

**FINALIST FOR THE 2017 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE**

**NOT IF, BUT WHEN  
AUGUST**

**A NOVEL**

**ANDRÉ YEBO**

**NOT IF, BUT WHEN.**

**9TH OF AUGUST**

ALSO FROM THE EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

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*To my mum and dad and sister Audrey.  
And to my wife Jasmine, and our kids—  
Renee, Raquel, Rachelle and Russell.  
Family is everything.*

*THE WHOOSH, WHEN it came, blew Henry across the packed MRT train carriage like an old toy someone had tired of.*

*A bright orange light enveloped everyone inside, forcing people to shield their faces with their hands. The breeze from the air-conditioners was replaced by a scorching gust of wind. The noise was so deafening that Henry couldn't hear anything else.*

*As the unseen hand of the blast lifted him, Henry noticed objects flying past—pieces of glass, teeth, one half of a pair of headphones, clumps of hair, a haversack, a pair of cracked spectacles, multiple droplets of blood breaking up in flight. Like an astronaut in space, he let the shockwaves dump him where they would. He crashed into the soft bodies of other passengers. A burning sensation crept over him.*

*This wasn't how he had planned to spend the public holiday: Singapore's 55th National Day. Not after all that had happened to him. He was tired of being a single parent to a teenage girl who kept asking him about the mother she'd never known.*

*There was so much he wanted to tell her.*

*But as he felt his flesh burning, he wondered if he would live to do so.*

BEFORE

## 1

IT WASN'T EASY being Henry's daughter. That was how Sally felt growing up as an only child in a single-parent household. She had often thought about what it would be like to have a mother. All 14-year-olds in Singapore had one. Except her.

Sandra was her name. Daddy said so.

Sally never knew her mother. Daddy said she had died giving birth to her. Flipping through photo albums of Mummy and Daddy from the time they dated, he told her Mummy was a hero and the bravest woman in the world for giving up her life for her. Because Sally was worth it. Sally wished she had known Mummy. So she could say "thank you".

To Sally, Sandra was one of those characters she read about in history books—brave, mysterious, human and always doing something cool in spite of what everyone else said.

Daddy kept so many photos of Mummy. There was one of her in her twenties, smiling while cooking salted-egg crabs at home with Daddy when they were dating. Another of her cycling along East Coast Parkway and having a barbecue with a group of friends. And numerous shots of her in Egypt, Paris, London, Nepal, India and Japan. The petite, short-haired woman with dark eyes, a round face, thin shoulders and slender legs had clearly loved life. No, embraced it.

There were so many questions Sally wanted to ask her.

Like how it felt to be dying yet carrying something inside you that wanted to live. Or how many kids she would have liked to have, and what she saw in Daddy. Sally smiled and imagined the many conversations they could have had just gossiping about Daddy, who didn't look like much of a catch.

And what advice would she give about boys? Loathe them or love them? Avoid them was Daddy's solution. But it was pointless wishing for something that could never happen. And so, since she was a child, Sally

had told herself there was no time for self-pity and to make the most of what she had.

A netball player at 1.82 metres, she was the tallest girl in school, much taller than her best friends—Macy and Sophia. They liked the same food, books, movies and celebrities. Others had tried to be accepted into their group but were roundly judged to be unworthy and would slink quietly into the background in shame. Not that the trio was arrogant or aloof. There would just be an awkward silence and the person auditioning for the part of "group member" would quickly get the message and find other unsuccessful applicants to mingle with.

Something clicked the day they met in school a year earlier. It was the moment they knew they'd be friends for life.

"The weekend's finally here! So what are you guys doing after school?" Macy asked her BFFs.

"Got to meet my mum to go shopping for clothes," said Sophia. "She's got a date with some doctor tomorrow. Ever since my parents divorced, she's been acting like a teenager. Like she's making up for lost time after fourteen years with my dad. She's living her second childhood and it's so annoying. I keep telling her there's already one teenager at home. Me. We don't need another one. What about you, Sally? What will you be doing today?"

Sally's thoughts had drifted off again. To Mummy, rainbows, rabbits, lollipops and Daddy.

She thought about his eyes, always sad, always hiding something. When Henry thought she wasn't looking, he'd stare out the window into nothingness. She had seen him do it often when she was a six-year-old, when he thought she was too young to understand what pain was.

She'd sit with her Lego sets or dolls and Henry would think she was playing with them. But she was observing him, studying his eyes. The way he'd stand with his hands on his hips, his head bowed, sighing heavily, sometimes crying quietly. It hurt her to hear him when he sniffled and whimpered like a wounded animal, with his right hand covering his mouth so she wouldn't hear him.

Sometimes, while staring out the window, he'd say something to her like, "Good job, dear" or "Okay, keep it up", even though she had not

asked him anything or done anything particularly interesting.

Sally had wondered who or what could hurt Daddy so badly. She had always been afraid to ask. Some scars don't show themselves. Some scars never heal.

"I'll be spending time with my Daddy," she told her friends.

She thought about her father again. And wondered if he was still miserable at home.

## 2

Hunching by the bookshelf while going through the messages on Sally's mobile phone, Henry kept looking over his shoulder to make sure she was still having her bath.

For 14 years, he had fumbled his way through raising another human being. All the self-help books and YouTube videos weren't much help to this IT specialist. Since none of them had said it was wrong to check your teenage daughter's messages, Henry reasoned it was perfectly all right for him to do so. Especially since he had paid for the phone and continued to pay the monthly bills. So, theoretically, the phone was his. Theoretically.

How he wished Sandra was still around. How much easier it would be for him. And for Sally.

He spent every day thinking about his dead wife. Breast cancer had taken her. The last year of her life was especially brutal as the cancer cells launched one attack after another. The first sign of trouble came months before she was pregnant with Sally. That lump on the left side of her left breast had made an unwelcome appearance. Sandra brushed it off, which was normal. But there was nothing normal about the lump.

"It's probably an ulcer," she said whenever Henry asked her to go for a check-up. "Relax. It'll burst and disappear."

Like an uninvited guest who refused to leave, the lump remained. Henry's constant nagging finally convinced her to see a doctor. Three days later, when the call came asking them to go to his office, they each knew it was probably

bad news. She was now three months pregnant and the baby was developing well. Thankfully, she had been spared morning sickness. So far, so good.

"What do you think he'll say?" Sandra asked Henry as they sat on their sofa at home. It was a simple three-bedroom flat with a massive bookshelf stuffed with fiction, non-fiction, cookbooks, dictionaries and titles on LEGO, *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*. They were Henry's. Sandra, a pre-school teacher, loved crime thrillers, romance and poetry. Lego Star Wars models took pride of place on custom-made cabinets. Henry said nothing as he stared at the television, not paying attention to what was happening onscreen.

"I don't know," he said, sounding annoyed. He wished Sandra would be more optimistic. Pessimism only complicated things.

"Maybe it's nothing" was all he could offer. Henry wondered how they would deal with that last day if cancer were to win. And whether his wife would be strong and healthy enough to see her pregnancy through. He turned away so she wouldn't see he was about to cry. There were two lives at stake here and six more months to go.

"It's probably just a routine session with the doctor," said Henry, trying to delude himself.

He knew he wasn't fooling anyone. He was such a bad actor.

"He probably just wants to tell you the good news so you wouldn't have to worry about the baby. Women have lumps all the time. I read somewhere it's quite common. It's probably just a false alarm."

No one said the C word that night. As if not mentioning its name could make it go away. They were playing pretend.

But this was a game Henry and Sandra knew they'd both lose.

## 3

Henry was 14 when he met a mean girl at the bookstore.

He was alone as usual. He didn't know many boys his age who liked to cook and read cookbooks. Proclaiming that to the world and to his



classmates in their all-boys school would be like pouring honey over his body, lying down and waiting for red ants to carpet him with a new layer of skin before feasting on his carcass.

Already struggling with his studies, he could do without that. It was his dirty little secret. Like not telling people you came from a poor family.

So whenever he went to the bookstore in Orchard Road, he'd always be alone. He loved getting lost in the forest of paperbacks, shielded by bookshelves standing like the solid defences along Normandy during World War II. Peace embraced him whenever he walked among the shelves, caressing the book spines.

Twice a week, he'd head down to the bookstore after school. It would usually be an uneventful visit. First to the comics section, then fiction, then the cookbooks, always in that order. Order made the world bearable for Henry.

Except that one day. Henry was reading a book on Mediterranean cuisine when he noticed the slim and sexy girl with the cute, round face and shoulder-length hair walking into the comics section. They go there?

He chucked the hardcover he had planned to buy back into the bookshelf and followed her. He wasn't sure what he was feeling and couldn't find the words to describe it. He wasn't aware he was still holding two other cookbooks when he walked among the comics. He was careful to keep his distance and control his breathing as he homed in on this fine specimen. Wait till he told his friends at school. No, wait. He wasn't sharing. No bloody way.

Henry walked along the perimeter of the outer shelves like a cheetah circling its prey, unaware of its presence among the bushes. He had one eye on the comics, another on Pretty Girl. Pretty Girl liked to read Iron Man and Batman comics. His kind of girl.

For several minutes, he pretended to be interested in the Japanese manga three shelves away while Pretty Girl browsed a copy of *The Avengers*. Henry was smiling to himself. It was a disturbing sight, enough to make a couple beside him walk briskly away. Henry didn't know how long he had been staring. And that was the problem. He had stayed at the same spot for far too long and Pretty Girl had begun to sense an evil presence behind her. She turned and looked momentarily stunned to find him gawking at her. Pretty Girl regained her composure, determined he was only a threat to himself and

smiled back.

Okay, that wasn't supposed to happen, thought Henry. Pretty Girl wasn't supposed to respond. Not to someone like him. Girls normally saw *through* him. But now, Pretty Girl was walking towards him. Henry suddenly felt numb and the blood drained from his face along with any remaining strength in his legs, which rendered him immobile. Pretty Girl was clutching three comic books across her chest.

"Hi," said Pretty Girl.

Silence.

"You looking for something? For someone?"

More silence.

"I'm Sandra."

Pretty Girl had a name! Progress! Henry then forced himself to say the first thing that came to mind.

"Errrrrrr..."

"What's your name?" asked Sandra.

Still more silence.

"You have a name? You know, that thing your parents gave you when you were born? When you couldn't speak? Like now?"

Pretty Girl was funny. And cruel. Henry wasn't sure if he still liked Pretty Girl. There was a meanness in her eyes. And it made her look beautiful.

"H-h-h-Henry."

"Hello, H-h-h-Henry," Pretty Girl said. "Relax, I was only joking. What have you got there?"

Oh great, his cookbooks. Here he was standing in front of one of the most beautiful girls he had ever met and he was carrying cookbooks. Henry wanted to say they were books on hunting, weightlifting, Army Special Forces or diving with great white sharks.

"Cookbooks. I love to cook," said Henry, nodding and half-smiling. He was holding onto the books so tightly, his palms felt sweaty. He was sure that would be the end of the conversation and was expecting her to smile back, walk away and then call security.

"I love to cook too. I've never met a guy who liked to cook. Cool. Wanna go for a drink?"

“Okay, sure. Let me pay for these first then we can go,” said Henry, unable to restrain himself from smiling ear to ear.

Henry couldn't remember what he had bought and walked slightly behind Sandra to admire her. Everything about her seemed perfect. Her flawless skin, the way the tendrils of her hair bounced gently by the left side of her face and the moles that dotted both cheeks like planets revolving around the sun. Henry slowly began to find his voice and they talked as they walked to a McDonald's.

Sandra was captivated by his stories about his adventures in the kitchen.

His mother was a housewife and had taught him how to cook. Since he was five, he'd wander into the kitchen in their three-room flat and his mother would never chase him away. He started by cutting vegetables and pounding herbs and nuts. Then, peeling potatoes, onions, garlic and carrots before moving on to the more serious stuff when he was eight. It took his mother three years to trust him with frying, using the oven, and slicing fish and chicken. But he was a quick learner and by the time he was 11, his relatives weren't able to tell who had cooked the dishes—his mother or Henry.

“When I was six, I nearly sliced off my left index finger while chopping spring onions,” he said. “And when I was twelve, I almost burned down the flat.”

“Really? Oh my gosh, what happened?” said Sandra, leaning forward wide-eyed.

“You know calamari? I didn't know you're supposed to first drain the water from the packet after you've thawed it. So, the water is accumulating in the packet, right? The calamari is softer, and I thought now would be a great time to fry it. Bad i-d-e-a.

“I was pouring everything into the hot pan filled with oil on high heat. Suddenly, this huge fountain of fire shot up from the pan the moment the water touched the oil. I jumped back still clutching the packet of calamari in my left hand and I just stood there. The flames were roaring and I could feel the heat on my face, you know. The flames are licking the cooker hood and they're growing bigger and bigger. And I'm just standing there, doing absolutely nothing. I was scared and admiring the fire at the same time.

“Then, I felt something hot on my arms. Droplets of hot oil were raining on me. It woke me up and I realised the fire was going to consume the cabinets above the stove.”

“Then what?” Sandra asked.

“My mother rushed into the kitchen and lunged forward to turn off the gas. She then grabbed a lid from the cupboard and slammed it down on the pan. It killed the flames. I could finally breathe after that. I had not realised I had been holding my breath the entire time.

“That was one of the most important lessons I learnt that day. Fire and water can never be friends.”

It would take another four years of meeting for coffee, and going to the movies and the bookstore, before Henry had the guts to ask Sandra to be his girl. There was something about Henry's honesty and eagerness to try new things in life that seemed to attract her.

Henry didn't know it then but he was right about one thing.

Fire and water could never be friends.

## 4

Inspector Rahim of the Internal Security Department crushed the piece of paper, rolled it into a ball and flung it onto the floor where it joined the other crumpled wads. Another terror suspect had evaded capture in Indonesia. And with him, the plans for potential targets of a possible attack.

As an intelligence officer at one of the world's best intelligence agencies, Rahim was tasked to identify terror threats and work with other security agencies like the FBI and MI6 to neutralise these threats. His work was the kind the Singaporean public would never hear about—secretive, low-profile and one that was underappreciated.

He and his colleagues hardly got any public plaudits for preventing a terrorist attack or arresting a suspect. It was fine with them. That wasn't why they took the job in the first place. The less people knew, the better.

But for how long?

Not *if*, but *when*.

The politicians had been repeating the refrain every other week for several years. They had also been urging as many people as possible to learn CPR in case they were caught in the middle of an attack and would be able to help the nearest casualties. Then, there was the SGSecure campaign to remind Singaporeans to “run, hide and tell” if an attack took place near them. There was even an app so the public could notify the authorities if they witnessed a terror act and receive emergency alerts about such strikes. Even ordinary vehicles like trucks, lorries and cars were being used as murder weapons. Something the people of Nice, Berlin, London and Stockholm knew too well.

In spite of all these efforts, some Singaporeans felt the likelihood of bombs going off in their country was low. It was tough to convince a people who had enjoyed peace and prosperity for more than fifty years that their lives were at risk.

Rahim, his colleagues and the government were concerned. But there was nothing more they could do. The only thing that would convince people to stop being complacent was...

Rahim swatted that thought out of his mind.

That was why he did what he did and had sacrificed so much for the cause. All those stakeouts and take-out meals. All those extra hours monitoring the online chatter of people with suspected terror links. All those birthdays, holidays and wedding anniversaries he had missed. He had even forgotten how long he had been married. Sixteen years. At least he remembered his wife’s name, Nora. And that he had four kids—a ten-year-old daughter, a seven-year-old son and four-year-old twin girls. And number five was on the way.

Wait a minute! What day was it today?

He remembered something big was about to happen but couldn’t for the life of him recall what it was he was supposed to be prepared for.

A conference call with his Malaysian counterparts? Documents about extraditing a suspect? Weapons training?

Nora’s face slowly came to mind like a ghostly vision. Nora?

What did Nora have to do with... Just then, an SMS came in. It was

from Nora. It read: “It’s a boy. U at work?”

Oh crap, Nora! She was giving birth today. She *did* give birth today. Rahim knew he was so dead. He was already an absentee husband and father. He knew he was bad at his job at home. He didn’t need to remind his family just how bad he was at it.

He slumped in his chair when he realised he had missed thirty WhatsApp messages from Nora while poring over charts, SMS transcripts and emails.

14.33: Where are u?

15.07: U cmg hm?

15.20: I need u!

16.12: I’m gg to the hospital. My dad’s taking me there.

Then, the last one at 21.01. “It’s a boy. U at work?”

It was now 2104 hours, or 9.04pm as civilians knew it.

Rahim gasped, grabbed some documents, stuffed them into his leather briefcase, shot up from his chair, startling his colleagues, then ran for the exit.

“What happened? A tip-off?” someone asked.

“Worse,” said Rahim. “Nora gave birth and I forgot! She delivered the kid alone, today.”

Yup, his colleagues agreed. He was as good as dead.

## 5

Their baby was in the nursery. Rahim went there first to look at him but couldn’t tell one kid from the other. He asked the nurse for help. She glared at him. Nora must have told her. The nurse pushed the crib to the viewing glass so Rahim could have a better view of the son he knew he’d ignore later in life, just like the rest of his four children.

When he had seen enough of his child, without feeling much for him, Rahim headed for Nora’s room. He opened the door clutching a bouquet of roses like a police officer entering a suspicious scene with a weapon—cautiously. Nora was sitting up in bed. Of the four pregnancies, this was

the first time he had been MIA.

“Hi, dear,” said Rahim, the bouquet now becoming a shield.

Nora rested her head on the pillow. Her eyes tracked Rahim as he held the flowers with both hands as if ready to swing them wildly in case she launched an attack. He studied her bed area nervously, noting the possible types of missiles available to her at arm’s length—a bowl of soup, a jug of water, a cup of Milo, and a fork and a knife that had come with her dinner. He eyed them intently as if willing them not to fly in his general direction. Rahim moved to the left side of Nora’s bed.

He didn’t like the look on her face.

He didn’t see anger.

It was much worse. He saw disappointment.

“Sorry. I got caught up at work. There were audio transcripts I had to analyse. Our contacts thought they were...valuable and suspicious.”

Rahim wasn’t supposed to reveal so much about his work. But he was a desperate man. Before he could finish, Nora launched her attack.

“You won’t change, Rahim.

“This job’s more important to you than all of us. I’ve tried to understand. But I can’t. I’m tired. And I’ve had enough. I keep telling myself lives are at stake and you are doing your part to protect our country and us. But when I see other people happy with their families, I ask myself, ‘Why can’t we have a happy family too?’

“After all these years, I’m done asking myself those same questions over and over again. You’ve told me many times you’d change. But you haven’t. And the kids know it.”

Rahim thought about reminding her of the MacDonald House bombing on 10 March 1965, when Indonesian commandos killed three people. Or about Mas Selamat, the Singaporean terrorist who had wanted to hijack a plane then crash it into Changi Airport. Or about the latest findings of the Global Terrorism Index.

But, looking at Nora, he thought keeping quiet was the better option right now.

She was tearing up. Rahim could see she had given this much thought, long before today. She knew what she was doing and saying. And that

scared him. She wasn’t done yet.

“I had been thinking of leaving you for years. But I kept saying no. For our kids, for our religion, for the sake of your reputation. And also because I was hoping you’d change. Then, today happened. You’re a man of empty promises, Rahim. And you’ve made up my mind for me. You can come home with us after they discharge me in two days. You can spend time with the kids then move out. The sooner you do it, the better, so we can move on.”

Those last few words winded Rahim. He didn’t know what to do with himself.

At work, he was indispensable. Thanks to his analytical skills and wide network of contacts in the region, he had been responsible for the break-up of several terror groups. Security agencies in the region were glad they had someone like him on their side. It was people like him who helped make the ISD a feared organisation around the world. But now, he was being dispensed with at home.

Fired. Sacked. Rejected.

Silenced by a pissed-off mother of five.

## 6

Somewhere in Afghanistan, 30,000 feet in the sky, a US Air Force drone was gliding silently like a metal hawk looking for prey. Merging with the clouds, it had been in the air for two hours and was capturing everything below with its state-of-the-art cameras, then feeding those images back to its pilots in a dark air-conditioned room in Nevada.

Eagle 3 was hunting terrorists and was one of several drones covering thousands of square kilometres and gathering data like vehicle licence plates, the types of settlements and their occupants, and even the vegetation and soil varieties in the area. US commanders were getting restless and were in need of a good kill.

Suicide bombers had been striking convoys and decimating the

American forces in recent weeks. The public and politicians back home were questioning the wisdom in continuing the war on terror in Afghanistan. They wanted their boys home, and not in body bags.

Eagle 3 was about to be recalled to base when it spotted something: three dots moving quickly along a winding dirt road across the desert, a trail of dust behind them.

The drone descended. Its cameras zoomed in. The pilots could see the dots were white bullet-ridden pick-up trucks travelling at about 140 kilometres per hour. They were definitely in a hurry and risked flipping over from the way they bounced off the surface. They looked like they had something to hide.

Each had four men at the back and two in front. They were armed with assault rifles. The vehicles and men matched the description of those who had been caught in a gun battle with US troops two days earlier. After several urgent messages and phone calls, the pilots got the order they had been waiting for.

Engage.

With a twist of his wrist, one of Eagle 3's pilots moved the joystick and the drone circled the convoy for a better angle. The control room was filled with officers, soldiers and other personnel anxious to see people die. Many of them went to church during the weekends and swore to observe the Ten Commandments and all of God's laws. Just not during an operation when they were about to kill suspected terrorists.

Eagle 3 lowered its nose and descended to 15,000 feet. The pilot controlling the joystick flicked several switches and pressed some buttons to get a clearer image of the vehicles and men on his monitor. They had to be absolutely sure these were terrorists and not members of a wedding convoy. There had been too many of those incidents. The Americans didn't need another one. Once it had been confirmed the men were hostiles, three trails of smoke streamed out of the drone after Hellfire missiles detached from its host to hurriedly greet their targets.

None of the vehicles' occupants knew that death was descending upon them at great speed. In the merciless heat, they were too busy shielding themselves from the sun to notice the three dark dots, slowly growing

bigger, hissing towards them. Clinging to the vehicles, they were looking down to breathe in as little sand and dust as possible. The men in the last vehicle cursed their friends ahead and wished their driver could overtake them instead.

Each missile wrote its own signature in the sky as it dropped from the heavens. The first one headed for the truck in front. Its driver and front-seat passenger were singing along to a song blasting from their MP3 player. It was their very own mobile disco. After barrelling down bumpy roads for more than four hours, they were almost at their destination—a village flanked by two mountains where two hundred of their brethren were gathered. They were just fifty minutes from the safe confines of the village when...nothing.

The six men in the first truck did not know they had died.

But their friends in the vehicle seventy metres behind had seen the ball of flame and dust mushroom that had shot out from the ground, then felt the shockwaves pass through their bodies as their truck shook violently.

They saw the lead vehicle break up into smaller pieces and thrown into the air.

The men in the other trucks shouted something and immediately guessed what could have caused it. Only one word came to mind—drone.

The driver in the second vehicle swerved to his left, deliberately driving off the road to avoid whatever had been stalking them. His four passengers were hurled around like dirty tools in a shabby toolbox but no one complained about their friend's efforts to keep them alive. They eyed their cargo of grenades and Claymore mines nervously. By now, their driver was fighting with his steering wheel like a madman as he careened left and right, struggling to control this wild beast that seemed to have a mind of its own on the undulating ground. If he had only known his efforts were in vain. The second missile, aided by satellite technology and a very reliable laser-guided system, had already locked in on them.

Boom!

A second explosion, another ball of flame and another endorsement for a "Made in America" product.

The truck flipped forward and executed 360-degree turns in the air before landing on its roof, the charred remains of some of its occupants

still trapped inside. The bodies of the rest were strewn across the desert like toys a toddler had grown bored of.

The third truck had veered to the right after the first explosion. The men had hoped whatever was tailing them would be distracted by the other vehicle headed in the opposite direction. They willed the missile to follow their friends instead. When they saw the second explosion, the four men in the back of the vehicle cocked their assault rifles and fired wildly into the air, like desperate gamblers with one roll of the dice left to throw.

Then, they noticed something peculiar above. It looked like a thin piece of cotton wool dancing in the sky. A silkworm growing in size and moving erratically and quickly towards them. They looked on in awe and, with their last breaths, truly understood the meaning of air superiority.

Back in that dark, air-conditioned control room, the words “target destroyed” were uttered three times.

Coldly, coolly and matter-of-factly.

Mission accomplished.

It was just another day at the office.

## 7

It had been seven hours since Tun had heard from his men.

He had refilled his pipe 12 times and glanced at his watch every few seconds while waiting to hear from them over the radio. It had remained mute and refused to speak. Eight of his men sat around him like obedient students at the feet of their teacher. Tun controlled his breathing, tried not to puff too quickly and looked stoically at the ground, as if the floor could tell him the fate of the missing. His men were usually punctual in reporting back.

Another glance at the watch.

There was so much smoke in the room men started coughing and some stepped out. The horizon gave no indication human life existed out there. Tun didn't like the idea of their travelling in broad daylight with drones

floating in the wind. But his lieutenants argued they could not wait till nightfall for the package to be delivered to them.

Those damn drones.

He had lost dozens of men and vehicles to the silent winged terrors. Tun had never felt more mortal than when trying to evade one of those unseen executioners. He couldn't afford to lose this latest group of soldiers. Not with what they were carrying. If they were to fall into the wrong hands...

Another glance at the watch, another puff of the cheek. He shook his head and had to accept the fact they were either dead or had been captured. If that were the case, Tun hoped they were dead. All 18 of them.

“They'll call us,” said one of his men.

No one else agreed with him.

“I need to be alone,” said Tun.

His men looked at one another, then got up and left the room.

Tun thought better when he was alone, when he wasn't surrounded by stupid people.

He put his pipe down after snuffing it out.

Then, he thought about his family and the day he lost it all.

## 8

The sun blooded the sky as Tun woke up to pray. His wife and six children were still sleeping on their farm. After praying, Tun would take the goats out to graze, return five to six hours later, have his lunch, then sit cross-legged under a canopy to enjoy his pipe. His wife, Mira, would nag him for smoking so much. He would smile at her then continue smoking.

He usually dreamt of Mira in her favourite blue floral silk dress. The one he had saved up for months to buy. The one that made her the envy of her friends, who wished their husbands had bought them beautiful dresses too.

Tun spoke only when necessary. And he usually spoke via his actions. Buying that dress was his way of saying “I love you”. He “said” it when

he put his arm around her waist, when he helped her carry heavy vases or when he protected her and the goats from a wild dog.

Tun never raised his hand against his children. His death stare and deep, low voice were enough to convince a potentially disobedient child to stick to the straight and narrow. Wandering off the path would be pointless. They had learnt that from a very young age.

Little Aisha was the younger of his twins—the baby of his family, only three years old. Hanna, her older sister by two minutes. Six-year-old Amri, his fourth child and the younger of two boys. Moon, his eight-year-old princess who loved to twirl around their home, dancing to the music playing in her head. Then, there was Sufi, the stern one in the family. Tun always felt she would grow up to be a civil servant, a school's discipline mistress or a diplomat. No one could remember the last time she smiled. Or if she had ever smiled before. It seemed as if nothing could make her happy. No one could figure her out. She'd shut them out when they spoke to her and she had done the same to her siblings. Was she proud, rude, arrogant or just a 13-year-old trying to fool the world into thinking she was tougher than she actually was?

Lastly, there was Hari, his eldest at 16. The young man was showing a lot of promise to be a leader of men. Hari reminded Tun of himself when he was younger. But Tun was pleased Hari was growing up to be a better version of himself from the way he walked, sat and spoke. There was an air of confidence in this boy Tun had not possessed at that age. He couldn't wait to see what kind of man Hari would grow up to be and the footprints he would leave in Afghanistan's journey out of its bloody past.

It was a simple life and Tun didn't need anything more. He felt he owned the kingdom of God and all its riches.

The day his old life ended began like any other.

The sun rose and Tun rose with it. He ate his breakfast, said a prayer then took the animals out, an hour's walk to the hills. He sat under a tree, taking shelter from the scorching sun while his goats ate lazily in front of him. Tun took out his pipe and smiled at it. No risk of being nagged at here.

Then, he felt the ground shake.

Earthquake, he thought, and waited for a heartier rumble. It never came.

Tun shot up and clutched his staff, bending his knees slightly, waiting to run home if the earth groaned again. The birds that had been chirping in the branches above suddenly took flight. The earth held its breath. Nothing moved except the gentle breeze. The goats stopped grazing and looked up, chewing whatever they had in their mouths while staring blankly ahead. Tun was breathing heavily and glanced nervously around for wild beasts, brigands or American soldiers. The US troops had been seen conducting patrols and surveillance operations in the area and he had often prayed he would never have to come face to face with any of them. Everything looked normal except for that finger of smoke on the horizon where his home was. Tun tried to make sense of what he was seeing and refused to believe what his brain was telling him.

“No!”

Dropping his staff and abandoning his animals, Tun ran home stumbling. His thoughts went to Mira and their children. Images of charred bodies kept taunting him and he tried desperately to block them out. But they were stubborn tenants in his mind.

Tun jumped over boulders, negotiated sharp bends and ran across shallow streams. And yet it seemed he was nowhere near reaching home. His sprint soon became a jog as the heat and uneven ground took its toll on his body. Perspiration caused his clothes to cling to him like a second skin. Whenever he stopped to catch his breath, he looked up hoping the plume of smoke had disappeared. But it lingered on.

With his arms flailing, Tun ran into trees, got scratched by twigs and shrubs, tripped over tree roots and was startled by his own shadow on several occasions, mistaking it for wild animals. His ankles and arms were bleeding and his fingers were swollen and sore from digging into the ground while attacking steep slopes. Perspiration stung his eyes. His inner thighs burnt from abrasions caused by his sweaty skin rubbing against his clothes that somehow felt like sandpaper.

Finally, he was standing in front of his home, or what was left of it. Flames were still burning and dead goats were lying around. Patches of grass were scorched black and the huts that once stood near the well were gone. Tun struggled to call out to his family. But the words wouldn't come.

He didn't know who to call out to first.

"Mira?"

"Hari?"

"Sufi!"

"Mir..."

Tun sobbed and his legs buckled under him. Smoke enveloped him, the stench of burning flesh wrapping itself around his oily body. He gulped in mouthfuls of air. Tun tried to command his legs to lift him but they disobeyed him. Perhaps they knew he was afraid of what he might find. He could feel the heat breathing underground, as if waiting to burst through the surface to claim another victim. Everywhere he looked, he could feel death's presence.

Tun got up and dragged his feet across the ground.

His mouth was open and still nothing came out. He walked around like a man with a deformity, no longer lord of his limbs. He wanted to cry out to God for help. But he knew God's answer would be "no". A crater sat in the middle of the compound where his home used to be. Rubble and bricks were strewn all over, sharing the ground with pieces of burning furniture, clothes and charred cutlery. The trees he had known since the children were born had vanished. Those that remained stood with singed branches and burning leaves, looking at him accusingly. As if blaming him for surviving this attack unscathed.

Then, something caught his attention. He thought it was one of his children's footballs. But it had hair. And eyes, a mouth and ears. It wasn't one of the twins. It was too big. It wasn't Mira, it was too small. It was Moon, his little princess who loved to dance, twirl, sing and jump. Her eyes were open. Her hair ruffled. She would not have accepted the condition her hair was in if she had been alive.

She might have died while performing one of her moves. The rest of her body was nowhere to be found. He knelt down to stroke her cheek and cradle her head. He rocked gently from side to side as he used to when carrying her as a baby. First a whimper, then a moan, then a piercing wail from the depths of his soul.

The sun was setting as if hiding from Tun.

He gently placed Moon's head down to see what else he could find before it got dark. The wind was blowing sand and ash into his face. He found more pieces of debris—chairs and pots, parts of his roof and the bodies of two of their dogs, whole but dead. Hunching, Tun struggled to see past his tears and the smoke as he walked gingerly around. Then, he stopped.

Something bent was on the ground. A little arm, caked in blood and dirt. It belonged to one of the twins, Aisha. He could tell from the birthmark, a small patch of red like a burn mark.

Tun was again on his knees. He gently lifted Aisha's arm and went to the spot where he had laid Moon's head. He put the arm down. Sisters reunited.

After scouring the area for another hour, Tun gave up hope of finding any survivors or body parts. He walked to a nearby stream to wash himself and to have his first drink.

He didn't know how long he had knelt in the waters as he buried his face in his hands.

All he knew was he had to find out who had killed his family. The embers had died down as Tun picked up from the ground pieces of food that once belonged in his kitchen and ate them. He widened his search for clues and covered the outskirts of the land where his home once stood. What had hit his farm was obviously either a bomb or a missile.

Then, something about five metres away caught Tun's eye. It did not look like something he owned. It was the tailfin of a bomb. A very big bomb. The tailfin was about the size of his torso and Tun needed both hands to lift it at a right angle to examine it. At least one question had been answered. He knew what had killed his family. His fingers went over the metal object as if reading it for clues. His eyes found the three letters first before his fingers went over them—U-S-A.

"Why?"

Tun let the tailfin fall to the ground.

Questions flooded his mind. He bowed his head and asked for guidance to find his way to The Cell.



## 9

In the desert, the wheels of the last truck had stopped turning. Everything around them was still. The distinct whir of propellers could be heard growing louder as three Black Hawk helicopters cut through the clouds, each descending near a burning vehicle. Eight American Special Forces soldiers jumped out of each chopper to secure their perimeter in prone position, their assault rifles trained ahead ready to put holes into anything that resembled a threat. The drone was still lurking in the skies above protecting the men. There was nothing around to trouble them. Two soldiers from each group then raced forward to search the wrecks.

It would have been better to not destroy the vehicles to increase the chances of retrieving documents, thumb drives or maps intact. But after the last costly firefight, American commanders in Afghanistan decided to shoot first, search later.

The first missile had hit its target dead centre, leaving nothing behind of its occupants. The fire took care of the rest of the vehicle and there was nothing to recover.

The other two missiles at least left something for the soldiers. In the second truck, they found what was once a man. He was the front-seat passenger with the top half of his body missing. Only his bloodstained legs remained, the boots still on. It made even the hardened soldiers turn away in disgust. Around the vehicle were rifles, limbs, torsos and chunks of the truck strewn among the cacti and rocks. A rattlesnake slithered past, startling the soldiers who pumped several rounds into it. Vultures arrived and joined the drone in making circles in the air. The men checked the vehicle, opened its glove compartment and found nothing valuable.

Their hopes were now pinned on the third truck. They found the front two occupants still strapped in their seats. The vehicle's horn was blaring away as the driver's limp body rested against the steering wheel. The passengers were found several metres away, bodies still intact but blood

oozing out of every opening. One of the American soldiers opened the driver's door and pushed the body back when it fell out. Silence. He saw something that made him smile. Next to the driver, a brown leather sling bag looked like it was about to burst. The operative took it, walked away from the truck then placed it on the ground.

"Got something," he radioed back to his superiors.

"Brown leather bag. I'm opening it now."

His commanders back at base leaned forward to hear him describe his find.

"Documents, pieces of paper, maps, packets of cigarettes, a lighter, notepad, pencils, markers...hold on. Got something else here. A thumb drive, power bank, portable hard disk and a brown file with more pieces of paper in it.

"It's got one word written on it—'Singapore'."

## 10

"It's cancer. I'm sorry."

Four words that felt like a death sentence but delivered in a voice devoid of emotion in Doctor Wong's office.

Sandra was four months pregnant and had two choices: do chemotherapy with a chance her foetus might die; or do nothing, give birth then die.

"Not much of a choice, doctor. You're a real doctor right?" said Sandra waiting for a comeback.

"Sandra!" barked Henry.

Doctor Wong let it slide. He had heard worse from other patients before. They were no longer around to insult him further.

"That's all right, Mr Tan," he said. "It's a very difficult time for your wife so I'm sure she didn't mean what she said. Cancer doesn't give us many options. Whatever we choose, somehow it'll never seem it's the right decision. Cancer always wins, I'm afraid. What we can do is to make the right decisions that will give us the best chance to fight it for as long as we can. In your case, if you really want this child, which I think you do, you

know the choice you have to make.”

“Cancer always wins” echoed in Henry’s mind.

Sandra hated to lose.

Henry knew he was supposed to say something, like ask an intelligent question or offer words of encouragement to his wife. But nothing came out.

His mind was a blank and he felt stupid and helpless. Or was it hopeless? He sat in his chair, rested his arms on his knees and stared at Sandra’s X-rays as if he understood what they meant. As if that would make a difference and save her life.

“I’ll skip chemo.” The defiant voice made both men and the nurse start.

“What? Wait, wait, wait,” Henry said as he got up from his chair. “You don’t know what you’re saying. You’re emotional, you’re not thinking straight, you’re trying to be a hero. You’re...”

“Going to save my baby. *Our* baby. I choose life, Henry. I choose my baby’s life. I feel it growing in me. I *feel* it. It wants to live. It’s begging me to let it live. How can I not love it? How can I let it die? It’s something I have to do. I could have been a better person. I could have been a better wife. And I’m sure I’d make a great mother, if I had the time to prove it. But I don’t. This is my chance to make up for all the wrongs I’ve done. There is no greater gift that a man can give than to give up his life for his friends. That’s what the Bible says, right? I need to do this. So, doctor, you can give my chemo appointments to someone else.”

Henry didn’t know who was more shocked—the doctor, the nurse or him. Doctor Wong pursed his lips waiting for the awkward moment to resolve itself. He played with his black Montblanc ballpoint pen and nodded pensively. The nurse was standing in the same spot not sure whether she should stay or go. Everyone waited for Henry to react.

Henry looked at Sandra hoping she’d decide what to do next. What did she mean when she said she could have been a better wife? Did she steal his money, throw away some of his Lego sets? She even quoted the Bible. He had never seen her read the holy book. He didn’t even *know* they had one at home. And what wrongs did she commit? How many? And against whom? Henry didn’t recognise this woman who was keeping secrets inside. He wondered what else she had not told him. He decided

he did not want to know. In a morbid sense, he wouldn’t mind if she took her secrets with her to the grave.

Sandra had decided to save their child. Henry knew there was no use convincing her otherwise. It would be like trying to convince a lioness to give up her kill.

They spent several more minutes in the doctor’s office discussing the risks involved in not choosing chemotherapy, then waited outside to pay the bill. They didn’t speak while waiting for their number to be called and the silence followed them on the drive home.

He watched Sandra stroke her tummy as she walked into their bedroom and closed the door behind her. It was 4pm and it would be dinner soon. Henry knew he shouldn’t be getting angry with a cancer patient. But he resented Sandra for that show-and-tell in Doctor Wong’s office. If she had to die and their baby die with her, he’d be okay with it. He’d get over them. That was how angry he was.

They avoided each other till dinnertime, absent-mindedly stirring their bowls of instant noodles with their chopsticks. They were grateful to have their smartphones. Another excuse to avoid the unpleasant. At bedtime, they lay on opposite sides, their backs facing each other. Sleep eluded them. An invisible line had been drawn down the centre of their king-sized mattress that had seen much action over the years. But tonight, they could sense the uneasy quiet in their room, like a formless being standing at the foot of their bed.

This dragged on for another five days. On the fifth day, when Sandra returned home from work, the smell of bacon chowder soup, her favourite, rushed out to greet her. Henry was perspiring all over as he stirred the potion of leek, garlic, onions, bacon, chicken broth and potatoes generously drizzled with extra virgin olive oil. After a healthy sprinkling of salt and pepper, dinner was served. A selection of breads sat on Henry’s favourite wooden chopping board with two saucers of extra virgin olive oil next to it.

“Hungry?” he asked.

Sandra licked her lips and felt her tummy rumble. Henry heard it, too. They laughed.

“Come, let’s eat. I know how hungry you get when you don’t talk for days.” Sandra tilted her head and rolled her eyes.

“Really? You just had to ruin the moment, didn’t you?”

They sat, ate and talked for hours.

That night, a truce was called and the invisible line on their mattress disappeared as it again bore witness to more action between the once-warring factions.

## 11

It was time.

After months of retching into toilet bowls, Sandra was ready to welcome Sally into the world.

Sandra and Henry had been monitoring Sally’s growth and, from the monthly scans, could see she was developing well considering the circumstances.

At every appointment with the gynaecologist, they bombarded the doctor with questions. Is the baby normal? How is she developing? Will she get cancer? Is she alive?

As Sally grew stronger, Sandra went the other way. She had lost 18 kilograms as the cancer cells continued to wage war on her body. While her tummy was round and firm, her face was sunken, her eyes solemn and her elbows more prominent and pointed. Her skin had shrivelled up and was turning yellow. She looked like an old lady in a sepia-toned photograph. Henry thought she resembled a prisoner of war from World War II. She had hardly any fight left in her. The cancer was winning. Victory was close at hand.

They checked into the hospital on her due date. She had to be pushed into the building in a wheelchair and she wore an oxygen mask connected by tubes to a tank behind her. She sounded like a scuba diver when she breathed. Henry couldn’t look at her and was ashamed he felt that way. She didn’t look like she could last the night. Her delivery was scheduled

for 9am the next day and he was weak with worry. They were so close to saving Sally. But if he could save one of them, who would he choose? He hated himself for not ever knowing the answer.

“Do I still look pretty?” Sandra asked Henry, with her mask still on, as she lay in her hospital bed after they had filled all the administrative forms.

“Like the day we met in the bookshop,” smiled Henry.

Sandra closed her eyes and smiled. That was how she laughed these days.

There was still 15 hours more to go before Sandra’s C-section. But about 7pm, one of the monitors began beeping. Henry, who had been trying in vain to sleep on the uncomfortable and hard foldable bed in the room, sat up at a right angle and tried to understand what the machine was telling him. Sandra was either still sleeping or was already dead. Nurses barged in followed by a doctor. He checked her pulse and her heartbeat and, without even looking at anyone, mumbled something which made the nurses detach Sandra from the machines before lifting her to a stretcher that had been wheeled in.

They whisked Sandra away. A nurse remembered Henry was also in the room and turned to him.

“Your wife’s heartbeat is weak. We can’t wait till morning. We need to get the baby out now. Wait here and we’ll call you once it’s over.”

Another nurse came into the room and told Henry which operating theatre they’d be in. Operating theatre. Not delivery room. Because of the severity of the situation, it had to be done there and they couldn’t allow him in.

For three hours, Henry paced outside the OT, getting in people’s way. He fidgeted in his seat crossing one leg over the other repeatedly, stared blankly at his smartphone, held a book he wasn’t reading and kept going to the toilet.

One life or two?

He didn’t know how many he would lose that night. He hoped Sandra would have the strength for one final push and would still be alive for him to kiss her goodbye.

“Mr Tan?” a voice called out.

“You can go in now,” said the nurse, who had stepped out of the OT

still in her all-blue garb, wearing her mask and cap.

“Your daughter’s fine.”

He nodded weakly at the nurse, aware she had not mentioned Sandra nor offered him her congratulations. The OT was colder than the waiting room. It felt like life didn’t exist there.

He heard the hum of the machines keeping his wife alive and monitoring her condition before he saw them. He focused only on the human form lying on the operating table. She was draped with a blanket and he could see she was breathing. A nurse was standing on the left side of Sandra where a bassinet was. Something was moving in it. It was wrapped in a towel like a spring roll and its eyes were closed. Henry fell in love with her instantly.

“Hey there, little one,” he whispered. “It’s Daddy.”

He picked her up as the nurses left the room so this new family could be alone. They bowed their heads, knowing one of them would not leave the hospital alive.

Sandra was barely awake and looked sicker than before. It was clear she had given everything to the delivery and had no more energy left for herself.

“Hey,” Henry said. “You did it. Oh my gosh, you did it. I’m so proud of you. She’s beautiful. She looks just like you.”

Henry noticed a tear roll down Sandra’s face and didn’t know what to say. What do you say to a dying mother who knows she’ll never see her baby grow up?

Sandra shuddered, and it startled Henry. He put Sally down. The look on Sandra’s face made Henry feel something he couldn’t describe. It was a mixture of fear and shock and it made the room feel much colder than it actually was.

“What? What dear?”

“Henry...”

Sandra was gasping and sucking huge mouthfuls of air. This was it, Henry thought. She’s going. I’m going to lose her now.

Sandra’s chest was heaving and she was desperately trying to get the words out. Henry bent down to put his ear next to Sandra’s mouth.

“What? What is it?”

He could feel her breath on his left ear as she whispered her last three words.

Then, her body relaxed forever. Henry didn’t move. Now, he was the one struggling to breathe. He stood there with his arms resting on the operating table trying to prevent himself from falling over. His head bowed, the tears flowed. A lot of things made sense in that moment and many more didn’t. Then, he looked at Sandra and stopped crying. Her eyes were open, so was her mouth. She looked grotesque, like a victim in a horror movie. That was not how he wanted to remember her.

The medical staff in the adjoining room had been observing them discreetly and some were weeping quietly. They had not heard what Sandra had said to him. But they assumed he had been crying because he was a new father and a widower. Henry composed himself, took a deep breath, straightened his body and promised himself he would not fail Sally. Walking over to the bassinet, he scooped Sally up carefully then walked over to Sandra.

He stared at her with contempt.

Putting his face next to her, he whispered, “I hate you, too.”

## 12

Rahim remembered the day 9/11 happened. He was just three months into the job at ISD. He had been packing up and stuffing his laptop into his haversack, ready to go home, when he noticed a mass of people deserting their desks, drawn towards the TV screens in the office.

His desk was at the end of the room, behind a pillar with a fire extinguisher clinging to it and next to the emergency exit. From there, he stood up to try to make out the images that had interested his colleagues so much. He walked towards them, past neglected desks with open drawers, not believing what he was watching on TV. He could first make out two tall buildings and a thick plume of smoke billowing from one of them. At the bottom of the screen, beneath the newscaster who was talking animatedly, were the words: PASSENGER PLANE CRASHES INTO WORLD TRADE CENTER.

Rahim had wondered if it was the same World Trade Center terrorists had attacked in New York in 1993, when they detonated a truck bomb in its basement. If at first they don't succeed...

Even veteran ISD officers were shaking their heads, some with their hands to their mouths, others with arms folded. Phones at their desks were screaming away but no one bothered to answer them.

"Terrorist attack?" asked one.

"Probably an accident. How could anyone crash a plane into the World Trade Center?" said another colleague. "Impossible."

"Yeah, has to be an accident. Like that one in the Netherlands which crashed into a residential area," a voice near them offered.

As they traded theories and expert opinions, they all let out an almighty "Ohhhhhhh!"

A dark winged object had slammed into the second tower, causing a fireball to balloon out of the building as flames shot out from the other side.

"Did you see that?!" someone blurted out.

Everyone did.

"Two?"

Those who had been planning to go home unpacked their bags, hooked up their laptops again and prepared to get back to work.

"The world's coming to an end," someone else muttered.

At that moment, no one was inclined to disagree with her.

The collapse of the Twin Towers changed mindsets that day. Everyone at ISD had already been working on the assumption that, sooner or later, Singapore would also be attacked. As shocked as they were by what they had witnessed, those who had been at ISD long enough were quietly impressed with the masterminds behind the strikes. To conceive such an idea was daring enough. To actually pull it off was sheer genius.

Rahim learnt an important lesson from the terrorists that day.

Never be limited by your imagination.

## 13

By the time Tun staggered into the nearest village four days after his home had been destroyed, he was hungry, exhausted and without hope. He looked and smelled like a beggar, the stench from his body clearing the path in front of him. Even other beggars avoided him. He went from stall to stall pleading for food and water, and was shooed away each time. He was bad for business.

He tried to steal scraps of food from a pack of dogs that barked at him angrily. But even they were not immune to his smell and trooped off in a disgruntled manner. Pleased with his victory, he scooped up whatever he could and crawled to the nearest alley so his shame would not be played out in public. Finding a secluded corner on a quiet street, he leaned against the wall of a two-storey building and wolfed down the spoils of his victory. He wasn't sure what he was eating, but it tasted good. When he had finished his meal, he allowed self-pity to overwhelm him again, and he cried. He prayed God would take him there and then. It was the least He could do.

Tun felt he did not belong in the land of the living. He heard a squeaking sound to his left. A rat. A grey ball of fur and it looked delicious. If only he had the strength to catch it. All he could do was stare longingly at it like an immobilised Goliath next to a pesky David.

Then, Tun noticed movement a short distance away. Two men were walking towards him, talking animatedly as they moved their hands about. Tun could barely move his head and eyeballed them like a paralysed man.

One was tall, had broad shoulders and a long, thick beard, and wore a grey tunic. He looked like an influential preacher or a rich and prominent businessman. The other was two heads shorter and slightly plump, and also had a long, thick beard. He looked like an administrator or treasurer. A corrupt treasurer. He was agreeing with everything the tall man was saying. Tun did not expect them to help him. By now, he was used to rejection.

But the pair stopped in front of him, pointed at him and continued talking. He was so weak and sleepy he couldn't catch what they were saying. Even the rat got bored and scampered off. Tun expected them to walk on by when they approached him, supported him by the armpits and hauled him to his feet. He was too weak and grateful to resist and felt apologetic about the smell.

Immediately, both men looked like they had regretted helping him when they turned their heads away. The tall one was about to puke. Tun could understand if they had decided to drop him there after realising this good deed wasn't worth it. But they continued dragging him several hundred metres to a waiting white Toyota pick-up truck parked on the other side of the village. It was guarded by three men in combat fatigues, wearing reflective Oakleys and carrying AK-47s. They straightened themselves, like palace guards, when they saw the tall man arrive. Tun was losing consciousness and wondered where they were taking him.

The guards helped load Tun into the back of the vehicle. Tun lay flat on his back in the pick-up. The short man jumped into the passenger's seat while the tall one drove. The ride was bumpy and the road seemed endless. Tun was bounced around and he struggled to stay awake. He could feel the base of the truck scraping against his spine, giving him a violent massage. The men at the back with him said nothing throughout the entire journey. He was grateful when deep sleep took him but felt dejected when he awoke to find they were still on the road.

It was night.

Stars sprinkled the cloudless sky and the bright face of the moon tailed them effortlessly. Tun felt cold. How long had they been travelling? Even the guards were sleeping, using their weapons to keep them from falling forward. Tun felt like throwing up several times. But there was nothing to vomit. Just as he was about to pass out, he noticed a change in movement. The vehicle was slowing down. Finally.

It stopped and Tun heard voices at the front of the vehicle. He heard the clanging of metal, like a chain being dropped and a gate being opened. The truck came to life again and lunged forward. Tun could see the edges of low-lying houses and buildings. Armed men were standing guard at the

balconies of some of these buildings. He tried to spot logos or flags but saw none. The vehicle travelled for several hundred more metres before stopping. The men jumped out, probably grateful to put some distance between them and the living carcass they had been travelling with for six hours. Two other men pulled down the tailboard and dragged Tun out.

"Ooh! Even the dead don't smell this bad," one joked.

"I wouldn't want to be around him when he's *actually* dead."

"All the more reason to keep him alive then," another said heartily.

Tun's body relaxed. He might make it through the night, after all.

The men supported Tun into a single-storey thatched hut. Inside, there were shelves fixed to the wall. Potted plants, books, bottles of medicine and unlit candles were arranged on the shelves. It was a dark room illuminated only by several lit candles scattered around. The two men dumped him onto the mat and Tun groaned in pain. He could feel whatever was in his soiled underwear hardening. He wished someone would change him. The men's voices died down. Then, silence.

Tun noticed a presence in the room. He tried to force his eyes open but, in the low light, all he could make out was a figure approaching him.

Then, darkness.

## 14

Tun felt clean. Somehow, he had fallen asleep filthy but woken up feeling and smelling different. Except for bedsores, he was robed in dignity once again. He didn't know how long he had been out—days, weeks, months—and felt sorry for the people who had cleaned him up. Strangely, he wasn't hungry or thirsty. He must have been fed although he couldn't remember consuming any food or drink. The room spun when he struggled to get up. He closed his eyes and waited for the room to stop moving.

"You're up," a woman said. The voice was so gentle it soothed his heart. Her big eyes, small face and sharp nose took him by surprise. She wore a white scarf over her head. Tun could tell she was a little fleshy in her tight,

light blue dress.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “Better?”

“Yes, thank you. Where am I? How long was I out? Who cleaned me?”

She laughed as she knelt next to him and blushed.

“So many questions. It’s only natural, I suppose, for someone in your state. The answer to your last question is I cleaned you. I’m Amita. It took me a while and I needed help from some of the other women. There was...much to clean.”

Tun wanted to curl up, hide his face and die.

“The answer to your second question is: you’ve been sleeping for two weeks. You were very weak, delusional and sometimes uncooperative when we tried to feed you. You kept talking in your sleep about your home, an explosion, a bomb, fires and your family. You mentioned some names. Mira. Moon. And a few others we couldn’t catch. Are they your family members?”

“Yes. They were.” It pained Tun to refer to them in the past tense.

“I see,” said Amita, who decided to change the subject.

“As to your other question, you’re in a village run by our leader, Akhbar. He was the one who brought you here. He found you in the street. He saved your life.”

“The tall one?” Tun asked.

“Yes. The tall one.”

“You said he was your leader. Leader of the village?”

“Yes, and of the group called The Cell.”

The Cell?

They had found him instead. It was a sign. It had to be.

He had heard of them and how they had repelled one attack after another from rival groups planning to add them to their respective organisations. The opposite had happened and it was The Cell who swallowed up their enemies.

“Can I meet him?” Tun asked. “To thank him. I’m Tun. And thanks for cleaning me up. I’m sure it wasn’t easy.”

Tun didn’t get to meet Akhbar for days. He was always off somewhere, travelling from village to village on some important mission or for meetings.

Tun stayed in the village because he had nowhere else to go. He had

decided he’d wait for Akhbar to return to thank him. In the meantime, he exercised and did his best to recover his strength. He ate, jogged and mingled with the villagers. He got to know them better and helped out in any way he could. A farmer, he tended their goats, irrigated their crops and played with their children.

As another village girl busied herself in a corner of the room, Tun confided in Amita—how he had met his wife, what he loved about her and about his children. That was the tough part. It was painful yet cathartic at the same time.

“There has been so much death in our country,” she said. “Every day, someone is losing somebody—a child, a parent, a husband or a wife. Blood is spilt daily. For as long as I can remember, our country has always been bathed in its own blood. Why? Even others want to join in our fight when it doesn’t even concern them.”

Tun thought of the Americans.

“What do they hope to gain from this?” asked Amita.

“I don’t know,” said Tun. “Nothing makes sense to me any more. The world has changed for me.”

Amita looked at Tun, who was staring blankly ahead. She studied the wrinkles on his face and noticed the scars.

She looked into his eyes.

There was no peace to be found there.

## 15

Tun busied himself in the village. He sat in on town meetings and listened to discussions on how the village was being run and the kinds of improvements that could be introduced. He suggested teaching the children Maths. But some of the village heads resisted and Tun lost that battle. A waste of time, they said. Tun felt the subject was important. His eldest son had told him Maths and Science were the solutions to their country’s woes.

His son saw possibilities. The elders saw problems instead.

He had hoped Akhbar would be convinced but he had not yet returned.

One thing Tun noticed in the village was a burnt mud house with a collapsed roof. Like the other houses, it was white. But three of its four walls had collapsed. Tun thought it strange this was the only house in the entire village that had been destroyed. Judging from the scorch marks, Tun guessed the fire must have started from the outside.

Something else unnerved him. A lock and chain on the main door that was still standing. Had they been placed there before, during or after the fire had started? Examining them closer, the burnt marks told him all he needed to know.

Each time he asked a villager what had happened, he was waved away or was greeted with silence. Once, when he walked nearer to examine the rubble, guards shooed him away. Tun wasn't sure but he thought he had seen human bones and burnt clothes among the ashes and charred wooden beams that had collapsed inside.

During the third week after his arrival, Tun was helping to mend some water pipes when he noticed excitement coursing through the compound. People were quickening their steps, kicking dust into the air while walking briskly towards the village centre. Men and women talked animatedly.

“He's here! He's back!”

Tun dropped what he was doing and followed the crowd. Trailing behind them, he saw about two hundred people gathered at the town square.

A convoy of four vehicles had just arrived. The horde surged forward, arms waved in the air and Akhbar's name was cheered in triumph.

When he emerged from the lead vehicle, there was pandemonium as men and women all wanted to touch his cloak as if by doing so, it would cure them of some ailment. Tun tiptoed and craned his neck.

Akhbar was an imposing figure. He resembled an NBA basketball player more than a preacher or terrorist. Even though he looked like a lumbering giant, he seemed to glide effortlessly as he walked. His followers had trouble keeping up with him.

He was never seen with a weapon. Perhaps it was deliberate to project a certain image—kind yet fearsome, gentle yet deadly.

A man of contradictions.

Tun waited for Akhbar to get closer before approaching him. He could feel the people's energy. It was easy to get swept away by all this euphoria. Tun was glad Akhbar was walking towards him. He had not yet spotted Tun, his line of vision blocked by the crowds as he waded through them flanked by two bodyguards carrying AK-47s and wearing ammunition pouches stuffed with magazines and grenades.

Walking closely behind Akhbar was the shorter man Tun had also seen in the street. His name was Syed, Akhbar's trusted lieutenant.

When Akhbar finally saw Tun, he smiled and stopped in front of him.

“Hello, my friend!” Akhbar shouted before throwing his big arms forward to hug Tun. Disappearing in the embrace, Tun could feel the warmth flowing from Akhbar's body to his.

“I see you are well. Good, good. We have so much to talk about.

“I'm sure you have many questions to ask and I hope you were able to find the answers to some of them while I was away. I'm tired. I've been travelling for many days. Let me rest first. Then, I will tell you why you are here.”

## 16

The next evening, Akhbar's men led Tun into one of the houses. This one was larger compared with the rest and had three bedrooms instead of the usual one. There was also a living room large enough for 12 people to sit comfortably on the floor. Tun had never entered this house before. He knew it was special as there were always two guards standing at its entrance even when Akhbar wasn't around.

Akhbar invited him in. It was just the two of them. A pot of tea and two cups sat on a tray that had been placed on a small coffee table. Both men sat around it and Akhbar poured his guest a cup of tea. His men closed the door behind them as they left.

“Come, drink.”

“Thank you.”

“How are you feeling now? Better?”



“Yes, much better. I’ve been wanting to thank you since I woke up. But you were out. So, thank you.”

Akhbar looked intently at Tun as if examining a new recruit and pondering over the potential he could bring to the group.

“When you were unconscious, I sat next to you, studying your face. I listened to you breathe and the stories you were telling while you were sleeping. A man usually tells the truth in his sleep.

“You can also tell a lot about a person from his breathing. I breathed as you did once, many years ago. When I saw you in the street, I saw myself. Like you, I was once lost, lonely and without hope. And when I found my way to this village, I found more people like myself. I was looking for guidance but there were no leaders. Everything was in a mess and there was no system. Everyone was waiting for someone else to lead them.

“So, I slowly organised them, delegated work for farming, security, looking after livestock, carrying out repairs to mend leaky roofs and pipes in people’s homes, and gathered the better educated ones to teach our children. I got every man, woman and child to contribute in whatever way they could so they would feel useful. I made them feel as if they belonged, as if they mattered. I gave them back their dignity, their pride and their self-respect.

“Their previous leader exploited them, ridiculed them, practised favouritism and cronyism, was corrupt and murdered those who resisted him. They lived in fear for three years under his rule. He allowed his guards to do whatever they wanted and, trust me, they did.

“Then, one day, I took over.”

“How?”

“I killed him. And his men. But I had help. I got the villagers to throw a party in their honour. They got drunk. The rest was easy. There were sixteen of them. The leader and his fifteen men.

“I got some of the villagers to get five canisters of kerosene from the storeroom and told them to lock the doors from the outside with chains and a big lock. I told them to douse the house with the kerosene. At first, they thought I was crazy. What? Kill them? Kill all of them?”

“You would think they would have rushed at the chance to kill these

savages, to put an end to their misery. But no, they froze. That surprised me. They had a conscience. I couldn’t believe it. After all they had been through, they couldn’t kill their tormentors. I told them they would never get another chance.

“Finally, they locked the door while the men were asleep and poured the kerosene on the walls. A woman came forward. She lit a torch and remembering what the men had done to her, threw it at the front of the house. The fire grew.

“By now, some of the men inside had begun to stir. We could hear, first, a scream followed by a second one, then many more. They were the screams of men who realised they were about to die. The same cries for help our women screamed, which they had ignored, when they were having their way with them.”

Tun’s tea was getting cold.

He was now sure those were bones he had seen inside the house. He thought of Amita.

“Amita. Did they...?”

“Yes. None of our women and girls were spared. But don’t worry about Amita, she’s handling it better than the others.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was the one who set the house on fire.”

## 17

The wolf that had slaughtered two of Tun’s goats was still on the loose. Judging from the paw prints Tun found among the grasslands nearby, it was the same beast.

Every day, for the past four months, Tun woke up at the same time to take the goats out to feed in that area.

The animal had noticed the pattern and profited from it.

Tun had set up traps and even took other shepherds with him to ambush the predator. But it had somehow managed to evade their attempts at capturing it.

Leaning against a tree in the midday sun waiting for a ghost to appear was tiring work. It was easy for Tun to get lost in his thoughts. He often dreamt of his family. It was only in his dreams that he could resurrect them to talk to them.

He had many conversations with Mira and they talked about their children and how they made them happy. Mira told Tun the dress he had bought her was getting a little tight. Just a little. Tun laughed. It had nothing to do with her overeating. Her body was merely changing, she argued. It happened to everyone. And she had the cheek to nag at him for smoking too much.

The twins were learning to read and write. They showed promise and Tun was sure they'd grow up to be teachers or healthcare workers. It was just a hunch. Aisha, the younger one, was always pretending to teach a class of students and scolding them when they talked too much. Hanna went around to her siblings and her parents to feel their foreheads for a temperature. Tun loved the way she put her left ear to his chest to listen for a heartbeat.

Amri was always with his football. He said one day, he would play for the national team. He had been practising non-stop and was neglecting his studies. Mira wasn't pleased with that but Tun was a lot more understanding. Many kids got out of poverty thanks to football. Look at Messi and Ronaldo, Tun told her. One day, thousands would be chanting Amri's name. They would all be living in a big house in Europe thanks to Amri, who would be signed by a big-name club. Mira would shake her head and walk away.

Tun loved his many talks with Moon especially. She told him she had choreographed new dance steps and showed off her moves to him. She looked so graceful and seemed to float on air. Gravity had no control over her. She was untouchable.

Sufi was still as stern as ever and didn't seem to like being summoned by her father in his dreams. Folding her arms and throwing him a reproachful look, she was still out of reach in death as in life. Tun decided he would leave her alone permanently.

As for Hari, he looked more handsome than before. He had grown

another ten centimetres and was now taller than Tun. He told his father he wanted to be an engineer to take Afghanistan to the next level.

Tun smiled.

"Make me proud, my son."

Tun felt lightness in his heart whenever he had these conversations with his family and the hours flew by. That was how he made life more bearable.

But the villagers were not what they seemed and he found he couldn't look at Amita for long. He was afraid of her and was careful not to offend her. He was judging Amita no matter how hard he tried not to and it hurt him. That was why he was only too happy to take the goats out. But how long could he avoid her and the others? There was nothing else for him outside The Cell.

He closed his eyes and summoned his family again. He was still dreaming when he sensed something fly over him. Something so large, it made the earth shake. Before he could open his eyes, two more huge shapes thundered past and the ground beneath him shuddered.

Helicopters.

Tun's eyelids flew open and the rays of the midday sun blinded him.

"Hurry!" he thought.

He needed to see where they were headed so he could warn the villagers. He looked at the 18 goats and wondered what to do.

It was happening all over again. Tun abandoned the animals and took flight down the hill. His mind raced wildly as he slid down slopes and grabbed tree trunks to turn sharp corners, cutting his palms in the process. He thought of his family.

Tun reminded himself he was rushing to save Akhbar, Amita and the rest. Not his family. They were beyond saving.

Then, boom!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andre Yeo is Deputy News Editor at *The New Paper*, where he works with reporters and edits commentaries. He has been a journalist for 22 years. In 2014, he self-published his first book, *Home: 50 50-Word Stories to Celebrate Singapore's 50th Birthday*. He and his wife, a secondary school teacher, have three daughters and a son. *9th of August* is his first novel.



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“Playing on that very real fear and threat of terrorism haunting our shores, Andre Yeo’s *9th of August* paints a dark, startlingly unambiguous and uncompromising picture of what might happen when terror does strike, and why.”

—Cyril Wong, award-winning author of *The Last Lesson of Mrs de Souza* and *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*

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