

The Japanese have found another use for these buses that not too long ago brought children to the school where I taught. I call them "death buses," fummy rickety buses that rattle and sputter as if dozens of pebbles and body parts have been thrown together to feed their engine bowels. Now convoys of buses and trucks careen through Singapore's scarred streets, stoking fear in everyone who still breathes.

Since the bombs landed in late 1941, I have watched busloads of men being carted away, never to return to their homes and families. China has fallen, and so has Great Britain. But the Japanese are building an empire, so they never rest, especially when the ethnic Chinese in Singapore - of which I'm a proud member - secretly organize against them.

They made an entrance and become the bosses of us - a week, a month, a year and more - they issue banana money, they ration rice and water, they kill and rape as if they have a God-given right. The more they mark parts of Singapore like a pissing pit bull, the harder I work to scour for weapons and medical supplies for our underground resistance group.

But my nights are long. I kiss Chun Yun's pillow and feel the cool touch of the empty half of our marital bed. I nurse a sadness I have run out of ways to soothe. I try not to think of the day they ambushed her. I get up, pace and stare into the almost empty crib. I play with the rattling Chinese drum that fits in my hand like a giant lollipop. I can almost hear my infant son laughing. I return to bed with the drum by my side and sometimes doze off into a fitful sleep. I'm grateful for daybreak. I have work to do.

But today, they are waiting when I show up at our group's meeting place. I always knew my day would come. I didn't know it would take them this long. They grab me and shove me on to the very back row of the last bus of the death convoy.

I sit still, but my legs quiver and my heart thumps like a fistful of nails in my rib cage. Through the fogged bus window, I see lines of people waiting for rice, sweet potatoes and tapioca. I see broken buildings and soldiers with bayonets. I see the black backs of the heads of my fellow passengers. The bus gutters on. I take a deep breath as it brings me closer to an eerily serene white-sand beach off of Singapore's eastern shores.

I will not be afraid. This is not me. And these are not death buses. These are vehicles with a touch of soul, guttering injustice for those of us who have had our figurative tongues cut off.

We soon arrive at the beach, its sand sparkling like jewels. There must be dozens, maybe a hundred of us. From the back of the line, I see soldiers line the first group of twenty or so men in a single file facing the ocean, and hand them shovels.

"Get to work." They poke the men's backs with bayonets. "Dig deep, deeper!"

The men work quietly, clumps of gleaming sand lifting and falling around and behind them.

"Too slow!" The soldiers yell and hit them with their guns. "Faster!"

The men breathe harder, shovel faster. The pit in front of them enlarges, deepening, until it is wide enough to contain their soon-to-be dead bodies.

"Stop, drop your shovels!" A booming voice comes from among the soldiers. He looks like the boss. He wears glasses and is taller than the rest, with extra shiny pumps.

"Put your hands behind your heads, and kneel!"

The men obey as soldiers poke at their knees to hit the sand. A tirade of shots burst from an overweight soldier's machine gun, sweeping across the backs of these men. Within seconds, lifeless bodies fall like sawed-off tree trunks and stumps into the pit. The Japanese do not flinch. Instead they quickly push the rest of us closer to the front of the line.

Very soon, I will see Chun Yun and our son. If I could choose a place to die, it would be at this beach. You see, Chun Yun gave herself to me here. I remember her light brown eyes that spoke only love, the feel of her bare silky skin against mine, the flesh above her lips moist with desire as I took her and consummated our love...

A soldier pokes a bayonet at my back.

"Get to work!" he says.

I see my family beckoning through shimmering sands and swishing waves. I smile and start shoveling.

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