

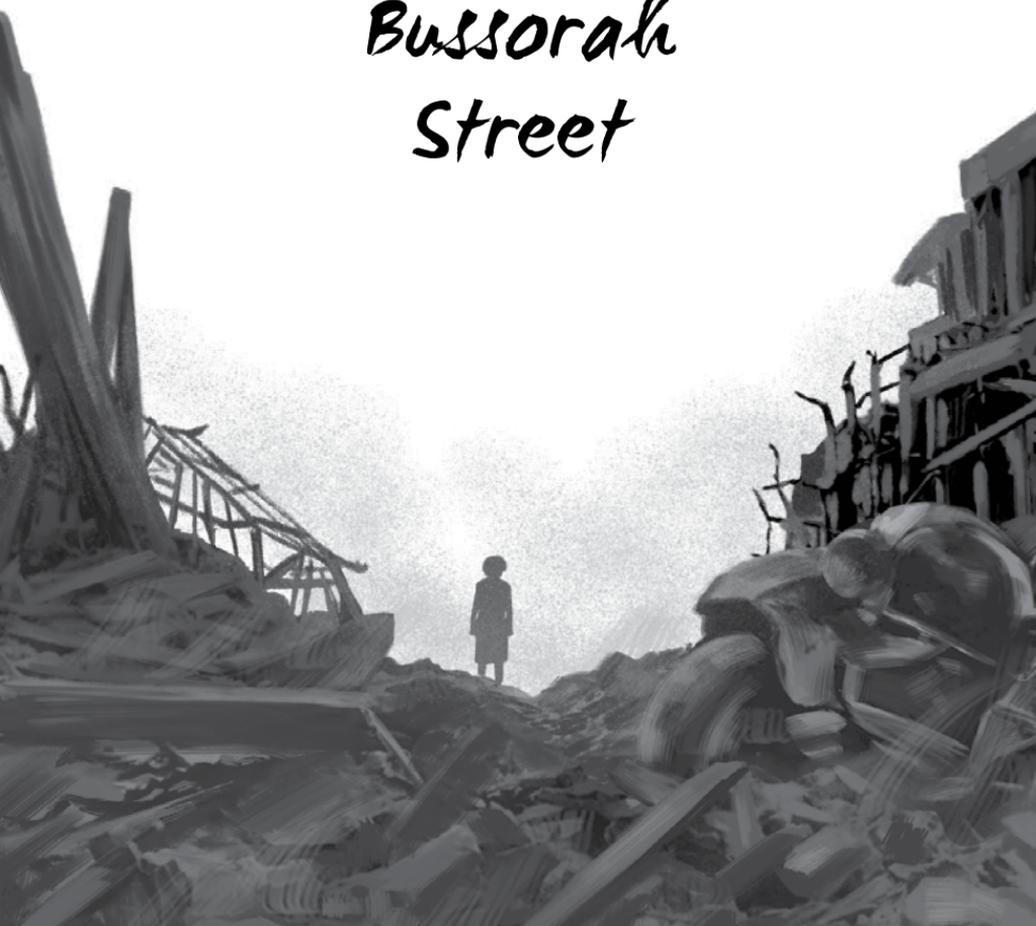


ESCAPE
from
BUSSORAH
STREET
A.K. ZAI

"This is the Peranakan story I have
been waiting to read all my life."

— Erni Salleh,
author of *The Java Enigma*

Escape from Bussorah Street



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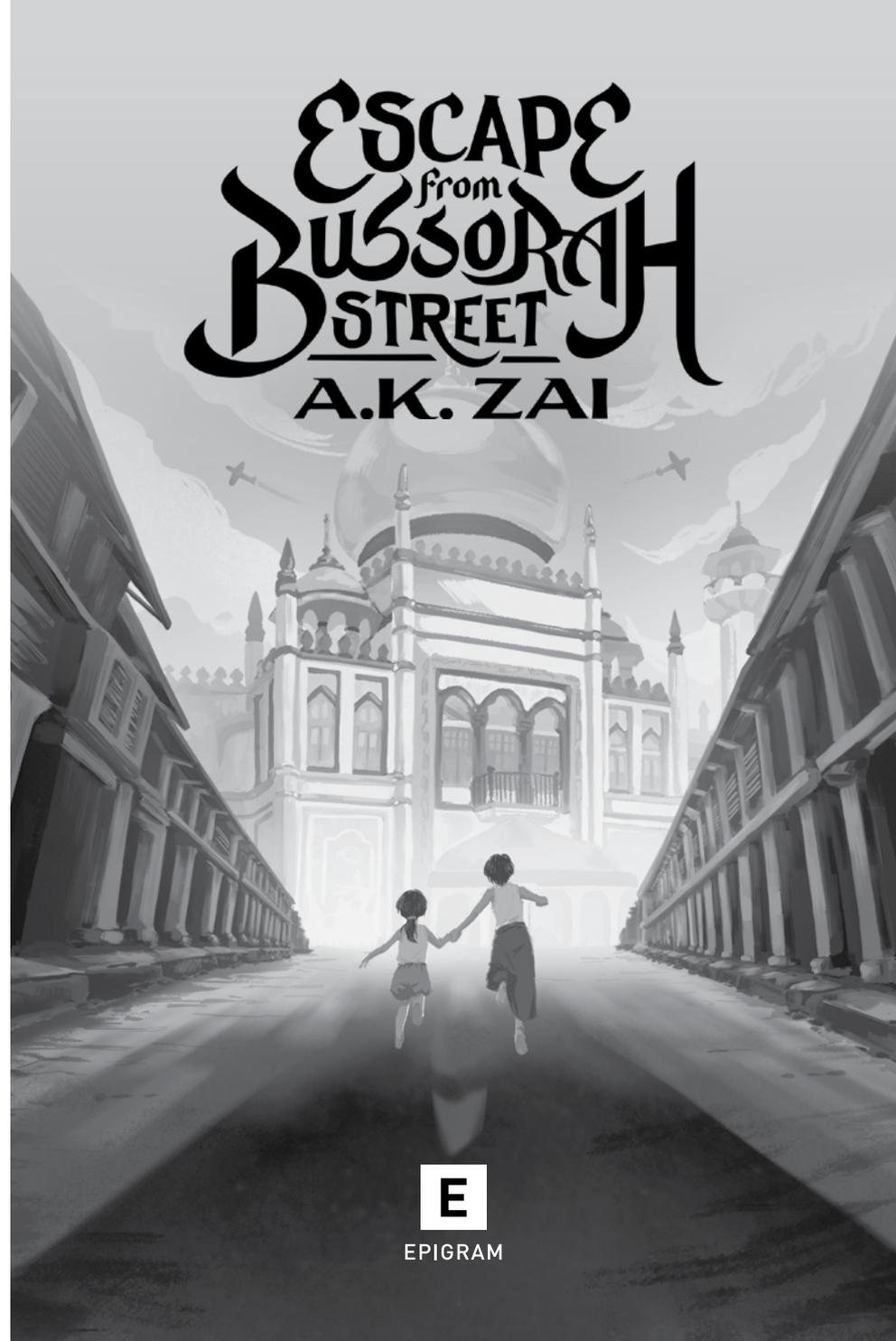
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ESCAPE from BUSSORAH STREET A.K. ZAI



E

EPIGRAM

for my parents

Into the Basement

4.15am, Monday, 8 December 1941

The blare of the air raid siren echoed in my ears, warning me to *RUNNN! RUNNN! RUNNN!* My heart pounded against my breathless chest, and I struggled to suck in short, rapid gasps of air. The entrance to Masjid Sultan was within my reach, but I forced myself to stop running amid my frantic neighbours bolting in. *I can't leave my family behind.* I turned away from the beckoning mosque to face our street: Bussorah Street.

Flanked on both sides with homely double storey shophouses, the lane flickered with oil light seeping through the shutters and windows. I could smell freshly cooked spicy mutton in long grain biryani rice. In the air too was the smell

of rice porridge being slow boiled in curry spices. I looked up at the inky sky for signs of warplanes—nothing. But my heart told me this was not a drill. Warplanes were coming. I blinked away tears.

My eyes searched for my sister Anna, whose little hand I had lost grip of; her seven-year-old legs must have given up trying to run as fast as mine, causing her to pull away. I saw her lying on the gravelled ground of our street while the surrounding chaos avoided trampling on her.

My big brother instincts kicked in. I adjusted my sarong higher above my waist, tightened the loose sarong knot, then took a deep breath and leapt towards my little sister. As I bent down to lift her up, I squinted, checking for signs of hurt. Her eyes told me she was in distress, though no tears flowed. Her mouth was wide open as if in a cry, though no sound came out. Her lips were distorted and swollen. I lifted her to her feet and brushed away bits of straggly hair from her face with my hands.

My mak caught up with us. Her headscarf had fallen to her shoulders, revealing dishevelled hair. From under her baju, her protruding stomach heaved in rhythm with her chest. On either side of her were my nine-year-old sister and my five-year-old brother. Both clung to her sarong. Their faces were covered in perspiration or tears, I couldn't tell. Though it was the early hours of the morning after a heavy downpour, we were sweating.

“Zak, quickly. Take your siblings. Go now to the mosque basement,” my mak panted. She pried Aisha and Yazid away from her and pushed them towards me.

“Where’s Bapak? Where’s Adik?” I asked about my father and baby brother. My mak didn’t answer. I gasped as I watched her run in the wrong direction—away from me, away from the mosque—back towards our house at no. 25 Bussorah Street.

The howl of the air raid siren was now joined by distant, multiple roars of low-flying aeroplanes. My annoying tears showed up again, this time accompanied by anger. *How dare the Japanese fly over us! Where are the mighty British soldiers? Why aren't they stopping the Japanese from entering Singapura?*

I looked up at the dark sky, wanting to scream, “GO AWAY!” at the top of my lungs, but my voice came out in a whimper and my throat let out a dry cough.

Ah Pek and Nyonya stumbled past me and my siblings to get inside the mosque. They each had their five-year-old twins in their arms. I heard Ah Pek yell at me, “Boy, come quick. This is real, not practice...” His voice tapered off. I took one last look at my mak running towards our shophouse before turning my back on her.

I shepherded my siblings into the mosque. The minute they scurried down the stairs to the basement, I slammed the door shut to the deafening roars. Silence followed.

In a clay lamp on a corner table, an oil light flickered, casting dancing shadows onto the walls. In the uneven darkness, the low ceiling and the brick walls of the basement seemed to have come closer together in a hug—to defend hidiers from seekers. I felt comforted, safe.

A series of sneezes and shudders by Yazid made me squat to pull his little body close to my chest. I could feel a draught coming from somewhere. I rubbed his arms with my hands to generate heat. My heart was pumping less wildly and my breathing gentler in rhythm with the movement of my hands.

Other than the corner table with the lamp, there was no other furniture. A half dozen stacks of tin pots, pans and lids took up space at an adjacent corner. Besides my siblings and me, only about twenty of us, including Ah Pek and Nyonya and their twins, were squatting on the floor or sitting cross-legged with our backs against the walls, resting on rectangular straw mats of various lengths and sizes.

I wondered where all my other neighbours were. There was not a lot of room in the basement, but far more people had crammed in during the drills we had in the previous months. Unlike then, none of us exchanged smiles now. Throughout the year of practising running for shelter, I had wondered why Ah Pek and Nyonya and a few of our Chinese neighbours would take shelter in a Muslim mosque. I found out later that it was because there were no Buddhist temples in my neighbourhood.

I had started to relax a little when suddenly, there came a

loud *BOOM*, and a sharp jolt to the ground beneath caused piercing screams to erupt in the basement. Startled, many of my neighbours jumped up. Panic gripped me, but I could not show my siblings I was afraid. All I could do was cower and force my siblings to do the same. Anna's and Aisha's fingernails dug into my arms. Yazid clung to my thigh and wailed, "I want to go home! I want to go home!"

The air raid siren blared again, this time like a trumpeting horn letting us know it was safe to come out. People started to scramble up the stairs to get out of the basement. I didn't want to get up; I didn't think my legs could move. As I watched my neighbours push their way out the door, I saw my mak push past them to come down. I jumped up in relief and waved my arm. "Mak! We're here!"

I was surprised when I didn't need to tiptoe to kiss her salty forehead; I had grown yet another few inches. No wonder my knees creaked when I moved them. "Where's Adik? Where's Bapak?" I questioned.

"They're safe in the house. Let's go home. I'll tell you later what your bapak was doing." Her voice faltered. She shook her head and frowned.

We were among the last to leave the basement. I walked barefoot as my siblings clung onto my limbs. Out along the street, oil light continued to flicker through the shutters of shops and homes. The sky was brown and ashy, while things on the ground looked and felt normal except for a strange

smell in the air. Something was burning. It didn't smell like charred food.

I saw Ramli, the newspaper reporter, out on the street with his tuan, Cheng, the owner of the newspaper printing business. Other neighbours stood nearby. The people who lived on my street were mostly Malays. A few were Indians, Chinese and Arabs, and they all spoke the Malay language. They spoke it with their different accents, maybe because of how they spoke their own language, but when we neighbours chatted, we understood one another.

Why didn't they take shelter in the basement? Did they want to see what Japanese warplanes looked like? And bombs being dropped?

My siblings let go of me to rush into our shophouse alongside our mak. Shophouses functioned as that—a shop and a house. Downstairs was mainly for buying, selling, making stuff; the upstairs was for a family to call home. My bapak needed only a third of our downstairs for his tailoring business, so much of no. 25 was home.

I went to stand next to Ramli. With downturned mouths and shaky voices, my neighbours repeatedly spoke of a possible bomb explosion nearby. The fears were confirmed when several panting Chinese rickshaw pullers ran up to us spitting out Teochew words at a speed faster than the frantic gestures of their hands. Most of the Chinese people I knew spoke Hokkien, but Cheng could speak both of these Chinese dialects.

He translated into Malay for the rest of us to understand

what the pullers were saying: Japanese warplane had dropped a bomb over Chinatown. Rickshaws damaged. Shophouses destroyed. Dozens injured. Scattered limbs and charred bodies everywhere.

I felt nauseous. My best friend lived in Chinatown.

* * *

I met Albert two years before the bombing in Chinatown. I had gone to Ah Pek's textile shophouse along Arab Street one morning to purchase cotton for my bapak to stuff his newly sewn pillows. We bought supplies from Ah Pek at a much lower price than anywhere else, and he, in turn, purchased custom-made items from my tailor father at a discount.

While waiting for Ah Pek to reappear from the back of the shophouse with my bags of cotton, I noticed an unfamiliar boy counting money on the counter beside the coin box. He didn't look up until Nyonya, Ah Pek's wife, whispered something to him and handed him a jar of sour haw fruit flakes. He came over and offered to share, as if he knew the dried fruit snack was my favourite.

Nyonya told us to go sit on the low bench outside and chat. "Talk, talk," she prompted. So we did. That was when I found out Albert and I were the same age, and that he and his parents had arrived from Riau Island to settle in Singapura.

We shared some other things in common as well: we both

spoke Malay and English but did not speak our fathers' dialects (his was Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, mine was Malayalam, an Indian dialect); we were both Peranakans (he, a Peranakan China, and I, a Peranakan India). Best of all, he loved playing sepak raga.

But he was a Christian and I, a Muslim; and unlike me, he was an only child, though he did have cousins—Ah Pek and Nyonya's little twin daughters. Albert's father and Ah Pek were cousins. Funny thing that one cousin was a Christian like the English and Australian people, while the other was a Buddhist like most other Chinese people.

Albert lived in Chinatown and went to Outram School. He would go to Arab Street to help out in the textile shophouse during the weekends and school holidays. On the days when I would meet up with him, we would brisk walk to Kota Raja Malay School for boys at Victoria Street to play sepak raga with my school friends.

* * *

"Oy, fool! Don't you know how to play sepak raga?" Samad taunted jokingly.

"Who's the fool?" Zul yelled out. To tease Samad further, he dilly-dallied and kicked the rattan ball from one foot to the other instead of kicking it back immediately to Samad.

"You're ALL fools," I threw in. Zul kicked the ball over to

me, and I let the ball bounce from one knee to the other, then high up into the air to come back down to my chest. I pushed my chest forward and upward at the same time, bending as far back as I could to catch the ball with my chest.

"SHOW OFF!" Jalil cupped his hands around his mouth for those words to be heard loud and clear.

"Ey, stop clowning around. Let's play ball!" Dolah yelled out in his high-pitched voice. That was how my friends and I would horse around before a match.

To play sepak raga, we needed only a rattan ball and just enough ground and air space for six players (three per side). Simple, yet challenging. Not only did we have to prevent the ball from touching the ground, but our hands could not touch the ball while we played.

It was my uncle, my Mamu Din, who had introduced the game to me. He even taught me how to make the ball by weaving strips of flexible rattan. I had mastered it in no time and was determined ever since to make my living from it. I was certain I could easily make rattan balls to sell for profit and convince boys from rich families to attend my training sessions. I couldn't wait to be done with school. I stayed only to be with my friends—and to be away from my bapak.

Acknowledgements

Back in the early 1970s, I was a thirteen-year-old reading *The Famous Five* and *Nancy Drew* when I dreamt of becoming an author. During this time, I was taught English and Literature by the eloquent Mrs Wong at Crescent Girls' School. After three years under her wing, I knew I had my dream in my grasp. Thank you, Mrs Wong.

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About the Author

A. K. Zai's love for literature began in the 1970s at Crescent Girls' Secondary School, where she was taught by an amazingly eloquent teacher, Mrs Wong, to think critically when reading and writing. Since then, Zai has been writing poetry, drama scripts and short stories for competitions and for pleasure. *Escape from Bussorah Street* is her first middle grade novel.

"A story about the tenacity of families
and the bravery to ask for help even
when society dictates otherwise."

— Erni Salleh,
author of *The Java Enigma*

**Twelve-year-old Zak dreams of
becoming a sepak raga trainer, but
his father insists that he learn the family
trade of tailoring. And he *really* isn't looking
forward to the circumcision ritual, a rite
of passage for all Muslim boys. Zak is
definitely not ready to be a grownup.
Then World War II reaches
Bussorah Street...**

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