

Creative Writing: Prose

THIRD PLACE:

The Citizen of Nowhere

Natasha-May Bowles, The Marist school

Tempestuous clouds gathered upon the horizon with menacing portent, vehement ink splashes obscuring the blanched sky. The rain fell in glistening sheets as it was expelled from the wrathful thunderclouds and plunged towards the litter-strewn earth with reckless abandon. The desolate landscape was wreathed by the acrid smoke of the flames which blazed ardently here and there, fires stoked in a vain attempt at survival. The barren land was ornamented with an endless expanse of drenched tarpaulin tents and ramshackle wooden shelters, a never-ending entanglement of grey hopelessness punctuated only by the vibrantly coloured graffiti emblazoned upon every concrete wall.

The girl surveyed her bleak surroundings through weary eyes. Her face still bore an indescribable trace of some ethereal innocence yet the haunted expression within her stormy green eyes hinted that she had witnessed the unspeakable. She could not have been more than fourteen years old but the events of the past year had mercilessly taken their toll upon her. Her slender frame betrayed her fragile state and her unrelenting battle against starvation. The pained dark shadows beneath her eyes spoke of her exhaustion and the privation that she had suffered. As she scanned the horizon, the delicate arms that she wrapped around herself were bruised and bloodied. Her tangled cascade of long, ebony hair and her caramel skin endowed her with a distinctive sense of foreign beauty, suggesting that she had once come from a land far away from the windswept shores of Calais.

The girl's name was Zeinah Ankia and her true home in the war-ravaged neighbourhood of Salaheddine, Aleppo lay 2,500 miles away from the Calais Jungle in which she had sought shelter. The Jungle was a sprawling refugee camp in which life was uncertain and she lived in perpetual fear of violence at the hands of her fellow refugees, or eviction by the French authorities. She had lived in the Jungle unaccompanied for almost a year and there were times when she believed that her struggle for survival in this dismal, forsaken place was even harder than in her own devastated home country.

She had begun the perilous passage to Calais with Ashur, her older brother, the previous summer. The harrowing scenes of their journey were indelibly imprinted upon her mind, an ineludible part of her consciousness during both her waking and sleeping hours. If she closed her eyes, she was back there with her brother in their flimsy dinghy, battling their way over the waters of the Mediterranean. Hiking across Belgrade with dwindling supplies, travelling by train through leafy fields of verdure in an unfamiliar place that Ashur said was called Hungary, glimpsing unknown, famous sights from the windows of the stifling, cramped bus across Greece.

Although he was only sixteen years old, Ashur had always demonstrated inspiring strength and vitality, a great determination to overcome the formidable obstacles that they faced together. Zeinah could still see his dark brown, laughing eyes, his brilliant smile, his tanned, weather-beaten face, the mess of chocolate-brown curls that covered his head, the great bear hug in which he used to envelop her whenever she had surrendered to the surge of terrified panic that rose within her when they were in danger. With him by her side, she had always felt a sense of security. Even when she was shivering with cold, or the debilitating ache of acute hunger ripped through her abdomen, she knew that she was not alone, that her brother would protect her with all that he had. Of course it was with his characteristic, selfless courage that Ashur had concealed from her that he was dying.

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On an oppressive, humid day during the previous June, the gas canisters, or *jarra*, had rained down upon the streets of western Aleppo. Zeinah would never forget the anguished screams of mothers cradling their infants, fathers throwing their battered bodies across their wives and children in a futile attempt to shield them from the blast, the horrific chaos as the streets they loved were bombarded with crude explosives. She remembered the blinding pain as some white-hot shard of debris seared across her back, scathing the skin between her shoulder blades. Even now, she could still taste the heady, metallic tang of blood in her mouth and feel her heart beating furiously against her ribcage, as the deafening crashes exploded against her eardrums.

Stricken with fear, she had kept her head down and crawled along the rough, heat-cracked pavement, through the mess of broken glass and rubble, across the threshold of a small shop that had been irreparably damaged by the hail of canisters. Her only chance of survival was to escape the second wave of the attack, the lethal *barmeela*, improvised devices packed with shrapnel which exploded at close range and ruthlessly killed hundreds of victims in every attack. She had spent the next sixteen hours curled up in a shaking, defenceless ball on the floor of the grocery store while the bombardment raged relentlessly, waiting for the end to come, for the moment when the shop would be attacked again and the pain would be over. Eventually she had passed out on the cold tiled floor, lying among the mess of crushed vegetables and spattered fruits that grotesquely resembled human gore. Yet somehow, unbelievably, she had survived and when she regained consciousness the streets outside were deserted.

She had tentatively picked her way through the streets, her head throbbing with an indomitable, shooting pain, still in a dazed trance. She tried to avoid looking down at the ground, at the disfigured, mutilated bodies of the people who had once been her neighbours. Sometimes her eyes wouldn't obey her command and they wandered to her feet, to the unearthly faces of the corpses that were strewn across the ground. Once, she came across the body of a small child, five or six years old, its small limbs twisted and contorted in pain. The child gazed upwards, all trace of youthful life devoid from its sombre, forlorn eyes. When she saw that his small fingers were curled helplessly outwards and understood that he had reached for his mother even in his moment of death, Zeinah could no longer bear her grief. Bending over, she had retched again and again as an irrepressible wave of nausea had suddenly risen within her.

Somehow, her reeling mind had steered her homewards and she had finally stumbled into the street where she had lived since she was born. As she stared along the length of the road that she knew so well, at first she failed to comprehend the sight that she was faced with. Her eyes informed her of the mass of smoking rubble, the venomous black plume of smoke that reached towards the sky, as if trying to defile even the azure blue of nature. She took in the charred brick and broken glass, the crumbling fragments of plaster, the foundations of buildings that were now starkly exposed to the sky, the burned-out, lifeless shell of the home that was all she had ever known. Unbidden, her mind turned to the inconceivable truth that she had tried so desperately to disprove. From beyond the barricade that her damaged mind had constructed as a last, feeble protective resort, the dreaded question emerged. Where were her parents and her four-year-old sister, Sabeen? An icy wave of dread washed over Zeinah as a high-pitched, keening sound, akin to that of an injured animal in pain, became audible nearby. The splintered pavement began to shift beneath her feet and the cracked walls of the ruined buildings swayed alarmingly. She suddenly got the nauseating sense that the animalistic sound of distress was rising from her own chest and yet still the question that could not be ignored beat against the back of her eyelids with a relentless, nightmarish rhythm. Where had Sabeen and her parents been when the attack began? As the answer came upon her in one shattering instant, the blistered ground rose up to meet her. They had been at home. Mercifully, she yielded herself up to the enveloping darkness and knew no more.

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Ashur had been less fortunate. He had been directly caught in the second wave of the attack as he left school and raced through the streets, desperate to get home and know that his family were alive. He had been thrown off his feet by the force of the first *barmeela* explosions. Shrapnel had torn through his clothes and shards of flint had embedded themselves in his skin. With no other shelter available, he had been forced to huddle in a doorway throughout the duration of the attack, until the explosions abated. He had some wild, impossible hope that aid might arrive when the bombardment ceased but of course he was wrong. No help came. Finally, he managed to summon up all of his strength and limp home, stopping every few metres to rest on the side of the road.

He was dimly aware that he had lost a dangerous amount of blood. A light grey sheen of sweat had broken out across his skin, and his face had a deathly white pallor. Yet the agonising pain faded into insignificance when he reached the street that he called home. He had barely managed a few steps along the road when he saw the young girl lying motionless upon the pavement, her long, jet dark hair concealing the side of her face. With a sickening twist in the pit of his stomach, he recognised his sister.

Sinking to his knees beside her, he had sobbed brokenly, believing that Zeinah shared the fate of the many others whose lives had been stolen during the attack. A few moments later, when she had stirred and murmured his name, the relief that had flooded through him was almost too overwhelming to bear. He had vowed in that moment that he would protect her life above his own, that she would survive the ruins of Salaheddine.

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Tears streamed down Zeinah's cheeks as she remembered the way Ashur had bravely hidden his wound from her. Even as the deep gash above his right elbow had become infected and the shard of shrapnel buried deep within had festered, she had never known the silent agony that he endured. From the moment that they fled Salaheddine, they had no access to medical facilities so her brother had washed his wound in clean water whenever he could and had always kept his sleeves carefully rolled down to hide the insidious infection that was slowly claiming his life. Even though the blood flowing through his veins was poisoned with every breath he drew, he clung to life with the most determined ferocity. It was his will to protect Zeinah, to escort her safely to Calais, that had allowed him to hold on to his rapidly diminishing life for so long.

By the time they had reached the camp, there was nothing that the medics could do to save him. So Zeinah sat beside her brother as he lay on the makeshift camp bed in the medical tent and his fever consumed him. As she gazed upon his wasted features, once so strong and proud, a crushing sense of bereavement choked her.

"Hey, don't cry for me," said Ashur, as he saw her eyes brim over with the tears that she could no longer hold back. "Maybe I'm the one getting the easy way out," he murmured, smiling warmly at her.

Zeinah knew that even now, as he lay dying, he was trying to make the hardship easier for her, to protect her from the pain of losing him.

"I'll always be watching out for you," he murmured softly, with his tender smile. His hand, once so robust and capable, struggled to take her own.

"Listen to me," he had murmured to her through cracked lips. "Never go back."

"I promise," she had whispered, tears flowing freely down her cheeks as she watched her brother close his eyes. His face looked more peaceful, as the mask of exhaustion fell away and he finally drifted into sleep.

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Furiously, Zeinah brushed her tears away. Her brother hadn't fought for her to reach the camp so that she could simply succumb to despair. Today was Wednesday, 26th October, the day when the Jungle would finally be demolished and all of the refugees living within the camp would be evicted. Violence had erupted over the past few weeks between the local police and the disaffected Jungle inhabitants. Zeinah had watched in terror from the flap of her damp, filthy tent as enraged men had hurled rocks at patrols of smartly dressed French officers, who had retaliated by releasing clouds of billowing gas that seemed to claw frantically at her exposed eyes and throat.

Although she had lived at the camp for over a year, she felt no keen sense of regret at being compelled to leave. Armed gangs ravaged the camp, intimidating the inmates and brutally inflicting wanton violence upon them. Disease spread uncontrollably as contaminated water supplies were shared among thousands of people living in abysmal squalor. The putrid air stank of decaying food and human excrement and many of the Jungle residents survived at subsistence level, their very existence dependent upon scarce charity supplies which were fiercely clamoured over.

Every day she had crossed the four-mile stretch from the confines of the Jungle to the border control centre, fervently searching for a train or truck in which she could cross the French border. Her brother had dreamed that they would someday reach England. He had told her that it was a land of plentiful peace and safety where they would be valued as humans and not condemned as animals. He spoke of their mother's sister, a gentle, affectionate woman who had moved to London when they were very young. He was convinced that her home would be a haven for them, if they could only reach England...

Suddenly, a brusque male voice jerked Zeinah out of her reverie.

"You!" he yelled. "Child 2,074! Get in the line!"

Zeinah nodded mutely and stumbled over to the long, snaking line of children that the official had pointed out. Although she had only spoken Arabic at home, she had learned some basic English during her time at the camp. Dully, she wondered why she was being forced to join the line. Deciding it was safer not to argue, she filed wordlessly into place behind a tall, Iraqi boy named Siddiq whom she recognised. Trying to remain inconspicuous, she nudged him and muttered in her vernacular tongue,

"Siddiq, what will happen to us?"

The boy turned to face her and his eyes sparkled with radiant joy.

"We've been saved," he whispered. "They say that they're taking us to England."

Zeinah inhaled sharply. Was the boy mistaken? Was she truly being sent away from the affliction of the camp? Could this finally be her chance of salvation?

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The charcoal clouds thundered in tumultuous protest as the waves reared up majestically, black as pitch against the stormy sky. Lightning illuminated the heavens with preternatural, eerie fire as the ocean waged war upon the ship that struggled with unavailing zeal against the transcendental might of the elements.

Zeinah gripped the neon plastic of the life jacket and tried to prevent herself from shaking. She was huddled on the deck of the sailboat with the other refugees, saturated by the salty spray that assailed the ship.

“Don’t worry!” shouted the captain. “Just a rough crossing, perfectly routine!”

Zeinah nodded numbly. She had been told to join the other refugee children below deck but she had never travelled in a boat like this one before and she secretly feared the confines of the small, dark cabins. The captain was an imposing, corpulent man in his late forties with a stern voice but he had welcomed Zeinah kindly on board. Despite his attempt at bravado, she could tell that he too was afraid. His steely determination remained unshakeable but his expression was grim and the deep lines that the wind had etched into his face seemed more prominent as he gritted his teeth and frowned intently at the rapidly darkening horizon.

The rain slashed down upon the boat with vicious frenzy and the wind roared with incandescent rage. The waves loomed threateningly over the tiny vessel before crashing down with livid splendour. Zeinah cradled her head in her arms and closed her eyes as a series of successive images danced behind her eyelids. The cerulean blaze of the Syrian sky during the height of midsummer, the emerald fronds of the palm trees that lined the street outside her home, the contagious liquid gold of her brother’s laugh, the naiveté of Sabeen’s green eyes, just a shade lighter than her own, the dazzling white marble of the curious Grecian buildings, her own sanguine hopes and boundless imaginings of England, the Elysium that she had strived for so long to reach.

Time passed immeasurably in gradual ebbs and rapid flows and still Zeinah kept her eyes closed, silently praying for some divine intervention, for some miraculous saving grace. The storm had reached a fever pitch of horrifying intensity and the water was inescapable. It beat sadistically against her closed eyes and drenched her skin as the ship plunged and rocked beneath her shaking limbs.

Eventually, after what seemed like an endless eternity and yet also a fleeting instant, Zeinah sensed that the waves no longer lashed against the ship and that the deafening howl of the wind had calmed. Drawing in several deep breaths, she steeled herself and tentatively opened her eyes. To her unfathomable relief, she realised that the storm had indeed subsided. As she glanced upwards towards the skies, she saw a golden shaft of dazzling sunlight suddenly penetrate the hostile clouds and burst forth with irradiant light. She laughed aloud with incredulity and then stopped short at the unfamiliar sound. Ruefully, she realised that she had not laughed for many months. She remembered that her mother always said that the sunlight was a sign of God’s grace, a fortuitous omen that He would never forsake those who needed Him. Smiling, she rose to her knees and peered over the iron deck rail, straining to glimpse the first sight of the promised English shores.

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Zeinah stood apprehensively in a dingy, concrete waiting room in South Croydon. Although the damp streets of London looked uninviting in the tranquil, silky gloom of twilight and the piercing cold accosted her dripping clothes, the profound sense of ebullient relief that had stirred within her after the storm remained inviolable. Nevertheless, her elation was somewhat marred by an intoxicating sense of nervousness that shifted uneasily within her stomach. She had been greeted by an efficient lady with a clipped accent and a grey, three-piece suit but all that she could understand

from the woman's rapid speech was that her aunt had been contacted and they hoped that she would come to collect Zeinah.

A melancholy sense of loneliness enshrouded Zeinah as she stood there alone, tapping her foot anxiously against the linoleum floor. The stark light afforded by the single light bulb fixed to the ceiling made her eyes ache and the cuts that criss-crossed their way across her skin stung from the salty seawater but she barely registered the pain. She recognised the extent of her utter helplessness, her role as the vulnerable plaything of Fate. The relative that was also a stranger might never come, or worse still, she might arrive and decide that she didn't want to be associated with Zeinah, that the scarred fourteen-year-old girl was damaged beyond repair, that she was a lost and frankly undesirable cause.

Suddenly, Zeinah started as the door swung open with alarming force. A tall, statuesque woman strode into the waiting room and without any preliminary introduction, caught Zeinah in her arms and enfolded her in a fierce embrace. As she broke away and held Zeinah at arms length to examine her, Zeinah saw that the woman had dark brown eyes flecked with amber that reminded her of Ashur. Her long, dark hair was the same shade of ebony as Zeinah's and there was something about her gentle, unassuming smile that reminded Zeinah of her own lost mother.

"You must be Zeinah," she exclaimed, her words flowing forth in an eloquent rush of Arabic. "My name is Amena and I've come to take you home. Would you like that?"

Zeinah realised that the social worker in the grey suit had quietly entered the room and had witnessed her aunt's arrival. There was a moment of sacred, unbroken silence as both Amena and the social worker paused and exchanged glances, clearly waiting for Zeinah's response.

"I would love that," Zeinah whispered, hesitantly reaching out her hand to her aunt. Smiling broadly, Amena took the slender, bruised hand in her own and Zeinah was finally led out of the abandoned waiting room.