

Collateral Damage by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The Man Who Teaches War to Children sits in my office. He is thin and frail, his hair prematurely white. He hunches over, as if he is a child himself, his arms wrapped around his stomach in a grim parody of a hug.

I watch him through the camera installed in the Monet on my inside wall. The camera is tiny, but it is powerful. It records everything on the eastern side of my waiting room.

Today, everything on the eastern side is a couch, two end tables, two matching lamps, and the man the government says I must evaluate, the man whose job rests in my hands.

His job is a difficult and specialized one. He supervises children at war zones. Usually, a child must spend two years studying war. The children go to famous battles and then visit their aftermaths. They use specialized booths unavailable to the average time traveler -- the children must be able to feel the dirt in the air, touch the blood, smell the rot.

In this way, and only in this way, do we prevent our people from going to war.

The Man Who Teaches War to Children has a name. It is Vincent Margolis. I have trouble using that name with him -- in his case, the job is so much greater than any individual that it is nearly impossible to think of him as a person.

I must, of course. It is my assignment in this instance.

I have a hardcopy file of Margolis's records on my desk, open to the battery of tests he has already taken. On my personal computer, I keep his digital file.

The digital file has some footage of previous trips the man has taken; it also has school and medical records, daily surveillance tapes for the past year, and statements taken from friends and relatives.

I have not examined much of this at all. I prefer my first impression to be untainted by the opinions of others. The hardcopy file before me has all that I must study before this meeting: the man's name (cited above), his age (an astonishing fifty-five -- I would have thought him several decades older), and the years of his employment.

I usually do not spend so much pretime making notes, but I must admit -- for the record -- that I am intrigued by this client and this case. Try as I might, I cannot set these feelings aside.

I am forty-five, too old to have experienced the War Classes. I have no children, so I am not privy to the Parents' Handbook on handling the Child at War Seminar. I also have no nieces, nephews, or siblings, so I have not had the privilege of sharing this information with family.

Instead, I have only the knowledge that comes from general reading -- news reports, popular analysis, cultural reference -- and peripheral scientific study, since so much of my profession was involved in establishing this program in the first place.

Should I believe that this unusual interest disqualifies me from making a dispassionate analysis of Mr. Margolis, I shall step aside immediately.

At the moment, however, I do not believe my interest is much more than healthy curiosity.

I shall proceed as if the curiosity does not exist.

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At precisely two P.M., my computerized secretary announces Mr. Margolis's appointment and his presence. My door unlocks and swings open.

Mr. Margolis looks up nervously. I see this on the small screen to the side of my desk. I hit a single button, and the screen folds up, receding as Mr. Margolis enters.

He is taller than I expect, and he does not hunch as he walks. He is wearing a suit that looks pressed and clean. When he sees me, he nods. I stand, step around my desk, and extend my hand.

His dark eyes take me in -- my upswept hair, my own carefully tailored suit, and the impractical high heels that are, in addition to being an indulgence, a sign of my wealth.

Usually my clients like the signs of my success. I have a sense that Mr. Margolis does not approve. Nothing has changed in his face, yet something in his posture, something subtle, has given me this impression. Perhaps it is the hesitation he makes before taking my hand.

He does not shake it. Instead, he grasps it loosely, then lets go -- the minimum he must do to maintain polite custom. Then he folds his rangy body into the patient's chair and rests his elbows on his thighs, ignoring the arm rests. His feet remain flat on my floor -- he does not cross his legs or hunch as he had in the waiting room. He is not at ease, but he is not defensive either.

"Mr. Margolis," I say, "do you understand why you are here?"

He nods.

"Would you care to explain the reason to me?" I have learned, in my years doing forensic psychology, to have the patient be as clear as possible. Not so much for the patient's sake -- since my job in this instance is not to heal -- but for the sake of the future court case. If I assume that Mr. Margolis understands based on his nod, and it is clear from later testimony that he does not, then I am the one who is discredited, not him.

"The Dobsons have accused me of inappropriately touching their daughter." His voice is quiet, raspy, like the voice of a man with a sore throat or a man about to cry. His eyes are dry, and he is clearly not ill. His voice has been irritated, damaged, perhaps, in some other way.

"And are you guilty of inappropriate touch in this case?" I ask -- a mere formality, since he will say no the way they all do.

"Yes," he says.

It takes a moment for the word to penetrate. I look up. Our gazes meet for the first time since he examined my clothing.

"You are guilty?" I ask, clarifying.

"Yes," he says softly. "I am."

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I cannot explain the uniqueness of that moment, the absolute shock his admission carries. It is enough to knock the breath from me, to throw me -- for one brief second -- out of my professional persona. I feel

an empathy for him I do not expect. I am not one who believes that fifty-five-year-old men should ever touch a four-year-old child, let alone touch one inappropriately.

And yet there is a sadness in his tone, an understanding of self that comes from years of analysis, of the courage to dig into one's own psyche, recognize the demons, and call them for what they are.

I write on the screenpad before me -- courage -- and the act of creating the word in my own handwriting is enough to bring me back to my work. "Would you like to tell me about the incident?"

"No," he says.

I study him. His face has care lines, and his mouth puckers in the corners as if he has held in his opinion for much too long.

"Mr. Margolis," I say, "you are here for evaluation concerning the incident. I need your side of the case."

He shakes his head. "I did it. Let them fire me."

Ah. It becomes clear now. He feels guilt, remorse, and believes he must be punished. So he will not assist in his own defense.

"I am not the one who makes that judgment, Mr. Margolis," I say, although my account is often the deciding factor in the outcome. "I'm just supposed to make a report on your current state."

He sighs. "I know. They're making me go through the hoops even though I admit what I did. The state doesn't want me to continue working. They just want to avoid a concurrent suit."

"Perhaps we should help them with that," I say.

He shakes his head, and gives me a small smile. The smile is gentle, which surprises me, and a little fond, as if he understands my dilemma, appreciates it, and wishes he could do more.

"I don't think there is any way to avoid it," he says.

"You may be right." I set the stylus next to my screenpad and lean forward. "But what if you're wrong?"

His smile fades, just a little, and he looks at me sideways through those dark eyes. He had been handsome once, before care and time wore his features into the hardness they now had. I wonder why he did not spring for upgrades -- skin firmers, bag removers, hair colors -- things that cost so little, but add so much to one's self esteem.

"I know the rules," he says, "and I broke them. Nothing else should matter."

But it does. For some reason, it does.

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Our session isn't as unproductive as the beginning makes it sound. He will not discuss the incident, except to remind me of his guilt, but the first incident recap is usually unproductive. Most people lie to me or leave out details. Some claim not to remember the incident at all.

Mr. Margolis is happy to tell me of his own childhood -- raised in a two-parent household in a small city, public school education in the days when that was uncommon, barely qualified for college, the joy he felt when he first got his current job.

I try to get Mr. Margolis to discuss what he hates about his job, but he shakes his head. I catch a glimmer in his eye, a moment of true emotion -- the hatred of the work is alive within him -- and I wonder if this hatred is connected to the incident.

But he will not comment, and I am left with only theories, theories I cannot commit to paper because I am without the proper analysis tools. I lack information.

As the session progresses, I ask Mr. Margolis what he likes about his work, and this he answers:

"I like," he says quietly, "the hope it gives."

"Hope?" I ask.

He nods. "Maybe someday the things I've seen...."

His voice trails off, and his eyes light on the Picasso print I have placed behind my desk. I have done so deliberately, knowing that Mr. Margolis would visit me this day. The print is of *Guernica*, Picasso's famous and graphic depiction of a horrible battle in the Spanish Civil War.

I know the painting well -- the prone humans, the large bull-like figure that dominates, the strange cubist depictions suggesting a violence so surreal that it should not exist, and the colors, stark and bare and gray, speaking of ghosts, speaking of loss, speaking of despair.

Mr. Margolis sighs.

"Hope," he says, and wrenches his gaze away from the painting. His eyes, when they meet mine, look even older than they had when he entered the room. "The work gives me hope that we will not create such horrible vistas in the future."

He looks again at *Guernica*, so that I do not miss his point. Just, I suppose, as he has not missed mine.

"We are not creating such vistas now," I say.

If anything, the care lines around his mouth grow deeper. He hunches forward and shakes his head.

"Just because we're rich enough to ignore the rest of the world doesn't mean that human beings aren't murdering each other somewhere in the name of statehood."

His point is true enough. But the First World realizes its obligation to the Second and Third Worlds. We shall prevent war among ourselves for at least a century and then, provided that the technology works for more than three generations, we shall pass our war-prevention techniques on to our less fortunate allies.

"Give it time," I say.

He snorts. "Yeah. Time."

He looks down at his hands. I am not sure what I said to offend him.

"Won't it work that way?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Do we ever know what we're creating when we tamper with the human mind?"

As he does, his head lifts. The care lines are in shadow, giving him even more age than he already has. His gaze meets mine, and it becomes clear that he is not asking a rhetorical question: he expects a response.

My response should be automatic. I would not be a psychologist if I did not believe that we are gaining an understanding of the human mind.

But the intensity of his question disturbs me. "Tamper? Do you believe that your job tampers with the human mind?"

"Believe?" There is a charge behind that word. "Doc, I'm supposed to tamper with impressionable young minds. That's what I do. I teach them what war is really like, what it really means. I show them bloody limbs and destroyed schools and desperate starving people who don't even look human. That's tampering. They used to call it aversion therapy in the bad old days. Remember?"

I remembered studying aversion therapy, but he is wrong. Aversion therapy gave someone too much of something, usually something they loved, until they could take no more, and would therefore want no more.

However, I do not argue with Mr. Margolis. Instead, I see this brief moment as an open door, and I am determined to enter.

"Tampering is a loaded word," I say. "It has negative connotations."

"Do you have a clinical practice, Doc?"

"Are you asking if I have regular therapy patients?" I ask, trying to maintain control of this session, and yet uncertain how my practice links to his ideas of tampering.

"Yeah," he says. "Do you?"

"No," I say.

"Then you might not see it in the next few years. But ten, twenty, thirty years from now, you'll see something no one expected."

"What's that, Mr. Margolis?" I ask.

"The damage that tampering does," he says.

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I have had difficult clients in the past, but none as slippery as Mr. Margolis. I doubt I will be able to trick him into revealing much about himself. I will try, of course, but I know, as soon as this first session ends, that I must do a lot of the leg work myself.

First, I contact the parents of the affected child. I send the form, stating who I am, citing the case and number, and explaining why I need a single interview (chaperoned if they wish) with their child.

Then I request more interviews, with Mr. Margolis's family, his employer, and his co-workers.

Finally, I send the most difficult letter of all, requesting a time visit, a viewing of the incident itself, as recorded on the travel equipment, as required by law.

Usually these things are confidential; often even the courts do not get a viewing. But because I am a psychologist and not a jury, because I need this to make my evaluation complete, and because I am not deciding a case of guilt or innocence, merely attempting to recreate a reticent client's mental state, I have a good chance of being granted a crime scene visit.

Such things, however, take weeks to determine. I have asked for an expedited hearing, based on the deadlines in my case, but I do not hold out any hope. Instead, I do the best with what I am given, and pray it will be enough.

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The child is petite and precocious, her vocabulary large for a four-year-old. She will be five within a month, and she does not seem proud of that, unlike most four-year-olds I know.

Her parents do not want to sit in with her. They trust me, they say, but I know they have accessed my records. They trust me because my record is clean.

The little girl has auburn hair that curls around her face, skin the color of weak tea, and eyes that seem golden in my office's lamplight. Her fingers are covered with expensive rings, and her ears are pierced, but without earrings. She does not wear barrettes in her hair, and it consistently falls across her eyes.

Most of the time, she does not brush it away.

"Hello, honey," I say as I guide her into my office. "What's your name?"

"You know my name," she says, her voice young, her tone not.

I ease her to the same chair that Mr. Margolis used. I have left the Picasso behind my desk. I want to see if the child notices it.

"Tell me anyway," I say.

"I'm Atalia." She slides back in the chair. Her small tennis shoes have no wear pattern on the tread. They are as new as they seem.

Atalia. I give her an extra moment to add a nickname, but of course she does not. She has parents who believed in her individuality from the moment she was conceived; they clearly struggled hard to name her with that individuality in mind.

The parents have already refused the personality and intelligence tests I had hoped to give the girl. Instead, the family provides me with the tests given before her war training began. While the intelligence numbers help -- they change only a little over time -- the personality tests do not. Personality is a combination of factors, some of which can be altered.

To fully understand the seriousness of the Margolis incident, I would have liked to know the effect of his inappropriate touch on this child as measured by tests. But the family will not allow that, believing that Atalia has gone through enough.

"Welcome to my office, Atalia," I say.

"I hate your painting." She speaks with a vehemence that only children can muster.

"Which one?" I ask, even though I know. There are other paintings behind me, some of them original, but her gaze is focused on the Picasso.

"That one." She points. I turn, pretending not to know what is behind me.

"The one with the bull?" I ask.

"The one with the dead people," she says, spitting out the words as if I had murdered each person

myself.

"Why don't you like it?" I ask.

"Because it's icky."

Icky. The first word she has used that's common to most four-year-olds.

"What makes it icky?" I ask.

Her face squinches. "The dead people."

"Why?"

She looks at the door, and I see a crack in that poised child, the perfect one who emerges for public consumption.

"Can I see my Daddy?" she whispers.

"Sure," I say.

She slides off the chair and heads for the door. When she puts her hand on the knob, I ask, "Will you come back and talk to me after you've seen your daddy?"

"No," she says. "I hate you. I hate this place. I'm never ever ever coming back here."

And then she slams her way into my waiting room.

I let out a breath, and glance at the Picasso. It is staggeringly ugly and powerful. But I would never have guessed that it would speak to a child, especially one as young as four.

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The word comes back from the travel agency. I am cleared to visit the crime scene.

The night before I go to the crime scene I do not sleep. I have read up on the incident; it occurred at a bombing location early in the training. According to the incidents manual, this site is the first place that the class goes in which other children -- historical children -- are involved.

I do not read about the incident itself -- the actual details of it -- preferring to see it all without preconceptions. I do, however, read about the course to that point, and I wonder how I would react to taking that course, even now, even with all my training.

The first time visitation is to a political rally, preparing for a conflict. Sometimes the visit is to Hitler's Germany. Sometimes it is to a Churchill speech. Almost always, the early visits are from the twentieth century, still accessible, language properly translated of course, but distant enough not to provoke the wrath of grandparents and great-grandparents.

The second visit is to a review of the troops. These vary according to the make-up of the class. Sometimes they see World War I troops marching to "Over There." Sometimes Napoleon watching his troops from a review stand. Occasionally, the children visit a more exotic leader -- a Saddam Hussein, an Idi Amin, even Harith Gelden from thirty years ago, in his failed attempt to take over Algiers.

The course is designed to teach children about patriotism, how easy it is to get caught up in the moment, to feel the passion of the cause, whatever that cause may be. Older children get to hear and analyze

military music, military press coverage, to hear the language of heroes and heroism and fighting the good fight.

Gradually, the class spirals into the realities. They start with bombing missions, flying over the Persian Gulf late at night, or German fields in the moonlight, experiencing the beauty of the moment, or the distance as bombs fall and leave only a cloud in their wake.

The classes move from beauty to the Enola Gay. It is an observational trip only: the children watch as the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima. At some later point, the children will go to Hiroshima days after the bomb fell, to see the effects. However, Atalia's class, Mr. Margolis's class, was a year or more away from that trip.

But as I lay awake in my soft cotton sheets, beneath a linen duvet I bought years ago, I find my mind wandering to these bomb sites and historical battles, and strange stump speeches by leaders long dead.

I understand the point of the class, the point of the exercises, but I wonder what kind of difference they will make. A truly determined person can accomplish anything. Violence, we have learned through sad and difficult study, is an inevitable part of human nature, and because humans are social creatures, violence becomes social as well.

We have stopped war in our part of the world, but we still have not ended violence.

And I wonder if that determined imaginary someone, that slightly more violent person than any we'd seen on the First World stage in two generations, could use all this information to create a "saner" war, one that will appeal to people brought up to reject the Sousa marches and the rallying speeches and the tickertape parades.

The thought brings me back to Mr. Margolis's prediction that decades from now I will not like what we have wrought, and my dreams, when they come, are filled with bright points of light, each representing a city destroyed at a safe and sanitary distance.

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It is impossible to describe the sensation of time travel, since no real sensation exists. I am in a booth, surrounded by screens and speakers and equipment. The walls seem to vanish as I move backward in time, but in reality, they do not. They merely become clear. I am viewing a recording made of the incident, a recording in three dimensions, complete with some of five senses, but a recording nonetheless.

We do not travel through time in the old-fashioned science fiction way; we do not participate in the scene. Instead, we look through windows on the past.

Common destinations use much more sophisticated equipment. They replicate sensory experiences so that you believe you are in the past. If I were traveling with the children, I would be able to pick up a handful of dirt and run it through my fingers -- even though it would not be the real dirt from the past, only a facsimile.

But recordings like this one are not enhanced. They simply provide a window on a window. On this trip, I will get the easy sensory details -- the smells, the sounds, and the sights -- but touch will elude me. That does not matter: I'm not there to interact with my surroundings, just to observe.

The walls swirl around me, a kaleidoscope of colors. Then the scents come: mold and damp, with the faint scent of smoke. An acrid taste forms in the back of my throat, and then bile rises: behind the smoke, I recognize the scent of charred flesh.

How do the children feel as they approach this moment? Had Atalia stood quietly, hands clasped, the way children are taught these days when they are in a crowd? Was her heart pounding with fear or had she enjoyed the first few trips, as the instructors lulled her into the beauty of violence, and the glory of war?

The swirling eases, and, as it does, I hear children laughing. The laughter has an edge -- a slightly out-of-control hysteria -- but it is faint, and probably recognizable only to someone with my kind of training, or perhaps someone who is (was?) familiar with the individual children themselves.

The kaleidoscope fades like a merry-go-round slowing, and the world comes into visual focus: stone buildings, bombed to rubble. Only towers remain -- towers that were once buildings, two and three stories high, with holes for windows and ceilings open to the sky.

In the distance, I can see buildings that still seem to be intact, and the skyline seems somewhat familiar. I am in Europe, judging by the age of the buildings in the distance -- somewhere I have been before, but at a later time, when the buildings before me had been rebuilt into something else, and the buildings that form the skyline got dwarfed by larger buildings made of steel and glass or perhaps by domes or towers or something else that makes the shape of the skyline both familiar and unfamiliar to me.

The laughing children run past me, scruffy and filthy, their hair filled with ash. They wear knickers and heavy shoes. The jackets that go over the knickers seem to match. They play a game I do not understand, with a round ball that they kick with those ungainly shoes.

The play is swift -- someone kicks the ball, someone else intercepts, a third person pushes it toward a pile of rubble that apparently acts as a goal. The children keep pace with the ball, trying to block each other, and they laugh more than I would have expected, given the smells and the still-burning buildings not half a block away, and the ash that rises in the gray sky.

Then Mr. Margolis appears. He stands only a foot from me, closer than he was in my office, his hands clasped behind his back. His face is impassive, his posture perfect.

A woman appears beside him -- his aide, perhaps, or a teaching assistant -- and then, one by one, a band of children ring him. They vary in age from ten to four. Atalia wears a blue jean skirt and a loose blouse. Her little feet are hidden in delicate boots built more for style than for comfort. Her hair has already escaped its barrettes, and her thumb has found its way to her mouth.

So, she does not like time travel, or something nearby. Maybe even the smell. Whatever she does not like, she takes comfort in a baby way, a way that I know, from one short interaction, her parents would not approve of.

Mr. Margolis glances at her, but does nothing. He is following protocol. Each child must experience this incident on her own.

The game has become a thing of beauty -- two teams, indistinguishable because of their tattered clothing, battle for the ball, which is gray with dust and ash. Children fall over each other, struggle, grab and kick, but with a spirit of fun.

The laughter continues as they run from one side of the makeshift field to the other. Some of the observing children cheer as the game progresses.

I try to focus on Mr. Margolis, whose posture has not changed, and Atalia. She too is watching with great attention -- more attention than you would expect from a four-year-old -- and her thumb has left her mouth. She even has a slight smile on her face. She doesn't cheer, but she wants to. Every time one

of her young friends yells, her smile grows a little wider.

Mr. Margolis stands straighter. There is tension in his body, barely noticeable, perhaps not noticeable at all to the children traveling with him. He knows that something is coming, and that something is the point of the visit.

I tense as well.

The ball starts in the center, then gets kicked toward the rubble goal. The children follow it, scrambling and laughing -- that slightly hysterical sound -- as they kick the ball back and forth between them.

Another child tries to insert himself between feet and ball, fails, stumbles, then sprawls in the dust.

The observing children are silent now, even the boys, who crane forward as they watch. Atalia has moved to the very front of the crowd. Her eyes sparkle, and she holds her breath as she watches, lost in the game.

The playing children keep moving, closer and closer to the goal. The ball goes back and forth between various feet: sometimes it gets kicked toward the rubble, and sometimes it moves back toward the center.

Mr. Margolis is so tense he's vibrating. I can see the shivering motion in his back, his arms. His assistant is looking down.

I hold my breath.

The gamesters head toward the rubble, screaming and blocking, the ball moving furiously. One child has positioned himself in front of the rubble as some kind of goalie. He is smaller than the others, but quick. Twice he blocks shots and from the reaction of the crowd around him, I assume his blocks are good.

The gamesters part: the ball slides through the opening, kicked by one of the girls.

It gets the goalie by surprise. He leaps for the ball, and then the boy lands on the rubble. Other children pile on top of him. The laughing continues as the rubble shifts.

The rubble shifts, and Mr. Margolis takes one single step forward as if he can stop it, and then the children tumble one on top of the other, still laughing, playing, before the rubble explodes.

Dust and dirt particles rise like a fan reaching toward the sky. The particles are several colors -- black, brown, red -- and I realize I am not looking at dirt, but human parts blown literally to bits.

The watching children scream and some turn away. Others duck as if they are going to get hit by shrapnel -- only they can't; it's one of the few things not replicated.

Mr. Margolis's eyes are closed, his assistant is still looking down, but Atalia --

Atalia is screaming. She has fallen to her knees, her hands in front of her face, and she is screaming as no child should scream, shrill with terror, and with the edge of mental collapse.

The dirt hits the ground in a splatter that leaves bones and charred bits of flesh and blood all over the playing field. The boy who had sprawled earlier, stands, the shock on his face palpable.

He turns and runs to where I do not know, lost to history, perhaps the one who recorded this incident so that the time-traveling psychologists could pick it as the first deadly place to bring such innocent minds.

Mr. Margolis has opened his eyes. The other children, the time-traveling children, have stopped screaming, even Atalia, who is still on her knees. She is rocking, her hands still over her mouth, her eyes so big that they take over her entire face.

The assistant looks to Mr. Margolis.

"I'll take care of it," he says, and walks to the child, still rocking, her eyes glassy and glazed.

When Atalia sees him, she looks up at him -- no longer four, but that inexpressible age that all children have when they believe their lives have ended, that look they can give that is both a cry for help and a cry for comfort, and he reaches down, the way any parent would do, and scoops her into his arms.

She clings, the sobs beginning, small at first, then wrenching, whooping noises that demand comfort. To his credit, Mr. Margolis offers no sweeping platitudes, no broad assurances that all will be fine.

He just holds her and comforts her and lets her cry on his shoulder.

Atalia's eyes close, and her shuddering stops. Mr. Margolis holds her a moment longer before setting her down, and disappearing from my sight.

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That night I dream of exploding children, their insides creating a gray cubist kaleidoscope against the sky. There is no one to comfort me when I wake up, no one to let me sob against his shoulder.

And I wish for it, despite my advanced age. I have not seen anything like that moment, although I have read of it. And I will not have to go from that moment to another, and another, and another, until I realize the full extent of destruction, both human and material, that composes an act of war.

Mr. Margolis will be relieved of his job. He will also be prosecuted for violating the terms of his employment.

No touch, no comfort allowed. Each child must come to an understanding of those moments on her own. None of them should be given the false impression that comfort will ease pain, that these situations will get better.

The only way to avoid such painful moments is to abandon war altogether.

I can do nothing to save this man, not that he wants saving. He no longer has the hardness necessary for his job.

I wonder if he ever had it -- how many other children he gave aid and comfort to. Perhaps he reported this one only because the assistant watched, or because he had been to this site before and anticipated the death shower, or because, for a brief second, he forgot his true purpose, the mission that he has interfered with.

I do not have to see him again, but his voice still echoes in my mind, mixed with hysterical laughter and the sound of dirt, flesh, and bone as it scatters across dry ground:

Ten, twenty, thirty years from now, you'll see.

You'll see.

But I find myself thinking, as I close my eyes to fight for a few more hours' sleep, that I have seen enough.