admit that *was* different. My memory throws up an image of me alone at the Scuola San Rocco.

Slumped on a green canvas chair, I'm in front of Tintoretto's '*Crucifixion*', finding I'm rendered speechless by the impact of its portrayal of Golgotha. It's huge, of course, the painting, an all-encompassing panorama, unsparing in its treatment of the cruel fate of Jesus and the two thieves. You've no choice but to be dominated by it, overwhelmed and immersed in the strain and sweat, the angst and the pity of it all.

The depiction of the details engrossed me: the mechanics of heaving the three of them up there: the ladder, the spars and ropes, the homely tool bag thrown down, spilling out its contents, those ugly, round-headed nails. The afterthought of the sponge doused in vinegar.

And yes, yes, then the agony of it all did *also* hit home as I sat longingly on, looking up at the vast canvas through eyes misted with emotion.

And now the import of that agony is ambushing me, affecting me – undoing me again – but this time as never before. Against the backdrop of these blank, merciless desert wastes I'm somehow seeing my very own Mount of Olives, thrusting up its mass here in front of me.

'*There is a green hill, far away, Without a city wall,*' that's an Easter hymn we sang in school. Later, I travelled there, Israel, went to the Holy City, stood under the city walls and saw the Dome of the Rock glinting gold against the white hills, the Mount with its green groves, saw where Jesus, despairing of Jerusalem, went up to seek quietude for prayer amongst the ancient trees.

And if the passion of the Mount is here with me now, what then, am I? I have the answer to that: nothing but a bystander, one who looks on, who brings no succour. One who, this Good Friday, sees but does not stay, who declines to keep company with those suffering children, does not walk beside them as they stumble their last steps to Calvary.

Tears come now but even as they fall, I'm conscious these are not compassionate tears. They are neither for barely-alive Miriam nor for the near-dead baby girl, nor for their people back there, pushed beyond their limits by what's befallen them, this harsh calamity about which most of the world neither knows nor cares.

My tears are for *me*. My tears are because of this job I chose that obliges me to harden myself, to remain dispassionate. This job where, at the slightest hint of over-sensitivity, of getting too involved, I'll be called in. All that those who question me will want to know is whether or not I can still be analytical, write evocatively, bear useful witness, still *deliver the goods*? I cry knowing that, having signed on the contract's dotted line, tomorrow will bring me no way

out, just the dawning of another day when there'll be more unbearable to be borne.

The vehicle jolts. My grip loosens, the pen falls and warm blood prickles as my numb fingers start to flood pink. Two of the team are snoring. I fumble for a tissue and then feel around under my feet to locate the pen and start work, while there's still light, on today's report. From time to time I chew the pen, often, I frown – no easy task finding words to sum it up, words to make it seem as though it's all alright.