



Source: Greg Myre, '700 militants agree to play security role in Nablus', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune online*, 24/06/05

Tags: [war](#), [water](#), [husband/wife](#), [surveillance](#)

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In the middle of our city there is a river—stinking, diseased, it is death to drink from. A bridge crosses the river, and on the other side live our deadly enemies. The war has divided us for so long. And now God has sent another trial for us, for the rain never falls and every day we are beaten down by the fierce sun. To think that I had children in these times, from hope. The wells are dry and I must go to beg the mercy of the enemy. I must cross the bridge.

I leave early, hoping to beat the rush. The heat is already beginning to displace the desert night, and dusty breezes tickle my nostrils. As I walk, a container slung from each arm and a third on my head, I see there are already refugees heading the other way, into the desert. I say a quick prayer for them, and add one for we who remain. Malia, then old Mrs. Tezhik come out of their houses as I pass and join me. Mrs. T. is quiet and looks tired already. I'm particularly glad of Malia's company; we grew up together, even shared our wedding day. We're different she and I, I'm the quiet one, and she was the one all the boys chased after. I guess that's why we get along so well.

Dogs, dust, dying trees. Other women come out from shadowed doorways in the cracked and parched facades, join our fearful procession. Soon the houses of white plaster and brown earth give way to the jumble of ruined shells that line the riverbank, in range of the enemy's guns. We pick our path through a litter of broken glass, stones and rank weeds, out into the open space before the bridge. Some of our soldiers loiter at the edge of the ruins, watching the bridge; they wish us luck as we pass. There are fourteen of us, fallen silent now. On the far bank we can see nothing. Silent, without any choice, we step out onto the bridge.

'Look, they're sending their women to fight us!'

'Hey baby, have you come to surrender...your body to me?'

They step out of the rubble as we approach the half-way point, whistling and jeering. Soldiers in grey-and-white camouflage, guns aimed casually towards our feet.

'What are you doing here?' asks one in a more serious tone as we pass the end of the bridge. I guess he is their captain and head towards him.

'We are civilians. We are not your enemies. We just want some water from the spring. Our wells are dry.'

The others add their voices, pleading with him to let us pass.

'We heard about that. My colonel says you can fill your containers. But you send this message back: the Populists must surrender to us or we will allow no more water across. They will be responsible for what happens to their people.'

I nod, and he waves us forward. Some of the soldiers grab at our breasts and buttocks as we pass, and women yelp, slap their hands away. I look back at the captain but he is indifferently studying the opposite bank.

'Come on ladies, let's just get this over with,' says Malia, striding ahead, determinedly ignoring the men. They let us pass, laughing. But their fun is not over yet.

'Hey, we only allow pretty women into our side, not ugly old Populist whores.'

One of the soldiers, tall and dark with fierce bloodshot eyes, grabs Mrs. Tezhik by the hair and throws her to the ground.

'Leave her alone!' I yell and run back to where she lies gasping in the dust.

'She can't go in. She'll have to go back home.'

Fear silences me as I look at the angry man, at the other men with guns behind him. Mrs. T. looks up at me with wide eyes, and nods.

'We'll take your containers,' I murmur to her. 'Malia, Larissa, give me a hand.'

I help her up and each of us takes an extra container.

'I'll wait for you. I'll wait in the shade, on the other side. I'm too tired to walk back now anyway.'

'Okay,' I say, and grasp her shoulder. 'Come on.'

We walk away as Mrs. Tezhik steps back onto the bridge and, unmolested, heads for the far bank. 'There was no need for that,' I think. He was just taking out his anger at the enemy. I hope that is as far as it will go.

Soon we are among the houses of the far bank, where we haven't set foot in years. Such memories they bring back, the streets and shops, places I haven't seen since I was a child. Before the war, the last time anyone was really happy. I look around for a familiar face, but most of the people hang back in doorways or peer from windows, afraid to be seen with us. Soldiers stand here and there, a pitiful bunch just like ours. But they have water.

We walk uphill towards the park where the spring bubbles up before flowing into an underground channel that leads to the dead river. One block to go and no sign of danger. We are nearly there. Then a group of soldiers step out from a lane and level their rifles at us.

It is late afternoon when we arrive home. We have the water, and we have the message from their colonel. We have another message, written on our bodies and in our memories. They took it in turns to rape us, then finally they let us fetch our water and leave, laughing and jeering all the while. And I thought of our husbands who wouldn't accompany us, because fetching water is women's work.

They are playing cards in the street when we return. My man looks up as I approach.

'Where have you been? You've been gone for hours!'

I turn and walk inside.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Paul Threlfall*