

Excerpt from "The Captain Has Come"

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Flashback. Scene in an office room. Two men, a woman, children are locked inside. The desks are piled with ledgers, files, typewriters. The woman stands at the window, reporting on what she sees.

WOMAN: Lots of men on the railway line. Hope they don't smell our presence here. They know where they're going. They know where those people are, where their houses are. They're carrying all kinds of implements in their hands, poles, sticks, axes.

(The woman's brother comes through an open door leading to the apartment which is situated upstairs. He is slightly built but gives the impression of quiet strength and determined purpose. He keeps cool, calm. It is he who goes up and down, to and fro from apartment to the boutiques on the main road to buy food, loaves of bread, tins of fish, eggs, tea, milk and sugar. He is protected by his being of a community that was not embroiled in all the turmoil. On a table there is a clutter of half-opened cans of fish, half-cut loaves of bread. Unfinished meals. There are some bundles of clothes in a corner of the room.)

BROTHER: I tried to get the signboard down. One of the names on it is dangerous. They might come in search of him. You never know.

WOMAN: How long can we stay like this, holed in. You too must go back to your life. We can't keep you here with us although with you we feel . . . a sense of safety. You have answered the door for us before, stood at the gate and faced all those unknown faces.

BROTHER: Let's go to the estate . . .

WOMAN: Anything can happen along the way.

(There is a knock on the door. A young girl and boy, Muslims from the apartment next door, stand outside. They rush in eagerly. They are excited with all the activity outside. The mobs are carrying out their attacks in broad daylight. Fire-engines with the sirens screech along the streets. Buses, vans drive at reckless speed along the road.)

FARHANA: Aunty, how are you? Mummy said if you want us to prepare anything for you, we can do so.

WOMAN: Can she just fry up this fish for us?

FARHANA: Yes, Aunty, and if there is anything else we can do?

ISBETH: Aunty, Aunty, they're burning up everything.

(Isbeth finds the excitement heady.)

Lots of trouble in town. In Mahaiyawa, that's where the labour lines are; they know how to defend themselves, Aunty. The women prepare big barrels of chili water to throw into the attackers' eyes. Aunty, where is Uncle?

WOMAN: Uncle is locked up in a room. He doesn't want to come out. He is scared that he will be recognised. He doesn't want to put us in danger.

(Isbeth and Farhana run to the window.)

ISBETH: Aunty, look, look, crowds of men on the railway line. They're screaming for someone's blood.

WOMAN: Don't talk so loud. Don't show yourselves. You're attracting attention to this place.

(Knock on the door. One of the children goes to answer it. She is a young girl of sixteen. Her face is wan and haggard. Her voice timid.)

GIRL: Ma, the Captain has come.

(Army Captain in full uniform, holding his gun prominently, walks in.)

CAPTAIN: How are you? I came to see you. You remember me? I was in the army jeep. You were on the road when the patrol came along. Curfew was on. You were walking along, looking lost, desperate. . . .

WOMAN: I was waiting for my husband. They, I mean the army, had taken him away in search of a refugee camp. But they had returned. The camps were not ready yet.

CAPTAIN: You are safe here. Here, in your brother's office. Stay here. I will protect you. I will come every day. You have nothing to fear.

(Captain talks with the barrel of the gun pointing towards the woman.)

WOMAN: *(Nervous)* Why are you twirling that gun about? It's loaded, isn't it? I feel afraid.

CAPTAIN: I always carry it in my hands. You're afraid? But I'm here to protect you.

WOMAN: Your name? I would like to know who you are. Something more about you.

(The children watch silently. The brother sits down at a desk and opens his files.)

BROTHER: I wonder when the office people will come to work. So many statistics to complete.

CAPTAIN: I am Captain Tissa. When I was a student in the University, I never thought I would always be carrying a gun around with me.

FARHANA: Aunty, Aunty, they are setting houses on fire.

(Screech of fire-engines.)

ISBETH: Aunty, look, look. . . .

(He stands at the window, excitement on his face . . .)

WOMAN: Why have you come to protect us? You know nothing about us. . . . Yes, I too was a student, like you, at the University. Perhaps that's one reason why you should. . . . But that gun . . . makes me feel nervous.

CAPTAIN: What other protection do I have? That's why I always have it with me.

WOMAN: At the ready? Yes, we must all have our defences. Yet, what can we do. We who are unarmed. I'm not ready to be the sacrificial victim. I have never thought of handling a gun. I'd like to . . . to know how to. Gives you a sense of power. The most insignificant man or woman can command your fear, your respect with a gun. . . . Please . . . put it away. It makes me nervous.

CAPTAIN: It's part of me now. Carry it to my death.

ISBETH: Aunty, come to the window . . . see what's happening. They're carrying away lots of things . . .

WOMAN: Is it too late to learn how to handle a gun? It's meant to either protect or defend . . . where do I fit in, where do you fit in . . . ? We're living in a jungle. Predators everywhere . . .

CAPTAIN: *(Strokes the weapon. Poses with it. Heroic poses.)* Do you think I can go out into the jungle without it? I need to defend more than you, more than myself. I defend the Establishment. Against all its enemies.

WOMAN: *(Musing)* My father was a good shot. A hunter in his youth. There were a lot of serpents on that coconut estate. The boundaries extended into the wilderness. He knew a great deal about jungles. They used to be full of bears, leopards, herds of deer. Fought it out with each other and survived. But the reptiles crawled in. Didn't respect boundaries, man-made ones. They didn't want to be disturbed but they were dangerous if they were. Couldn't teach them a lesson and tell them

to go back to their own habitat, because they felt that you, humans, were the threatening force so before they could destroy you, you destroyed them . . .

CAPTAIN: You are beginning to understand . . .

WOMAN: Sometimes he discovered, my father did, a deadly reptile under his mattress. Or in his room, hood raised. He must have had a charmed life. The walls of our home were covered with reptile skins. I was fascinated by them. Glittery skins that were growing dull, losing their sheen. One day they would disintegrate, crumble, be rolled up and thrown away. Yet in their own habitat they had power. . . . They were good shots. Followed the rules. Never left a wounded animal to bleed to death. Had packs of hunting dogs. The best breed. Terrible, it must have been for the hunted. Terrible, that sense of fear. Being tracked down by the baying hounds, packs of them. Especially if you are the weaker. A peaceful nature has made me a flawed human being. I am weak, flawed, unable to take a torch to the streets, a gun or hatchet to a village or leave a bomb that blasts people into eternity. I can't do any of these things.

CAPTAIN: Stay here. You'll be safe. I'll come and visit you regularly.

WOMAN: If you come here, the people will notice the jeep and wonder why . . .

CAPTAIN: Now we know who the cause of all this is. It is a proscribed political party. We are asked to be on the alert.

WOMAN: Can we go back home?

CAPTAIN: It's better for you not to go just now.

WOMAN: (*to audience*) You can't ask questions of a man with a gun.

FARHANA: Where is Uncle?

(The husband has locked himself up in a small room in the office. He paces up and down. Opens a window slightly, peers fearfully out and then closes it again.)

WOMAN: Come out. Why are you hiding? Are you afraid? I am not afraid.

MAN: No, I'm alright. Nothing is wrong. I am not afraid. I am not afraid.

WOMAN: We can't go on like this for ever.

MAN: I can't stand it anymore. I can't. I'm putting all of you in danger, too.

WOMAN: Would you like to go to one of the refugee camps?

MAN: I'll go alone. You and the children wait behind. You can go to your brother's estate.

WOMAN: Let me think. I'll put some 'phone calls through. There's Suren. I'll 'phone him. His children and ours studied together for years, spent holidays on the estate — we'll be hidden away there, the bungalow is secluded, on an eminence, no one will come there . . . Suren will protect us.

(Dials with telephone in her hand. Rings. No answer. Dials again, and again.)

Have I got the correct number? The 'phone doesn't answer. Hopeless. Hopeless. I can't get through. Shall we try the Bishop? After all, we taught in Roman Catholic schools for the better part of our lives. He won't refuse us asylum. The Church has always been a place of asylum. That's our only hope. He will surely offer us sanctuary.

(Takes up the 'phone again. Dials.)

25670 . . . is that the Bishop's Palace? Can I speak to the Bishop?

(The answer comes through.) Yes, is that you, your lordship? Who is speaking? Your lordship, please advise us what to do. I must get my husband to a safe place. His nerves are going to pieces. Yes, yes, what is it, your lordship? You want us to ring up the police? The police? You want me to take down the number . . . *(Gropes for a pen and a scrap of paper.)* The

number is . . . yes . . . yes, I've got it. You feel then that that is the best thing to do. . . . You have no other suggestion . . . nothing . . . nothing . . . nowhere. . . . Yes, your lordship, goodbye. Goodbye. . . . *(Turns to the silent watchers.)* That's all the Bishop said . . . that's all. Nothing else.

(She dials the police station again. The answer is immediate. She turns round to her husband.)

Will you . . . can you go alone . . . to the camp?

(Changes her mind.)

No, we will all be in this together. We shall all be in this together. We'll all go. Wherever they take us, all of us, you, I, the children.

(She turns to her brother.)

What do you say, Henry?

HENRY: It is your decision.

(They get their bundles together and troop down the narrow stairway. The police jeep has arrived.)

WOMAN: Henry, we'll see you again. Goodbye. Thank you for protecting us, for saving our lives. For sharing our fear . . . giving us courage. . . . Goodbye.

(They get into the police jeep with its two armed policemen and are driven off to a camp.)