

Where the Sun Shines Brightly

By

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Under cover of darkness a column of heavily armed tourists moved inland from the beach and blocked the city road. Before dawn the village near the abandoned airport was cut off behind their lines.

Tomas lay on his makeshift bed on the floor of the cantina and listened to the rumble of heavy engines in the night. He had known something like this was coming, the same as it did every summer. The tourists had their favourite places to dig, bulldozing earth ramparts, diverting streams, damming the river. Then, when they left, days or weeks later, they knocked it all down, levelling the fortifications and even destroying the things that might be useful for the village. He pulled on his trousers and scudded barefoot across the stone floor to where his grandfather slept.

‘Grandfather Georges, the *touristas* have come up from the beach.’

‘All right, I hear them. Turn your back while I dress.’ Georges was already awake. He was too old to sleep well - recurring dreams, restless legs and his bladder all broke his rest.

Tomas listened to his grandfather’s groans and exhalations as the old man pulled on his trousers and tied his sandals. In the fly-specked and frameless wall mirror Tomas glimpsed the pale mottled skin of his grandfather’s back, his tanned arms and age-wasted muscles of his thighs and buttocks.

Georges slung the old canvas satchel that held his tobacco, eye glass and whisky over his shoulder, took down his old bolt-action Enfield and filled his coat pockets with a double handful of long brass-cased bullets. Finally he took up his pipe and slipped it carefully inside his coat. ‘Go wake your father,’ he told Tomas. ‘I’ll meet you at the road.’

Tomas’s parents slept in the kitchen behind the cantina. Tomas pushed open the slatted door and called out:

‘Father, mother, get up. The *Panzertouristas* have come up from the beach.’

Tomas’ father, Christos, woke slowly, groggily. Bleary-eyed, he drank from the beaker on the floor by his bed.

Maria, his wife, draped a black woollen shawl over her nightdress, 'Tomas, you will go up into the hills with your grandfather.'

'What about Julia?' Tomas said.

Maria looked sick with worry, 'She stayed the night with Rosa, at the other end of the village.'

'What?' Christos shook his heavy head, trying to think. 'When was that discussed?'

Maria filled a knapsack with food from the cupboard: two loaves, goats cheese, three handfuls of olives. 'I told you yesterday.'

'When?'

'Yesterday.' Maria faced her husband, 'Before you were drunk.'

Five years ago the holidaymakers had blown up the weir across the stream that fed the village. That year and the next were difficult, with little water in the dry months. Then another group of *touristas* excavated the pool, rebuilt the weir, and stocked the now much deeper pond with fish. Life became a little better. Tomas's father led a delegation of grateful villagers; Tomas and his grandfather spent the day in the hills.

Christos sat on the edge of the bed and beckoned Tomas to him. Tomas came forwards, he tried not to wrinkle his nose at the stale-sweet reek of his father's night sweat.

'Do as your mother says and take the goats into the hills.'

Tomas was dark-eyed, his hair black and straight the same as his father and mother. Stocky rather than slim, he would never be tall. 'What about Julia?'

Christos shook his head, 'There is no time.'

'What will you do?'

'Open the cantina and serve the *touristas*. Your mother will stay in the back and cook.'

Christos scowled at his wife's wordless exclamation, 'Yes you will, woman.'

'Father, please don't-' Tomas lacked the courage to finish the sentence. 'Please be careful.'

Christos ruffled Tomas's hair. 'You're a good lad, a man now. See you act as one.'

Maria pushed the knapsack and a water bottle into Tomas' hands, her fingers smoothed back his untidy hair. 'Off you go.'

Tomas went out the back door and found Georges had already driven the goats from the fold. He ran to catch up, coat and bag clutched in his hand.

Headlights swung through the night as a second column of vehicles advanced from the coast. One by one, the holidaymakers' biofuel powered transports drove up the potholed road towards the cantina.

Grandfather Georges held rifle under the front of his coat. Nervous, Tomas snapped his switch against the rump of a dawdling goat, the animal bleated and trotted on.

'Don't hurry,' Georges told Tomas. 'Don't look around. Keep the goats moving.'

Bell jangling, the last of the goats jumped the dry ditch on the far side of the road just as the first of the vehicles rolled past. Georges kept his back to the road, his chin tucked down. He pushed Tomas along with his free hand. 'Don't dawdle.'

Tomas bridled at his grandfather's attitude, he was a young man yet Georges still treated him like a child who knew nothing. Across the ditch, Tomas watched the last of the convoy rumble past in a cloud of gritty dust. A long wheelbase Land Rover towed a light artillery piece, the sleepy-eyed children inside peered excitedly out. A Mercedes convertible and a white-painted Humvee bounced through the ruts and potholes, old UN insignia and logos crudely painted out. Their muscular young occupants gripped assault rifles and grenade launchers and nodded their heads to the bass-heavy beats booming from the Mercedes' speakers. A young man with a red head band and mirror shades aimed his finger at Tomas and grinned, chewing gum, his teeth flashing white and flawless.

The last vehicle was a heavily modified half-track Winnebago. The barrel of a heavy machine gun protruded through the empty rear window, a spot-bar on the roof brightly illuminated the road and verges to the rear. The perforated barrel of the air-cooled machine gun swung towards Tomas, then away. Behind it, a girl Tomas' own age watched him down the sights, her blonde hair tucked

under a dark beret, her blue eyes intense. The Winnebago's engine roared as it shifted gear, the girl panned her weapon back and forth, the vehicle moved away into the pre-dawn gloom.

Tomas stood in the dust and fried-oil stink of the bio-fuel exhausts, until the rear spotlights faded from view, then hurried up the rocky goat trail after his grandfather.

Georges and Tomas drove the goats into the heights above the village, along tracks they and the animals knew well. The path rose to a steep sided hanging valley of ochre shale, climbed for a long mile through sparse pine wood and opened onto a high plateau. It was cooler here, high enough for dawn fog to dampen the ground.

The two men crossed to the far side of the plateau and sat on the crumbling rocks. Grandfather Georges pulled out his pipe and began packing it with tobacco. Tomas broke one of the loaves in two, gave half to his grandfather and settled down to eat the bread with a handful of black olives.

A thousand feet below, a desiccated plain stretched to a dusty horizon. A mile from the foot of the plateau lay the abandoned commercial airport of the distant city. Taxi strips fanned out across the parched ground, the runway led towards the empty river bed. A dozen derelict passenger liners and freight transports were parked neatly on the embarkation apron beside the terminal buildings, others stood beside the runway.

Puffs of aromatic smoke from Georges' pipe drifted past Thomas. When he was five, Thomas discovered the pipe on the kitchen table, sniffed the pungent bowl and marched stiff armed into the cantina with the stem clamped between his teeth. Georges was playing draughts with his friends and beckoned him over. 'Never hold it with the teeth, you will break it' he scolded gently. 'Hold with your lips.'

Tomas tried but it was too heavy. Georges took back his pipe. 'I have had this since I was fifteen. You will not touch it again.'

In the heat of the afternoon a group of young *touristas* came up to the plateau. Their loud voices alerted Tomas and Georges a full minute before they appeared. Agitated, Tomas looked significantly at the old rifle.

‘Be calm, they are youths,’ Georges told him.

Three were young men, swaggering teenagers. Tall, with lean frames, broad shoulders and overdeveloped biceps, all three wore sidearms. The oldest wore a red headband and mirror shades, his sleeveless olive green armoured vest unfastened at the front. Tomas recognised him from the night before.

The fourth was the fair-haired blue-eyed girl in the Winnebago. She too wore an armoured vest and sidearm, her hair was pushed back behind a baseball cap, a camera hung around her neck.

One of the boys sighed with bored frustration, ‘You dragged us up here for a load of rocks and a kid with some goats.’

‘Go back down then,’ the girl said.

‘No look, there’s an old dude – hey old dude, peace, man. Shalom, Tovarisch, Skol, Alaikam Salman Rushdie, whatever.’

‘I like ‘em Salami,’ the one on the red headband genuflected, an elaborate bow. The boys all laughed, high chattering giggles.

Grandfather Georges raised his hand in acknowledgement and lifted the old Enfield across his lap to the far side of his body.

‘Watch out, he’s got a gun, a musket or something.’ Although they rolled their eyes in mock fear Tomas saw the one with the red headband zip up his vest.

Tomas grew still as the girl made her way towards him. She was pretty and he fought down his reflexive grin, irritated with himself, when she smiled and gestured with her camera.

‘Por favour, *scuzi*, pardonez-moi, parlez vous- Sorry, salaam, sprechen-ze Deutch?’

Tomas laughed at her earnestness, ‘I understand you, and I do know how to use a camera.’

'Yes, of course you do, I'm sorry.' A flush of pink spread across her neck and patched her cheeks. She groaned and looked up at the sky. 'I'm blushing, aren't I?'

'Yes, you are.'

She fanned her face, 'I hate this.'

'It doesn't matter, you still look nice.'

She brushed at her hair over one ear, 'Look, I'm not really with Kaz and those other two idiots. My parents wouldn't let me come up here on my own, They're here to,' she quoted the air with her fingers, 'protect me.'

'They look very brave.'

Her eyes twinkled, 'You noticed that? Is this where you can see the old airport?'

'Yes, anywhere along here.' Tomas indicated the plateau edge.

'Pagan,' one of the boys called. 'Hey, Pagan. What are you doing?' In the instant before she turned, Tomas thought they were shouting at him and his heart set like stone.

'I'm asking if he'll take our picture,' the girl called back. She held the camera out to Tomas, 'Please, would you mind?'

Tomas felt less cooperative now. 'Just you, or the idiots as well?'

'Don't,' she begged, half delighted, half alarmed, 'They'll hear you.'

'Pagan?'

'Yeah, I know. My parents were more idealistic back then.'

'Which one is Kaz?'

'The red headband.'

Tomas held his hand out for the camera, Pagan indicated the simple controls and ran back to her companions.

'Take two or three,' she called

The teenaged boys struck various postures, made devil signs, thrust forward their holstered hips. Pagan stood to one side, looked straight at Tomas and smiled.

'Come on, let's go,' Kaz said as soon as Tomas lowered the camera.

Pagan shook her head, 'I want to see the airfield.'

Kaz rolled his eyes, bored, 'Oh, come on, you can see exactly the same thing back home.'

Pagan walked away, Kaz snagged her arm, pulled her back.

'Hey.' Tomas was on his feet.

'Look at him,' Kaz grinned and pumped his tongue inside his cheek. 'She's not going to marry you, kid. You don't get past border patrol that easily.'

Pagan jerked her arm free. 'Fuck off, Kaz.'

'You got it. Let's go, guys.' Kaz led the other men back across the plateau and down the path, 'She's all yours, gringo.'

'Thanks,' Pagan said as Tomas returned the camera.

'It was easy.'

'I meant just now, with Kaz.'

He shrugged and smiled, head down. 'They are idiots indeed.'

'Totally.'

'Come over here.' Tomas led Pagan to the edge of the plateau. Far below the airport lay spread out like an abandoned toy. In the middle distance the sand-filled river bed wound across the plain like a dead snake.

'Wow.' Pagan began taking pictures. 'Awesome.'

Beside her, Tomas was lost in his own thoughts, angered by the arrogance of the male holidaymakers. Pagan took his picture, she showed him on the camera screen, his young face in profile against the sky.

Tomas looked at his dark-eyed, serious face and wished he looked older.

Pagan looked across the plateau to the trail down to the village, 'I should go.'

He wanted her to stay but could think of nothing. 'OK.'

'It was nice to meet you.' Pagan took two steps backwards, turned, walked away.

Tomas hurried after her, 'Wait. I know a way down. To the airport. I can show you.'

Pagan's face twisted in a grimace of indecision, 'I'm not sure I'm allowed.'

'Come back tomorrow. Bring some water.'

Pagan looked doubtful, then made up her mind. 'OK,' she smiled, waved, and skipped away.

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Over the years the goatherds had built a variety of shelters on the plateau. As the afternoon wore on Tomas and Georges rounded up their animals and Georges led them towards his favourite place, a jumble of massive slab-like boulders. From the outside it was nothing to look at, inside the air was cool, with an open space big enough for two. In the centre it was high enough for Tomas to stand, the overlapped slabs of the roof kept out the weather and the gaps created a draught that took away the smoke from a fire. In one were several blankets, neatly folded and stacked. Thomas took them outside and spread them out to air.

'Not everyone knows about this place,' Georges said. 'It's a family thing, it's up to you to keep it that way.'

After hobbling the goats, they walked back down the path to the heights overlooking the village. Twilight turned the shadows mauve and violet, overhead the evening star shone through a thin haze of cloud.

The family cantina was still open, yellow paraffin light shone from all the windows, a crowd of noisy *touristas* milled around the benches and where Tomas's father cooked over an improvised grill of old oil barrels topped with metal mesh. On open ground across from the cantina the local children and young *touristas* watched films, sport and music videos on a large screen.

A young woman in a long skirt and apron moved through the crowds in front of the cantina with a serving tray. 'Julia,' Tomas said.

'She should be inside, with your mother,' Georges said.

Young *touristas* sped up and down the village road in their militarised convertibles and SUVs. As night deepened, a jeep unhitched a generator and light gantry and the cantina was lit with red,

blue, and green lights. Dance beat music began to play, the lights pulsed, the crowd grew noisier. A woman climbed onto the cantina wall and started dancing; two more joined her. Screams and cheers came as one removed her top.

Older *touristas* and families with young children began to leave. Tomas' sister went inside and did not re-emerge. Now it was Maria who served the drunken holidaymakers. A young man, tall with a red headband moved to intercept her - Kaz. Tomas watched his mother as she deftly evaded his attentions with a sway of her hips, a smile, a contemptuous toss of her head. On the far side of the cantina Tomas' father clumsily danced with an older group, a bottle in his hand. Kaz return to his grinning companions; bottles knocked together, a complex handshake was exchanged, raucous laughter.

Tomas scanned the crowd.

'I'm not with those idiots, she had said.

'Can't see her either,' Grandfather Georges said.

'Julia's gone inside.'

'Not her, the blonde girl this afternoon.'

'I wasn't-' embarrassment flared inside Tomas.

'I've got ears, haven't I?' Georges laughed gently. 'I got eyes.'

'All right, she's not bad,' Tomas admitted. 'Her name's Pagan.'

'She's a pretty thing.' Georges heaved himself to his feet and stretched his back, 'Tomorrow I will fetch food and firewood from the village. And you, down in the airport, you will behave yourself.'

~

Tomas was up early, woken by the dawn cold. The rock shelter had kept out the damp but there was no wood for a fire. Grandfather Georges was already up and about. Tomas, dimly aware of the old man's restlessness throughout the night, pulled a blanket over his shoulders and went outside. He found Georges seated on a rock, smoking his pipe, the Enfield at his feet.

The sun rose as a sullen orange ball above a dirt-brown horizon. Wordlessly, Georges handed Tomas bread and cheese, and the two sat huddled under their blankets waiting for warmth from the sun. Tomas thought about spending the coming day alone down in the airfield with the confident yet self-conscious Pagan, exciting, novel thoughts. Beside him Georges' mouth pressed into a thin line and his chin drooped lower and lower.

'What are you thinking?' Tomas said.

Georges rinsed his mouth with water from the canteen and spat. 'The past.'

'When the river ran?'

'When the river ran.' Georges clamped his jaw. Once the plain had been green. It was an old, old wound.

Tomas had been born in the cantina, to him the farm was not even a memory. 'We are doing all right, we have the cantina-'

'And fourteen goats. Once I had an office in the city, a motor vehicle. Once I flew away to...'

Georges flapped his hand vaguely inland and gave a phlegmy bark of laughter, '...fourteen goats and a cantina.'

Tomas didn't know what to say, he hung his head, he wanted to understand.

Georges unclipped the magazine from the Enfield and cleared the chamber. 'Clean this will you? I'll see to the goats.'

Tomas loved handling the old rifle, the weight, the glossy dark amber wood of the stock and grip, the grain worn smooth and dark where palm and fingers rested. Georges was an excellent shot, Tomas had soon become one. He had been startled by the recoil the first time he fired the gun, ready for it when they spent an hour shooting old cans and piled stones in the hanging valley.

He took out the bolt, ran the wadding through the barrel, wiped and oiled the parts and reassembled it. The job absorbed him, he didn't see Pagan arrive.

'Hi.'

Tomas looked up. 'Hi.'

Pagan wore light grey shorts and a long sleeved dust pink cotton top, pink and grey walking boots, bare arms and legs. As before, she also wore her armoured vest and sidearm.

'I brought some food,' she said. 'Enough for us both.'

Tomas quickly packed away the cleaning things and slung the rifle over his shoulder. 'Let me give this back to grandfather.'

Georges took back the rifle and checked it over. 'Good lad. I'm going to go back down to the village. I'll meet you back here. Hot food tonight, don't be late.'

'No, Grandfather.'

The path down to the airfield was a steep zig-zag of switchbacks across bare earth and age worn rock. Before they started down, Pagan touched Tomas's arm.

'I don't know your name.'

'Tomas.'

Pagan darted forwards and pecked him on the cheek. 'Pleased to meet you, Tomas. My parents think I've gone to the road block with Kaz, it's his turn to help with the perimeter patrol. I'll need to be back in the village before sundown.'

The spot where Pagan kissed Tomas tingled, he wanted to touch it, he took her hand instead and led her over the edge. An hour of walking, a scrambled detour around a landslide, and they arrived at corroded wire fence enclosing the sand-blown perimeter road of the airport. The terminal buildings were still a kilometre away, the lines of derelict airliners further still. Pagan took some photos, they drank some water, Tomas enlarged a rip in the rusting fence and they climbed through.

'Come on,' Pagan said as the enormous buildings and silent aircraft loomed closer. Laughing, Tomas raced her towards the empty hangars.

It was cooler in the vast terminal but it was too silent, too empty. Their boot soles squeaked on the marble floor as they walked through the deserted booking hall and emigration zones strewn with abandoned trolleys. Pagan snapped pictures and they climbed to the mezzanine. The withered carpet of the departure lounge crumbled to dust under their feet, teak veneer hung in brittle, curled

strips from the bar top and counters. They inspected the empty display cases and shelves of the retail zone, and looked through the sand scarred glass of the great windows onto the runways. In the middle distance high fences enclosed a series of empty car parks.

Tomas inhaled the stale air. Grandfather Georges had walked here as a young man, touched the door handles and seating, traversed the bustling crowds along sloping corridors and gleaming travelators. 'Let's go outside,' he said.

Up close the airliners were hollow, fragile things, the empty chrysalis cases of something long flown. Tomas walked around the landing gear and climbed the embarkation stairs while Pagan took more pictures of the slowly disintegrating airframes and corroding engines.

The sun was high, the upper sky white with heat. They sat in the shade of an airliner, Pagan drank more of her water and flopped artlessly against Tomas. 'It's so hot. I wish we were down at the beach, skinny-dipping in the sea.'

Tomas said nothing.

Pagan tipped her head, 'Can you swim?'

'Of course I can swim,' Tomas said, louder than he intended.

'Everyone does it, we're on holiday, anything goes. It's like a real nudist colony - coloured canopies and beach bars and music.' Pagan laughed, 'It's fun, you should try it. Sunbathing.'

Tomas looked at her. 'Here?'

For an instant Pagan looked startled, then gave a shrug of faux indifference, 'All right.'

Tomas found himself completely tongue-tied.

Pagan kicked off her boots. 'Come on, think of the breeze on your skin.'

Hastily Thomas scraped off his own shoes and pulled off his shirt. His forearms and neck were brown, his chest and shoulders pale.

She looked at him thoughtfully, then shook her hair free and pulled off her own shirt.

The air felt good moving across Tomas's skin, the unfamiliar sun hot on his groin. Pagan was tanned all over, her body trim, her breasts high. A small tattoo of curling leaves lay across her hip.

She crouched beside her bag, extracted a set of curved tubes and joined them together into a hoop.

‘An epidermal adjuster,’ she said. ‘Hold your arms up.’

Tomas did as she asked and she passed the hoop over his head, down his body and back again, the ring expanding and contracting with the shape of his body. Now Tomas was tanned all over, the white of his stomach, chest and thighs as brown as Pagan’s.

‘Do me,’ she said and Tomas took the hoop and passed it along her arms and down her trunk, crouched to bring it over her hips, her sex, and tanned legs. And back again.

‘Now we’re both the same,’ Pagan said. ‘What do you think?’

Tomas stood next to Pagan and held his bare leg against hers. ‘I like it.’

Nearby, a rear-engined executive jet lay canted to one side, wing down where its hydraulic undercarriage had collapsed. Pagan spread her clothes on the sloping wing and lay back.

Tomas lay beside her and looked up into cloudless blue sky.

‘I’m glad we did this,’ Tomas admitted. ‘It makes you feel so free.’

Pagan rolled onto her side. Without looking at him she stroked his chest, then stomach, ‘Out here we can be even more free.’

Her fingers encircled him and Tomas gasped. He looked down at her hand holding him, then looked into her blue eyes, inches from his. She smiled and gently pulled and stroked, ‘Is that nice?’

‘Oh yes.’

He came then, across his stomach and onto his chest, and Pagan gave a delighted cry.

Tomas’s skin tingled, he felt elated, fulfilled, thrilled by the sensations Pagan summoned from his body. He rolled onto his side and felt his semen trickle over his body. His hand slid along her flank onto her hip, traced the tattoo and brushed the edges of her groin. ‘How does a girl do that? Where is your pleasure?’ Here, today he did not mind admitting his ignorance.

Pagan took his hand and guided it between her legs. ‘Like this, here... Wait, gently.’ Tomas let her place his fingers against the cleft of her sex, moved them as she enjoyed and felt the little nubbin grow firm between slick and silky lips. Pagan groaned, a red flush spread across her chest and

up her neck. 'Oh,' she said, and tensed, then she laughed and pulled Tomas's hand away. He hadn't known when to stop. Pagan sat up and kissed Tomas on the mouth. He kissed her back, both inexperienced, each found their noses somehow in the way.

'Sorry.'

Pagan pulled back and gazed at Tomas with such serenity and wisdom he doubted then if he would ever be that mature.

They lay under the sun, dozing, sharing water. Pagan said they should use the sun hoop again and this time it became a game of touching, fingernails grazing skin, following curves. More pleasure followed.

Shadows moved, they shared Pagan's food and wandered in silence beneath the sand eroded fuselages, still naked, walking close to each other, touching often. Pagan took more pictures and they walked out along the runway where the dunes swept across the concrete.

Far inland came a series of distant crackles, deep rumbling booms. After an interval the sounds came again.

'Summer thunder,' Thomas said.

Then a great tearing noise rushed up from the coast like a thousand claws in the sky, a horrid, frightening sound. Terrified, Pagan and Tomas clutched each other and crouched on the sand. Three times the sound came, and three rolling concussions boomed far inland.

Pagan clutched Tomas's arms, 'The off-shore batteries are firing, the city is attacking the road block. Kaz is up there.'

Tomas didn't care about Kaz, he just wanted to reassure Pagan. 'The city doesn't have an army, it's probably just a few men in trucks.'

Pagan glared at him wildly, 'I hope Kaz shoots them, I hope the big guns blow them up. The liner captains should open fire on the city. It could have been my father there today, my mother.'

Now their nudity felt ridiculous. They ran back to their clothes and dressed, their return across the airfield and up the steep path, hurried and wordless.

'Pagan, I...' Tomas was suddenly tearful, the day had started as a perfect dream.

'Hush,' she said, but didn't touch him. 'I'm worried sick, it's not your fault.'

Strong thermals from the plain pushed up against the plateau, Pagan's fair hair swirled in the hot gusts. 'I have to go.'

Tomas returned to the rock shelter and sat on the cool shade. Memories of Pagan's body and what they had done filled his mind and he sank into a fantasy of recollection. In his mind they discarded all possessions, clothes, camera, gun, their shoes; hand in hand they walked naked into a shimmering unpopulated landscape never to return. His heart felt different, as if he had gone a long way and only now just returned.

The scunch of grit under boots announced the return of Grandfather Georges. Tomas shook himself, the dream was a fantasy, Pagan would never come back, she was more worried about Kaz than himself.

'I saw that girl of yours in a tearing hurry, she didn't even give me a smile,' Georges said.

'She's worried about her friends, in the battle.'

'Battle?' Georges barked with laughter, 'Two pickups drove out to sell some sheep and those trigger-happy *panzertourista* idiots shot at them. Nobody was hurt until those big sea guns blew up some of their own vehicles.' Georges weather-seamed face creased with humourless mirth.

'Damned idiots. Tell me, how did you get on with the girl?'

'All right.'

Georges gave a sly look. 'Did you fuck her?'

'No, Grandfather Georges,' Tomas said patiently.

'I'd have fucked her. Anyway, I got some meat, firewood and fresh tobacco.'

Outraged, Tomas scrambled out of the shelter and marched away. He had neither reason nor desire to spend another night on the plateau with the old man. Georges cared for nobody except himself and nothing except his stupid pipe.

Behind him Georges called, 'Wait, Tomas. The *touristas* are upset, be careful-'

Tomas hurried away. Georges' cries faded into the distance.

Tomas watched the village from his earlier vantage point. Down below, the road was lined with parked vehicles, *touristas* swarmed like ants in a broken nest. Across from the cantina the big entertainment screens were grey and silent. Beneath them, four people lay on pallets, each with a bag of clear fluid connected to their arm by a tube. The light array from last night's party now shone down on a table where a white gowned man and woman worked over a fifth body. The cantina, like almost all the houses in the village, was in darkness.

As Tomas watched, the white robed man and woman grew agitated. Quickly the woman administered an injection directly into the patient's chest. Moments later the man began artificial respiration. When he grew tired the woman took over. Tomas turned at a sound: Grandfather Georges crouched beside him.

Georges' voice came low and urgent, 'Keep down, Tomas, don't let them see you.'

Together Tomas and Georges watched as the woman abandoned her efforts. Beside her the man clutched his scalp and a thin cry of anguish floated through the evening air, followed by a dull moan from the sullen crowd.

Out of the mass broke a group of young men. At the head strode Kaz. Marching up to the cantina they began beating on the door.

Tomas tensed, Georges' hand lay heavy on his shoulder.

Tomas' father Christos opened the door. Kaz dragged him outside, raised his fist and clubbed him to the ground. Maria ran from the cantina and threw herself across Christos's body. Kaz dragged her to her feet and tore away the front of her dress. Head down, Christos charged Kaz like a bull. Kaz stepped back, drew his gun and shot Christos so he sprawled motionless in the dirt. Maria fled back into the cantina, Kaz shot her in the back and she collapsed across the threshold.

Tomas leapt forwards. Georges flung himself at Tomas and pinned him to the ground. Tomas kicked and struggled but old Georges was strong, his weight too great to shift. Tomas's cheek pressed hard into the gritty earth, he convulsed, heaved, strained and collapsed weeping with rage and despair. Through his tears Tomas heard Georges swearing, cursing vilely, calling damnation down on all the *tourista's* heads.

Down below the crowd rapidly dispersed leaving a rump of a dozen men and women with Kaz. They gathered old lumber and threw it through the door of the cantina, onto Maria. Two men fetched jerry cans. Liquid was splashed across the wood, over the roof, burning paper was thrown. The cantina roared up into the night.

A young face appeared at the window of the blazing cantina, eyes and mouth round with terror.

'Julia!' Tomas found a strength he never knew and flung Georges away.

'Tomas, no,' Georges cried.

'You don't care,' Tomas howled. 'She's my sister.'

Behind Tomas, Georges' old face sagged. He stepped forwards and crashed the rifle butt against the back of Tomas's head. As Tomas staggered, a second blow numbed his thigh and he fell. Then Georges' arms were under Thomas, lifting.

'This family does not end with me,' Georges said.

Barely able to stand, leaning heavily on Georges, Tomas let himself be led away. Behind them the orange flames of the burning cantina blazed sudden white. The roof collapsed, a fountain of sparks shot high into the air.

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The following morning Thomas sat alone on the plateau edge. His head ached, his leg was still tender, his mind blank with grief. Far below, derelict airliners gleamed deceptively, their fuselages scoured to bright metal by sandstorms, the tyres of the undercarriages perished by the sun.

Georges sat far to one side with his pipe, the rifle at his feet. Smoke trickled between his lips. he moved only to tamp the tobacco in the bowl.

Far across the plain came the crump and flash of demolition charges as the tourists began an orderly withdrawal to the defensive perimeter around their beachhead at the floating dock. In an effort to avoid his own emotions, Tomas once more dismantled, cleaned and reassembled the Enfield.

A stone rattled, light footsteps scuffed. Pagan stood beside Tomas dressed in her habitual dusty pink cotton top, charcoal shorts and armoured jacket.

Out on the plain, dust plumes sped towards the airfield as the city militia drew nearer. Several lightly armoured *tourista* vehicles fell back before them.

‘We’re going,’ Pagan said.

A loud bang came from the plain below and one of the holidaymaker’s cars slewed to a halt. Another vehicle drew alongside and the occupants scrambled free.

‘Look at them down there,’ Pagan tried to laugh, a brittle sound. ‘It’s like a game. Nobody gets hurt, not really. Broken arms, that sort of thing.’ She crouched beside Tomas, prised his fingers apart and took hold of his hands. ‘There’s going to be an inquiry when we get home. Dad said so. A lot of people are really angry, none of this should have happened. You’ll probably get some compensation.’

Tomas stared at her, unable to speak, unable to think.

Pagan clenched her fists, ‘Why couldn’t they leave us alone? Why can’t they just let us have our holiday?’

Tomas opened his mouth then shook his head, too weary to explain.

Pagan squeezed his shoulder, ‘I’m so glad I met you. Amongst all this that’s something at least. Let’s stay in touch.’

‘I don’t have a phone.’

Pagan pulled a multi-function device from her pocket. 'Take this. I'll tell Dad it was stolen in the village, he'll buy me a new one.'

Tomas' head came up, 'We don't steal.'

Pagan opened her mouth, closed it again and became still. Then she grinned and held the phone out at arm's length, 'Come on, let's take pictures.' She shuffled closer, 'Put your arm around me.'

Tomas did as he was told. Pagan hugged him with one arm, pressed her cheek against his and beamed into the phone's camera. 'Smile, Tomas. I'll take another one.'

Tomas tightened his arm round Pagan's waist. Her lashes and eyebrows were bleached by the sun, she smelled very clean. Julia was dead, burned alive. Christos used to spit-roast whole goat, the flesh burned black and cracked to show red, sizzling meat. Pagan's waist was narrow, power surged in Tomas's arm, he could crush her easily.

Pagan turned into his arms, she brushed back his hair and looked at him with that same sad, wise look she gave him yesterday.

It was all illusion, she knew nothing. Tomas pulled her tight against him then pushed her down. Pagan lay passively with Tomas on top. He kissed her hard, pressed his hips against hers, she kissed him back.

Tomas held her with one hand on her shoulder, his other hand pulled at her waistband. Pagan began to struggle, her palms were on his chest, a barrier. 'No, Tomas, stop. We're too young, or rather, I am. I want to, it's just I'm not ready.'

They broke apart. Tomas sat hugging his knees. He was not his grandfather, the thought no longer pleased him.

'I'll remember you forever,' Pagan said.

There was too much hurt. Tomas struggled to find some words.

'It's so sad, Tomas. What will you do?'

Tomas shrugged, 'Rebuild the cantina.' The future was empty. He and Grandfather Georges would form a broken family of the old and the young. Tomas would herd the goats, Georges run the cantina until he died. Beyond that Tomas could not imagine.

'It's too dangerous.' Pagan said.

He looked away. 'I'll be fine.'

'I'll worry.'

Kaz was out of reach. Tomas found he did not believe in compensation. Georges was wise in other ways, lips not teeth, fingertips instead of fists. Tomas smiled gently and slipped his arm around Pagan. He kissed her softly, brushed her lips with his. 'I'll miss you too. Leave me something to remember you by.' He pretended to think, then said, 'Perhaps your jacket, it would keep me safe.'

Pagan kissed him tenderly, 'Yes, my love.' She unzipped her armoured vest and shrugged it off. 'I won't need it aboard the liner.'

'Thank you.'

'Try it on. Let me see you in it.'

Tomas loosened the buckle straps and put it on.

'It fits, see?' Pagan adjusted the waist belt.

'It's a good make.'

Down on the plain the holidaymaker's rear-guard had pulled far back towards the coast. Three armoured cars from the city rumbled slowly through the derelict airport followed by a scattered line of infantry.

Pagan's fingers dragged along his arm, 'I really have to go.'

Tomas's throat ached. 'Goodbye, Pagan.'

At the top of the track she jumped and waved. 'Ciao, Tomas!'

Tomas pulled off the vest and went to sit beside his grandfather.

'Have fun with your girlfriend?' Georges said without looking round.

Tomas flung the vest down at Georges' feet.

A sharp crack came from Georges' mouth, the bowl of the pipe dropped into his lap. Georges gave a sardonic grunt of surprise and spat out the mouthpiece. Briefly he considered the broken parts then tossed them over the edge.

'Give me the gun,' Tomas said.

Georges' mouth trembled, 'No.'

Fists clenched, Tomas loomed over Georges. 'Give it to me.'

Georges averted his gaze. 'Take it.'

Tomas took up the rifle and worked the bolt to load a round into the chamber. Kaz was far beyond reach. No matter, Tomas would now touch the *touristas* as they had touched his family. He took off after Pagan at a sprint, the rifle clutched in his hand. He leaped across rocks and vaulted the twists and turns in the path. Soon he reached the place where the trail descended from the plateau. Flat on his belly, Tomas crawled to the rim of the slope.

Down in the valley Pagan jogged along the trail, back and forth along each switchback. Tomas knew the path well, able to predict each change of direction. He licked his thumb, wiped the end sight and tracked Pagan. In the past he had easily hit small targets at this distance. Three times Tomas steadied the rifle and waited for Pagan to cross the sights. Then he aimed at where he knew she would be next. From the corner of his eye he watched her approach. He held his breath. His finger touched the trigger, a gentle squeeze took up the play.

Pagan filled the sights. Tomas lay like a stone. Then she was gone.

Tomas sprang upright, removed the cartridge, cleared the chamber and took aim again. Every time Pagan appeared, every time she paused at the turns, Tomas fired, worked the bolt and fired again. The sound of the hammer on the empty chamber was like the harsh tick of a clock. When she was out of range, he reloaded the gun and emptied it into the air.

Far down the valley came a similar salute from Pagan's hand gun. Then, drawn out and faint on the wind: 'Tomas.'

Pagan was a pale dot moving across the landscape. Tomas watched until she vanished, and still he watched. The afternoon was gone, a breeze came up from the plain and the air grew cool.

Tomas's legs failed him and he sat down hard. A huge choking sob welled up inside him and burst from his mouth. Alone under the empty sky he finally cried, he wailed out his grief and wished Pagen was there to hold him in her arms.

Eventually he gathered himself and went back to his grandfather.

Georges studied him warily.

'She's all right,' Tomas said.

'Good.' Georges touched Tomas's arm, 'My good boy.'

They sat in silence as the light faded.

'What shall we do?' Georges said.

An unutterable rage grew inside Tomas, vast and gigantic. In his mind he called down destruction on the *touristas*, their whole country, the entire world.

Two of the goats were fighting, the clomp of their horns roused Tomas from his trance. He dragged one of the animals aside by its horns and cut its throat with his knife. When it was dead he tried to catch another but they were skittish and danced away whenever he came close.

'Take the goats back to the cantina,' Tomas told Georges. Then he slung the rifle over his shoulder and set out on the long walk towards the city.

The End.

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This started with a simple 'What If?' idea – What if the annual invasion of holiday-makers to coastal resorts was exactly that – an invasion.

I didn't want to explain how a world like this could come into being politically or economically, I didn't have any clear ideas and also didn't think it would make much of a story. I was much more interested in trying to write about misconceptions, different cultures failing to

understand each other, respect and lack of it, and radicalisation. I also wanted to make the location unspecified. There's no clear location because this could happen anywhere.

I was truly delighted when this won third place on the 2011 Aeon Award, run by Albedo One magazine.