

Refugee – An Original Story

I am not alone, but I am alone. A thousand shuffling people are walking beside me but I don't know any of them by name. The silence deafens me but I hear the sound of fear loud and clear. My world has fallen apart around me and I am afraid for my life and my future.

This week started like any other for me; I went to school on Monday morning as usual, but that was where the similarity ended. By mid-morning, from the **flimsy**¹ shelter of the classroom, we could hear the boom of bombs **relentlessly**² dropping on the southern side of our village and we could feel the earthquake tremble of their **impact**³ through the soles of our feet. Bricks rained from above and **shards**⁴ of glass pierced the air without a care.

As the **bombardment**⁵ stopped, our teacher ordered us to remain in the safety of the school grounds – but how did she know where safety was? I thought our village was safe, our neighbourhood was safe, our country was safe.

The unsettling quiet afterwards did nothing to calm or reassure us. Our fathers had been working in the fields around the village, our mothers had been shopping in the village market, our brothers and sisters had been sleeping in their cots as we left for school. Where were they now? How were they now?

I had to know what had happened to my family, so I left the familiar setting of my school and stepped into an unknown landscape of destruction. Not one house on the south side remained standing. Not one tree upright. Not one familiar face to be seen. Dust and rubble covered everything in sight like a death shroud.



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In some ways, the events of the past week could have taken place a year ago. Time seems to have raced while standing still. The enormity of the attack on my home and family is yet to sink in for me. I don't want to think about it, don't want to remember it, don't want to look it in the eye and face it.

Forcing myself to put one foot in front of the other, I beat time with my pace and keep up with thousands of other homeless, shocked and frightened people. I don't know where we are going, but the movement of our tidal wave of bodies creates its own **momentum**⁶ and we surge forwards as one.

Hundreds of homes in my **province**⁷ have been destroyed by those once regarded as 'friends'. Without shelter, food or water, the only chance of survival is to keep moving and stay together. The larger townships are in sight on the horizon and so is hope; the sort of hope that comes from not thinking too

far ahead or **considering**⁸ too many options.

Shouting from the front of the group signals that safety has been reached. But who wants another thousand uninvited **residents**⁹? Who can risk sheltering 'the enemy'? Who has enough food for unwanted visitors? Hope is **tempered**¹⁰ with reality, but the rock to cling to is hope. Just one welcoming face, the offer of a cup of friendship, a warm hand in mine, could make the difference between life or death – my life or death.

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The kindly face in my imaginings never appeared. There was a **scant**¹¹ cup of grimy water for each weary traveller and the wave was moved on before the township fell to the same fate as my precious village. The quality of kindness **posed**¹² a danger that no one was prepared to risk.

Once through the town's guilty streets, there was talk of a boat trip. I looked up with eagerness – maybe this would be the route to safety? Without time to consider, I was bundled onto a small rowing boat with 47 others; far too many for the small vessel, but not enough to carry us all. I considered myself lucky that I **secured**¹³ a place, but at what cost? Until we were well out of sight of land, there was no word of payment, but as soon as the boat rowed over the horizon, the hopeful mood changed to menace. Those that couldn't (or wouldn't) pay were tossed overboard to fend for themselves – whether they could swim or not. The **remainder**¹⁴ parted with their only belongings; a watch here, a ring there, at times cash or precious belongings crossed hands. The journey to safety was tainted with greed.

Land was sighted, but the owners of the small boat refused to beach. Once more, people were thrown overboard to make their own way to shore and the little boat **retreated**¹⁵. How I thanked the moon and stars for my wasted youth at the village pond! Helping those I could, we scrabbled, bedraggled, onto dry land. Like ants from their hill, people came to greet us with waving arms and clothes and blankets. The smell of freshly baked bread filled my nose and filled with relief, hope and expectation, my legs buckled underneath me and I fell, exhausted, to the ground.



Glossary

1. Easily broken; not strong.
2. Continuing without becoming weaker or less severe.
3. The force with which one object hits another.
4. A sharp broken piece of glass or metal.
5. To attack somebody forcefully without a break.
6. The power to increase or develop at an ever-growing pace.
7. A political region or division of a country.
8. Taking something into account.
9. Somebody who lives in a place.
10. Balanced
11. Only just enough.
12. Caused
13. Held or obtained.
14. Those that were left.
15. Moving back from danger or confrontation.