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The Photographer

Tibor Tarent had been travelling so long, from so far, hustled by officials through borders and zones, treated with deference but nonetheless made to move quickly from one place to the next. And the mix of vehicles: a helicopter, a train with covered windows, a fast-moving boat of some kind, an aircraft, then a Mebsher personnel carrier. Finally, he was taken aboard another ship, a passenger ferry, where a cabin was made ready for him and he slept fitfully through most of the voyage. One of the officials, a woman, travelled with him, but she remained discreetly unapproachable. They were heading up the English Channel under a dark grey sky, the land distantly in view – when he went up to the boat deck the wind was stiff and laced with sleet and he did not stay there for long.

The ship came to a halt about an hour later. From a window in one of the saloons he saw that they were heading not for a port, as he had imagined, but sidling towards a long concrete jetty built out from the shore. While he wondered what was happening, the woman official approached him and told him to collect his luggage. He asked her where they were.

'This is Southampton Water. You're being taken ashore at the town of Hamble, to avoid delays at the main port. There will be a car waiting for you.'

She led him to an assembly area in the lower crew section of the ship. Two more officials came aboard and he was led by them down a temporary ramp and along the windswept open jetty towards land. The woman remained on the ship. No one asked to see his passport. He felt as if he was a prisoner, but the men spoke politely

to him. He could only glimpse his surroundings: the river estuary was wide, but both shores had many buildings and industrial sites. The ship he had been on was already moving away from the jetty. He had boarded it during the night, and he was now surprised to see that it was smaller than he imagined.

They passed through Southampton in the car soon afterwards. Tarent began to sense where they were taking him, but after the last three days of intensive travel he had learned not to ask questions of the people assigned to him. They went through countryside and came eventually to a big town, which turned out to be Reading. He was lodged in a large hotel in the city centre. It was a place of stultifying luxury within a cordon of apparently endless levels of security. He stayed only one night, sleepless and disturbed, feeling like a prisoner or at least a temporary captive of some kind. Food and non-alcoholic drinks were brought to the room whenever he asked, but he consumed little of it. He found it hard to breathe in the air-conditioned room, harder still to put his mind at rest, and impossible to sleep. He tried to watch television, but there were no news channels on the hotel system. Nothing else interested him. He dozed on the bed, stiff with fatigue, suffering memories, grieving over the death of his wife Melanie, constantly aware of the sound of the television.

In the morning he tried breakfast but he still had little appetite. The officials returned while he was at the restaurant table and asked him to be ready to leave as soon as possible. The two young men were ones he had not seen before, both wearing pale grey suits. They knew no more about him or what was planned for him than any of the others. They called him Sir, treated him with deference, but Tarent could tell that they were merely carrying out a task to which they had been assigned.

Before they left the hotel one of them asked Tarent for identification, so he produced the diplomatic passport issued to him before he travelled to Turkey. One glance at its distinctive cover was enough to satisfy the enquiry.

He was driven to Bracknell and at last he was sure where he was being taken. Melanie's parents were expecting him at their house on the outskirts of the town. While the official car drove away,

Tarent and his two in-laws embraced on the steps outside their house. Melanie's mother Annie started to cry as soon as he arrived, while Gordon, the father, stayed dry-eyed but at first said nothing. They led him into their house, familiar to him from previous trips, but now it felt cold and remote. Outside, a grey day brought heavy showers of rain.

After routine polite enquiries about his need for the bathroom, drinks, and so on, the three of them sat close together in the long sitting room, the collection of watercolour landscapes, the heavy furniture, all unchanged since his last visit. Melanie had been with him then. Tarent's bag was outside in the hall but he kept his camera equipment beside him, resting on the floor next to his feet.

Then Gordon said, 'Tibor, we have to ask you. Were you with Melanie when she died?'

'Yes. We were together the whole time.'

'Did you see what happened to her?'

'No. Not at that moment. I was still inside the main building at the clinic, but Melanie had walked outside on her own.'

'She was alone?'

'Temporarily. No one knows why she did that, but two of the security guards were on their way to find her.'

'So she was unprotected?'

Annie tried to suppress a sob, turned away, bowed her head.

'Melanie knew the dangers, and you know what she was like. She never took an unnecessary risk. They warned us all the time – no one could be a hundred per cent safe if we left the compound. She was wearing a Kevlar jacket when she left.'

'Why did Melanie go out on her own? Have you any idea?'

'No, I haven't. I was devastated by what happened to her.'

Those were the first questions and they ended like that. Annie and Gordon said they would make some tea or coffee, and they left him alone for a few moments. Tarent sat in the thickly padded armchair, feeling the weight of his camera holdall leaning against his leg. Of course he had intended to visit Melanie's parents, but not as soon as this, the first full day back in England, plus living with the guilt about Melanie's death, the loss of her, the sudden end to their plans.

After the non-stop travel and temporary overnight stays, the familiar house felt to Tarent stable and calming. He consciously relaxed his muscles, realizing that he had been tensed up for days. Everything about the house looked unchanged from before, but it was their house, not his. He had only ever been here as a visitor.

He came awake suddenly, the smell of cooking in the air. There was a mug of tea on the table in front of him, but it had been cold a long time. He glanced at his watch: at least two hours had passed while he slept. Sounds came from the kitchen so he walked in to show them he was awake again.

After lunch he went for a long walk with Gordon, but the subject of Melanie's death was not discussed. Their house was on the Binfield side of the town, close to the old golf course. It was late summer but both men wore thick outer coats. When they left the house they had to bend their heads against the chill blustering wind, but within an hour the weather had changed and both men took off their jackets and suffered the glaring heat of the sun.

Thinking of the heat he had endured while he was at the clinic in Anatolia, Tarent said nothing. It was uncomfortable to be out in the sun, but it was better than the cold wind.

They walked as far as what Gordon described as the decoy site, one of dozens that had been built around London as a fire lure during the Second World War, to try to keep the Luftwaffe bombers away from the city. Bracknell then had been a village three miles away, and the decoy was out in the wild. There was not much to see: the remains of a dugout shelter, bricked up and overgrown with weeds, and some half-visible piping firmly buried in the soil. Gordon said he took an amateur interest in these old decoy sites, and described how they had been used. He sometimes went to look for other sites. Most of the big industrial cities had installed decoys in 1940, but nearly all of the sites had disappeared since. This was one of the less well preserved ones, but some of those up north were in better condition.

Walking back towards the house, Gordon pointed out the hospital where he was a consultant surgeon, and where Melanie had also worked for a while. It was before she and Tarent met. Gordon told Tarent a long story about an operation he had performed

several years earlier. Every procedure had gone wrong almost from the start, and although the surgical team did everything possible it was one of those cases where the patient had just died, no matter what they tried. The patient had been on the table for more than eight hours, a young and attractive woman, a dancer with a touring ballet company, apparently healthy, in for minor abdominal surgery, little risk of infection or other complications, no reason to die. That day Melanie had been training as a theatre nurse, on secondment from her ward nursing, and she had been beside him the whole day.

'I love that girl more than I can ever say,' Gordon said, and he and Tarent walked on down the hill in silence. By the time they were approaching the house the cold wind had returned. Gordon's story about the operation was, for the rest of that day, the only mention anyone made of Melanie.

The next morning Tarent awoke in the guest bedroom, refreshed after several hours of deep sleep, but wondering how much longer he was to stay with the Roscoes. From the time he had been evacuated from the clinic in Turkey his life had been taken over by the authorities. The people who accompanied him never said who they were, but Tarent's licence to go abroad had been authorized by OOR, the Office of Overseas Relief, so he assumed the bland young men and women who ushered him around were from there. It was they who had brought him here, and presumably they would collect him. But when? Today? Or the next day?

Gordon was already out of the house, away on call at the hospital. Tarent showered, then went downstairs and saw Annie, so he asked her if it was OOR who had warned them he was being brought to their house – she confirmed that it was, but that they had said nothing about when he would be collected.

After breakfast, feeling that he should, he said, 'Would you like me to talk more about Melanie?'

Without turning towards him, Annie said, 'Not while I am here on my own. May we wait until this evening? Gordon will be back then.' She too had a medical background: she was a midwife who worked in the same teaching hospital where Gordon had trained.

Tarent spent the rest of the morning in the guest room, making

a start on the immense task of sorting through the thousands of photographs he had taken during the trip. At this stage he restricted himself to looking for the dud or unfocused shots and erasing them. Fortunately, the signal was strong in the Roscoes' house, so he could access the online library without any problems. He kept all three cameras on recharge, because online editing quickly depleted the batteries.

He took another walk in the afternoon and when he went back to the house Gordon had returned. The three of them sat around the bare pine table in the kitchen, a place of family meals, easy conversation, but today it was different.

Gordon said, 'Don't try to spare us details, Tibor. We are used to details. We need to know how Melanie died.'

Tarent began his account with a white lie: he said that he and Melanie had been happy together. Instantly he regretted it, but it did not seem to him likely to affect what her parents wanted to know. He described the clinic in Eastern Anatolia, situated close to a town but also within reach of four or five villages in the hills. It was one field hospital among several that had been opened in Turkey – they weren't in direct contact with any of the others, except when a Mebsher called with supplies or relief staff, or one of the helicopters came in with extra medicines or food.

He showed them some of his photographs, ones he had found while scanning the mass of others that morning. Mostly he had selected shots of Melanie to show them, but for reasons he was never going to explain to her parents there weren't as many of those as perhaps they expected. There were thousands of others, all without Melanie, many of them duplicating each other, some showing the worst victims of the situation in the region, the children mostly, and the women. There were dozens of amputees because of the land-mines. He had photographed many skeletal bodies, babies with diseased eyes, wasted women, dead men. Because the Roscoes were a medical family he felt no qualms in showing them what he had seen. Gunshot or blast wounds, dehydration, diarrhoea, cholera, typhoid were the most common injuries and diseases, but there were other horrors that seemed untreatable, new strains of

virus, different bacteria. In many cases starvation took the victim's life before a more serious disease took hold.

He had taken photographs of water – it was a novelty to come across areas of standing water of any size. He found damp patches under trees, a filthy puddle, a vile swamp littered with abandoned vehicles, rusting oil drums and the corpses of animals. The one river in the area had become a dehydrated track of crazed and hardened mud, with sometimes a trickle of brown water near the centre. Everywhere else for miles around was a continuum of dust, wind and found corpses.

Annie admired one of the photographs he had taken, of Melanie working in the clinic surrounded by desperate people waiting to be treated. Her expression was composed, neutral, intent on what she was doing. The small boy she was treating was lying limp and still while she unwound a long dressing from his head. Tarent remembered the circumstances of taking the picture: it was a day when not much had gone wrong, on the scale of routinely awful events at the clinic. He had stayed inside the building with Melanie because there was a warning from one of the militia groups. It was a disrupted day, men with automatic rifles on the balcony and in the yard outside, alternately threatening the staff and pleading for drinking water. Every now and then a couple of the younger bloods would fire rounds into the air. In the evening a pickup truck arrived, bringing some kind of leader of the militiamen, and there was another volley of bullets, prolonged in welcome. This was towards the end: Tarent had had enough of taking risks for the sake of photographs, of being there, of hearing guns going off and land-mines exploding in the near distance.

He remained silent as Annie held the digital viewer, Gordon at her side, while the pictures flicked past.

On the evening of the day that photograph was taken, he and Melanie fell into another bitter argument. It turned out to be their last row, so everything between them ended in anger. He remembered his frustration, not necessarily with Melanie but focused on her because she was there. He simply wanted to cut loose, head back to England somehow. He could no longer tolerate the endlessly killing heat, the scenes of desperation, the cocksure

and unpredictable gunmen, the dying children, the threats and misunderstandings and random beatings, the women with bruised loins and broken limbs, the total lack of any kind of support from the Turkish authorities, if there still were any. Everyone said there was no longer a central government, but the relief charities who sponsored their work should have known what was going on. There was no way he could travel home on his own, so he had to wait until a group of the workers was evacuated, and even then he could not join them unless Melanie decided to leave too. He thought she never would. It depended ultimately on a team of relief volunteers being sent from the north, but there was not even a hint that anyone was coming.

That night, Tarent was convinced they would have to stay at the clinic indefinitely. In one sense he was right, because it was to be their last night together. After Melanie's death the other medical and relief workers were so demoralized that they began to close down the clinic, abandoning the local people to the heat and the drought and the militiamen.

They never found Melanie's body. She walked out in the afternoon of the day after their argument, seething with rage at him, saying she wanted to be alone. He said nothing, let her go. Their rows always hurt them both, because underlying the differences was a genuine bond of love and long-term commitment. For Tarent, one of the most urgent reasons for wanting to escape from the field hospital was his wish to repair the damage the episode was causing them. But that day, knowing he was watching her helplessly, Melanie pulled on the Kevlar vest over her nurse's uniform, packed a rifle, took a canteen of water and a radio, followed the rules, but she was leaving the safety of the compound at one of the most dangerous hours of the day. When the explosion was heard in the near distance there was the usual immediate head-count, and they knew she was missing. No one had actually witnessed the attack, but one of the orderlies said that immediately before the explosion he had noticed a point of light in that direction, something in the air, higher than tree-height, and so bright it had hurt his eyes. All the security guards, and some of the medical team, drove out in reinforced vehicles to investigate. Tarent was in the front

vehicle, his gut instinct telling him it had to be Melanie, that it was all over, but because all they could find was a huge triangle of blackened earth and no sign of a body, her death seemed at first to be uncertain. There was just the weirdly regular scar caused by the explosion, three straight sides forming a perfect equilateral triangle, an inexplicable shape for a crater, with no sign of other wreckage, no blood anywhere, no human remains at all.

By the end of the following day Tarent and the others knew she had to be dead. Even if she had somehow survived the explosion, one so powerful that it appeared to have wiped out everything in its immediate vicinity, she would have been morbidly injured. Without medical treatment, without fresh water, without protection from the daytime heat, it was impossible to survive.

2

The OOR people came to collect him the next morning – they telephoned the house thirty minutes before he was to be ready, and arrived at the exact moment they specified. Tarent was still upstairs, carefully packing his cameras, when he saw the car drawing up outside the house.

His farewell to Gordon and Annie Roscoe was more hurried than any of them would have liked. Gordon shook his hand, but then unbowed and gave a hug – Annie held him closely and cried.

'I really am so sorry about Melanie,' Tarent said, again at something of a loss as to know how to say the right or true thing, and settled for the true. 'Melanie and I were still in love,' he said, 'after all these years.'

'I know, Tibor, I believe you,' said Annie softly. 'Melanie always said the same.'

Tarent joined the others in the car. This time his minders were a man and a woman – the man was wearing a grey business suit, the woman a *burqa*. The driver was another woman, glassed off from the main compartment of the car. An attaché case parked on a rack at the back of the passenger seats bore the OOR insignia, but that