

Bottled Water and Chocolate Bars

They slept in the gymnasium. In huddles on a patchwork of blankets. Behind hastily packed cases. Crumpled clothes spilling from plastic bags. Empty water bottles with nowhere to go. Exhausted toddlers in tightly curled balls. Disconnected teenagers. Phone service—none. Parents wide-eyed. News—none. Cold to the bone. Heating—none. Aid workers. Fluorescent vests and torches.

*Meriam sits cross-legged on hard concrete. She sacrifices her puffer jacket, turns it into a sleeping bag for four-year-old Damian, and shivers as she cradles him in her lap. Torchlight crawls along a gap in a human carpet. Somebody hands her a bottle of water and a bar of chocolate.*

Rain pounding. Wind screaming. A roaring steam train wind and them on the rails. Angry giant tugging at the roof. Pulling, pulling. Fragments of ruptured city booming against walls. Bang! Bang! Loud. So loud they can feel it. Doors shuddering. Lock bars straining. The stink of fear—everywhere.

*Meriam cannot imagine how Damian sleeps through this, but he does. She whispers a wish for sweet dreams, above his soft child skin, his fluffy child eyelashes. She looks to the windows, black as tar, long narrow slits of windows high up, near heavy metal beams. She wonders if the metal will save them all. The gymnasium is a storm shelter, but it shudders, and so does Meriam.*

Seconds passing. Minutes. Hours. A time taffy. Stretching, stretching. Onwards and forever. People. Hungry and thirsty. Shivering. Tired. Taut with terror. Waiting and wishing. Praying. Cursing. Crying. Thoughts tumbling and turning. Mixing. Chaotic. Forgotten futures. There is only now. Surviving now.

*Dawn struggles through a blanket of clouds and with the coming of light Meriam realises the storm has quietened. Damian wakes, wriggles from her grip and turns full circle, surveying the human morass. He smiles at nearby children. They smile back, and Meriam takes his hand to keep him close. "I'm hungry Mummy."*

Waking. Stretching. Bustling. Snaking queues to the toilets. Aid workers at trestle tables. Long-life milk. Bottled water. Fruit. Biscuits. Chocolate bars. Vacant stares. Running on auto. Worry lines etching faces.

*Damian nibbles on a biscuit that came in its own plastic wrapper and sips strawberry milk through a straw from a small carton. Meriam holds an apple but doesn't eat. She's thinking about their home; hers and Damian's. A small house, weatherboard with an iron roof, old, and in need of maintenance that Meriam cannot afford. Has it survived the storm? Do they have a home at all?*

People in uniforms. A megaphone. News. Electricity—off. Gas—off. Damage—everywhere. Missing roofs. Trees down. Phone towers—down. People surging forward. Ears pricked. Talking. Talking. Lists. Places they cannot go. Talking. Talking.

*Meriam stays seated, her unbitten apple still in hand. Her mind is numb, her ears unhearing. She fears what they will find, or not find when they go home. She could not afford insurance. By the time she rallies enough to listen, all she hears is, 'Any questions?'*