

Shade
steven gould

Xareed had been waiting for the water truck for two days, seated in the dirt at the edge of the camp, his family's plastic ten-liter water-jug tied to his ankle.

He didn't like being on the edge of the camp. Except for the piece of cardboard he carried impaled on a stick there was no shade. The poet Sayyid had said, "God's Blessings are more numerous than those growing trees," and Xareed hoped so, for there were no trees in the camp or outside. So the blessings had better be more numerous, not less.

Being on the edge of the camp, especially on this side, was also bad because rebels would occasionally fire into the tents from the far side of the old lakebed, or set up mortars among the folds and gullies in the bottom.

Bad enough, but when the government troops came in response, the rebels would be long gone, and the troops would say they were hiding in the camp and there would be searches and arrests and summary executions.

It was safer deep inside the camp where Xareed lived with his mother and grandfather and sisters. Back when they'd come here, after the rebels had killed his father and burned their farm, there'd still been a little water in the lake and a lot of mud, so his family actually had a house, just a one-room building, but made of thick sun-dried bricks that kept the family cool in the heat and which had, on more than one occasion, stopped stray bullets and shrapnel that tore through the tents that most of the refugees lived in.

It had been Xareed's idea, one of the few things he'd gotten from school that meant anything here. That, and enough English to talk to the foreigners who helped at the camps.

But Xareed really missed the shade of trees. His last memory of their farm, as they fled, was not the burning house and fields, but the flames consuming the wide canopy of their umbrella thorn acacia tree.

When the strangers showed up at the clinic tent, rumors and questions flew up and down the water line.

"How did they get here?"

"I don't know. Maybe a truck on the far side of the camp?"

"Maybe they came on a water truck?"

This was nonsense since the entire camp knew within minutes when the water truck had been sighted.

“Could it be a new supplies convoy?”

“Maybe a new drilling machine?”

The camp's three wells, drilled two years before, had dried up in the previous month. There was still some water in the clinic's tanks but it was being strictly rationed. One of the NGOs had sent a new drilling rig but it had been confiscated by the government and sent south.

Everyone was dry-mouthed and angry and all the young ones kept saying “Waan domonahay” (I'm thirsty) over and over again. Many had woken to find their water bottles stolen and accusations had flown, followed by fists.

“Maybe there was a helicopter?”

Sometimes the IRC got copters in with medical supplies.

“I heard they walked.”

Xareed peered across the baked earth toward the nurse's station. The strangers were a white man and woman, wearing practical khakis and baseball caps. They didn't look like they'd walked. It was possible, but it was thirty dry kilometers to the next village. These people looked fresh, almost moist, like the reeds that grew by the stream in his old village.

“It's like they sprouted from the ground.”

There was laughter at this, but only quiet laughter. Everyone was too hot and thirsty to laugh loudly.

“Xareed,” one of his friends said, “you go ask.”

Xareed translated to English for anyone. “They could be French or German or Norwegian. You go ask. Nurse will know.”

A boy further down the line saw the tanker truck first, by the dust it threw up, while it was still kilometers away. It was coming by the lake road, winding along the old shoreline. Some of the newer refugees surged to their feet, but the old hands sat stoically. Time enough to stand when you could hear the diesel motor, hear the creaks of the springs as it bounced in and out of the road's potholes. Even then there would be some delay as they put the dispenser hose on the tank and filled the clinic's tanks first.

Xareed shifted his cardboard parasol as the sun tracked across the sky. It was one of the few things he owned and he had to watch it carefully. As shade it was valuable enough but during the cold nights any number of his campmates would steal it to burn. Fuel was not quite as rare as water. You could get it by walking far enough from the camp but the rebels or government troops might find you and that never ended well.

The sound of grinding gears was plainly audible and he had untied the string around his ankle and was thinking of standing when the truck hit the mine.

He jumped to his feet, his mouth open in dismay. The rebels must've planted it in the last two days. This same truck had used the same route the week before with no problem. The diesel was burning and he was pretty sure he'd seen water spray from a tank rupture before the swirling dust had engulfed the vehicle.

He was running, sprinting forward, almost without thought. The water. Even ruptured, the tanker could take some time to drain, if he could get to it in time—

It was at least six hundred meters to the truck and he slowed almost immediately to a steady jog. While speed was of the essence, it would do no good if he collapsed on the way to the truck or was too weak to carry his filled water can back.

Or if I step on a mine, he thought, and shifted his course off the dirt road.

If he could just fill his can. His sisters complained all day long about the thirst but his grandfather, who never complained, was weak and feverish.

He glanced behind. He'd clearly had the element of surprise but now a general rush was on, other boys and men and a few girls, enough that dust was rising into the air from their passage. Ignore them, he told himself.

A tall thin boy sprinted past Xareed, running for all he was worth, a twenty-five liter can in each hand and two more slung over one shoulder, banging against his back and chest.

For an instant Xareed was tempted to match his speed, to sprint as he did, but he kept himself to the steady jog. His resolve was tested as two more men dashed past. He was over halfway now, but the truck still seemed small in the distance, shrouded in dust and dark smoke, and the tall, skinny sprinter seemed almost there, but that had to be an illusion.

He hoped it was an illusion.

It was. The tall sprinter collapsed a hundred meters short of the truck and the other fast men were reduced to a staggering walk. They were bent over, gasping for air as Xareed jogged past them.

Xareed was also gasping for air by the time he reached the truck. He circled wide around the front where the fuel tank, behind and below the driver's side, had been ruptured by the mine and a puddle of diesel burned, flames licking up the driver's door. Even from eight meters away the waves of heat were painful and he held his cardboard parasol out to keep the worst of it off his face.

He glanced back. The rest of the crowd was still coming and the cloud of dust had grown but he still had a fifty-meter lead over the closest. As he got around to the passenger side his eyes were on the water pouring out of the rents in the tank and he dropped the parasol and began fumbling with the screw cap on his jug.

And that's when he heard the cries.

Someone was still alive in the truck cab.

The water was already slowing as it poured out of the ruptured tank and the others were so close. With a curse, he dropped the water jug and scrambled up on the step and clawed for the door handle.

The door came open about six inches and jammed. He braced his foot against the side of the truck and pulled and it creaked, then gave way suddenly and he fell to the ground, but he was back up on the truck step without thinking about it.

On the far side the driver was clearly dead, his clothes aflame, but there was a woman in the passenger seat moaning and staring about with wide eyes. Her face was bloody and her clothes too, but he couldn't tell if it was her blood or the driver's. She was fumbling with her right hand, reaching across her body, trying to reach her seat belt release. Her other arm was hanging, apparently useless, and her shirtsleeve was starting to smoke.

Xareed reached for the buckle and screamed as it burned him. He reached again, and instead of grabbing it, punched two fingers into the release button. The tab slid out and he pulled her, by her good arm, and, toppled back down onto the ground, her weight pinning him to the ground.

"Christ, she's on fire."

The weight came off of him and he saw the stranger, the white man, stripping off his shirt and smothering the flames that had started on the passenger's sleeve. Then the other stranger, the woman, was there suddenly. Xareed thought he must've passed out; for one moment she wasn't there and then she was. She looked angry and scared.

"You're going to get yourself killed!" she said fiercely, but then added, "She better go straight to hospital. One with a good burn unit."

Xareed blinked. What were they talking about? The nearest hospital was over three hundred kilometers away. Even if they could get a helicopter in, the chances of it being shot down were high.

The man nodded. "Right. I'll take her. Check on him, okay?" He jerked his chin toward Xareed. "He pulled her out."

The heat from the burning cab was increasing and the white woman pulled him further away.

There was shouting from the end of the truck. The ruptured tank was empty now and they were trying to get the other compartments open but it was crowded. Xareed looked around for his jug but it was gone. Someone in the crowd had snatched it up.

He tried to scramble to his feet but the woman pressed him down. The man and the injured passenger were gone. He must've carried her around the end of the truck and back to the camp.

"My water can!" Xareed said, struggling against her. "My can she is gone!"

"Ah, good. You have some English," the woman said, clearly relieved. She still kept her hand on his shoulder, though.

"I must find my can! My family needs water!"

She nodded. "Water is important. I'll get you some water but let me see if you're hurt."

Xareed looked at her. "Are you crazy! They will take all the water. There isn't enough." He tried to get up again but his six-hundred-meter run, the heat, the lack of water, the fire, his burnt hand—it was all too much. She was able to hold him down easily.

"Shhhh. I promise I'll get you some water. What's wrong with your hand?"

Xareed was cradling his right hand. "I, uh, fire, uh hot, it. On the belt seat."

"Ohhh. Burned? When you got her out? That was very brave of you. Let me see." She held his hand lightly by the wrist and looked closely without touching it. "Ow. Looks like you'll blister. Wait here."

She stepped back around the front of the truck, where the smoke still billowed. Xareed tried to get up again but he was suddenly overwhelmed by it all. They were pushing and shoving at the other end of the truck. His hand hurt. The water jug was gone and his mother and grandfather and sisters would go thirsty.

The woman stepped back around the front of the truck. She had a cloth in her hand wrapped around something. She crouched again, beside him, and said, "Put this against your fingers—it will help."

He held out his burnt hand, cautiously. He thought maybe she had some salve, some ointment, but she gently pressed the entire cloth against his hand.

The relief was sudden and shocking. It was ice, like they used to have at his old school, like the tops of distant mountains. She opened the cloth a little and took a chunk, a cube, from inside and mimed putting it in his mouth.

He did. So cold. So good. He sucked greedily at it.

"Rest here a few minutes. I'll go get your water."

She brought him back a jerry can, plastic, with "5 gal" embossed on the side. It was full. More shocking, it was cold—beads of water were condensing on the sides and it felt almost as good on his burn as the ice.

He looked around for his makeshift parasol and it was there, but the crowd had trampled it flat and the stick was broken and the cardboard torn.

He couldn't help it. He cried.

The woman picked up the scraps of cardboard. "Ah, I saw this, when you were sitting in line. Clever."

He nodded. "My parasol."

"A nice bit of shade. What's your name?"

"Xareed, Miss."

"Call me Millie."

The crowd around them was growing and on the other side, someone was throwing dirt on the burning diesel oil. He put an arm around the jerry can, holding it close.

The woman eyed the growing crowd uneasily. "Come on, Xareed. I'll help you carry this back to the camp, all right?"

They walked side by side, the can between them. She was only a little taller than he was and they shared the handle, his left hand, her right touching.

“Where are you from, Miss Millie?”

“Canada,” she said. “How long have you been here?”

“Three years. We were firstcomers.” He told her about their mud brick house and his mother, grandfather, and sisters. “Is that man your husband?”

“Yes. David.”

“Why did you come here?”

“To help, if we can,” she said.

She was sweating now, and Xareed was relieved. He hadn’t been sure if she was human or not. He asked his next question nervously. “How did you come here?”

She glanced sideways at him and then back at the dirt they were trudging across. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s hard to get here. Sometimes helicopters come but the rebels have rock ... ats?”

“Rockets.”

“Rockets. And the roads have mines. And there is no convoy.” He peered at her. “And I do not think you walk.”

She sighed. “No. We came our own way.” She did not elaborate, but instead asked him what circumstances had brought him to the camp.

He found himself telling her the entire story, right up to looking back at the burning farm, the burning tree.

“Ah,” she said. “Shade.”

“Yes.”

She left him at the edge of the camp where he was able to get one of his trusted neighbors to carry the water can the rest of the way in return for a liter of its contents. By the time he’d reached the mud brick house, the ice was reduced to a handful of small chips but there was still enough for his sisters, mother, and grandfather to each have a small mouthful.

It was a miracle. A small miracle, but still a miracle.

* * *

Later, that afternoon, the next miracle happened.

“The tanks are full! The tanks are full.”

“Are the wells working?”

“Did more trucks come?”

Wildly different stories swept the camp. He got one version from Yahay, who lived in a tent near Well #2. “It was that stranger, the man who came with the woman, without a car.”

“What did he do?”

“He climbed up onto the water tower.” The water tower was a metal tank on legs three meters above the ground. A petrol well-pump filled it so gravity could drain it. It was three meters across and four meters tall and held 38,000 liters when full. Since the well had gone dry the month before, it had been mostly empty.

“So?”

“He opened the inspection hatch and climbed down into it. I was standing near. I heard water rushing and then the tank began to creak. I ran to the tap and cold, cold water came out when I held the valve open. I cried out in surprise and everyone came running. In the excitement, I didn’t see him come out of the tank. Maybe he didn’t,” Yahay said, wide-eyed. “Maybe he turned into the water.”

Xareed remembered the man disappearing with the injured passenger. He didn’t think the man had turned into water. Especially when the other two tanks were found to be full very soon after.

Xareed went looking and found the strangers sitting with the French IRC nurse and watching the sunset in front of the clinic intake tent. He crouched down behind the tent flap and listened.

“It’s a respite. How often can it be done? We’ve been short for a month now. Forty-five hundred people go through a lot of water.”

The man—David—looked at his wife. “Can’t keep it up. It will attract too much attention and it will be bad for us and for the camp. But, I do have a longer-term solution, I think.”

“Yes?”

“Let me try it. You’ll know if it works.”

They left after that, walking out into the sudden dusk, and Xareed watched carefully. He was wondering if he would see another miracle when he saw another man leave the edge of the camp and drift after the strangers.

While it was true that the rebel troops did not hide in the camp, it didn’t mean that they didn’t have their spies among the refugees. This man was a bit too well fed, a bit too well dressed. He wore boots and pants, not sandals and the robe, and his shoulder-slung bag was shiny new.

Perhaps he too was interested in the miracle of the water.

Xareed looked around and then followed, swinging wide to the north. He kept his head down, like someone looking for firewood. Anything near the camp was long gone, but that didn’t keep people from looking.

David and Millie kept moving, crossing quickly over the dip that marked the old lakeshore and then down the slope. They were moving by feel and starlight now.

Xareed found a shallow gully that marked an old streambed and ran down it, using it to hide his passage. He passed David and Millie and crouched low as they walked closer.

Millie was saying, “—find Canadian salmon here and it will blow the whole thing.”

David said, “Yeah. Pity. There’s an awful lot of snowmelt going to waste up there. But you’re right. And there’s the hypothermia danger. BBC Meteorological says it’s raining around Lake Tanganyika. That’ll do.”

From Xareed’s position in the gully they were all silhouetted against the fading sunlight on distant wisps of clouds, so he saw the follower close the distance and take the gun and something else from his bag.

Xareed felt a rock under his knee and dug it out of the dried mud. It was bigger than his fist and sharp cornered. He threw it as hard as he could, aiming behind and above the gun.

Light from a flashlight stabbed out and then there was a smacking sound and a cry. The flashlight tumbled to the ground where it shone across the submachine gun lying by itself in the dirt. Then he saw a hand, a white man’s hand, reach into the light and pick up the gun. The flashlight came up and shone down on the man who’d followed them from the camp.

The man was clutching his head with his hands and blood stained the side of his face. He was groaning and Xareed said, “It is deserved.”

The flashlight turned his way and he blinked in the sudden glare. “Ah. You, eh? From the truck? What did Millie say ... Xareed?”

“Xareed. Where is Miss Millie?”

The flashlight swept around in a circle. There was no sign of anyone else.

“Ah, well, she’ll be back.” David’s voice didn’t sound puzzled at all by the woman’s disappearance. “What are you doing out here?”

“I saw him follow you from the camp.”

Millie was there, then, wild-eyed, a baseball bat raised high and swinging.

The flashlight moved sideways three meters. No. It was suddenly three meters to the side—there was no movement. Just as Millie had not been there and then she was, the flashlight was one place and then another.

“Whoa, Millie. It’s okay!” David turned the flashlight on himself, then pointed it at the man on the ground, then at Xareed. “Xareed got ’em. With a rock?”

Xareed’s mouth was open and he felt numb. With some effort he said, “Yes. I threw a rock. How did you do that?”

“Don’t think about it, Xareed. It’ll only make you crazy,” said David.

"I think maybe crazy is what I am."

Millie lowered the bat. "No. David is the crazy one." She glared in the light. "You scare me like that again and I'll ..."

"It wasn't me," David said in an offended voice.

The man on the ground had stopped moaning and was looking at them all, wide-eyed. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and ran out into the darkness, down the slope into the lake bottom. David swiveled the light to follow his flight but the man didn't turn back and soon dropped out of sight into one of the gullies below.

"You did not shoot him," Xareed observed.

David looked down at the submachine gun dangling in hand, as if he were surprised he still held it. "No. Not me."

"He is a rebel. He may bring back more. Sometimes they hide down there."

David looked vaguely concerned. "Oh."

There was a flash from several hundred meters ahead of them followed by a loud noise. Ten seconds later there was an explosion in the camp behind them, followed by distant screams.

Xareed shuddered. "Mortars. They're firing on the camp. Give me the gun. I will go stop them."

David looked down at the gun in his hand. Another mortar went off. He shifted the gun in his grip and Millie said, "No! That's not the way!"

"Then what?"

"Water runs down hill."

David blinked. "Oh. So it does."

He handed the flashlight and the gun to Millie and vanished.

Xareed recoiled and fell backwards, then scrambled back to his feet.

Millie gestured with the flashlight. "We need to get up the hill a bit."

"Why?"

She pulled the clip from the gun and threw it out into the darkness, then worked the slide, ejecting another bullet from the chamber before she threw it in the other direction. "You'll see."

They backed up the hill, toward the camp. Another mortar shell exploded in the camp and Xareed thought of his sisters, probably tucked in the corners of the house, their one mattress pulled up around them. The house would be proof against anything but a direct hit or near miss. Then the bricks would go from being protectors to projectiles.

David was back, but then gone, like he'd blinked into existence then left. Then he was back again. Then gone. Then it was as if he was blinking. There, not, there, not, but the time between slowly decreased and then there was a David-shaped hole and water flooded out of it in all directions, fast and furious, like a river torrent after a heavy rain.

Even up the hill, it washed all the way up to Xareed's knees, warm water, not too cold, and then it flowed away, into the gullies and down the hill.

There was one more mortar flash from the bottom of the old lakebed before the rushing water arrived. The rush of the water drowned out most noise but he thought he heard distant shouts and cries.

He and Millie backed further up the hill until they reached dry ground, then sat. Millie turned the flashlight off but the sound of the water was overwhelming. Xareed could even feel it through the ground, a thrumming vibration against the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands.

The smell of it, wet and rich, permeated the air, turning the normally dry, searing air into a moist and heady mix of half-familiar smells.

"It smells like ... like rain."

"Yes," agreed Millie. "Like rain after a long dry spell."

* * *

Xareed woke to the morning light, which, magnified, reflected off wavelets on the surface of a lake stretching two kilometers to the far shore.

He sat up and looked around. He was above the shoreline, barely, and his head had been pillowed on a rolled up jacket. It was Millie's, he realized, but he did not remember falling asleep.

He wondered if they'd taken him someplace far away, but when he looked around, the sleeping camp was stirring. People stood at the edge of the camp, staring at the water, taking a few tentative steps forward, as if they thought it was a mirage that would vanish when they walked toward it.

Maybe it was. He reached out a hand and trailed his fingers through the water, then held them up and let them trickle into his mouth. An empty mortar casing bobbed on the wavelets, a few feet out from the shore, and he remembered the night before. He imagined the rebels trying to get up the wet slopes weighed down by their guns and mortars and ammunition, and, though he hoped they'd made it out, he felt confident they'd had to leave the heavy metal tools of war behind.

He got up and went to see how his family was.

* * *

It could've been far worse. The mortar had hit in the square, a stretch of empty dirt where people with things to trade or sell sat in the morning and where the men sat in the evening discussing the Qur'an. There was a small crater and shrapnel had killed a woman across

the way, but the nearest structure was Xareed's house.

"She's fine," his mother said, though she kept her arm around his youngest sister and wouldn't let her go play with the other girls.

Xareed nodded. Awrala really was fine. She'd woken from the loud noise and the weight but it really hadn't even frightened her. She'd been far more worried by her mother's frantic cries and when her mother and grandfather had pulled her from under the pile of collapsed bricks, her mother had run her hands over and over her arms and legs and back and front, looking for some hurt, some wound.

Awrala was fine but it would take some time for his mother to believe it.

They were making bricks. They'd separated out the unbroken ones from the collapsed wall and the rest they'd thrown into the mortar crater. Xareed spent his time walking back and forth to the lake, carrying water and mud for the crater. His sisters trod and stirred the sludge and his grandfather formed the bricks and set them out in neat rows. It would take a few weeks but the wall would be good as ever and they were making enough bricks to add another room.

He was on his way back to the lake, his back sore and the buckets light and empty, when Millie fell into step beside him, looking cool and comfortable in the heat, her eyes shaded by gleaming sunglasses. "Hallow," she said, trying to say it like they did locally, but she still sounded foreign-alien.

"Hello." He tried to act relaxed but he couldn't help looking at her from the corners of very wide eyes.

"I wanted to thank you, for the other night. For helping us."

He shrugged. "I have been thinking that maybe, perhaps, you did not need help."

She smiled. "You didn't know that. I don't know that, for that matter. Who knows what would have happened?"

Xareed snorted. He knew what he thought. "You are kind."

"We are grateful. We could take you out of here. There is a large community of your people in Minnesota. In the United States."

He had heard this. It was cold there. "How many could you take? Could you take my sisters? My mother and grandfather?"

Millie licked her lips. "Yes."

"How long would it take? The journey?"

She half-smiled. "No time, really. A few minutes for all of you and your things."

"Then you could take all of us, yes?" He sketched his arm around in a large circle, encompassing the entire camp.

She frowned. "No. I don't think we could. People would come and stop us. We have

enemies.”

“The rebels? The government troops?”

She shook her head. “Ah ... no. That’s local. Our enemies have a very long reach. We could take your family, though.”

He looked around. The water had changed things. There were waterfowl on the lake. Someone had seen fish. An NGO had gotten a food convoy through and, hearing of the lake, they’d included seeds: maize, beans, and wheat. All over the camp people had started gardens, putting children to work scaring off the birds who might eat the seed. The wells were no longer dry as the water from the lake seeped into the water table.

“We are here. This is where we have come and, thanks to you, there is hope now. As long as the lake does not dry up again.” He glanced at her again and raised his eyebrows.

She looked at the lake, her hands on her hips, and smiled. “Perhaps that can be avoided.”

She flicked away and he blinked, surprised. He thought she would’ve said goodbye.

He bent down to drag the buckets through the water and she was back. She had a Chinese parasol, bamboo and bright blue paper with a sprinkling of red and pink flowers, and she held it out to him. “To replace your old parasol.”

He took it without thinking, then said, “No.” He tried to hand it back to her but she stepped back and put her hands behind her back.

“No, it’s yours.”

His face contorted. He wanted the parasol with all his heart. He ran up over the rise and handed it to the first person he saw, a young girl carrying a baby on her hip.

He went back to the water buckets and Millie looked at him, then disappeared again, coming back immediately with another umbrella.

This one was pink with white hyacinths. He took it from her and gave it to an old woman washing clothes at the water’s edge. He began walking with the buckets back toward the center of camp.

Millie walked out from behind a tent and held out a green umbrella. Xareed gave it to a boy chasing a grasshopper. Millie stepped out from another corner with another parasol and Xareed gave it to a woman weaving mats out of plastic and cardboard. By the time they reached Xareed’s house, he’d given away twenty-three umbrellas and a long line of people was following them.

Millie shook her head. “You are very stubborn.”

He smiled.

“All right, you win,” she said.

“No more umbrellas?”

“Not exactly.”

* * *

The word spread quickly and the lines formed at the edge of the square. There was much scrambling to keep the new bricks from being ground into the dirt. His entire family stood there, taking the umbrellas out of the cardboard boxes and handing them out and giving the boxes away, too, when they were empty. Then they would go into the mud brick house and bring out more boxes.

“Where are they coming from?” asked his friend, Yahay. “Your house could not hold a tenth of those boxes.”

“Where did the water in the lake come from? Where did the water in the tanks come from?” he asked back. “It is as the poet said, God’s Blessing are more numerous than those growing trees.”

* * *

He saw Millie one more time after the crowds had been shown that the “miracle house” was empty once more. She was sitting by his grandfather, helping him pat the bricks into shape, accepting feedback; laughing as the old man make invisible corrections to every brick she’d formed.

Xareed crouched on his heels and watched.

Millie looked sideways at him, “Did you take one for yourself?” She lifted her arm and gestured around. As far as you could see, the camp had blossomed with color. People were laughing, people were singing, and people were dancing, bright canopies of color twisted and whirled.

Xareed smiled and stepped into the house and then came back. The shaft was from one of the broken umbrellas—you open enough crates and you run across some breakage—but the top was a circle of cardboard, cut from one of the boxes.

Millie stared at it, her mouth dropping open. Then she fell onto her back and laughed and laughed.

He stood there and watched, dignified.

In the shade.