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Moonlit Landscape with Bridge

The Minister of the Interior stood in the middle of the room, assessing three suits laid over a chair. One was a pale morning-sky blue; the next tan, of light material, intended for these terrible summers; the last a heavy worsted English three-piece, grey, for state visits. They were slung across one another every which way, three corpses in a pile. The rest of the marbled room – his wife had liked to call it the 'salon' – was in boxes, labelled, optimistically, with a forwarding address. Within the hour, efficient young Ari would drive the Minister to the airport, and from there – all being well – he would leave to join his wife and children in Paris. The car would not be a minute out of the driveway, he knew, before the household staff fell on these boxes like wild beasts upon carrion. The Minister of the Interior rubbed the trouser leg of the grey between his fingers. He was at least fortunate that the most significant painting in the house happened also to be the smallest: a van der Neer miniature, which, in its mix of light and water, reminded him oddly of his own ancestral village. It fit easily into his suit bag, wrapped in a pillowcase. Everything else one must resign oneself to losing: pictures, clothes, statues, the piano – even the books.

'So it goes,' the philosophical Minister said out loud, surprising himself – it was a sentence from a previous existence. 'So it goes.' Without furniture, without curtains, his voice rose unimpeded to the ceiling, as in a church.

'You call me, sir?'

Elena stood in the doorway, more bent over than he'd ever seen her.

'Call? No . . . no.'

She seemed not to hear him. Her eyes had taken on an uncomprehending

glaze, open yet unseeing. It was the same look the Minister had noted in all those portraits of heroic peasants presently stacked against the wall.

'Difficult days, Lele,' the Minister said, picking up the light blue, trying not to be discouraged by its creases. 'Difficult days.'

Elena twisted her apron in her hands. Her children, he knew, lived by the sea with their children. All along the coast the mobile-phone network had been obliterated.

'God is powerful,' she said, and bowed her head. Then: 'God sent this wind.'

The Minister sighed but did not correct her. They were from the same village originally, distant cousins – she had a great-uncle with his mother's surname. He appreciated her simplicity. She had done much for his children over the years, and for him, always with this same pious sincerity, which was, to the Minister, as much a memento of his village as the woven reed baskets and brightly coloured shawls of his childhood. But why bend so deeply, as if she were the only one suffering?

'If it were only the wind!' the Minister said, tilting his head to look through the missing skylight. 'We had measures in place for wind. It's not true that we were unprepared. That is a wicked lie of the foreign press.' He pointed at a lemon tree, horizontal and broken outside the window. 'The combination of the wind and the water. In the end, this is what proved so difficult. As I understand it, most of the deaths in the south were drownings, in fact.'

He frowned at her puffy face, made puffier by tears, and at her apron strings, cutting into a wad of encircling fat. Why was her hair so sparse? There was only a year or two between them. But, of course, he had never felt old and, consequently, had never looked it. A clear case, in the Minister's view, of the importance of mind over matter.

'God is so powerful,' Elena said, and wept into her hands.

Out of habit, the Minister thought now of Elena's suffering and multiplied it by the population. (By inquiring after her gut feelings he had been able to correctly predict three elections, the death penalties of several notorious criminals, and the winners of half a dozen television singing contests.) He put a light hand on her shoulder.

'Unfortunately, these weather events are democratic. Big countries,

little countries. We are all caught by surprise. It's not possible to fully prepare for them.'

'God help the children!' Elena said. She swayed into his hand like a cow nudging a barn door. Gently, the Minister righted her.

'Well, when we're settled in Paris, Lele, we'll send for you.'

'Yes, Minister,' Elena said, but continued to weep freely, just as if he'd said, 'When we're settled in Paris, you will never hear from us again.'

'Minister,' Ari said, appearing in the doorway.

The Minister stepped forward and pressed the housekeeper to his chest. The girl of faint erotic memory had vanished, and in his arms he held an old woman, easily mistaken for his mother. Hard to believe that she had once been his sweet relief from the shock and boredom of his wife's first pregnancy, the months and months of it, in this unforgiving climate, and with such a difficult, pampered woman. Now the Minister's youngest daughter was turning seventeen, and his wife hoped to present the child as a débutante in a grand hotel in Paris, making some kind of opportunity out of a crisis. Thinking on this peculiar fact, the Minister got stuck on a sentence: *I am further from my village now than I have ever been.* Italicized just like that, in his mind. Unsettled, he drew back, pressing an inch and a half's worth of currency into Elena's hands, which, for the first time in their history, she made no pretence of declining, grabbing it from him like any beggar in the street, folding it, crying some more.

'The time, Minister,' Ari said, tapping his wrist.

The Minister had not ventured outside in three days. Yet the scrolling devastation held few surprises, maybe because the foreign news crews filmed in just this way, from the window of a moving vehicle. For the first mile or so, the magnitude of what had happened was not obvious. Up here, the storm had knocked down only every third tree, blown out a few windows, and driven a stone general and his horse nose first into the ground. By the time they reached the valley, however, any hope one had that the television exaggerated was destroyed. The water had retreated, leaving behind a shredded world of plastic, timber and wire. Under the wall that had once circled the parade ground, the Minister spotted several pairs of feet, purple and bloated, liberated of their shoes. If Ari slowed or hesitated even for a moment, the sound of hands banging on the trunk

came, but mostly he did not slow, and the SUV rolled over everything in its path. The Minister thought of his children making this same journey forty-eight hours earlier. He looked through tinted windows at his people scavenging from mountains of rubble. He groaned and wept discreetly into a handkerchief.

'Oh, I'm not listening to that.'

The Minister – who had not thought that he could be seen or heard – experienced a surge of humiliation and rage, pressing him against his seat, inflaming the tips of his ears.

'It wasn't much use before' – Ari tapped the satellite navigation unit suctioned to the windscreen. 'It's totally pointless now. If a road looks OK, I'll take it. Otherwise I'll detour. Sound OK to you, Minister?'

'Yes, yes, whatever you think.' The blood that had rushed to his extremities returned to where it belonged. His tongue relaxed; his face lost its awful contortion. He wiped the wetness from his cheeks, folded the handkerchief into a sharp-tipped diamond, and replaced it in the top pocket of the grey suit.

'Of course, the whole system is linked to an American military satellite,' the Minister said, leaning forward to peer at the delusional technology as it recommended impassable roads and pointed out a bridge no longer in existence. 'If the Americans ever chose to switch it off, we would all be plunged into darkness. Metaphorically speaking.'

Ari shook his head: 'What a mess.'

Through the windscreen they could see a large gathering of people, waiting outside an empty municipal office. As the car approached, heads began to turn, followed by hands lifted to throats, patting the skin there, over and over, like some mass mating call. The Minister took a pen and pad from his inside pocket and made a note of the location. For whom, for what purpose, he no longer knew.

Ari wiped his forehead with his sleeve. 'We can't get through this.'

'We are not going to *get through*,' the Minister corrected. 'We're going to stop. There are three crates of water in the trunk.'

Ari made an incredulous face in the rearview mirror.

'They'll be just as thirsty by nightfall. Meanwhile, you miss your plane!'

The Minister retrieved his handkerchief and worked at the sweat on his own forehead.

'Your generation is so cynical. You should try to help every individual person you meet, Ari, as a reflex, without thinking.'

Ari put his head on the steering wheel. 'Here we find a fundamental weakness of the Christ doctrine,' the Minister declared, making that wise and relatable face that had always been such a success in his television lectures. 'It troubles itself too much with conscience, rationale, and so on. Now, I myself am a student of human nature. I observe all faiths, and draw my own conclusions. For example, a Christian sees a tramp in the street, he begins agonizing. Should I give him the money in my pocket? What if he uses it for drink? What if he wastes it? What if there's someone else who needs it more? What if I need it more? And so on. The Jews, the Muslims – they see a tramp, they give him money, they walk on. The action is its own justification.'

'I'm not cynical,' Ari objected. 'How can I be cynical? The fact is, I'm a Buddhist.' He examined his hair in the wing mirror and pressed the button for the back window. Fetid air – which the Minister had earlier made clear he did not want to breathe – invaded the vehicle.

'Pull over just there. Look, I don't mean to insult you – anyway, I'm nothing at all, as I said, only a student of human nature, so there's no need to be insulted. Let's get this water distributed, eh? Then we can move on.'

With a great sigh, Ari drove forward until they were ten feet shy of the crowd. Here he stopped, leaving the engine running. The Minister, who was not a tall man, swung his little feet to the right, tried the handle twice, asked Ari to release the child lock, opened the door, and slipped down into ankle-deep sludge. His left shoe came off and was submerged. Catching the eye of a handsome peasant woman with a large child in her arms – seven or eight years old – he thought he saw in her anxious face the group's dilemma. Hold your ground in this line? Or risk losing your place for a dubious little man who still cared about his shoes?

'WATER!' the Minister cried – this broke the stalemate. He had reclaimed his shoe, and now, without planning to, found that he was opening his arms wide. Had he come to embrace them all?

'We have water! Women and children first!'

The people ran towards him, ignoring his instruction. He turned from them, walking thickly through the sludge to the trunk. The first to put a

hand on him was a middle-aged man with a head wound that needed attention. For a moment, he seemed to recognize the Minister. Yet if recognition was there it was also perfectly useless. There were things that had mattered before the storm and things that mattered now, and the Minister fully understood that he belonged to the former category. Who cared, today, about the Long-Haired Bloc? The Minister's offices, like much of the government, had been flattened; seeing this chaos on the news, even the Minister had not been able to rid himself of the childish notion that it had been stomped into the ground. And what was a Minister without a ministry?

'Please, I beg of you – help my family.' So said the man with the wound. At the same moment, Ari stuck his head out the window. This left the Minister little choice but to reach for his wallet, take out the remaining paper currency, and press it into the hands of the man, who immediately had a portion of it snatched from him by a little girl, who in turn had her share taken from her by someone else, at which point the beleaguered Minister lost track, rolled up his sleeves, and turned back to bend over the trunk. He struck it twice with an imperious fist; it opened, as if by magic. The first thing was to rip the plastic covering off the crates while making a swift, imprecise count of how many bottles were in each layer. But the plastic was not so easily removed, and before he had finished ripping even one corner he felt many hands reaching around him, pushing him aside, knocking him to the ground. By the time he had struggled to his knees, fallen again, grabbed onto the bumper, and dragged himself up, the crates were gone, the people were running back to the municipal building, and several small fights had broken out. The Minister hung on to the side of the vehicle and edged his way around to the back door, one shoe forever lost to the mud. He heaved himself up into his seat. Without comment, Ari passed a tub of wet wipes over his shoulder. Without comment, the Minister took it.

Before the storm, it would have taken the Minister perhaps an hour to get to the airport. Now the sun fell in one part of the sky, while the moon rose in another. He dared to look at his watch. Five hours had passed since he promised Ari that he would make no further attempts to leave the vehicle.

'But I can't hold on any longer. I'm afraid it's unavoidable, Ari.'

'Minister, everything is avoidable.'

'Do you want me to piss myself? Is that it?'

'You should not make promises your bladder can't keep,' Ari said, causing the Minister to reflect that one never really knew a person until one was caught in a situation of extremity with that person.

'I tell you it's unavoidable!'

'Well, I don't know where you think I can stop. All these people are trying to get to the airport. If we stop they'll slit my throat!'

'You are becoming hysterical,' the Minister said. He pointed at a brick church whose four sides were still attached, providing the only shade for miles.

Ari parked right at its door, like a chauffeur delivering a bride. People were everywhere, along with cars and vans and news trucks. The arrival of a small well-dressed man with one shoe did not attract much attention. The Minister struggled through an inert mass of people until he reached the yard behind the church, where he relieved himself against a sliver of dusty blue wall, watching with interest as it turned as vivid as the Virgin's cloak. Somewhere off to his right, a German film crew lent a boom mike to an American film crew. 'There's a woman in there lighting candles, praying, etcetera,' an American voice said. 'Her English is pretty good.' To which a German replied, 'I sink we have enough church.' The Minister zipped up and walked with as much dignity as could be managed back through the milling crowd, accepting the sweat of many strangers. People without direction or focus, swatting halfheartedly at the flies, standing around with no purpose other than to be among one another.

He caught a flash of Ari, smoking louchely out the car window – before a tall man blocked his view. More and more people gathered, and the Minister could get no further. Then a sudden shouting and crushing; everyone turned to face the murderous sunbeams in the west, and the dark shadow of an open truck, from which two figures, silhouetted, hurled sacks into the crowd. Cornmeal? Rice? Why not demand an orderly queue? Why cause the maximum amount of chaos? Next to the Minister, a hysterical woman held her baby above her head and wailed. A nice spectacle for the foreign press! Towards them both a sack sailed; the gallant Minister moved to push the woman out of its path. He was rewarded by somebody's powerful fist connecting with his left temple. Once again he

found himself in the dirt, contemplating the bare feet of his countrymen. In pain, he called out for Ari; Ari heard, Ari replied – but from this nothing followed. The crowd was too thick to penetrate. The Minister decided instead to crawl forward on his hands and knees, and in this way made progress. He was within a yard of the car when he found himself being roughly lifted to his feet and brushed down by a pair of oversized, hairy hands.

'On your feet, on your feet – we need everybody standing, if they can stand! Red Cross! Red Cross!'

The man doing the shouting was broad and dark, with a boxer's broken nose, thin, silky black hair cut in a Caesar style, and a chin with a huge, inelegant cleft. He was in uniform, though even at this confusing moment something in the Minister registered the wrongness of this, in terms both of this man's particular body in a uniform and the uniform itself.

'Please take your hands off me – I am going to my car.'

The big man smiled foolishly and gripped the Minister by the elbow. A bolt of clarifying pain arrived: broken, in the fall. At the thought of spending any time in a local hospital, the Minister's legs went weak. In response, the man took almost all of his companion's weight and began pushing his own giant body through the last two layers of people until he had hold of the car's door handle.

'Red Cross! Back this up. I'll open when you're clear.'

'Do no such thing!' the Minister croaked. But he had lost Ari's vote. The car reversed, moving just fast enough that the man and the Minister were forced to jog along beside it. Once they were relatively free of the crowd, the man jumped into the car, pulled the Minister in beside him, and shut the door.

The Minister backed away until he was pressed against the car window.

'You've made a grave error. I am the Minister of the Interior – I advise you to get out of this vehicle at once.'

The man chuckled and patted the Minister's delicate knee.

'I know who you are, Minister. I saw you arrive. I just want to go to the airport, that's all. No trouble.'

'Ari, this man is not Red Cross – that is not a Red Cross uniform. Stop this car immediately.'

The man leaned forward and placed the flat edge of a knife against the back of Ari's neck.

'Keep driving,' he said.

Ari screamed, a woman's scream. The man laughed again: the genial, warm laugh of someone who finds the world delightful.

'Put that knife down,' the Minister said, in a very small voice.

'Fine,' the man said, without any rancour, and slipped the weapon back into a pocket in his uniform. 'You'll see that it doesn't change anything.'

Considering Ari, driving and weeping, and himself – a slight gentleman in his mid-sixties with a broken elbow who did not, after all, weigh much more than sixty kilos – the Minister of the Interior understood that the man was entirely correct.

They passed the old reservoir. The Minister was nudged gently in the ribs and offered that dim-witted smile.

'Nothing to say?'

The Minister lifted his chin and looked out the window. The reservoir was a decades-old failed public-works project, presided over by the Minister, and it was always unpleasant to pass it on the way to the airport.

'You're angry. Of course, I know very well you're a proud man who doesn't like to be tricked. I suppose I *have* tricked you, Minister. But think of me! I'm disappointed!'

The sun was setting, pink, over the rancid water, and the cracked concrete walls of the overflowing reservoir made it look like the basin of some ancient ruined amphitheatre. It had a strange beauty. The Minister had never noticed any beauty in it before. He wished he did not have to notice it now, while stuck in a car with a lunatic and a coward, on the way to his own execution.

'I may not be very educated, Minister, but I have my thoughts and feelings. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover.'

The Minister, lost in a fatalist haze, turned to his captor with a mournful face and said, matter-of-factly, 'But of course you're going to kill us.'

The man frowned and bit his lip.

'So you really don't recognize me at all. Truly you don't. Ah, it's disappointing!'

From Ari, another whimper.

'I should know you?'

'Well, we went through a lot together. Though my hair's shorter now. But then so is yours. And the Prime Minister – he's bald as a coot! And he was the longest-haired boy of all! Ha! Ha! What kids we all were!'

'Please don't kill me please don't kill me please don't kill me,' Ari pleaded, and, despite the sunset half blinding them all, and the large, menacing hand presently encasing the Minister's knee, the precise and vengeful Minister took note of Ari's use of the singular pronoun.

'Who said a thing about killing anybody? No, no, no. We gave that up a long time ago. A long time ago. Some of us served our time for it, some didn't – and I say well done to those who didn't! But now you know me for sure, Minister. Marlboro! The Marlboro Man. Nobody believes me when I say the Prime Minister himself named me. But it's true! My aunt used to send me the red ones from America – you must remember that – and he loved to smoke them. One day, we were making camp, way up in the hills this was, and he said, "Hey, you, Marlboro Man" – and it stuck. Forty years later, it's still sticking.'

If a bell rang for the Minister, it was a faint one indeed. He made his hands into a steeple and pressed them, upside down, between his knees.

'You must understand, there is no way I can get you onto a plane. When we arrive, you will be arrested. It will be out of my hands. There is no other outcome.'

The Marlboro Man gave the Minister's knee a jovial squeeze.

'But I don't want to get on a plane, Minister. I wish only to go the airport. That's where we hear all the action is – and I always want to be where the action is. Money, food, girls! Besides, I helped build it – I'd like to see it again.'

It was surely a mark of the pain and distraction in the Minister's mind that only Ari grasped the significance of this revelation. The name of the infamous prison escaped the young man's open mouth like an involuntary burp. The Marlboro Man clapped Ari on the back, congratulating him for solving such a jolly riddle.

'Thirty years we've been trying to get out of that place – and then the Lord himself goes and does it for us. Down went the walls – flat as a pancake! What a thing! Anyone still on his feet simply walked out into the sunshine and looked up at the clear blue sky . . . Ah!'

He stretched his arms across the back seat. The Minister was put in mind of a holiday-maker settling into a sand dune.

'All criminal fugitives will be executed,' the Minister said, reduced to repeating what he had heard on the news. 'Their only chance is to hand themselves over to the authorities.'

'The way I see it,' the Marlboro Man said, 'this is a moment of opportunity – for both of us.' He winked, then picked up the Minister's left hand and pressed it down on the Minister's knee until he yelped in pain. 'It's all a question of timing. The thing I've always admired about you, Minister, is your timing. You've always known when to move. Always known when a reckoning is coming. And you see it, don't you? You see that the people have begun to smell your shit – and it's not so sweet! Ha-ha! Finally, they can smell it. I mean, they've *always* smelled it, but back then they were children – *we* were children! – and now they are grown and not afraid to say it to your face. Any day now. Next year, they'd have had the lot of you in cuffs, off to The Hague! So it's lucky: the wind came, just in the nick of time! Eh? The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want! It's an opportunity, and you're taking it. Listen, I admire it! I am a student of history – now, don't laugh. I tell you, a man gets a lot of time to read in that little cell. I've been trying to educate myself. I want to be one step ahead of history – that's the game, isn't it? Maybe I don't play it as well as you. But I'm learning. Oh, yes, I've become quite the student of history.'

It was madness, of course, and the Minister did not imagine that Ari would make much sense of it, but, at the same time, it was unfortunate that within this man's madness he should have hit upon that particular phrase, so like the Minister's own, and keep repeating it, with that idiotic, implicating grin, which necessitated, the Minister now felt, a restatement of his own position, lest Ari should hear echoes where none existed.

'I, meanwhile, am a student of human nature.' With his free hand, the Minister tried to hold his crushed elbow together. 'And students of human nature understand that ungrateful children always revert to their parents' wisdom, in the end.'

'Ah . . .'

Under the Caesar hairline, the man's granite forehead wrinkled, and

the tip of his tongue poked out from between his lips, like a schoolboy engaged in a fearful piece of calculation. Observing this effort, a village thought now came to the Minister – a memory, really, of the Devil as a young man. Tales concerning the childhood of the Devil were a specialty of his people; Elena had a wonderful way with them, turning them into bedtime stories for the Minister's children – a rather low-class habit of which the Minister was supposed to disapprove. Unlike his colleagues, however, and unlike his difficult wife, the Minister of the Interior was essentially a pragmatist: if it were up to him, political men would never cross the thresholds of either bedrooms or shrines. He believed in leaving people to their private fantasies. When his children were small, he liked to open the door to his study at night, slicing through envelopes with a pearl-handled knife, while listening to Elena's Devil-talk. In these tales the Devil was never quite an idiot, no, not quite. He was like this fellow to the Minister's left. A good student, very attentive, eager to get on, who nevertheless always learned the wrong lesson.

'Weren't we children?' the man cried suddenly, bringing his fist down heavily on the upholstery. 'And weren't we ungrateful? Then we became the fathers in our turn. That's the truth of it. Yes, we were young – we were heroes! But we're not long-haired any more, my brother. Yet we survived. Most people didn't. So that's to be celebrated. That's a sign. Do you see? You must see that. You and I! Survivors!'

The thud on the seat continued to radiate through the Minister's elbow.

'I do not see,' he whispered. 'I do not see, because there is no analogy at all between us. I am the Minister of the Interior. You are insane. Perhaps once you were one of us – or worked for us. I don't know. You say you did. Now you are only a criminal. A fugitive and a criminal.'

Through his agony, the Minister was able to feel some satisfaction at having hit the mark. For an abashed expression passed over the Marlboro Man's face. To hide it, he turned from the Minister to face the window.

'Oh, I meant no offence, Minister, none at all. All I mean to say is – excuse me if I'm not speaking in an elegant way – you were smart and we were stupid. That's all. And let me tell you, you were really admired in there, truly. Much more than the Prime Minister. Because we remembered that you were once one of us! Smarter than us, maybe, but one of

us all the same. But him? Never, not really. For he never really got his hands dirty. Not like we did. And now they call us "mercenaries" and put us in prison and pretend they never knew us. But without men like us where was the victory? Answer me that. That boy took the glory, but it was others who did the work. He was just a pretty face. Like this one here.' He reached forward, horribly animated, and grabbed Ari's cheek between thumb and forefinger. The car lurched towards a deep gully at the side of the road – the Minister's turn to scream – before the Marlboro Man leaned all the way forward to seize the wheel briefly with his free hand, steering them true.

'Don't panic, don't panic,' their captor said, fondly. He patted the top of frantic Ari's head, sighed, and sank his great buttocks back into the upholstery.

'But you! That's a lot of blood to wash off, brother. Oh, we never forgot. Hell of a lot of blood. A river of blood. I saw it, I was there. Up to the knees! Up to the knees!'

The Minister, just now emerging from the brace position, looked up to find Ari eying him strangely in the mirror. Never mind that it was a grotesque exaggeration: a river, stained red with blood, is not the same as a river of blood. But the Minister had not forgotten, no, not the difficult things, nor did he, as so many did, exaggerate or obscure. He remembered perfectly well how the Prime Minister had looked at nineteen, marking out an ambush on a field map. He remembered how they had recruited from the villages, handing out guns to young thugs who could not even spell their own names. He remembered the two halves of a girl's head, rolling down a riverbank through reeds into water. Divided, perhaps, by this very man's machete. All their boys had fought like animals, at one point or another. But the Minister had never forgotten, either, the beauty and quiet triumph of the nights that had followed those bloody days. A different life. Sharing simple food in the moonlight, not only with the village thugs but with bold, intelligent young men, committed to the future of their nation and willing to risk anything for it – including the eternal pollution of their own skulls.

'A sissy. Always with some sissy book in his back pocket. It should have been you, brother. Up to the knees!'

So it goes. Together the Minister of the Interior and the thoughtful

boy who would later give him that title had read a thrilling book by an American with a German name – Vonnegut! A tale of war. It had so electrified them at the time, and yet, forty years later, the Minister found that he retained only one sentence of it and could not even retrieve its title. But he remembered two young men bent over one battered paperback, under a tree in the cleared centre of a village. Books had been important back then – they were always quoting from them. Long-haired boys, big ideas. These days, all the Prime Minister read was his bank statements. Yet, in essence, he was the same good and simple man, in the Minister's view – naïve, almost, doglike in his loyalties and his hatreds. If you were on the right side of the Prime Minister, you stayed there. So, at least, it had been for the Minister. Whatever he had needed had always been granted, up to and including this evening's flight. He had been lucky, always.

'That's lucky!' the man cried, and the Minister, yanked from his memories, began to fear that some form of voodoo was at work. 'The water's gone down! Look at that fat beautiful moon! We can take the bridge!'

Over the last bridge they went. The small tent city that had sprung up around the airport lay before them. The knife re-emerged, this time held low, at Ari's waist. At a makeshift checkpoint, Ari stuck the green government badge in the windscreen with a shaking hand, and they were waved through, instructed to follow a police car past the camp and its abject inhabitants.

'Leave me anywhere here,' the Marlboro Man said. 'Next to one with her legs open. "Let's lift some skirts and make it hurt!" Remember that old chant? And they'd all go running with their mothers into the bushes! Ha-ha! Now, don't begrudge me that, Minister, please. You probably had some yesterday – but for me it's been a little longer.'

For a big man, he moved nimbly, passing himself over the Minister, opening the car door, and stepping down onto gravel, smiling all the while. The Minister closed the door behind him.

'What the – What are you doing? Minister? Minister? He's just walking away!'

The Minister's phone was cold in his hand. He watched the man stride into the crowd. He felt as if he were releasing the spirit of chaos into the world. But wasn't it already here?

All commercial flights had ceased. The tiny half-destroyed airport had become a base for aid workers, stranded journalists, sleeping soldiers. Only the runway still functioned. The few planes available had been chartered by the government, and passengers approached them by driving to a gate in the perimeter fence and having their documentation checked by yet more officials. When the Minister's turn came, several young men approached the car, in uniform, or else in the dark-blue suits of the faithful. 'This way, Minister, this way,' they said, hustling him out of the car. He was crossing the floodlit tarmac before he realized that he'd said no goodbyes to Ari, but when he turned to look back he could no longer even see the vehicle. Hundreds of people pressed against the chain-link fence, waving pieces of paper in the air, shouting and begging. Just outside the painted yellow line, along which the Minister had once liked to walk in his neat, upright way, wheeling a discreetly luxurious brown-and-gold suitcase behind him – just on the other side of this yellow line, instead of the usual bustle of baggage handlers and suitcases, there lay a young man in a yellow neon safety vest and ragged trousers, sleeping on the tarmac, his head resting on a boulder.

'This plane, Minister. Keep to your left, Minister. Keep moving, Minister. Minister?'

But someone was screaming his name, his given name, which he heard so rarely these days it stopped him now in his tracks. He swivelled to locate the source and soon found it, a clear head and shoulders above the majority of his diminutive countrymen. He was grinning the same stupid devilish grin and making the old gesture of solidarity, wildly above his head, with the crossed fists they had all once used to signify 'You, too, are my brother.'

'Arrest that man,' the Minister said, quietly, to the young aide beside him, who, either not hearing or not understanding, nodded twice and said, 'This way, if you please, Minister.'

Across the lake of tarmac, the Minister and the Marlboro Man locked eyes.

'Bon Voi Yah Gee! Bon Voi Yah Gee!'

Bon voyage. A phrase he'd probably only ever seen written down. Screaming it at the top of his lungs. And making that gesture, over and over, a gesture that, the Minister was painfully aware, had fallen out of

fashion in recent times – in truth, had come to be reviled; the Minister himself had not performed it in many years. He could see people on either side of the lunatic hanging off his giant arms, cursing and abusing him.

The Minister tried to remind himself that nothing horrifying was happening – he was merely being wished well on his trip by an idiot. Bon Voi Yah Gee! Bon Voi Yah Gee! He turned back to his handlers and once more attempted to give his instruction, but the jet's engines started up, and all was lost in this fresh wall of noise, all except those ridiculous words, attending the Minister's footsteps like an incantation of some kind, or the rungs of a ladder, ascending and descending both, depending. Bon Voi Yah Gee! Up to the knees!

'This way, Minister. This way.' So many people seemed to be touching the Minister, guiding him, advising him, that he felt as if he were not so much walking as being carried. He stopped trying to speak. What point was there in words? Actions, only actions. A few feet from the stairs to the plane, he became aware of a sudden change in the light: an impudent grey cloud between the Minister of the Interior and that fat beautiful moon. Large warm raindrops big as acorns fell on his nose, on his single shoe, on his lapel, on the world. Rain fell off the curve of the plane in torrential sheets, rain rioted on the cheap tin roof of the airport, soaking the Minister to the skin, making it even harder to hear instructions, and then, just as abruptly, stopped. The cloud moved on, the moon returned. The Minister held his elbow together. He pressed his suit bag to his chest. 'This way, Minister, this way.' The Minister shut his mouth and followed.