

# The Sahel

*Darfur, Western Sudan, Africa, not too long ago ...*

*A brutal, sun-bleached land - scorched and scarred by UV rays and genocide.*

*Mile upon mile of dust and desert hiding the brittle borders of a war with a front line as nebulous and fleeting as the shifting sands.*

*A bitter and dreadful conflict conjured from the disputes between men who herd and men who farm. A conflict between Arab men and African men. A conflict between men.*

*A conflict between men that has seen women gang-raped, thrown down wells, burned alive.... a conflict between men that has seen children hurled into vats of boiling water as their mothers are forced to look on...*



*I am Paula Lopez, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, feminist, atheist and famous for bringing the World's attention to the atrocities perpetrated on the women of Darfur by the Sudanese militia.*

*Crossing the Chad - Sudan border I was captured by pro-government guerrillas -*

*grinning teenagers wearing dreadlocks, magical amulets and Kalashnikovs – and charged with “spying and publishing false news.”*

*I was detained in a dilapidated police station jail along with other women whose “crimes” were even more doubtful than my own.*

*I was there for three weeks - twenty one days – would it make a better story to say it felt like twenty one weeks or months or years... Or a lifetime? I don't know – but it didn't – it felt like twenty one days and I remember every last second of them.*

*I remember Fatma. She was about my age. They beat her with sticks. They beat her for days and I never heard her cry out—her only sound was a constant mumbling—a prayer, a protection, a curse—I don't know. And then one day the mumbling stopped and she simply died*

*I remember Nazir. He showed me once and for all that human beings are not constant creatures. He would sometimes bring me food and talk whilst I ate. He was educated and spoke of one day going to the United States or Europe and becoming a doctor. Other days he tied a sink chain round my neck, wired it to a hand-generator and watched impassively as I pissed in my pants and freely swore that my mother was a “bitch fucking whore.”*



*I remember Raoul. He was South African and was paid for concerning himself with the troubles of Sudan. His eyes burned with the need for revenge – a terrible revenge upon the whole world for merely being born...right now I don't want to remember anymore about Raoul...*

*These Sandmen... these sandflies brutalized me and badly frightened me but it took until the night that they brought a web-cam and a boning knife into the interrogation*

*room for me to feel the boiling panic of absolute terror.*

*I was an aspiring writer, a small-caliber journalist now about to become truly world famous only for the last few utterly atrocious moments of my life – a life to be snuffed out for the wretched glory of misogynist zealots embroiled in a pitiful squabble over the rights of water, grass and sand, and who objected to the indignation and horror of wealthier nations to that carnage.*

*In what I thought were going to be my final moments I resolved not to show these bastards the abject fear that was storming through my soul... but as they prepared for it, a barely audible babble escaped my lips, and I knew I was praying – even then the hypocrisy of desperation was not lost on me – I was praying for a miracle to a God that I didn't believe in.*



*He came silently out of nowhere and faster than I could follow... My tormentors – Fatma's murderers – all died. They died wearing expressions of shocked disbelief – their final thoughts registering the terrible and irreconcilable fact that the universe actually did not operate according to the tenets that they so believed in. I felt little compassion...*

*We ran from that place along with three others. He had transport waiting and rapidly we were distanced from immediate danger.*

*He told me he was called Captain Hawke and that he commanded a special operations unit that had been contracted to "work" in the area – exactly what that work entailed and who it was for he didn't volunteer and I didn't ask.*

*I realized that perhaps I was not quite the unknown reporter that I'd believed myself to be and that somebody somewhere of influence had missed me – unlike the poor women of Darfur I had been incarcerated with. The accident of my nationality – despite a shared gender and similar skin-tone to my fellow abductees – was probably the only reason we'd got out alive. All of us except Fatma.*



*Later in the village, seeing Hawke communicate wordlessly with the orphan boy and somehow temper the anguish and blazing rage that filled the boy's eyes, made me wonder at the soldier's own past... what had he borne witness to at such a tender age that he could silently empathise with the grief-stricken child and tell him "I know?"*

*I got out through Chad, and the publication of my experiences once back home and my campaigning on behalf of the horrific ordeals faced by the Darfurian women have since propelled me to international fame.*

*I never saw Hawke again or heard more about his unit and I resisted the investigative reporter's urge to track him down.*

*I think that this was partly to do with an inexpressible gratitude for my life, and partly because I wanted him to remain as an ideal in my mind – he had appeared in my darkest hour in response to a prayer – a human being, specifically a man, appearing in the guise of what (to a religious mind) would have seemed like Divine intervention.*



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