38.The team leader leans from the vehicle’s front, ‘There and back – it’s far, it’ll be a push.’ He taps his clipboard, ‘Know what you’re getting, right?’

The others grunt. I close my eyes. Sahel journeys are tediously the same: sand flats forever, bedraggled palm trees, the occasional gulley where startled black-bearded goats scamper between scrubby squat bushes.

Hours later, the clinic – the one staffer manning it just a very young guy. We check supplies, the sacks stamped with a bright blue UN logo.

‘Is this food enough?’

‘I don’t know,’ his voice whines, ‘I don’t *know…*today they’re so many.’

We make it worse for him. ‘Well, don’t look *now* - but there’re more coming.’ ‘Yes,’ someone chimes in, ‘On that last stretch we pushed past a whole throng - not in good shape.’

I’d seen the face of our local driver tighten. His people, *in extremis.* First, the ones who’d lain down to gasp out a final surrender to the desert. Next the stragglers, the staggering ones. Then the mass, relentlessly advancing: shoulders hunched, heads veiled, faces averted, eyes unseeing, although close against the jeep’s windows as we lumber past.

The young guy says, ‘Look, you’ll get your distribution coverage. We’ll reduce the portion of milk powder. The canned fish should be enough. No maize oil, though.’

Outside an angry beehive of voices: the hapless unshaded waiting in the searing heat.

I ask, ‘You’ll set up a system, won’t you? Some sort of queue?’

‘You know it’s not always straightforward.’

‘Hey, yes, but *you* know the shots and the video will be really tricky otherwise…’

I reckon he’d like to get angry but doesn’t have the strength. Instead, he says dully, ‘You’ve seen them. They’re desperate - no proper harvest for years. It’s famine.’ He sees my face. ‘Yeah - not allowed that word, am I? But what else is it? *Community hunger?* well ha, bloody ha.’ Animated now, he wags his finger, ‘Whole families on the move, walking days to get here. With nothing. The little kids...as for the babies....’

I look down, in order to not see his cheeks redden, his raised hand wipe his eyes, to ensure he doesn’t catch *my* expression.

‘We’ll just do what we can.’

Noise now like a tide rising, ebbing, rising again to a roar. A lone voice, ‘*Ayeeeee, ayeeee, ooooooh wa wa.......ooh wa wa wa, ooooooh wa* ***waaaaa.*** Shrill, unsettling, notching up my tension. Admit it, truly dire as this situation is, it’s good too: we’re guaranteed great pictures, testimony, something we can use to put on a real show.

Zooming in on the red rimming this guy’s eyes, yes, ideal for our tv news audience in Europe and America. The commentary will write itself: ‘*Gruelling relief operation in remote African region,* *exhausted aid worker battles on.*’ If distressing enough, it might just wrest a moment’s attention out of that audience, Easter-weekend-lamb-roast-and-chocolate-egg-sated as it’ll be.

Opening the door to the compound, the team leader stops abruptly.

‘Uh-oh… phew - that out there is going to take some handling.’ He waggles the clipboard, admonishing us, ‘Now team, watch yourselves, we can’t let this get too chaotic.’

Qut we file, find ourselves confronted with a mob. At this moment, when hungry, exhausted and angry people finally come in sight of food and water, we expect order? No chance - immediately this *is* chaos, the rudimentary line ruptured into shoving, elbowing, writhing bodies, a riot of strident colour, yellow, scarlet, blue, green, a shrieking fuchsia pink. The patterns on the women’s wraps: boldly blocked abstracts, polka dots, blowsy flowers, are like prints in a Matisse medley. You’d want to sketch it with oil pastel, were circumstances different.

The circumstances: ferocious *heat,* children bleating and mewling, adult voices cackling, vying against shouted instructions, sneeze-inducing red dust swirling. Somewhere in the churning melee a teetering table for registration. Reaching it, the fierce-faced women prod bony-fingered at the staffer scooping their milk powder, bend down akimbo nudging his arm to get more.

The team has plenty to do, videographer getting long shots, photographer kneeling, telephoto lens dauntingly close to a squatting toddler. The child’s eyes are vacant, a yellowish trickle of diarrhea staining the sand beneath its scrawny bottom, its face split in silent anguish, flies circling its mouth, crawling on its cheeks.

My question is relayed by an interpreter. Sweat, pearlised, bubbles on the back of my hand as, slick-fingered, I note: ‘*Girl, 3 years, Miriam*.’ I must sigh because the photographer looks over, says, ‘Well, they never said we’d find a picnic in the park out here, did they?’

The food isn’t enough, despite the last sack being turned upside down, shaken, beaten. Children crouch, fingering the sand, picking a granule here, one there, stuffing their hands in their mouths. Their mothers stand implacable, keeping us in their sharp-eyed gaze.

Not our problem, we turn, readying for our usual unceremonious leave-taking, only a quick scribble in the visitors’ book needed.

While I’m writing, the young staffer asks, ‘Off home now, are you?’ His voice is like a box snapping shut. ‘Bye then.’

The narrow hall is jammed with women and children, the air foetid. I’ve no alternative but to push through. Trying to slip sideways between two women, that’s when I feel the pinch sharp on the thin skin of my wrist. My way is blocked by a tall gaunt woman who flips back the cloth covering what she carries, seeks my eyes with hers.

My teeth clench - I know what I’ll see. My mind screams, ‘*Don’t* look now’. But I do - and if any life is left in that tiny crumpled form it can be but its last clinging, futile few moments. A girl, greenish-yellow, her form somehow *redundant,* her face a wizened rictus.

I gasp, ‘*I’m not a doctor.’* This woman, seeing the white vehicle, the blue logos, the white faces asking questions, the cameras, the notebooks, thinks we bring help. How to explain we bring nothing - are here only for what we can take away?

‘Come *on*....’ shouts the team leader from the jeep, ‘… or we’ll never make it back by curfew.’ The engine revs, iced air raises goose pimples on my forearms. He quizzes, ‘Did we get everything? Close-ups: anxious faces, clawing hands?’

‘We’re fine, chief,’ the photographer says. ‘I’ll crop in for a tight focus on the drama.’

‘You got our logos clearly in view, I hope - but made sure it was locals handling the goodies? Can’t have it look as though we aid workers run the show.’

‘It’s alright, chief – anyway, I can always strip in stuff from another location – who’d know?’

The leader’s looking at me, ‘You’re quiet - today’s been heavy, huh? Four hours before we’re back, isn’t that right, driver?

The photographer nudges my shoulder with his, ‘Hey, what’s with the biro?’

I look at my right hand, at the biro, the pen, clutched so tight my nails dig into my flesh, my knuckles hillocks of striated red on a white ground. On my wrist, an angry red mark. I twist to face the window. On the left the sun dips and I register it - but I *see* nothing except a face, that baby girl’s green-yellow face I’ll never be allowed to forget. Hunched over, I’m willing the others: don’t *look* now.

They’ve not noticed a thing though, conversation turning swiftly to anticipation of coming comforts.

‘Any ideas where to eat tonight?’

‘Beer for me first - God, I could down a dozen right now.’

‘A swim before anything else, guys – yeah? Hasn’t today been the sweatiest ever? What day is it, anyway? Friday, isn’t it?’

The words, ‘Good Friday,’ come out, my voice a raw croak. *Good Friday.* God, no. I’m remembering Easter last year: Venice for Renaissance art. Upstairs at the Scuola San Rocco, Tintoretto’s agonizing Crucifixion, unsparing in its depiction of Jesus and the thieves: the ropes, the toolbag spilling its contents, those cruel, round-headed nails.

Tears dribble now as here before me in this desert my very own Mount of Olives thrusts up its mass. And if that’s here, what am I? Useless: a bystander, passive observer of that little girl’s Calvary, choosing to ignore the darkest hour’s dawning, the rending of the Temple’s veil.

Scrabbling for a tissue, I must acknowledge the self-pity behind my weeping. Not compassionate tears, these, not for that child nor for the crisis just witnessed. No, they’re for me, for my tough working conditions, for today being obliged to deal with relentless reality and tomorrow go deal with it again.

The vehicle jolts. My hand’s grip loosens involuntarily. The pen falls. Blood floods my fingers pink. Let it *go*, I think. It wasn’t a nail anyway, just a pen. *Forget* - just do the best job you can. Later, I feel around, pick it up and start my report, frowning and puzzling one more time how to find words that will explain and expiate, words that will make it better.