

“Singapore”, a Short Story

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Translated by Sarah Enany **

Miss Ruqaya’s heart seized at the violent knocking that pierced the terrifying silence that had blanketed the apartment building since it stood empty of inhabitants. The sound, having subsided, suddenly crescendoed: a mixture of yelling and the sound of footsteps running down the stairs, then a hurried pounding on her door, mingling with the shouts of the person who knocked: “Get downstairs at once! They’re going to bomb the building!”

As soon as Ruqaya had realized what was going on, her brain had whirred into action, as rapidly as she normally used it to solve the most complex mathematical equations in seconds. She could barely walk. Meanwhile, each family would pick up its children and whatever papers and lightweight valuables they could carry. The warning lasted five minutes, at most. Who would stop to think of her at a moment that most resembled Judgment Day, the day each person flees from their own children and mother and father; how, then, would they not flee from an elderly neighbor not related to them by blood?

She had made her decision. One strike and it would be over. She locked the door, as though the turn of the key in the lock would protect her from what awaited. Then she sat down, muttering what verses of the Qur’an she could remember as she trembled.

The knocking stopped, to be replaced by battering. From the center of her small hall, she watched the door vibrate, then burst open. Two young men rushed in. “Miss Ruqaya! The building! They’re going to bomb it!” cried one of them.

“Let them! I don’t care!” she yelled back. “I’m not leaving my home!”

With the stubbornness of the elderly, she clutched onto her chair. But her feeble hands were no match for the two young men, who bodily lifted her, chair and all, each carrying one side of the chair, and rushed out of the apartment. “Why are you taking me out of my home?” she screamed, overcome with something like hysteria. The young men ignored her protests. “Get out of here and run for your lives!” she went on, but they were already heading down the stairs. They carried her down six

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flights in a rush that was nevertheless somewhat careful, despite the sweat pouring off both of them.

When they reached the ground floor, they made their way hurriedly to the plaza, where hundreds of men and women of varying ages had already gathered. Some were carrying sleeping children; some were clutching a small briefcase or plastic bag to their chests. No sooner had they put her down than a tremendous explosion boomed. It rocked the very ground, like an earthquake. The building came down like a house of cards, one floor after another, until it sank into the earth.

Silence overcame the stunned assembly. This was the apartment building that had always echoed with their voices as they traveled up and down in its rickety old elevator; with the din of children running up and down its staircases and playing in the plaza downstairs; with the smells of cooking; with the voices of women seeping out through its open doors; with the noisy throat-clearing of menfolk going and coming from its prayer-nook; with every apartment’s contents, furniture and kitchen utensils and pantry staples and books and pens and inkwells and albums and photographs and scratches on the walls and clothing and memories of lovers and dreams of love and marriage – all this collapsed before their eyes in an instant to turn into a cloud of dust, a cloud that dissipated little by little to reveal a mound of rubble, topped – like a gravestone – with a rusty sign engraved in large letters with the legend:

The Singapore Tower.

Sounds began to float around the area like intermingling bubbles. “Is that it?” one woman wept, “Our homes all gone?”

“Five minutes to empty out a building with 80 apartments?!” screamed another man, distraught.

“Rasha! Where’s Hassan?!” cried a terrified mother.

“Better they had brought it down on our heads,” said one disgruntled young man.

“We’re all okay; that’s all that matters,” said a young woman trying to put on a brave face.

There were also a great many, “God’s will be done!” and “May He avenge our wrongs,” in broken whispers. Soon, stronger voices prevailed, mostly from passers-by and the inhabitants of nearby buildings, all a mixture of curiosity and solidarity, saying traditional phrases of comfort: “God is great,” “There now, man, put your faith in the Lord,” and, “May God grant you recompense.”

When the security men arrived, blaring through microphones: “Move away from the building, please! The enemy might strike again!” or, “Please clear the area! There is danger of collapse from neighboring buildings!” those assembled seemed not to hear it; instead, they headed for the demolished building, by artificial light, to clear the rubble with their bare hands, and thus save what they could of their things and possessions.

“Better for disaster to strike your wealth than your children’s health!” The old proverb, spoken out loud, reached Ruqaya’s ears as she sat alone on her chair, which remained where the young men had put it. Something of a veil had come over her

consciousness as she watched her lady neighbors surrounded by their husbands and children, or receiving phone calls from relatives asking after their safety.

She glanced at her silent phone, which she was in the habit of clutching. ‘No wealth and no children,’ she said to herself. She had already sold the two bracelets her brother had given her to cover essential repairs to her apartment. Then she remembered: “The burial money!” And then she thought: ‘I have lost nothing but the money to pay for my shroud and burial expenses.’

She remembered the day she showed Karima, her favorite neighbor, where she kept the burial money. “It’s all ready,” she said, “but I’ll put you to some trouble, making the arrangements.”

“Don’t say that, Miss Ruqaya! God grant you health and long life,” Karima responded, her tones full of affection.

Why didn’t they leave you hidden within the walls of your own apartment?

For that matter, why didn’t we stay in our homes? Our *real* homes?

It had been decades since her mother took her and ran from the shelling, like all their neighbors. She remembered that day like it was yesterday. Their mud-brick house with the arches, receding until the sycamore fig tree obscured it from both their gazes. Waves of rippling wheat eager for harvest, bisected by furrows made by running feet. The texture of her mother’s dress, the hem of which she clutched so as not to get lost. The bulging bundle on her head. The weariness and misery that settled suddenly upon her face. The urgency with which she stopped passers-by to ask them what had become of her husband, Abu-Said. The way her eyes went unfocused when she received a response. As for Ruqaya, she followed in her mother’s footsteps, like one hypnotized. She dared not ask after her father, or complain of thirst, or of the pain in her small bare feet, swollen on the scorching earth, or to grumble at the weight of her baby brother in her skinny arms – arms that would, a few years on, carry stones alongside her mother to form the walls of a room to replace their refugee tent – a room whose corrugated roof blazed with heat in summer, and let in the rain in winter, but was, for all that, “four walls and a roof to protect us,” as her mother said.

The voice of Abu-Ashraf snapped her out of her memories. He, and his son after him, had been a student of hers when she first started teaching at eighteen. “All right, Miss Ruqaya?” he asked gently.

She looked up at him with reproach. “Why did you risk both your boys’ lives for me?”

He smiled feebly. “Ashraf and Ali saw you weren’t there when we all came downstairs, and decided to go back for you.”

She frowned. “But imagine if they’d bombed the building and two fine young men had died for a doddering old crone like me!”

Abu-Ashraf couldn’t deny it. It was clear that he had been thinking the same thing. Finding nothing to say, he fell silent. “Dad!” one of his daughters could be heard calling.

“Go be with your family, Abu-Ashraf. May God reward your good deeds.”

‘Everyone is with their families,’ she thought. ‘What about me? Where’s *my* family?’

“That makes the third guy asking for my hand that you’ve rejected,” Ruqaya remembered complaining to her mother, “and I’m not such a great beauty, as you can see!”

She remembered saying it laughingly, secretly hoping her mother would deny it and give her a comforting compliment. Instead, her mother’s face hardened. “Since you know you’re not pretty,” she said harshly, “you might as well know that he’s greedy. He has his eye on the paycheck you take home every month.”

“So what? Let him be greedy! I just want my own home and a family like other women,” Ruqaya pleaded.

“I said no.” Her mother turned her face away.

Mother, you never had any sympathy for me. “Give the sweets to your brother.” Or, “Pull the covers up over him, keep him warm.” And, “Here, Saïd, you take the meat. You’re a man, you need your nourishment.”

“I’m sorry, Sis. When I graduate, I’ll make it all up to you, every penny.”

“I’m saving up every penny. Your brother will become an engineer even if we have to starve. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Here, Sis. This pair of gold bracelets is for you, a gift for your pilgrimage to Mecca,” Saïd whispered, fearing his wife’s wrath.

This suitor was greedy; that one was corrupt; the next had a mother you didn’t like. God forgive you, Mother!

“Can you tell my aunt,” Saïd’s daughter whispered, “to change into something nicer before my girlfriends get here?”

“All her clothes are like that!” sneered her mother in disgust.

“Put up with her for these two months. Put up with her for your father’s sake.”

“So now I’m the engineer’s mother?” her mother whispered when Ruqaya read to her the news that her son had graduated. Suddenly, she burst into a ululation – she, who had scarcely even smiled since they were driven out of the country. “I swear, I’ll bake the biggest tray of *nammura*, and the entire camp will have sweets to eat!” she exclaimed joyously.

Hardly a few weeks had passed when they got another letter from Saïd. “I got a contract to work in Qatar.”

“And where might this ‘Qatar’ be, Ruqaya?”

“In the desert, Mother.”

“Oh no! They’re letting my son go out into the desert?!”

“Don’t worry, Mother. Lots of people go there.”

“Oh Saïd, apple of my eye, you’re throwing yourself into the desert for our sakes!”

And so it was that Saïd threw himself into the desert, which soon became the land of milk and honey. News started trickling in news that puffed up Om-Saïd’s chest as she proudly shared it with her lady neighbors in the refugee camp: “Saïd’s been blessed with good fortune. Saïd, praise be! is now the development manager for the Sheikh himself. Saïd has married the sister of his Syrian business partner – she’s

blonde and fair-skinned like the girls in Europe! Saïd has moved into a mansion, a real palace – but in fairness, he sends money home like clockwork to his mother and sister. God bless that boy.”

“God bless you, Saïd,” were her mother’s last words, before she gave up the ghost after two years of illness. During those two years, Ruqaya’s slim body had become hunched over and wrinkles overtaken her face; her thick black hair was replaced with a cotton cap under which a few wispy white hairs were hiding. The years till her retirement had gone by in a battle against time and exhaustion as she was worn away by the demands of her job at school and caring for her mother at home: “Ruqaya, I want to go to the bathroom.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Ruqaya, this soup’s too salty.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Ruqaya, put me in the gallabiya that Saïd sent me.”

“Yes, Mother.”

When her mother grew gravely ill, Ruqaya asked her: “Who will you leave me to?”

Her mother replied, “Your brother, of course. He won’t leave you alone. He’s the kindest soul in the world.”

“Find yourself an apartment in one of the new buildings in Gaza,” said Saïd.

This is how she received the message her heart had been telling her ever since she put down her suitcase at the gates of her brother’s stately mansion in Qatar.

“I’m prepared to help you pay for it,” he went on. “These new apartment tower blocks are the future of the city. It’ll be bursting with people after everyone comes back.” A faraway look came into his eyes, which shone, for a moment, with a businessman’s gleam of opportunities for profit. “Land prices,” he went on, “are skyrocketing. There are fantastic opportunities in Gaza. It’ll become another Singapore!”

He said this after they had watched, in his luxurious living room, the leader of the Revolution smiling triumphantly and reaching out to shake hands – in front of the TV cameras – with the enemy. Outraged, she exploded, “So it’s come to this? But what about us? What about our right to our country?”

But Saïd smiled knowingly. “On the contrary, it’s a masterstroke!” He added hurriedly, not wanting to lose his sister’s respect, “Of course return is what we all dream of. But thrust and parry, that’s the ticket! Give and take! That’s tactical negotiation!”

She said no more and didn’t argue. But she knew that even he himself didn’t believe his own words.

It had been twenty years since that day, during which Ruqaya spent no more than a year with her brother and his family in Qatar. Afterward, she returned and sold her house in the refugee camp, added on her retirement bonus, and bought a small

apartment with a sea breeze and a window overlooking a blue horizon visible from the Singapore Tower in Gaza.

Apartment blocks, which they called ‘towers’, had sprung up suddenly everywhere like gigantic weeds surrounded by hybrid concrete swampland, composed of randomly constructed buildings, private houses, and apartment buildings, which quickly swamped the open spaces of fine white sand that had been there before, the vineyards and olive groves and orange orchards that had been, until recently, the playground of the *Fedayeen*.

Twenty years was enough for the illusion to recede; for the city to return to desperate fighting, as it had been since its birth thousands of years ago.

Twenty years of disappointment; of anticipation; of siege; then war upon war.

Ruqaya experienced it all with her neighbors in her apartment whose door stood open day and night, in the apartment tower that had become a world unto itself. When it was first constructed, it had been clean and shiny; its paint soon chipped and peeled, its tiles wore away, pieces broke off the stairs, garbage piled up at its entrance, and nothing remained of its former glory except a bond forged between its inhabitants despite the problems of communal living. “I was nice to them because I needed them; a lonely woman like me has no family nor tribe. But need blossomed into companionship and affection. God bless all kind people,” Ruqaya sighed.

“You need something from the market, Miss Ruqaya?”

“Shall we drop you off somewhere, Miss Ruqaya?”

“A plumber? Of course, Miss Ruqaya!”

“Miss Ruqaya?”

She looked up. One of the security men stood before her, a big, burly fellow with a thick beard. “I’m your student! You taught me in third grade!” he cried out, his smiling face filled with a childish glee quite unsuited to the situation.

Ever polite and friendly despite her distraction, she responded weakly, “You look familiar.”

“Why are you sitting all alone in the plaza?” he asked sympathetically, the childish glee dissipated.

She gave him a stunned stare and made no reply.

“...your home was in that tower?”

She nodded.

He whipped out his phone. “Who should I call? I mean, your family?”

“I don’t have anyone,” she whispered.

“Your children live abroad?”

“I have no-one, except my neighbors. Well. My former neighbors.”

He stood perplexed for a moment, then shouted, “Come stay at my house, Miss Ruqaya! You’ll be the guest of honor there.”

“You’re very kind,” she demurred, her heart sinking more and more as she realized the extent of her catastrophe. “But...”

He smiled broadly and quoted the old proverb: “He who teaches me a letter earns my servitude forever.’ And you taught me the entire alphabet, Miss Ruqaya!” Then he added, “By the way, you’ll recognize my wife, too. She used to be your student as well.”

She stared at him, stunned, and only came to herself when she found rivers of tears flowing down the valleys of her wrinkled cheeks. They were tears she had longed to shed for years, for decades, ever since she left behind the mud-brick house with the arches, carrying her brother Saïd.

Salma El Rayes, Casablanca, 2/6/2021