

A REFUGEE CRISIS

By Callan Wink



Audio: *Callan Wink reads.*

In the afternoon, I cross-country ski up a logging road not far out of town. We haven't had any new snow for a week, and the trail is a hardened icy crust, spackled frequently with brown streaks of runny, frozen dog shit. A local dogsledding operation frequents this trail. Tourists staying at the hot-springs resort down the valley get decked out in mukluks and parkas and tool around under the watchful eye of the head musher. I don't know this man personally, but I've heard that he competed in the Iditarod several times, and finished quite well. I can only imagine the cognitive dissonance that results from running dogs under the northern lights on the frozen Yukon and then returning here to haul overweight Texans up and down logging roads at half-hour intervals. I wonder if the dogs themselves have any thoughts on the nature of their cargo. I see them occasionally, lunging in their harnesses, tongues lolling. Once, I came around the corner, and there'd been some kind of wreck, sled turned over, the bearded musher helping his client to her feet, peroxide-blond hair askew under the fur-rimmed ruff of her parka. The dogs were all resting patiently on their haunches, ears back, with wry grins on their lean faces.

No dogs today, though, just me, crunching up the old snow through the pines, trying to work up a sweat. I get to where the road flattens out and there's a small overlook from which you can see the thin silver ribbon of the river splitting the valley, and the scattered black forms of cattle grazing the wind-raked pastures. This is the turnaround point, and after a moment spent catching my breath I start the descent, gathering speed instantly, my skis chattering over the grooves of a snowmobile track. The trunks of the lodgepoles are a gray blur, and I focus on keeping my weight over my heels, knees slightly bent, dragging my poles in an attempt to slow myself down. Down the last hill to my truck, I'm flying. There's a slight turn in the trail before the parking lot; I've

crashed and burned here before, but today my luck holds out. I briefly wobble up on one ski but then regain my balance and career into the trailhead, coasting all the way to my tailgate, cheeks stinging from the rush of wind and the cold.

When I get home, M is lying on my couch. Her large green pack is next to the door. She's wearing black jeans, a black leather jacket, a black scarf around her neck, black boots that are propped up on the arm of the couch. I haven't seen her in more than a year, and, for lack of a better word, she looks European.

"I let myself in," she says. "I hope that's O.K. The key is still under the mat." She sounds tired and I can smell cigarette smoke on her clothes. I ask her how the travel went and she runs through a list of places and planes. From Serbia to Budapest to Frankfurt to Salt Lake, and finally to Bozeman.

"Serbia?" I say. "I thought you were in Athens."

"I was. But then I moved to Serbia. The camps there are just—no one ever hears about them. Really bad. People are trying to get across to Hungary and the military is beating them and even shooting at them sometimes. Hungary is in the E.U., remember? And yet they're committing atrocities." One of her booted feet is knocking against the other one and she sits up suddenly. "Is it O.K. if I smoke in here? I'll blow it out the window."

While she smokes I scramble her some eggs. She sits at my kitchen table and pushes the eggs around on her plate and then comes to perch on my lap. Her ass is bony, the points of it digging into my leg. After a while I carry her to the bed and she clings to my neck. I undress her and her skin is sallow, her breasts flaccid and goosefleshed. I can smell her and I ask if she'd like to take a shower, but she shakes her head. And so we fuck, rather coolly, I think, compared with how I remember it being with her. I'm not squeamish, but I really wish she'd showered. Maybe that's shallow of me. Here she is, a woman who's been volunteering in refugee camps for more than a year, who is currently undergoing an unfortunate life experience, and I'm hung up on bourgeois standards of personal hygiene.

I finish and roll away and I lie next to her, breathing hard, the midwinter light already growing dim and stale in the room. "Well, at least we don't have to worry about birth control," she says and gives a laugh that turns into a cough. She smokes another

cigarette, and although she makes a slight effort to blow the smoke out the window, it's not very effective. She finally gets up to use the bathroom and the water runs in the shower for a very long time. I hear noises from behind the closed door that I think are muffled sobs. I can smell her on me, her cigarettes and her unwashed body, and I hope she doesn't use all the hot water. I wonder exactly how long these procedures take, if there will be a lot of crying in the days to come, and where she'll go when it's all said and done.

Later, she tells me about the guy. He's just a boy, really, nineteen years old, from Raqqa. She is only twenty-three, although at the moment she looks about forty. She's wearing one of my T-shirts, reclining in my bed with her hair wet and pulled back, a mug of tea in her cupped hands.

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“Did you tell him?” I ask, and she looks at me like I'm stupid. “Of course not.” She turns her head and her eyes close and she smiles as if she's got an image of him tacked up behind her eyelids. “He's beautiful,” she says. “So damn beautiful. He and his older brother have travelled such a long way. Seen things I don't even want to imagine.

Parents both dead. He's been beaten three times since I've known him, trying to cross. The border guards have clubs, and one night he got his eyebrow split and I cleaned it out for him. I put those butterfly bandages on it to close up the wound and he had his head in my lap. He needed stitches probably, but all we had were the bandages, and that's how it began. His head in my lap like that." She puts a hand up. "I know, I know. Don't even get started on the ethical dilemma here. I was fucking him and at the same time I was also in charge of bringing him his food. I kept it a secret from everyone. We had to do the most ridiculous things to get together."

"I'm not judging you at all," I say. "You were drawn together by trauma. People are people."

"Some people are people. Some people are monsters. Most just seem casually vacant and can't be bothered to care. If more people only knew what was going on over there." She shakes her head, puts her mug down, and turns her back to me, pulling the sheets up over her head. "It's just so unfair," she says. "All of it."

When we sleep I try to put my arm around her, but after a while she shrugs out from underneath and moves away from me. Truthfully, I don't care much, putting an arm around her just seems like something I should do, the correct gesture for the moment. During sex, I kissed her only once, and her lips didn't part even slightly, and I could read that message easily enough. I hadn't really wanted to kiss her anyway, but I was born in the Midwest, and they teach us there to try to be good people, and to kiss during sex. Twenty years ago I left that place, but it seems as though at least some of the lessons stuck.

I generally like to rise at a decent time and make coffee. Then I sit at my writing desk for a couple of hours, staring out the window, my French press going cold next to my laptop. After my self-imposed penance/work period is over, I shut my computer and get some exercise.

This morning, I don't even bother to open the computer. She's still burrowed under the covers. Out in my living room, her green bag has vomited socks and bras and shirts and leggings all over the rug. Work seems impossible, and so, without any coffee, I put on my running clothes and head out.

It's a still morning, cold air spiking my lungs. I head through the park toward the river path for my customary easy-day loop. I've done interviews in which I talk about running and how it factors into my "process." "There's something about running," I said once. "The body is engaged, thus your mind is free to wander in interesting ways. I run and I consider problems I'm having with whatever I'm working on, and sometimes I end up having breakthroughs on difficult plot points."

At the moment, I'm writing a story about a writer. This is something I would have scoffed at not long ago. Writers writing about writers—the sort of navel-gazing drivel that I regarded with contempt while I was blithely finishing my first book. It was full of characters doing manual labor, living lives of gritty desperation. But at this point I'm several years removed from my initial success, and it's been even longer than that since I've done manual labor. However desperate I still may be, to continue flogging this territory seems a bit pathetic, not to mention dishonest. Honesty is something I've been thinking about a lot. How to achieve it in my writing, but also how to achieve it in my life. Increasingly, it seems to me that fiction is the most shameless genre. It makes no attempt to avert its lying face. In fact, it does the opposite—putting its dishonesty on display and trying to make a virtue out of it. Every morning at the keyboard, I lie, cheat, and steal, and then, after I close the computer, I go about my day disingenuously presenting myself to the friends and lovers whose lives I've plundered for my own ends.

I run and I think about honesty. I think about my character—a writer who is having a hard time writing—and I have absolutely zero breakthroughs. My feet pound the gravel along the river path, and this sets off the mergansers at the water's edge, a thrashing mass of windmilling legs and pumping wings. I run under the shadow of the mountains, the same mountains, incidentally, that I described in a hundred lyrical ways in my first book but now can't seem to conceive of as anything other than exactly what they are—mountains. Indifferent piles of rock covered in snow.

When I return home, M is still in bed. She has her computer on her stomach and is watching what sounds like a Bollywood movie. She smiles at me and asks me if it's O.K. if she just stays in bed all day, because it's about all she can handle right now. I tell her of course. She should make herself at home.

While I'm in the shower, I can hear her laugh at something in her movie, and maybe it's just the way the sound is coming through the closed door, over the rush of the

water, but it occurs to me that she is a woman whose laugh sounds like a cry and whose cry sounds a bit like a laugh. No doubt when I get around to writing about her this will be a detail I'll trot out to reveal something ill-defined but important about her character.

In the evening, she is in my kitchen wearing the same black jeans and black tank top as the day before. She's turned my thermostat up higher than I like it, and the apartment is close and hot. She is stirring a pot on the stovetop and the place smells of curry.

"I went to the store," she says. "I was out of tobacco, and I wanted to make you dinner. I wandered around in there forever. So many aisles. It all seems so foreign to me, the variety. I ended up getting the same stuff I'd get when I was working in the camps. Potatoes, carrots, onions, lentils, curry powder. I splurged and got some chicken. Something as simple as getting chicken feels like a splurge to me now. Does that make sense?"

"Sure," I say. "That makes sense. I read the other day that when people are confronted with more choices, in almost any avenue of life, they report feeling less happy, on average."

She stirs the contents of the pot and her lips tighten. "And yet there are thousands upon thousands of people stuck in cesspools in Serbia and Greece who have sacrificed everything for the chance to suffer from an overabundance of options. People are dying for choices, and we're here complaining about how many of them we have." She bangs the spoon on the side of the pan. "This stuff is done if you're hungry."

I pour two glasses of wine and we sit across from each other. The bowls of curry in front of us are steaming. "This is good," I say. "I never think to make curry when I'm cooking for myself. I don't even really know how to go about it, actually."

She shrugs, already pouring herself more wine.

"I have this thing with curry," I say. "I like the way it tastes, don't get me wrong, but the smell of it really lingers in a room, you know?"

She nods but clearly she's not listening. Her phone has buzzed and she's frowning, scrolling with her forefinger, reading. She groans and stabs her fork into her bowl, spearing a carrot chunk. She holds it up and blows on it and then plops it back down without eating it, pushing the bowl away.

"What is it?" I say.

She's at the window now, rolling a cigarette, the small white Rizla filter already between her lips as she works the paper and the loose tobacco. "It was an e-mail from a girl I worked with over there. Some of the boys tried to cross again last night, and the fucking Hungarians beat the shit out of them. They have dogs now, and a few of the guys got bitten. He didn't go with them this time but some of my other friends did. Apparently my little buddy Malik got his leg torn up. He's fifteen but he's so skinny he looks like he's about twelve. He could be my little brother. They set a German shepherd loose on him. It's just—it's criminal. And," she says, blowing a long stream of smoke, "the ridiculous thing is that I can leave. Me, with the passport I have, I can pack up and go whenever I want, but these kids have to stay there indefinitely, in limbo." She puts an index finger into the soft roll of her belly. "I've got this thing, growing here, and the guy who put it there can't leave. But me? I can go wherever I want, whenever I want. And for what reason? Aren't we all born on the earth the same way? Why can I—and his never-to-be-realized offspring—come and go, and he can't?"

"I'm sorry to hear about your friend," I say. She shrugs and inhales so hard I can hear the tobacco crackle from across the room. She's silent and, because we don't actually know each other well enough to endure this for long, I say, "Smelling curry always makes me think about all the shitty hotel rooms I've ever stayed in. You ever notice that?"

"Not really."

"I guess you haven't stayed in as many janky hotels as I have, then. When I was a kid, we'd go on these family road trips, and we were always broke. Five of us to a room. Two beds and a cot if they didn't charge extra. Me on the floor if they did. My sisters always got the bed my parents didn't use."

She laughs and then coughs. Flicks her butt hard out the window. “I’ve basically been living in a tent for a year. There were times I would have killed for a Motel 6.”

I think this response is beside the point, but I don’t say anything. We drink the rest of the wine and when we’re in the middle of having sex she stops and rolls over with her back to me. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m different now from when you knew me before. It’s like there’s something dead inside me.”

The room is dark and I can smell curry on the sheets, and the irony in her statement has a devouring echo that threatens to swallow the bed and all its inhabitants.

In the morning, I’m at my desk and I can hear her in the bedroom, talking on the phone. There is something strange in the inflection of her voice. She’s speaking English but giving certain syllables a foreign lilt, as if she were speaking some other language, or, maybe more accurately, as if she weren’t a native English speaker, which of course she is. This seems like some sort of affectation, and it annoys me. She releases her near-hysterical, skittering laugh and I close the computer and flee to the coffee shop.

After working, I meet my friend Wells at the Livingston Peak trailhead and we run his dogs in the big expanse of stiff yellow grass and sage. We plod along, weaving around the occasional pocket of wind-packed snow. Wells has a bright-red Stormy Kromer hat pulled down over his ears, and his dogs, setters, range out in front of us, zigzagging, negotiating a scent stream we humanoids can only guess at. I hunch my shoulders and jam my hands down in my Carhartt pockets, wishing I’d remembered to bring gloves.

Wells is older than me, in his early sixties, but still wiry. This fall, he field-dressed, hauled out, and processed three elk. One for him, one for his grown son, and one technically poached with a tag I bought. Last year, I saw Wells get into a drunken fistfight at the Murray Bar. As you grow up and go on to get your graduate degree among polite society, you learn that your heroes should be men of temperance and wisdom and equanimity, or, better yet, women. Wells is not my hero, but he has the whiff of legend about him.

“What’s new?” I say.

“Oh, not much,” he says. “Feeding the woodstove. Doing some inside jobs. How about you?” I take a deep breath through my nose. There’s not much to smell in a winter pasture. There actually is, of course, I just can’t register it, and I think for the millionth time that, at least on an olfactory level, a dog’s life is infinitely more interesting than mine. “I might need to get out of here for a while,” I say. “There’s absolutely nothing going on.”

“Aren’t you just wrestling the verb? You think you’re going to be able to do that better somewhere else?”

“At the moment, I’m writing a story about a writer having a hard time writing.”

Wells raises an eyebrow at me and doesn’t say anything. Spits a brown rope of tobacco juice into the snow.

“It’s better than it sounds, I think.”

“Your area of expertise, not mine.” He removes a can of Skoal from his jeans, thwacks it a few times against his thigh, and repacks his lip.

“I know you never finished reading it, but in my first book I described the moon approximately thirty different times. Recently, I’ve been getting to certain points, and I know I need to insert some nice descriptions, but instead of inserting the nice descriptions I just drop a placeholder in, like *Cold. Trees. Mountains. Grass. Wind. Clouds. Shadows.* And then I move on.”

“Maybe you’re evolving as a writer.”

“Or devolving. I open the throttle on the poignant descriptions of the moon and the magazines come calling. This current stuff? Not so much.”

“Maybe you’re just ahead of your time.”

“That’s probably it. Unappreciated genius. Let’s go get a beer.”

The dogs are circling our legs now, and I rub them behind their ears in turn as we head back to our vehicles.

I heard this famous writer say one time that the art of the short story is the art of the transition. This struck me as correct, and also got me thinking that maybe on some level the whole endeavor is just a scam. Insinuate and intone up to the very edge of sense-making, and then at the last moment cut away before any real definitive conclusion or lack of conclusion can be inferred. I've got this thing I do: if I'm in a paragraph and I'm having a hard time figuring out where to go, I just end it as quickly as I can. I've found that, if nothing else, this tactic sets a certain tone.

She has the Bollywood movie on again, and after a while I go in and ask her if she'd mind putting her headphones on, because I'm trying to write. She's propped up in bed with all the pillows behind her. Her laptop is next to her, and she has a crochet hook and is turning a skein of chunky gray yarn into a scarf. "Oh, shit, of course," she says. "I'm sorry. I know you're trying to work. I don't want to interrupt."

"It's no big deal," I say. "It's fine, really."

"It's very nice of you to let me stay. I just want to thank you. I mean, I realize I'm not doing a very good job of putting out right now, and that's probably pretty annoying for you, because up until this point that has mostly been the basis of our relationship."

"Really, it's O.K. I don't need you to put out."

"I'm going in tomorrow, by the way. I got an appointment. They're going to vacuum the thing right up, or cut it out, or whatever they actually do."

"O.K. Do you need a ride, or can I help you out with anything?"

She shakes her head. "I've got it covered," she says. "Thanks, though."

That night it's more curry. She turns up the radio in the kitchen. It's the reggae show on the college station out of Bozeman, and she's dancing around a little, in her socks, in front of the stove. I have a bottle of decent whiskey and I pour us juice glasses full and we toast to the procedure, making a show of being irreverent. I, for one, am feeling like maybe we are trying just a bit too hard, but at the same time I'm feeling like it's her party, and her body, and her sense of humor. So who am I to say?

M mostly drinks and smokes her dinner. She gets out her phone and shows me pictures of her friends in the camps. Her lover mugging with a friend, both of them in flat-brim New York Yankees caps, looking for all the world like a couple of bros messing around on campus, except, of course, for the patchwork of tents and laundry and water jugs in the background.

“Were you taking photos over there?” I ask. “I mean, with your real camera? Last time we talked, you said you were working on a project, documenting what was going on. I thought that was a really good idea.”

“I was taking some for a while. But then it started to feel intrusive. Like I was taking pictures of my family members when they were at their most vulnerable. I ended up putting the camera away. But that reminds me—remember when you said you might write something about it? I have enough pictures for that. If you wrote something, I could give you the images. I could give you contact info for people to interview and whatever you need. We could work together on it.”

“Maybe,” I say. “Are you done with that bowl?” I head to the kitchen with the dinner dishes, and after a while she comes to stand on the threshold, leaning against the doorjamb, whiskey glass in hand. “Well, what about it?” she says.

“What about what?”

“Are you interested in writing something?”

I’m scrubbing the curry pan. There’s a layer of burned potatoes that might have to soak overnight. “Maybe *you* should try to write something,” I say. “You’re the one with all the experiences there, not me. I can read it and give you some feedback.”

“I’m not a writer. Remember last year, when I was still in Greece? You said you wanted to come over to visit me and see what was going on there. To see me, you said, but also to see about doing an article. You said you had some connections and you might be able to get it in the *New York Times*, or something like that. Why didn’t you ever come?”

“I got busy. I couldn’t just drop everything and come to Greece. I never said I had connections at the *New York Times*.”

“Whatever. Just be honest with me. Really, at this point that’s all I care about. Did you tell me you wanted to come to Greece and write something about what’s going on there because you were actually considering doing it? Or were you just feeding me bullshit because you were fucking me?”

“I wasn’t just feeding you bullshit. I thought about it.”

“Then why didn’t you come?”

The dishes are done now, and I’m drying my hands on a towel. “I guess it’s not what I do,” I say. “I’m not that kind of writer.”

She snorts at this and finishes her whiskey. She heads for the bedroom and before she shuts the door she says, over her shoulder, “Remind me again, because I forgot. What kind of writer are you?”

She’s on one side of the bed, curled up with her back to me, and I’m on the other, facing away from her. I know she’s not sleeping, so I say, “Just to play devil’s advocate. What if you went through with it? You could marry him, right? Wouldn’t that give him a fast track to being here?”

The sheets rustle as she turns over. “I thought about it,” she says. “Seriously. I could change his life, just like that. Chop vegetables in a refugee camp for a year, and what good am I doing? But if I get knocked up with a refugee’s baby and actually have it, and get him out of there somehow—that’s enacting some actual change, on an individual level, at least. And that really pisses me off. It’s part of the bullshit of being a woman. I can do any number of things, but none will ever be as valued in the eyes of the world as the stupid magic trick I can pull with my pussy. I knew we weren’t being as careful as we should, but, as dumb as it sounds, I guess I thought that I was just being so awful to my body, and I was so stressed out, that there was no way I would ever get pregnant. Occasionally, I would tell him we needed to be more careful, and one time he said, ‘It’s no problem. If you get pregnant, you just eat a lot of spicy food and that takes care of it.’ I mean—that’s what I mean. The cultural divide is just a chasm. Could you imagine him here, in this sea of whiteness?”

“What are you going to do when this is over? Go back to the camps?”

“I might. I haven’t decided. My parents want me to go back to school. I might go work for an N.G.O. or something.”

“Are you going to see them?”

“My parents? Yes. When this is taken care of I’ll go. I just couldn’t deal with my mother with this going on. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What could I say to make you care about the refugee crisis? I mean, is there anything I can say, or show you, that would awaken your social consciousness? Just be honest. You don’t care about what’s happening to these people, do you? When it comes down to it, you don’t give a shit, because all you care about is your own life.”

“You can’t expect everyone to be as concerned about it as you are. I’m just trying to get by. Trying to do my thing. Trying to write.”

She’s silent for a few moments, and then laughs softly. “In this day and age, what else could you possibly be writing about? I mean, *really*.”

After her appointment, as far as I can tell, she doesn’t leave the apartment for four days. I buy her six assorted pints of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and a bottle of mid-range bourbon and try to be gone most of the time.

One night, the snow starts coming in large feathery clumps, and in the morning I go out and broom a foot of it from the windshield of my truck. It’s still early, and the plows haven’t run yet, and I drive slowly down the valley, coffee mug steaming in my hand. The mountains flank the river, and the world is a monochromatic white that thankfully needs no further description. I put the truck in four low and grind up the Mill Creek road, following a single set of tracks. The parking lot is empty except for the dogsled man’s big red Dodge and its custom-fabricated topper with ventilated compartments. I get suited up and kick down the trail, the tips of my skis parting the white blanket of powder, the sun coming out between the pines. A jay lands on a snow-laden bough, sending loose a ghost of crystalline fog that melts on my face as I ski through it.

At my customary turnaround spot, the dogsled man is there with his team sitting in their harnesses, occasionally whining, the clouds of their breath visible in the air. The musher is reclining with his back against the handles of his sled, facing the overlook, a thermos in his gloved hand. He sees me coming and raises his hand in salute. His thick beard is clotted with ice at the tips. He is alone, apparently with no paying customers. I coast to a stop. "Howdy," he says. "Nice morning, eh?"

I agree that it is. The dogs become agitated at the sound of our voices, and he snaps a command and they sit, tails churning the snow. "They're not used to me just sitting here like this," he says. "A morning this perfect, and all they want is to run. A dog doesn't give a damn about enjoying the view with a nice cup of coffee."

I've never spoken to this man before, and I take the opportunity to ask a question I've long thought about. "I ski here a fair amount," I say. "And I see you and your dogs a lot. I've always wondered, what do you feed them? I ask because I've run over a decent amount of their shit over the years, and it seems uniquely foul. I mean, it's just completely rank, to be honest. Not like any other dog shit I've ever smelled."

The musher laughs long and loud at this, and the dogs get restless until he shouts at them once more. "I got this deal with a mink farm over in Three Forks. They raise minks for the fur, of course, but after they've skinned them out they have all these carcasses. Not a damn thing you can do with a mink carcass, really, but the dogs like them just fine. I supplement with other things, but we go through a lot of mink, for sure."

"Mink," I say. "I guess that explains it."

"Yeah, a mink is a nasty little critter. Cousin to the skunk. They have a certain aroma. I don't smell it anymore, personally. Sorry about all the shit. I clean it up in the parking lot but it's not like I can stop every time they let loose on the fly."

"No, of course not. Not that big of a deal. You by yourself today?"

He nods. "No bookings, for some reason, but it was too beautiful this morning to just sit around. All winter I dream about a day off, and then one comes along and what do I do? Pretty much the same thing I'd be doing if I were working. That shows how smart I am, I guess."

I wipe my runny nose and consider this. The barren, serrated expanse of the Absaroka Range is spread out in front of us. “I heard it said once that if a man gets the right job he never works a day in his life.”

The musher looks at me sidelong, one eye squinted up. “And what do you do?”

“I’m a writer, mostly.”

“Interesting. Can you make a living at that?”

“To be honest, the jury is still out. What does it really mean to *make a living*, anyway?”

“What does it mean?” he says, rubbing his bearded chin. “It means dog food.” He shakes his head. “I guess that’s one of the good things about having thirty-three animals to look after. They have to eat on the regular, and that kind of keeps your head out of your ass.”

When I get home the place feels different, and I immediately know that M is gone. The bed has been made, the kitchen counters wiped clean. There is a note on my writing desk. She’s torn a page from a notebook I keep next to my computer, the one I sometimes scribble ideas on. Unfortunately, my most recent scribbled ideas were roughly these:

M speaks English like she has an accent while on the phone with her refugee friends. Why do I find this so annoying?

White-savior complex?

Most refugees are young males, would she be as gung ho if they were young females?

M’s parents’ wealth, never had to work, volunteering=status for rich kid?

Volunteering in a refugee camp the
new gap-year trend? Like
backpacking through Europe used
to be?

Write screenplay where she has the
refugee's kid and raises it in
Montana?

Research how to write a
screenplay.

M's note is brief and to the point, and it is clear that she has read my scribbled ideas. And, while I'd cleverly shortened her name to M, it was not enough to disguise the fact that I was scribbling about her.

She tells me that volunteering in the refugee camps was the most difficult and rewarding thing she's ever done. She can't help the fact that her parents are wealthy, just as I can't help it that mine weren't. She's discovered a passion within herself to help other people, and this is obviously something I don't understand. She feels sorry for me, because I'm stuck in my small world, too scared to confront the great problems of our time. She says that living in the camps has awakened her passion, and she simply can't be with someone who doesn't have a similar degree of passion, and she hopes, for my sake, that eventually I discover something in my life that I can be passionate about.

I throw her note away and give my apartment a thorough cleaning to exorcise the lingering cigarette-curry ghosts. Mostly I'm glad to have my space back. In the coming days, I resume my routine of writing in the mornings, skiing or running in the afternoons. Spring is still a long way off, but occasionally a chinook blows down the valley and the air warms, patches of dead grass showing through in the pastures, chinks in winter's armor.

A few weeks later M texts me: "Not that you probably care, but he got to Germany. He's staying with a family friend there and he is looking for a job. I'm one happy white savior."

At this point, I haven't spoken to her in months, but I always think of her when I read the news about the situation over there. The statistics. The conditions. The boats sinking. The border fights. The beatings. The rhetoric. The rising tide of nationalism.

I know that when I told her I might write something about the refugee crisis this is not what she had in mind, but I'm starting to think that in every fiction writer's chest is hung a coward's heart.

Or maybe that's just me.

Sorry, M. ♦

Callan Wink lives in Livingston, Montana, where he is a fly-fishing guide on the Yellowstone River. His short-story collection "Dog Run Moon" was published in 2016 and a novel, "August," will appear next year. [Read more »](#)

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