

The eruptions did not relent until the early dawn, arriving with unpredictable frequency and severity. By the end of it exhaustion had desensitized the children—the twins curled up against their mother’s breast, Simon seated on the floor beside them, unmoving, watching the sunlight seep through the window.

Martina stared ahead at the entrance to her home, waiting. In the wake of the explosions she listened now for small sounds—footsteps, whispered directives, the cocking of a gun. None came. There was only the distressed clucking of the chickens and the audible pulse of the crickets and the sound of her children breathing.

Look what stubbornness took from you already, she thought. Don’t let it take any more.

She motioned to her son. “You think you can get us across the river in your boat?”

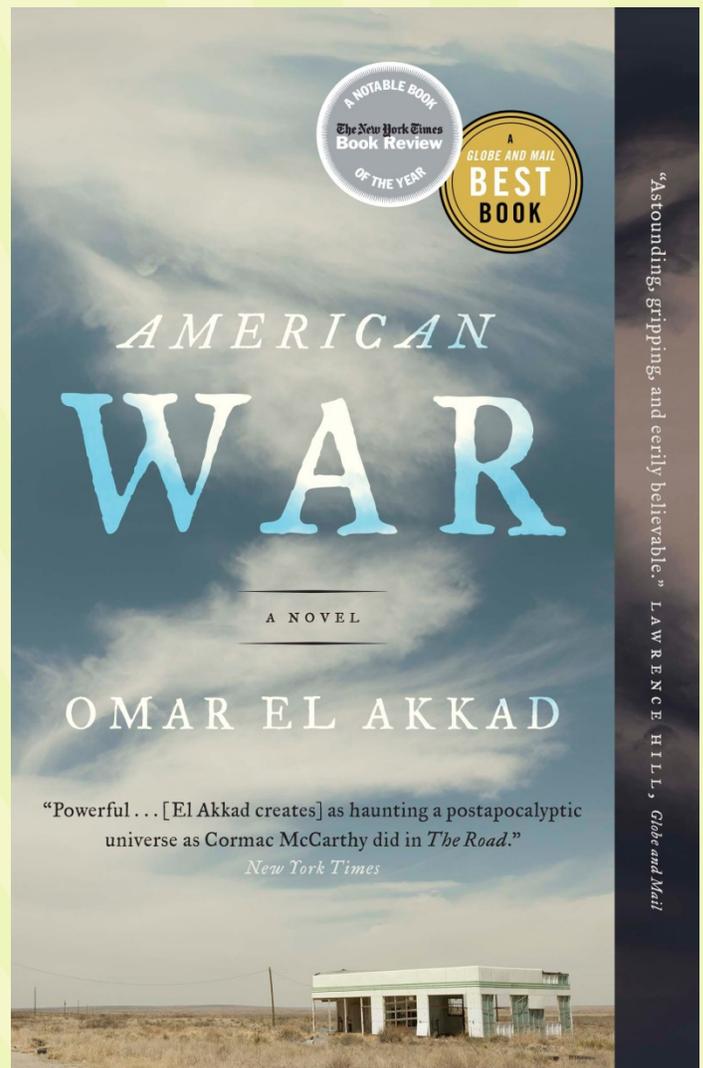
“Yes,” Simon said without hesitation.

“Go on to your room—quiet so you won’t wake the girls—and pack as many change of clothes as you can get into your backpack.”

“Why?” Simon asked.

“Hurry now. I’m counting on you to get us across the river. Your father’s counting on you.”

The boy stood up quietly. Martina waited until he was done packing and then she stood up and carried the girls, still groggy and half asleep, to their beds. She set them down and instantly they dozed off again. While they slept, she pulled the Chestnut’ biggest piece of luggage—an old bronze-detailed suitcase that once belonged to her grandmother—from under the bed. It was deep and wide and brittle at its copper hinges. Stickers covered its sides, each commemorating a visit to some historic site or state park that Martina knew only from the schoolbooks of her youth.



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She laid the suitcase open on the bed; the room filled with the smell of mothballs. Inside she found a couple of pens and a cracked frame with no photo inside. She tossed these things on the floor. She opened her dresser drawers and began stuffing the suitcase with clothes and toiletries. Instantly and without thinking, she developed a hierarchy of need,

starting closest to the skin and working outward—tampons, underwear, dresses. She packed two towels and two rolls of toilet paper and a packet of wet-naps. When the suitcase was almost full she stopped and went to the kitchen. She took jars and containers of the least perishable foods—jams, peanut butter, all the remaining military rations. She took the large plastic soda containers and emptied their contents outside in the dirt, and then refilled them from the tap connected to the rainwater tank. She packed the suitcase until it threatened not to close. She sat on it to keep it shut but the old clasps would not hold, and so she took two of her husband’s belts from the dresser and tied them to each other and looped them around the suitcase to keep it from bursting open. Then she found Sarat’s and Dana’s matching Minnie Mouse backpacks and filled them with the girls’ clothes.

She went outside. Around the south-facing side of the house, near the firewood stove, there was a wide-mouthed drainage pipe that ran from the roof of the home but was connected to nothing. The pipe was sealed shut at its top and bottom. She knelt to the ground and unsealed the bottom cover. A little bit of brown water trickled out of the pipe. She reached inside and felt for a coffee jar. She tugged on it until it came out. She opened the jar and counted its contents: five hundred dollars in American money; another three hundred in Louisiana Assistance Equivalents; three 16-sheets of prewar stamps; two thousand dollars’ worth of rebel currency issued by the New Zouaves in the very first days of the war and virtually worthless now as a trade currency, but which Benjamin suspected might one day be valuable as a historical curiosity; and a broken Rolex wristwatch that once belonged to Martina’s great-grandfather.

When she had finished packing, Martina set the bags out in the front yard and went inside to wake

the girls. They gazed at her, glass-eyed, still exhausted and incoherent.

“Girls, we’re going to go on a little adventure,” she said. “We’re going to cross the river together, all right?”

At the mention of adventure, Sarat perked up. “Why are we crossing the river, Mama?”

“Because we have to go live in a new house for a little while, honey.”

“Are we going to go see Daddy?”

“Yeah, honey, we’re going to see Daddy. Now go on, let’s get you dressed. We’ve got to get moving.”

As she and the girls prepared to leave, Martina removed from the bottom of her jewelry box a couple of photos of her and her husband. They were ancient things, taken with her grandfather’s camera. She tucked them into her dress.

She walked to the front of the home, where she found Sarat on her tiptoes, struggling to lift the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

“Let that be, honey,” Martina said. “We’ll come back for it later.”

“Daddy will want it,” Sarat replied.

“Just leave it for now. We’ve got to go. Daddy will understand.”

“No!” the little girl yelled. With Herculean effort she lifted the statue from the table. It fell into her arms, nearly knocking her over. Sarat hoisted the statue, which was almost as tall as she was, and waddled out the door.

Martina pulled the shipping container’s rusted door shut behind her and held it with a flimsy combination lock she knew would not withstand the teeth of even the smallest bolt-cutter. Then she carried her suitcase and led the girls down the

embankment to the waterfront, where Simon and the raft were waiting.

They climbed aboard. The raft bobbed and sagged under their weight. Martina had never ridden on it before. She had only rowed the river a handful of times in the last few years, usually on Alder Smith's boat whenever he invited the family into town for one of his cookouts. The raft was a child's thing, unsuited for the crossing, a polyp on the mouth of the Mississippi.

Under the reddening sky the Chestnuts unmoored. Martina took the scoop shovel from her son and began to fight the water. Already she could feel the current pulling them downriver, and she knew by the time they crossed to the eastern bank they'd have to hike a mile or more up the road to reach the place where the bus would be. Wells of sweat formed dark and wide on the arms of her dress; her eyes stung. She continued rowing.

Many years later, in the tents of Camp Patience, Martina would silently curse the day she left her home and took her children willingly into the festering heart of the war-torn South.

What she couldn't have known that morning was that the rebels, the federal troops, and the Mexican militias ultimately fought to a standstill; the violence never inched any further into Louisiana than it did on that brittle April day when the Chestnuts left their land.