

# A Better Day

Thoughts rise up in my mind like lazy bubbles. As they're almost within reach, they burst. I'm left questioning whether they were ever there. I try to remember, try to recall what I was just thinking, but it's evaporated and I'm left with the expanse of self-doubt and the cruelty of imagination. All at once my mind is too quick and too slow.

The heat is consuming. This much I know. Later it will cool and I'll be able to better think, better forget. I can't remember when my mind and body partnered this dance, but it's as certain as the sunset to repeat.

Things unknowingly mark the passage of time. I'm sure this is the fifth season of the insects. When we first arrived, their unrelenting buzz reminded me of when the TV at Jim's Tuckshop would be broken. The noise was so constant we had to strain to hear the variations and rhythms within each insect. Like a choir, waves of sound would rise and fall and I imagined each excitable creature preparing for a solo that never eventuated. Cicadas, we learnt. I imagined their colourful wings swirling through the sky and wondered if they too were so remote they'd found themselves stuck here. We'd paddled through such vast, uncompromising ocean on our journey, sometimes I was convinced that the Earth must have sunk.

Even when it wasn't working, the TV increased trade. The mere presence of a box of images, regardless of language or channel, made people feel safer; as if somehow the dangers of such a place were unable to penetrate Western familiarity. It was a piece of theatre. There wasn't even anyone called Jim.

I remember the first time I saw a cicada shell. A relic of dullness, beautiful in intrigue yet bitterly disappointing in allure. The colourless casing soon replaced the intricacies of how I'd first imagined this majestic insect and I can no longer trust what is recorded in my mind. Even my memory has dulled. And still I am envious. I imagine shedding my skin, leaving my existence behind and being free to disappear into the unknown as an entirely new self.

My brother's eyes come into focus. Did I roll over to face him or did he just lie down? It must be nearing evening. Soon, the most fearsome time of day will set in and its darkness will stretch out far beyond its hours. Towards the end of life at home, we all became scared of the dark. Each one of us tried to disguise the tension of not knowing what fate awaited as our sight lost the ability to adjust and protect. We'd given all we had to survivors from other villages that had been rampaged beneath a slither of moonlight. I'd crept up to my neighbour's house one evening, crouched under their kitchen window and overheard horrifying truths that I immediately wished I'd never been curious about. People had been locked inside their houses as they were burned to the ground. Families just like ours, slain. Girls as young as four were raped as their great-grandparents' throats were slit. Age was no protection from evil. But most survivors didn't stay long. Once their lives had been destroyed, there wasn't sense to be found in any of it. With nowhere to go, I think they moved on simply for the movement itself, as if somehow they could distance themselves from what had happened and carefully place miles and miles between themselves and the injustice of it all. But you can't outwalk your mind.

On the boat, I was the only one who wasn't afraid of the dark. I found the cloak of night-time comforting. When the storms came to threaten our survival, what difference would daylight make? We'd still have to bail out the gushing water with small, leaking buckets and attempt to save what little there was in the name of supplies. The rickety boat was so compact, we intimately knew every inch we could reach and instinctively did all we could to save each other. It would have

been no different if we were blindfolded. It went unsaid that our very lives depended on teamwork. We only knew about a third of the group when we boarded, yet within weeks each person had become as intuitively close as family. It wasn't until the interrogations months later that I realised I never even knew some of their names.

Since then even our own names have become lost. We're all just "boat people". The second word of our combined title swiftly disregarded.

Sometimes I look into my brother's eyes until eventually the rest of his features fade away and through his unblinking trust I see my sister staring back at me. Only a year older than me, she'd assumed the duty of my caregiver. I tried to emulate the same authority over our little brother but he never allowed it. I couldn't be the boss of anyone, not even myself. But my place in the middle was reassuring. No matter which way I turned, I felt secure.

This compass of sanctuary has long since shattered.

In this moment, my sister's gaze brings deep sorrow. I miss her endlessly. I find it difficult to breathe unless I press my chin to my chest, but doing so would break our gaze. We lost her during the flee. My parents blame themselves, but really we all lost her. My father, uncle and two neighbours armed themselves as best they could and returned to the village for her and many others, but all that could be found was wreck and ruin among slow-rising ash. For months, they scoured land in every direction but only managed to add more recruits to a fruitless search party for more and more disappeared loves. In the end, we had to move on. How long can you risk the lives of your two remaining children in a futile effort to find the third?

“Towards the end of life at home, we all became scared of the dark.”

Many of my friends were lost during the flee. It's hard not to think about what might have happened to them. What might still be happening to them? I know boys are often taken and trained as soldiers, brainwashed to tap into a terrifyingly present capacity within all humans to inflict evil. But the feared fate for girls is far worse. I used to pretend that my sister was murdered to put her out of misery in my mind, but such hope requires optimism in order to survive.

For years I wished to be as pretty as my sister. When the threat of rebel forces was nothing more than a rumour, our mother shaved off all our hair to make us less appealing. It seemed deeply unfair and drastic. The only thing worse than having lost my hair was seeing how wondrously my sister had transformed to appear elegantly older than her young years. How were we to know she had such a beautifully shaped head? Somehow her natural beauty had become her blameless flaw.

And so begins the dance of late afternoon. As the stifling heat slowly releases its grip, I try not to think of ugly things done to beautiful people. I urge myself to think of nothing and empty my mind to be a complete void, but this skill that comes so effortlessly during the unbearable humidity of day is now impossible. By nightfall, these agonising thoughts will be interrupted only by the gripping terrors I'll drift in and out of.

I smell the doughnuts before I see them. It seems the day is not yet finished and I am taken to the visitation area of the detention centre.

I used to look forward to seeing Kate. I believed in her reassurance that things would soon improve, that it was just a matter of time until we would be free to walk out of here and start new lives in the safety of Australia. The sincerity in her eyes tells me that she still believes her words. But I can't. I worry that if she stays too long I will drain the last

drops of her hope. I try to look away but I can't. With her curly red hair, bright green eyes and remarkable constellation of freckles, she is the most fascinating thing I've ever known. As always, she offers unreciprocated conversation and comforts me with her ease in my silence. I am once again given a notebook and some pens. Perhaps she hopes to capture my thoughts through these pages as my throat won't work, but we both know before I even accept her gifts that I'll give them to my brother when I trade him half his doughnut.

The visit is swift, and before long Kate is among a group of about a dozen officials, walking along the other side of the fence. She sympathetically looks towards our caged community; unrecognised prisoners of war. The rest of the group continue. They each display uniform name badges with photo ID as if the importance of such documentation hasn't already been stated clearly enough. In their still foreign society, this tagged proof is required even just to walk through the corridor to use the bathroom. Ironically, while the importance of identification was being painstakingly repeated to us during our interrogation, our names were replaced with assigned numbers that we don't need to carry around but cannot seem to forget.

As the officials shake hands and load themselves into various cars, a tall man drops to the back of the group. He mills around, gazing at the mass of our static lives while staring right through us with disinterest. He lights a cigarette and slowly breathes in the smoke alongside the spectacle that is our purgatory. My brother catches his eye. He's holding half a jam doughnut and half a sprinkle doughnut. Eventually my brother notices that he is being watched and cautiously approaches the man. I'm surprised to find myself feeling proud that some part of his childlike curiosity is still intact. Almost instantly, I regret that I've outgrown mine and follow him. For a rare moment I can be my brother's keeper.

The man looks down at my brother and with one word he lifts me up out of myself.

"Freeloaders."

I've never heard this word before, but I know free and freedom and this has to be something similar. Did I hear it correctly?

"You freeloaders," he repeats, flicking his cigarette towards me. I feel a rush through my veins as this man acknowledges us fully. Without thinking, I pick up his cigarette. Its hot touch is the proof I need that this is not a dream. The man lets out a short, sharp laugh before striding away.

All doubt leaps from my mind. We have been promised a thing of freedom from this important man. This is an entirely new experience. I look to my brother and see he has connected the same dots. Or perhaps he is mirroring my own expression, as seeing him makes me aware that my own smile has returned. We laugh and laugh as we have not done for years, tears rolling down our cheeks.

The man's voice stays with me. Over and over again I hear his promise. Freeloaders. You freeloaders. There is unmistakably hope in his words and confidence in his tone. I look to the shifting colours of the sky and I sigh relief as I realise I am no longer afraid of the night approaching. I am no longer afraid, because very soon we will be living a better day.

## AUTHOR RACHEL MUSGROVE

Rachel Musgrove loves to travel, write and drink cheap wine with top-shelf friends. She utterly adores her baby girl and the beautiful perspective only a child can show you. She is a supporter of UNHCR and deeply admires their tireless efforts to physically and emotionally help those in need.



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