

"Life would never be the same again." by Amber Asher

As I ran around the lush gardens of our black-and-white house, the words my father had delivered to my mother seemed as heavy and stifling as the Equatorial heat we'd been forced to endure since joining Father here in 1939. When quarters finally became available for all three of us, Mother and I moved across the world to be reunited with him after two long years. The challenges of tropical living were only diminished by the relief we felt at avoiding the spectre of war in Europe. Little did we know then that we would be staring war in the jaws in Asia only a few years later.

What my father had learned was that the previous evening, the Japanese had successfully breeched our impregnable fortress in a series of landings off the north-west coast. Since that first air raid at the start of December, my friends had been leaving Singapore; my age and naivety convinced me it was because we weren't allowed to have Christmas lights that year because of the blackouts. Now, here we were, two months later, facing the nightmare we never really believed would materialise. When we blew up the Causeway to prevent the Japanese crossing it just a few weeks before, I never imagined they would find a way in - let alone so quickly, so inexorably. So powerful was the rhetoric, it was clear my parents hadn't been prepared for this either.

What followed my father's sombre announcement that morning was a flurry of chaotic, yet purposeful, activity: bags and trunks were being packed without the usual care and precision Father insisted upon; Mother was having hushed conversations with our neighbours about "boats", and my Chinese amah - who always cared for me so patiently - seemed preoccupied and shorter-tempered than usual.

From garbled conversations amongst my friends over the next couple of days, I gleaned that things were not progressing well: William had heard his sister say the Japanese had reached Bukit Timah - the fuel and supply depots - and we were retreating. At home, after the initial fervour, there seemed large amounts of hesitation, deliberation, procrastination. It was only much later I learned from my father about his insistence on following Churchill's orders to stay at his post and my mother's reluctance to leave on an earlier evacuation ship (as that would mean leaving him behind). The resoluteness of both of their decisions would ultimately seal their fates and, of course, mine.

The ever-increasing shelling only served to add more weight to the building apprehension amongst the thinning community. It hadn't struck me that we were in imminent danger, until my mother broke the period of inertia with the words, "It's now or never." The readied bags were duly moved out, there were hurried goodbyes and it was the last time I would see Father until he was released from Changi camp at the end of the war.

On arriving at the wharves, the sense of panic was as asphyxiating as the smoke-laden air. All around us, flames engulfed what was left of the heavily shelled buildings and they were now ominously silhouetted against the amber sky. Immediately, it became apparent that we were two of the many hopefuls scrambling to get onto one of the last evacuation boats. Even at seven years of age, it seemed strange that we would risk the intense bombing of the straits waters rather than staying put - but then again, I was unaware that surrender was imminent.

The ship set sail and I watched my mother's spirit wither considerably. She was a stoic woman, who raised me single-handedly when Father had gone ahead of us to the Far East, but she'd vowed then she never wanted to leave him again. But Father had to stay. There were no two ways about it. Seeing him cry for the first (and only) time that day we left, was not only unsettling but another sign that this was serious. Looking back, it was clear my mother sacrificed her own happiness for my survival: she would have risked her own life to stay with Father but she would not risk mine.

I found a huge comfort in the fact there were many nurses aboard the ship and I even made friends amongst the other children, all of whom were sailing with only their mothers. There was no time to get lost in frivolity, however, as no sooner were we off the coastline than the air strikes punctuated our passage. All around us, bombs shattered the tropical waters, mocking us with their proximity to the ship. What happened next will forever remain a confusion of noise, fear and determination to survive. Many perished in the powerful currents; some were killed by the continuous bombardment from the skies. An unthinkable number who made it to the nearest uninhabited island in the straits with me - including Mother - were badly injured and some of the nurses were now forced to abandon their own terror to fight a battle against adversity - one person at a time.

Time elapsed, the amount immeasurable to me. The few hundred of us that remained were rescued by a liner which crawled tentatively through the seas to Batavia. It was an unthinkable tragic journey - one my mother and many others didn't survive. As a child, standing there alone

and full of despair on the harbourside, the end of the journey seemed to be the end of all things for me.

Life never would be the same again.

And it never was. But not in the way I had anticipated in that moment. Nor in the way Father meant when he first uttered those seven prophetic words.