

# Forced Return

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**H**E KNOWS WHERE her eyes will be without turning. About three meters to his right. The miniature jean jacket rolled at the sleeves; blond hair that must be weightless. The boy looks about eighteen months, maybe a month or two younger. Weight first on his toes then teetering heelward, unsteady in either course.

The boy reaches high to push his stroller and for a moment the stroller, like the boy, balances back to front, neither calamity nor calm. Pulling it further, grabbing for the handles, everything topples back. He isn't hurt. Andrew can tell he isn't hurt, but the wreck of this small world freezes the boy's face for a moment, just before the scream breaks. Andrew bounds three strides and rights the stroller. As the mother scoops up the child with an appreciative nod Andrew checks Laetitia. He sees he was right—her eyes exactly where he knew they must be. He shoots her a brief comforting smile that does not seem to register, so his eyes avert hers, down to his open, idle hands.

Most of the flights from Paris to Africa depart late in the night—Kinshasa, Dakar, Johannesburg, Abidjan, Khartoum—so there is time to kill. Strangely, shops and stores are closed except for one poorly stocked cafeteria, an airport purgatory, full of jet-lagged passengers waiting for connections. The family with the blond boy disappears and Andrew senses Laetitia come out of her book. For a while they play the game of guessing where the Africans are headed, spotting their different ethnic characteristics. Her decade of development experience makes her better at than him. Andrew is cut in the relief worker mold—ignore culture and history, forget about participatory programming or empowerment. Humanitarian work provided a cleaner imperative: treat this or fix that *right now*. There's no need for a political taxonomy of the local emir's dynasty in order to restore a cracked pump casing to the way it was.

“Senegalese,” he says, tipping his head in the direction of a two young men, perhaps students returning home for vacation.

“Ivoirian,” she says, shaking her head as if it were obvious.

She may have guessed it. He sees now the square vault of their foreheads, a common feature in the Gulf of Guinea countries. He takes her teasing as a good sign. Maybe it isn't too early. Him? He needs to return, to immerse himself in a packed hospital with a temperamental generator or a garage full of dust-fouled engines. The long leave worried his fingers, left him too often steeping in his thoughts. Her? Andrew again wonders if they shouldn't have waited another month, perhaps heading to stay with friends in Vancouver or camping in Nova Scotia. Maybe she is doing it for him. He can't tell. “You said you were OK with getting back to it,” he commented earlier in the day, before boarding in Montreal.

“I said, Andrew, that they're depending on us and I wouldn't want to screw that up.”



“ISN'T THAT Mustafa?” she says, spotting the driver as they exit the main door of Khartoum International Airport. Mustafa is indeed waiting, arms elevated to pat them both on the top of the shoulder, an exuberant welcome that pulls a high wattage grin from Laetitia. These greetings are repeated over and over with the twenty or so staff at the office, each suffused with invigorating warmth. The excitement of being back chases Andrew's fatigue. He looks over and sees Laetitia, walking arm and arm towards the balcony with Hawa. Is she actually engaged in girl talk?

Andrew pokes around the office, stopping to study the “hall of fame.” The national staff keep an unofficial record of all the expats tacked to the wall in the administrator's office, slipping a passport photo into the dry weave of a straw mat. There are about 250 on the Khartoum wall, like an entire college yearbook, save for the prevalence of scruffy beards. For old-timers it's a source of amusement, with photos spanning over a decade. Andrew bends forward to eye his picture, one he used for years, remembering the glint in the corner of his wire-framed glasses. He prefers contacts nowadays, but travels with those glasses as a back up. Next to him is Laetitia, her hair still long three years ago, a wayward lock only just clinging to her brow. He misses the way she used to blow the hair from her face.

“Do returning expats earn a second photo?” he asks to nobody in particular.

Konstantine, the head of mission, is almost as happy to see them as Mustafa, clasping them to his keg of a chest. It’s partly how desperate they are for experienced staff, partly his Mediterranean way. Andrew prefers a world without hugging other men, especially overweight Greeks who drip all day in the furnace of Sudan. Konstantine promises to keep the briefing short. They already know Sudan, having spent ten months in the refugee project in Kassala, in the east, and they’ve read through piles of reports on Darfur, more than Andrew’s hands-on mentality could support. Hundreds or thousands of aid workers producing paper, as if that’s what Darfurians needed. How to help for real? Give all those trees to women in the camps, so they wouldn’t get raped or killed looking for firewood.

When they left three years before the first signs of crisis were emerging from Darfur. Concern for the situation in the South—the delicate peace talks to end decades of war—blocked criticism of what was happening in the West. So when refugees in Chad first recounted stories of burned villages, nobody wanted to notice. A million people driven from their homes into the desert, and the specter of something worse, something more sinister, progressively eroded global intransigence. Once the outside world awoke to the reality, the horrors of Darfur fast unfurled, earning the rank of number one humanitarian mess on the planet according to no less than the UN’s Jan Egeland, who had said the same thing about northern Uganda some months before. Food, healthcare, shelters, latrines, blankets, vaccinations poured in—everything except what the people needed most of all. An end to the violence. And so the clarion *Never again!*, just one and six decades old, whorled impotently over mass graves in the dust a thousand miles from just about anywhere.

“Darfur is totally fucked up,” says Konstantine in his thickly accented English. A huge map behind him is quilled with green and black stickpins showing (respectively) project sites and the main camps. It’s an enormous territory. The swaths of open space register, as do the black pins uncrossed by roads of any kind. Overhead, the dark fins of a fan limp round and round, drawing its axle in a wobbly loop.

“We’re one of the two biggest NGOs in West Darfur. We’re up to 1500 consultations a week.” He continues with the details: a hospital plus feeding center in Mornay, and satellite health centers in some of the smaller camps nearby. Twenty-three expats and one hundred and fifty national staff. It’s a major operation, bordering on a circus. Laetitia will coordinate the project and run the nutrition programs while Andrew will freelance in logistics. He knows HQ calls with offers for Laetitia, yet he more than manages to earn his keep fixing whatever is broken, his long, talented fingers resurrecting Thuraya phones, emergency generators, and crappy Chinese toasters from the literal dust heap.

“Anything new on the security front?” asks Andrew.

“It’s much worse than last year. The main new issue is resettlement. The GOS is pushing to make these camps disappear. They want everybody to return home. There are rumors they’ll start forcing people back. Then we’re screwed. If they start and we run out there to deliver the assistance then it’s like a giant green light for more.”

Andrew and Laetitia turn to one another, understanding. They’ve seen this situation before. Angola 2002. She finishes Konstantine’s thought: “But if we don’t play along, who suffers? The people.”

“Voilà.”

“Nasty situation.” Andrew gives her shoulder a gentle squeeze as he steps around, moving to study the map more closely.

“Enfin, the people don’t want to go anywhere with the *JJ* still running around.”

“Of course not!” says Konstantine. “But this Government of Sudan is too genius. They’re promising to increase protection. You want to know how? They’re converting the *JJ* into a protection force.” Konstantine kicks away from the desk, unable to contain himself. The chair back strains against the mass, ready to give. Andrew makes a mental note to stop by later and fix it. “They’re giving them uniforms and salaries in the police and military.”

“Goddamn bastards!” says Laetitia. She enunciates each syllable.

“Who? The Janjaweed or the GOS?”

“Les deux,” she says, raising her hands in the air. “Nobody should let this government deal with protection. It’s like the wolf guarding

the chickens.” Her animation surprises Andrew, not because it is unlike her but because it is so like her, like the way she used to be. He collects these small signs like shells from the beach, spinning them in his hand, pitching even the imperfect ones into his pail of hope. Maybe she performs the same accounting on him? He wants to ask but never does.

At the end of that long first day, they retreat to the rooftop balcony and drink hibiscus tea, known locally as *karkaday*. A handful of expats join to say welcome and offer encouragement. Andrew and Laetitia know some of them from eight years of field postings in the small world of relief work, others from HQ or various training courses. Andrew feels liberated among these Africa vets—people who breathe the continent, exhilarated by the panorama from a crest in the road and unfazed by their car stuck deep in the muddy troughs; people with grandiose theories to explain the cultural relativism of female genital mutilation yet who can share in a bemused laugh at the way the Sudanese take their tea with at least six spoons of sugar.

These are people who know Africa is a place unlike and yet like any other, not a catastrophe newsreel but communities where you might live and work and love and raise your child. There is no recrimination here, nothing like the whispering eyes of even their close friends and families, the so-called support network. No accusations making it seem as if Cedrique’s death from flu and then acute malaria should have been expected, as if they’d taken a two-year-old shark diving. Of course there is no malaria in Montreal. He has explained it so many times. Just as surely Cedrique wasn’t going to drown in the neighbor’s swimming pool in Niger, where they were stationed when he died. Or become paralyzed in a ski accident or one day get shot in the high school parking lot over a pair of Nikes.

“Thank you,” states Laetitia after Gerald says the entire Sudan team has been pulling for them since hearing the news. “Merci beaucoup.”

“It means a lot to us,” Andrew adds, instinctively drawing the attention away from her.

A quiet passes—awkward but not oddly so—before Clare, a doctor, brings up what he guesses is an old thread of conversation. “Why can’t somebody bottle a good karkaday? You know? Iced

karkaday beats that green tea piss they're selling to all the yuppies." The conversation spins away, into all the different products Africans should be selling to the West. Andrew joins in. For the most part, Laetitia follows along, turning her head to whoever is speaking, only occasionally staring off to the distance, or to the depths of her tea. He senses her at all times, each tick on the inner Geiger of her mood a guess as to its true meaning in terms of their marriage, seemingly reduced these past months to an inert coexistence. He feels as if he's driving on an unsecured road, constantly gauging her, looking for the right way to get them back to where they were. An excited cloud of swallows breaks from the trees, winging toward the house, veering at the last instant to pass harmlessly over the lip of the roof.

Andrew covers Laetitia's hand with his own, resting over her thigh. It's an old, shared memory from this very balcony, now interrupted when Laetitia slides her hand away to drink the last of her tea, raising the wide bowl to cover her face. The swallows continue their chatter, the neem trees flashing with wings, raising a din to match Andrew's self-chastising inner voice. He stifles his frustration even as he aches to hold and hold and hold her hand, one more intimacy that seemingly reminds her of making love and pregnancy and consequently of Cedrique. He knows he's not like Laetitia in this way. It's not that the pain consumes him less, it's that he is an engineer. He accepts the precision of death; its unique insusceptibility to being fixed. She, however, is a dreamer. The pain tears at her sanity, rejects closure, pushes her thoughts just beyond the fringes of reason. At least, that's his take on it.

As they drive from the Mornay airstrip to their base the compression of people strikes him. "Last year there were 10,000 residents here. Now it's between 75 and 120,000," Andrew says, remembering from one of the UN's reports. Mornay is crowded, the hospital is crowded, the team house is crowded. There aren't enough buildings in town so the IDPs, the displaced people, have erected crude shelters everywhere, transforming schools and family courtyards into shantytowns of plastic sheeting and cardboard, constantly pressing towards the center, like lion cubs jostling for their mother's teat. The organization's own national staff, the nurses, mechanics, cooks and cleaners, say it is not safe to live near the outskirts, defenseless against

the *Janjaweed*, so the outer ring constantly shifts inward, seeking protection in this last resort of human hope, the safety of numbers, the comfort of each other. The crowding will bring disease and death, but at least not beating and rape and execution.

“Look at that place.” She follows his pointing to a small hut constructed almost entirely from the flattened tins of donated cooking oil, the manifold repetition of USAID logos producing a brilliant red, white and blue advertisement for the United States government. Back in Niger, Cedrique used to play with a truck fashioned by a neighbor out of that same oil container. He raced it into walls and trees, clapping to himself with every collision, even after Andrew could no longer reattach the jar lids cum wheels.

“Not many older boys or men,” she observes. They’re either hiding in Chad, fighting with the rebels or dead somewhere.

“I was just about to say that.” Definitely a good sign. This is why he wanted to come to Darfur. For a context so undeniably compelling; for the therapy of being wrenched into an outward gaze.

It’s late by the time a young administrator named Johanna shows them their room. “Being a couple has its advantages,” she says. Most of the expats are doubled up in rooms because of the shortage of suitable housing. Pulling the door shut: “Dinner starts at 1800. The food goes pretty fast so I’d recommend being on time.”

“Being a couple has its advantages,” he chirps in Johanna’s Texas accent. Andrew spread eagles himself across the entire bed while Laetitia’s pack slides from her shoulders to the tile floor. He bounces up and gives her a quick kiss on the lips; she wraps her arms round his bony back, then spins away, ostensibly to survey the bathroom. Andrew forces himself to be busy, opening and shutting all the dresser drawers, testing their slide, stooping to eye level with one that sticks. The runner is bent. Two screws and it will be as smooth as new.

The banality of the dinner conversation is soothing. The three vegetarians complain that the rest of the team is eating the dishes prepared for them, which is understandable given the vinyl content of the meat. A certain nurse, not present at dinner, is sleeping with one of the drivers. Their local-hired Darfurian staff think the expats favor the Khartoum-hired staff, who they view as snobs from rich families or, worse still, Arab spies. At least the staff are unified in

bitching about the salary, which is far lower than what the UN pays. And the number one preoccupation there in the middle of genocide? HQ's rule prohibiting them from sneaking beer into Darfur. What lovely bullshit, Andrew thinks. Much healthier than a team consumed by the world beyond the compound walls.

Back in their room he tries to engage her. "As you're fond of saying, I'm not the quickest to pick up on irony, but there's something funny about living in Darfur and the conversation is about food *we're* eating." They're each readying small backpacks for their visits, he to the warehouse/garage and she to the feeding center.

"I know. Some things will never change."

The hint of defeat in her response pounds Andrew in the chest. Her face remains inscrutable as he again questions whether he is seeing and hearing through the lens of his own guilt and uncertainty, imbu-ing her every tick with some manifestation of their lost little boy.

"You good to go?"

"Ready," she says.

There it is again: Did "ready" mean they could go, her bag zipped shut and a loose wrap covering her shoulders so as not to offend Muslim sensibilities? Or is she really ready to face a room full of infants and toddlers? He's tried to talk to her about working with children again. She seems muted. Is it the heat? Or a broken soul?

When he returns that night, Andrew finds Laetitia in bed, the standing fan rattling every time it reaches the leftward extension of its sweep. The small double bed seems ill-designed for his rangy frame, and the canopy of mosquito netting brings to mind the image of a frilly gift package. Irony again! He slips under the net and finds himself practically on top of her, his knee brushing her thigh, his hand on her hip for lack of alternative. They have not laid this close since March, when they held each other awake with grief for nights on end. Later, at her parents' home in Montreal, he usually woke to find her in the recliner, legs bunched under the blanket from her teenage bed, full of bubble gum hearts and billowy yellow stars. He stays there, in the middle, keeping his limbs away from the netting and the hungry insects beyond. He also keeps his hand there, hoping against odds, waiting to see if there is a reaction and knowing she is awake by the way her body stiffened.



“How was it?” he asks. He does not have to explain further. She doesn’t move to answer. “Bien. Most of the kids were asleep.”

He waits for more.

“I’ll get used to it.”

He caresses her leg, then thinks twice about it. “To what?”

“You remember how we thought it would be different in Africa? You know, no kids with reddish curls or wearing Gap jeans. Well, I still see Cedrique there, in millions of tiny things, like the way one boy tilted his head towards his mother, or the way another coughed milk out his nose.”

“Are you okay?”

She rolls away from him, onto her back. “How’d the garage look?”

He shuts his eyes, talking himself down with a series of internal platitudes. The fan rattles. He wants to turn on the light and oil it. *Just be patient with her.* The fan rattles. *Time heals all wounds.* But really, how long can we go on like this? “I won’t be bored.”



LIKE MIGRATION PATTERNS, ethnic alliances and everything else in Darfur, time itself seems to become unglued, the first six weeks passing like a light rain into dry sand. His inner calendar blurs, a torrent of days and nights in the garage, the *wadis* and roads of Darfur tearing up the Landcruisers as children do their toys, the supply of spare parts always one month behind and the computerized ordering system complicated beyond his patience. It recalls the time after Cedrique’s death, the way the days washed into a fog of bereavement, and yet he also remembers exactly the overwhelming sense that the passage of time became paralyzed, each minute clamped in place as he waged a singular bout with grief.

Frequent *haboub* winds raise clouds of dust, darkening the small spaces in which Andrew lives with Laetitia, drawn into her own routine of obsessive hours and detailed reports to HQ. They sleep the sleep of the exhausted. One day she asks him to fix the tap system at the feeding center. Surveying the hodgepodge of pipes and hoses, he pauses every now and then to watch her heft a stunted child to her shoulder, bouncing him or her in a practiced way, cooing as the traumatized mothers sleep in the spare, overcrowded room that must

still seem like a godsent sanctuary. Four days later, the feeding center is almost empty, the IDPs gone, having been herded and dumped in their former home areas, perhaps now nudging the soil to discover the ashes of their *tukul*'s roof, perhaps unable even to nudge the soil, paralyzed by the ghost of murdered family and clan beneath.

Government officials ordered the sheikhs to take their people home one day, and the military showed up with commandeered trucks the next. Another round of outcry from the international community pings off the outcry-toughened armor of the Sudanese authorities. After accusations of genocide, those of forced resettlement seem almost comically weak. That, and Sudan has oil, lots of unexploited oil, with keen interest from the Chinese. So the Security Council can do nothing more than gnash its diplomatic teeth and issue a generic condemnation of the situation, tacking on a few strident calls for respect of international standards.

Laetitia reads the decision aloud to open the emergency meeting. The whole team already knows what the email contains.

*Yes, Leti, various agencies are reporting the same thing. The UN has already said she will not respond. Egeland wants no aid until he can negotiate a framework for an organized return home. One month notification, water and health services in place beforehand, security assessments, etc. The NGOs are going to take the same line. There is a lot of pressure on the government to stop moving people. We need to take a stand and show being tough. So if the authorities pressurize you to go to the return areas, you refuse. We all refuse. That's our position. Cheers. Konst*

“Well, that settles that,” says Jorge, the financial administrator. If only it did, thinks Andrew.

“Even if we do something, what? If we distribute food out there the *Janjaweed* will attack to steal it.”

Andrew looks across the table. It's Karl, one of the new loggies, mouthing the logic being touted by other agencies to justify their inaction. An excuse, and yet sadly true in many respects. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Situations like Darfur perverted

the spirit of compassion to the point where aid brought destruction, not life. He thinks about saying something. Young guys like Jorge and Karl were struggling to find the heroic path, resistant to performing what Laetitia refers to as the “least worst option.” Far from the TV ads seeking donations, humanitarian work wasn’t very pretty: Pardon us, victims, but we have decided not to offer our assistance program in your home area because we do not want to be perceived as endorsing the resettlement policies of the government.

“That’s too easy,” she begins. “Konstantine can say from Khartoum not to go, but we are *here*, standing in front of a woman with a sick child. Who has been raped and burned out of her home. Or who has lost one child to diarrhea in the bush and whose husband was shot dead in front of her.”

The team goes over and around the issues. A few are with her: head down, focus on the people, deliver the aid and leave the politics to the politicians. More are against her: maintain the unity of the international community; don’t collaborate in the government’s plan; follow Konstantine’s orders. Laetitia’s opening salvo set the tone. Both sides make impassioned pleas, lose their temper, accuse the other of murder. He knows this split will poison the team for weeks, until hindsight settles the debate or a new crisis carries them off. Laetitia ends the meeting without doubt. “We go,” she pronounces.

Andrew finds her in their room, coming from the shower, dark brown feet trisected by the lines of untanned skin from her sandal straps. He sits on the edge of the bed, directly in front of the fan, closes his eyes when the breeze comes.

“Are you okay?”

“We go, Andrew. I hope you’re not here to talk me out of it.” More of a statement than a question.

“For fuck sake, I’m here because I’m your husband! Remember that?” He rarely snaps, surely not since Cedrique’s death. Regretting it, he quickly exhales a deep breath and holds his head at the temples. Laetitia sits next to him. There are tears in her eyes. He does not know why but dares not word the questions. What’s wrong? What can I do? How long is this going to continue? Do you still love me?

He clenches his mouth, feels the fan pass through several rotations. Do you still want me?

“I hope you know what you’re doing. Konnie’ll probably pull us back to Khartoum.”

She waits a few moments before speaking. “Two weeks ago we admitted a little boy named Haroun. He was below 65 percent weight for height, eyes deep into his skull. Another day and he probably would have died. His mother refused to feed him. We don’t know why. Maybe there’s something wrong with her. Maybe she’s been raped. We don’t know. We’ve been feeding him instead of her. I’ve been feeding him. All those thousands of little spoonfuls. Now he is out in a place called El Sinett and he doesn’t have a chance.”

“So we get fired for Haroun.” Even saying it like that, he knows she is right. “Not a bad deal.” He means it. Forget about all the speculation and weighing of possible political outcomes. He wouldn’t have had the clarity or the conviction to take the decision—too many uncertainties—but he can follow the logic. “I’ll see about getting a convoy ready for tomorrow.”

They never find Haroun. El Sinett is almost empty. Its people too frightened to stay, they’ve fled once again. Staring at the ruins of the village they send their Sudanese nurse to talk with a few of the lingerers, to offer blankets and plastic sheeting for shelter. Laetitia walks in the other direction, towards the rubble of a group of houses, arms out to the side and slightly stiff, as if wading into a cold sea. He watches her, the wind snapping her baggy pants, as she wobbles the ragged mud brick wall of what used to be a home. The ruin caves towards her and she jumps back.

“Are you OK?” he yells, starting in her direction. The wind intercepts his voice, carrying it into the nowhere. When he reaches her side she is prodding a brick with her foot, grinding broken chunks into the dusty soil. “Are you OK?” he asks, almost in a whisper.

She nods.

“I’m glad we tried.”

She nods again. “Oui, moi aussi.”

He breaks a small silence. “This place is one hell of a mess. Maybe now they can convince the GOS to put a plan in place.”

“A plan for what?”

“For the return.”

She kicks the ground. “Return? Look around you, Andrew. There is no such thing as return.”

At first he is confused and then something clicks inside, like two halves of a steel coupling suddenly sliding together with machine-tooled precision. There is nothing merely out of order. There is nothing to be fixed.

He sees the story will repeat itself over and over. Some of the returnees will show up days later in Mornay, others will trek to camps in Zalingei or as far as El Geneina. New camps will form on the fringes of settlements or maybe beneath a cluster of trees skirting the edge of a *wadi*. Scattered attempts at finding refuge. For whatever hardship and death it will bring, the government’s action will at least usher in the next phase. All will suffer. Many will fail. Yet most will persevere, perhaps right here in El Sinett, not returning to the old but building new homes on top of the ashes. “It will be alright,” he says. The words ring solemn, certain. “You did everything you could. Everything.”

A column of dust swirls madly in their direction. Andrew steers Laetitia into the shelter of his lanky frame. She resists at first, then folds into his side. He cups her head with one hand, pressing it to his chest, and angles his other hand to block the open side of her face, a small wall of flesh and bone.