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Thirst

WE HAD CONJECTURED the impact of the blockade: shortages of petrol and tobacco, a dearth of news, an end to the tourist trade. But now we were told potable water would be rationed. Water surrounded us, of course, dappled sea extending to the horizon in every direction from our little island. But freshwater was scarce. Our brackish and brown tap water was drawn from old, depleting wells. For years, potable water had been brought into the harbor on water tankers and trucked to storage cisterns around the island. We had purchased it by the barrel from sellers who made a narrow margin hauling the liquid around the rough roads that traced the circumference of the island.

We were, it turned out, on very dry land.

The Governor-General announced water rationing on the fourth day of the blockade. The taps would now run one hour a day. Even worse, we would have to make due on just one liter of drinking water a day for the months until the autumn rain.

THAT NIGHT, the restaurants in the harbor did a roaring trade, the few remaining tourists bivouacked there still desperately hoping for a boat out, and plenty of us residents congregating on the sidewalk and patio tables, and making a show of our indifference to the new austerity, drinking bottles of cava and mugs of cider, emptying jeroboams of red wine. So we couldn't drink water, but we could still drink!

The cooks brought out pans of fisherman's rice, octopus, scallops, sea urchin, and smoked cod cooked in garlic and saltwater, langoustes boiled in salt water, deep-fried sardines. We slaked our thirst with more wine. As our enforced revelry mounted, the waitresses brought out plates heaped with sliced tomatoes and cold, salted potatoes, and the few remaining, wilted heads of lettuce on the island were chopped and soaked in vinegar and oil and deposited on tables. Then, to gasps from the drunken patrons, plates of peaches, melon, and figs were set upon the tables—the last fresh fruit we would be seeing for a while.

We feasted until finally the girls from the nightclubs made their nightly turn through the restaurant district, blowing whistles and punctuating their stroll with castanets, attempting to lure customers to their abandoned venues. Wives sternly observed their husbands' leers; children ran amidst the long, elaborate gowns of the made-up club girls. We drank until finally, even through our drunkenness, we couldn't ignore our thirst. The fathers imbibed beer, the mothers more wine, and the children slept fitfully on rattan chairs, their mouths parched and cracked. We made our way home, the buggy rattling over the rough pavement, the engine's noisy, metronomic clatter almost putting me to sleep until the road began its winding ascent and I shook myself awake.

Perhaps, I thought, this won't be so bad.

WE LIVED CLOSE to the sea, above abandoned fishermen maisonitas that we had repaired and let out to the vacationers who came every summer. My wife cooked them breakfast and, for an additional fee, laundered their clothes. I had gone down there as soon as Marchand had told me about the rationing, to gather up the pitchers of freshwater that we had left by the rough-hewn plank beds. The visitors had left after the blockade was announced, booking passage on the few fishing jollas that were still making the run back to the mainland. I had gathered up all the freshwater in our possession: the half-full barrel in the pantry, the two pitchers in the bathroom, the two half-full pitchers I had scavenged from the maisonitas. I checked the toilet

cisternas, the rust-colored water there would soon come in handy, I decided, and siphoned that out into another jug.

I pointed out to my wife that we could boil this water and make it potable. Washing, cleaning, bathing, that would all be done with salt water from now on. We had on hand a case of young red wine, five bottles of beer and two of bitter cider, two bottles of rum, and a half bottle of herbal liqueur. In the kitchen were two cans of tomato juice, one of cling peaches, two jars of pickled cucumbers, and one of pimentos. In the pantry was another cask, half filled with apples, and a basket of a half-dozen tomatoes. Nothing else in the house contained any liquid at all.

There was one family in the urbanization whose swimming pool was filled with freshwater. I thought of them after I had taken stock, as I made my way down our street and saw Marchand gathering a length of hose to hold the nozzle over a little tin bucket. He looked at me as I walked past and shrugged simultaneous to the spattering of a few drops into his container.

Don Aljafar had the largest house, at the top of the steep hill from the sea, a vast stone manse shaded by cypress trees. I was joined by a few fellow residents as we climbed the hill and at the top, after we had wound up the Aljafar's considerable driveway and past their parked motor coaches, we were astounded when we belled up to the gate to see Don Aljafar afloat in his swimming pool, a pair of goggles affixed to his face as he did a lazy, dignified, backstroke.

We stood at his gate for a few seconds, watching this spectacle and unsure if we should disturb him. Finally, Marchand cleared his throat and shouted hello.

Aljafar stopped swimming for an instant, treaded water, and listened.

Marchand shouted again.

Aljafar turned vertical in the water and raised his goggles, looking around until he saw us behind his gate.

"Yes?"

As a group, we seemed unsure of how to address Don Aljafar, and none of us had considered the possibility that he would be inside his pool when we arrived. Since we lacked a leader, I spoke up.

"Your pool, it is freshwater, correct?"

Don Aljafar shrugged in the water. "What is it to you? I'm having my morning swim."

"Freshwater is rationed."

Don Aljafar nodded. "So?"

"You should conserve this water."

“Again,” Don Aljafar said, “what is it to you?”

“We’re all in this together,” Marchand tried to reason.

Don Aljafar ignored us and started swimming again. Donna Aljafar, his dark-haired wife, the former beauty now turned plump, emerged from a bougainvillea-covered patio. The outline of thick, fleshy thighs was visible through her magenta sarong.

“This is our cisterna,” Donna Aljafar told us, wagging a finger.

We retreated and stood on the driveway for a while, conferring until finally we went back down the hill. At the moment, we weren’t thirsty enough to proceed further.

AN IMMEDIATE CONCERN was where we could make our toilet. Without running water, our septic systems would soon malfunction—at any rate, the gypsies who cleaned out our tanks had vanished with the blockade. Our little houses by the sea sat on small, rocky plots, unsuitable for the digging of latrines. The men could piss into the sea, of course, but our women and children were reluctant. And even I found the idea of defecating into the ocean complicated and untidy. I met with a few other men—Marchand, the Italian Cappilini, and the locals—and we discussed what would be a suitable location for trench latrines, one for women and one for men. Nobody wanted it on his own property, of course, so we agreed to dig them in a narrow stretch of loam next to the road, downwind from us. We would string sheets on a clothesline between the two sections of the latrine.

We planned to begin digging in the late afternoon, when it would be cooler. But when I arrived at the agreed-upon time with my shovel, none of my fellow heads of households appeared. I saw Marchand open his front door and toss out urine from a bucket.

“Hey!” I shouted.

Marchand shaded his eyes and looked around.

“We’re supposed to start digging.”

Marchand shook his head. “Too hot!”

I shrugged and got to work, plunging my shovel into the hard earth. Marchand was right, it was still too hot for this unpleasant labor, and after twenty shovel loads I was leaning on my shovel in the manner of lazy proletarians everywhere. I was shirtless with a straw hat on my head but was sweating profusely and, more alarming, was very thirsty. Finally, one of my fellow residents emerged with his shovel, and then another, and even Marchand joined

us, carrying a wineskin full of water. He offered me a sip, and then watched carefully as I squirted the precious stuff into my mouth.

“Enough,” he said, pulling it away.

The trench was not as deep as we had envisioned, just three feet, but that was all we could manage before we all grew so parched we retreated to our houses to drink our water in private.

In just two days, the trench was filled with feces and so fly-ridden my wife refused to use it.

AT NIGHT, we could see the blockading fleet near the horizon, the mast lights on and searchlights scanning the sea in a monotonous sweep. When the Governor-General closed the water pipes, announcing that the wells were dry, Marchand and I decided that we should pool our reserve petrol and take the buggy on a scouting trip to town, to see what was still for sale and what might have appreciated because of scarcity. We were fortunate that the buggy’s motor was air cooled—modern, water-cooled vehicles would soon pose for their owners a dilemma: to siphon or not siphon the radiator. From the road descending the hills and into the city, everything still looked normal, horses and donkeys pulling their wagons, bicycles negotiating their way between them, fewer automobiles than before, but that absence seemed almost welcome. The winding roads up to the old fort were as choked by pedestrians as ever; the Governor-General’s citadel atop the vast, old fortresses walls the familiar sun-blasted sandy color. It was only as we came closer to the city that we noticed the differences: no old women in their traditional white-and-red dresses selling tomatoes or olives in earthen jugs by the side of the road. Instead, there were just a few boys with piles of unshelled almonds spread on newspapers, these dried-looking nuts unappealing in the hot sun. When we stopped at a T intersection to wait for a mule train to pass, boys with cracked, swollen lips ran up to our idling buggy, holding in their hands glass bottles filled with precious clear water.

We couldn’t resist and asked how much.

The boys quoted a surprisingly reasonable price and when we paid them, they ran off without waiting for us to return the empties, which made sense when we sipped the water and discovered it to be from the sea.

On the last *ronda* leading into the city, we saw the girls from the nightclubs, standing by the side of the road, flashing their thighs. At night, their makeup made them seem youthful and fertile. But against the muted, dusty, daytime

landscape—every browned leaf coated with a fine sheen, every stone dipped in a filigree of soot—their garish color made them seem like another species.

They were trading favors for full bottles—wine or water, it didn't matter. Up close, we saw their skin was cracked.

THE CITY WAS quieter than usual, torpid, as if its unlubricated gears and belts had seized up. Café Farouk was closed, as was Menassa. The Montesol was open, and a few well-dressed customers sat before plates of sardines and half-empty glasses of wine. We parked next to three tethered donkeys and went inside to the long, maple bar, which had been the first air-conditioned building on the island. Now it was hot, and the menu, when it was presented to us, had zeros added to all the prices. A cup of coffee, which both Marchand and I had been looking forward to, now cost almost a day's wages.

We conferred and decided to each order a coffee with milk.

"What news?" We asked the waiter when our coffees were delivered. We stirred in our sugar and tasted our coffee. They had been stingy with the milk.

"Two fishing boats got through yesterday," the waiter said as if bored by the information.

"What was their cargo?"

"Fish!" he said, and laughed. There was talk that the mainland would send a squadron to relieve us, he reported. But there was also talk the Governor-General would soon decrease the ration.

"Impossible!"

He nodded.

Meanwhile, he continued, he knew a very good dowser. "Instead of a branch," he said, pulling the bottom of his right eye down with his index finger, "He uses the wishbone of an albatross."

ON THE ROAD BACK, at the top of the hill just down the driveway from Don Aljafar's, we stopped the buggy. We gazed up the driveway, which now had a chain strung across it and a sign warning to keep out. There were the motor coaches, and beyond them, just out of sight behind a wall of limestone topped with brick and tangled with pink flowering vines was the object of our desire: the pool. The rich pink of the flowers struck me as vulgar, we lived in a swirl of dust, a universe faded and coated, gone to brine, pollen caked, so that nothing was bright and shiny anymore. Color, bright colors, required moisture, lubrication, water.

Then we saw a flicker of movement, a bloodred sarong, and Donna Aljafar, her luxuriant black hair loose and falling down her back. She carried a watering can—we hadn't seen one of those in a while—and sprinkled water at the base of the vines.

Marchand began to exit the buggy to charge up the driveway. I grabbed his shoulder, restraining him.

I HAD BEGUN to wonder about the possibility of searching for hidden wells near our urbanization. After all, those ancient fishermen's maisonitas cut into the stone had been there long before any of us arrived, and those old seafarers must have chosen that cove for a reason. I had unfolded a parchment map, and was studying it in the late afternoon when Marchand knocked on my door, breathless.

"They've cut the ration," Marchand announced, his voice hoarse. "Half!"

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth; his breath was sour.

"We have to seize the Aljafar cisterna," Marchand declared, "for the good of the people!"

By now, my wife and I were down to just the bottle of rum. We were saving that. Today, we had already unwisely finished our water ration and were left with the bitter juice from the pimento jar. Nothing more. My body felt caked in salt from bathing in the sea and when I kissed my wife, I couldn't stand to feel her dried tongue, and her chapped lips scratched me.

My urine was a bright, glowing orange. Soon, I supposed, we would be drinking that.

We went outside to the street where word of the new ration had brought out the families to commiserate in thirst and outrage. The whole street now stank of feces and urine; we had never bothered to dig a new trench and so were disposing of our waste atop the old one. The women were desiccated, pallorous lips, cracked skin, wrinkled eyes, puffy tear ducts—they were too dehydrated to cry. The children were sluggish and swollen, their bellies already distending. We were crumbling, turning to dust and salt, a ghostly, powdery rabble, a strong wind could scatter us into so many clouds of dead skin.

Again, Marchand was proclaiming the villainy of the Aljafars, decrying their hoarding. The men were listening but unmoved to action. The wives, however, eagerly imbibed Marchand's agitating. Why, they wondered, why shouldn't the water be shared?

The community turned to me. They viewed me as more reasonable than Marchand, more measured. I saw my wife, her brown hair going gray, the formerly thick strands splitting from the rough salt water. Her upper lip was bleeding where it had cracked open above her right canine.

“Water,” she mouthed to no one.

WE MET BACK in the street after dark. I had brought our bottle of rum and the other men had similar ideas, producing their remaining spirits. We passed around bottles in the still-hot night air. We didn’t talk about why we had gathered. Finally, Marchand began to lead us up the hill. The rest of the men wavered until I shrugged and followed. We knew the way even in the dark. As we climbed we quieted down, occasionally making a clink where we set down an empty bottle.

The driveway was quiet, the gate was closed. It swung open easily. First, I had told myself—we all had told ourselves—we would lie down on the dead grass and push our lips against the cool water, drinking till we burst, then we would find Aljafar and explain to him that the water must be divided equally, among all the families of the urbanization.

But the water was gone. The pool’s white cement bottom shined in the moonlight like exposed bone. We turned toward the house where we saw lights hurriedly extinguished and heard whispers.

“They siphoned it,” Marchand said. “Put it in casks.”

We needed to drink, either more alcohol or, preferably, water.

We crossed the patio and were surprised to find the old oak door unlocked. Inside, the house was silent. Aljafar had built this house himself, and he was spendthrift, cutting cushioned benches into the thick walls, whitewashing those walls with multiple coats of lime, hanging tapestries that he had imported from the mainland. The tile-and-marble kitchen was dry, every vessel empty.

“The wine cellar!” Someone suggested.

We found the door, an oaken plank with iron belting, in a hallway between the kitchen and the abandoned servants’ quarters. We banged on it, calling Aljafar’s name.

“Leave us alone,” Aljafar called back.

“We want the water,” I shouted.

“We don’t have it.”

“Liar!” Marchand pronounced, to murmurs of agreement all around.

“We’ll break this down,” I told Aljafar. “By God we’ll smash it up!”

The men had begun to gather up whatever items looked like they might make a dent. Heavy candelabras, an old olive press, each of them did little against the heavy door.

Then Marchand appeared with an axe he had found in the workshop. Six blows and the door began to split.

“OK, OK,” Aljafar shouted. “Stop. I’ll let you in.”

We heard him climbing the stairs and unlatching the catch. We pushed open the door, shoving Aljafar aside and descending. They had lit candles in the vast cellar, which was cross shaped, a long central corridor and two wings filled to the ceiling with casks of water. Along the sides were wine bottles. We grabbed these without regard for vintage, smashed them open at the neck and began pouring the contents into our mouths. Marchand took an axe to one of the casks, which burst forth with a lovely, translucent torrent of freshwater that three men attached themselves to lips first like ticks to a sheep’s belly. There was a ladder that ascended to the top of another cask, this one as vast as a small silo. It was pried open and found to contain cider, and a few of my neighbors pressed their mouths into the shimmering, golden liquid.

The perfidy of Aljafar, to withhold this bounty from us. He had enough water, cider, and wine to keep us for weeks, and here he was hoarding! The men, temporarily slaked but still deeply parched, took a break and turned to see Donna Aljafar in a burgundy velvet dress. She had been hiding behind a cask and now had emerged, standing in the candlelight.

“Dogs,” she said.

In the flickering light, she looked so . . . moist. Her hair was a ravishing black, still healthy and luxurious. Her cheeks were a glowing pink. She had full, succulent lips such as we hadn’t seen in a while, or perhaps had never seen. Her face, her chest, her stomach, all of it seemed swollen and buoyant. In the cool cellar, she stood before us; though we had regarded her as a former beauty, she was still, we now realized, powerfully attractive. We imagined her here, imbibing, slurping, sucking, while we had been deprived. I can’t recall who grabbed her first. She hyperventilated in reaction to our rough handling, short, sharp gasps preceding her fainting in the manner of well-born matrons; she was unpliant as we lifted her. But she was soon borne aloft, her thick arms and fleshy hips suddenly seeming weightless as we passed her along over our heads on outstretched arms. I have seen photographs of observation dirigibles, vast airships, the mass of them seeming to defy their implied tonnage as they hover hundreds of meters over the earth, tethered by rope lines to formations

of grasping men; Donna Aljafar had this appearance: she seemed to float over us and then, even as she woke and was prodded with wine-bottle shards to climb the ladder to the cider cask, she seemed to be lighter than air.

The air in the cellar was close and damp and in the torchlight we could see motes of stirred dust swirling and something else we hadn't seen in a while: droplets, a fine mist thrown off by all our smashing of casks and imbibing, the sheen coating our faces and making us shine. We were soaked, I realized as I looked around, all of us having drenched ourselves in the sudden surfeit of fluids.

Donna Aljafar paused on the ladder to gather the hem of her dress tightly around her legs. When she hesitated, she was struck violently on the side of the head by an empty tossed bottle and she gasped as she was poked by broken glass.

She ascended.

I heard Don Aljafar, restrained by a few of my neighbors, weeping on the stairs as his wife was dunked into the cask. She can't swim, he was crying, she'll drown.

TWO DAYS AFTER we rolled the casks down the hill to our own homes, leaving Aljafar his fair share, the Governor-General announced the blockade was lifted.

The rains came early that year, replenishing the wells, and soon the gypsies reappeared from wherever they had gone, their mule-drawn wagons making their way around the island, the barrels of freshwater deposited and left unguarded, as if they had no value at all. There was a chorus demanding that the island take measures to ensure hydrosecurity. For the cost of rebuilding the old ramparts near the port, it was pointed out, we could dig a new aquifer, a reserve that could be laid in for the next drought. But we are forgetful, as soon as our thirst is gone, we can't reconjure our desperation. Oh, we recall it in words, evoking it with our explanations of dry throats and coughs and sticky mouths, but we don't really remember. The Governor-General commissioned new ramparts, somehow conflating greater security of the harbor with fending off future blockades.

Four months later, Don Aljafar sold his house and moved away. In our stories of the time of the blockade, the strange goings-on and the extremes to which we were forced, we often told of seizing the water from the rich man who lived up on the hill, but we never mentioned what happened in the cellar that night. And in time we must forget all about Donna Aljafar.