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Nicholas Kristof and Ann Curry Reporting

In the summer of 2006 I received a call from New York. Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* and Ann Curry of NBC News, along with her crew, needed my help. I soon met them in Abéché. There was a lot of fighting right along the border at that time, so this would be busy and difficult for everyone.

We went immediately to the border town of Adre, Chad, in a convoy of Land Cruisers. This is exactly on the Sudan border, due east from Abéché. Ann wanted to report on the fighting close to Adre, since her big equipment could be set up on the safer Chad side. Nick wanted to go deep to the south along the border to villages that were in the line of attack.

As we made our plans, I saw that Ann and Nick were very admirable people. She was very polite but asked more questions than any reporter I had ever met. Nick looked like a man who gets into trouble. So I went with him.

He wanted to travel first along the Wadi Kaya, the big canyon that separates Darfur and Chad, controlled in most places by the Janjaweed. Nick had a cameraman, a woman assistant, and of course we had a driver. Sometimes we had to drive a little ways down into the wadi, seeing Janjaweed camps so close we could wave to them. We didn't wave, of course; we just drove fast. The driver was very good. The wadi was filled with mango and orange trees, and the vegetable patches of the villagers who had lived there until recently. The fruit was falling unpicked.

After eight intense hours, we arrived at the village Nick most wanted to see. The surrounding villages had been or were being attacked. Nick and his two people thanked me for getting them to the village. Because there are no real roads that you might think of as roads, they couldn't believe how we had even found the place and gotten there safely. But I was thinking that any minute they might not be thanking me.

The sheikh of the village said he expected an attack that night. I wondered if these newspeople really understood that a *New York Times* press pass would not help them unless it happened to be bulletproof. Nick was very casual when I told him we should not unpack too much, and not set up our beds too far from the Land Cruiser. He was as casual as if he always slept in villages under attack.

We could hear shooting in the distance. The sheikh warned me that the trees surrounding the village probably hid some Janjaweed watching us—shots had been fired from there earlier.

I should have mentioned that to Nick, but I didn't want him to smile at me again like I was *such a worrier*. Besides, there was nothing we could do except be ready to move quickly, which was my job, not his.

The three of them rolled out their sleeping bags while the driver and I talked to the sheikh. The Americans had little flashlights on headbands to help them get their sleeping bags just right. The sheikh pointed to the trees of the wadi again and said I should say something about the headlamps; he said the little lights were saying, *Please shoot me in the head*. Maybe I should have said something to Nick about this, but I decided they would be finished soon and lying down, which was true.

In such situations, of which this was not the first, I preferred to stay awake. The driver and I talked quietly and ate sardines from tins. In the middle of the night, automatic rifles and RPG fire came very close and woke up the sleeping campers, who seemed afraid.

I looked at Nick like *You are such a worrier*. I told them to go back to sleep, that the fighting was still two villages away. Even so, the driver and I stayed awake and counted the seconds between the RPG flashes and their noise.

The next morning we were still alive. After tea we drove to the next village, which had been attacked in the night but had defended itself and survived.

One of the attackers had been captured and badly beaten. He was about fourteen. Another attacker had been shot in his back and was barely alive on the sand at the edge of the trees. His blood was flowing out around him and probably nearly all gone. He was also about fourteen.

These were Janjaweed Arab boys. We talked to the boy who had been beaten. I translated.

"Why did you attack this village?"

"We are from a village just over there. We have always been friends with the people of this village."

"So why, then?"

"We were told by the government soldiers that these people were going to attack our village and kill our families if we did not attack them first. They would give us money if we did this." The money was equal to about two hundred dollars, which was a lot of money—if anyone were ever really paid it.

"Our families need this money, and we had to protect them."

So that is how it was with them. We left the beaten boy with the villagers. They would probably not be kind to him. He was fourteen, as I said.

From here we cut deep into Darfur. The fighting here was heavy and we passed thousands of fleeing women and children as we drove toward the fighting.

"You are crazy!" people yelled at us. "The Janjaweed are everywhere over there. You must turn around!" I should have told Nick what they were saying, but I think he understood; their frightened faces and gestures needed no translation. Somehow, I had no fear myself. Whatever it was that makes a rebel or a government soldier or a Janjaweed feel like he is already dead anyway and might as well just do his job—it was like that. But I worried for Nick and the cameraman, for Nick's woman assistant, and for our driver. For them I had to be as clever as I could not to get them killed.

We reached an abandoned NGO health clinic. Beyond it lay a grassy flat over which people now ran toward us. A village just through the trees was under attack and they were running in panic past us, stopping, remarkably, to urge us to escape with them. Next to the clinic, under plastic shade tarps, were wounded people from a prior attack who had been left behind when the clinic was abandoned moments earlier. Some of those fleeing were wounded, or held their wounded children in their arms. They screamed for medical help that was no longer there. The most seriously injured just sat or lay down around the clinic, some crying or moaning from pain or despair, waiting to die from their injuries or be killed by the approaching Janjaweed. Yet they looked at us and felt concern for us and told us to run while we could.

Nick Kristof, of course, got out his notepad and started calmly interviewing these people. Madness is the business and the method of a war reporter. I breathed deeply and knelt to translate. *This man was shot by his longtime friend and neighbor, an Arab man who had been instructed to collect the gun of this man. When he refused, his friend shot him.*

The gunshots and shouting were getting closer every few seconds. "Nick, we should leave now," I said between every few phrases of translation.

"Just a few more questions," he replied, bouncing from one wounded person to another. I could see some Janjaweed assembling among the trees, waiting for their other

"A very good time to leave," I said again.

"One more quick one," Nick said, flipping the page of his small notebook to make space for the next interview.

Okay, I said to myself, *this is my work*. I translated as the birds in the trees around us now flew away.

The last man interviewed was not wounded, but was huddled there with two small children. He said he was waiting there, hoping that his wife and his other child were alive. She had fallen up ahead. Another man had run to help her, but he had fallen, too.

"Let's go up there," Nick said to me.

Okay. *This is my job*. We crawled in the grass to the woman. She was dead. The man who went to help her was dead. It was hard to look at them so close.

Nick said that maybe we should get going. He was such a worrier.

As we moved low and quickly past the poor waiting husband, I told him to leave now, that there was no help for his wife and child.

After one last glance at these kindly but doomed people we were running for the Land Cruiser, zigzagging and calling to the cameraman and the woman assistant to jump in the open doors, hearing the gunfire now in the open as we sped faster and faster from the meadow. A child sitting in the grass stopped crying and waved good-bye to us.

We pushed through very deep sand, sometimes with the wheels spinning. "Drive perfectly," I said to the driver. There was no room now for one wrong downshift. We got stuck for several seconds but he calmed down and drove us out. He was too nervous to be driving, but he was in the driver's seat.

We cut through a thick jungle where the Janjaweed lived with their families. This would not be where they would fight if they could help it. Yet here we got stuck very deeply. The young Arab children, maybe one or two years too young to fight, started running over to us.

Like Mr. Thoreau said, when a dog runs at you, whistle. I jumped out of the vehicle and yelled for the boys to come faster, faster, and help! I am your uncle. Help us push this vehicle! They came in a mob and helped us. I knew their brothers and fathers could be moments away. Chug, chug, chug, and we were free and moving very fast toward Chad.

We made it back to Adre, all very tense and tired. Ann and Nick shared their stories. I brought out some Johnnie Walker, which is part of what is done after such a day. I looked at them a lot as they talked. Unlike us, these people did not have to be here. *Cheers to these people*, I said to myself as I washed out my heart for the day, thinking of the child who waved to us from the grass.