

Alison Wisdom

How We Disappear

From our bedroom, my sister and I cannot see the flames burning in the next village, but we can see the plumes of smoke, thick and black as an animal's coat, rising from little homes just like ours. A nest of trees separates our villages and obscures our view of the other village's houses, but we've all been there before. We can picture what their houses look like as they burn. Their village looks like our village. Their homes look like our homes. Of course we are scared about the closeness of the fires—a bad wind could blow it in our direction—but what really frightens us is how easy it is to imagine flames eating up our house, too. Then another girl in the next village will be watching the smoke rise from our house, over the trees, and she'll think about her house burning, and so will another girl in another village, and so on, until all the houses in Sittwe are heaps of ashes and charred wood.

Because Suu is still young, only seven, she has bad dreams at night and cries for our mother. Our mother comes in and rubs Suu on the back and tells her that it isn't real, whatever she is scared of—it only seems real. Tonight, though, my mother is quiet. She sits in the kitchen with our father and says nothing at all. This is how we know to be scared.

I leave Suu at the window and go to the kitchen. My mother is talking now in a low voice, the one she uses when she prays. I wait. If I go in now, they will stop talking, and I will know nothing more than I already do. "We can leave," she says. There is silence. My father must have shaken his head, because then my mother says, "There are camps. We can go there. The army—"

"Will kill me and rape you," my father says. "And the girls, too, unless they get sick and die first."

"Bangladesh then," my mother says.

"They won't take us," I hear my father say. "They haven't taken anyone so far."

"I don't understand," my mother says, and her voice has changed—it's no longer her praying voice but something deeper and sadder.

Last month there was a celebration in the capital, not for us but for the Buddhists, and my father took me to see the festivities. This was before the conflict between our people started, but still we only watched from a distance. Monks in maroon robes sat cross-legged in rigid lines, chanting, and the sound of their chanting was terrible. It was sort of like a song but one sung in a single flat note. I asked my father why the monks were sad. It sounded like they had resigned themselves to something; whatever it was they didn't want to happen they had now accepted as inevitable. He said I was wrong, that wasn't what it was at all—but right now, in the kitchen talking to my father, that is how my mother sounds.

“There's nothing to understand,” my father says. “They don't want us.”

My father has said this to me before. When I was little and learning about geography in school, I asked him what he knew about our country. I thought maybe I could tell him something he didn't already know. But he shook his head. “We don't have a country, Lily,” he said. “We belong to no one.” I asked him who he meant; was it just our family? He shook his head again. “Our people.” *Rohingya*—our name used to ring like a bell when we spoke it, but now even *we* say it with something like disgust. Bangladesh, my father said, doesn't want us, and neither does Burma.

Sometimes my mother tells Suu and me to pick up our books or games or whatever we left lying around the house, and we just look at each other, neither wanting to take responsibility for what lay so plainly between us. *You touched it last*, one of us will say. *You pick it up*. And so our things will sit on the floor, unclaimed and ignored, until my mother finally grows tired and picks them up herself. This is how it is with us. *You touched them last*, Bangladesh whines to Burma. *You take care of them*.

But what began as a reluctant tolerance of our presence has escalated into a version of the fistfights the boys participate in after school. One taunts another, and the boy being teased lashes out at the first boy, who then strikes back, and the two take turns trading blows one for one until finally one of the boys is named the victor. It is the same with our people and the Buddhists. My father says we harmed them first, and they retaliated. Then we did. Then they did, and all of Burma joined them. Now it seems as though it has been their turn for a very long time, and I don't think we will have another chance to strike back.

I hear my mother get up. Her chair grates against the floor in a screech. “What can we do?” she asks. I imagine her at the window above the sink, pointing to the fires in the distance. “They're coming,” she says, and I don't know if she means the fires or the people who set the fires or both.

“Lily?” she says suddenly. Her voice is her own now, the one that tells me to get dressed for school and to pray in the evenings when all I want is to play outside in the last bits of afternoon light.

I don't respond; instead, I creep back to my room, where Suu lays

curled on her side, the white bedsheet in a tangle at her feet. She faces the wall, away from the window. “Suu,” I whisper. I want to tell her what our father said, that no one wants us, and we have no place to go. It will make her cry, but I don’t care. I climb on her bed and peek at her—she’s asleep, and she doesn’t even wake up when I get off the bed and the wooden bedframe creaks under the weight of two girls.

I go back to the window. The smoke floods the dark sky, and the wind pushes it around until the smoke is barely distinguishable from the clouds.

In the morning, I wake up because I hear shouting outside. It’s still early. The sky is gray and soft, like the color of a bird’s tail feathers, and on a normal day, one that did not begin with smoldering fires, it would be still. Perhaps there would be fisherman leaving for a day on the water or stray dogs wandering through the neighborhood, sniffing and squatting and claiming our territories as their own. Maybe birds chirping, maybe a newborn mewling for his mother’s milk—and that is all. But today there is shouting right outside our window. From my window, I see men I don’t know, people who don’t belong to our village. They are wielding sticks, knives, iron rods like the kind we use to stoke fires. Among them, our neighbors move in a frenzy of activity: they are pulling clothes from laundry lines and shoving them into bags, there are mothers forcing their children into shoes, and then the sounds begin to distinguish themselves from one another. Babies wail, men are shouting, and there are deeper, darker cries from older children. I worry that the fires have finally come. The men with the weapons have brought their flames to our village.

But when I check for signs of fire, I see nothing. We have a white mosque in our village that we keep clean through vigilant scouring, each household taking turns to scrub its walls, and if the others are going to burn us out, they’ll start there. I can see the corner of the mosque from my bedroom window, and it is as it always is. Clean and white and quiet. No flames lick at its sides. But I know now they are coming.

I can hear my father, like a whirlwind, rustling through pots and pans in the kitchen, then stomping through the narrow hall. He calls out for my mother. I climb into bed with Suu, and together we wait for my father’s storm to make landfall in our room. He sweeps in, my mother right behind him, and tells us to gather our things. “We’re leaving now,” he says.

There’s chaos all around us, and the gray sky has lightened and threatens to turn a sharp blue. We hurry away as throngs of our neighbors push past us. We are strangers to each other now.

I see men in uniforms, soldiers. They wear helmets and hold long guns; some of them have their weapons casually resting against their shoulders, the gun barrels pointing to the sky. Some are watching. Some are talking and laughing, the way the teachers do at school when they let us out to play. I stare them down when we walk past until one of them looks

at me. He smiles, baring yellow teeth like a rat. Then he covers his eyes with his hand. He sees nothing.

After that, I don't look back, because I don't want to see the men with their knives and spears or the fire eating away at the flesh of our home, leaving behind nothing but its black, burnt bones.

On the third day in the camp, a girl is waiting for me outside the tent. I hate to be in the tent unless I have to be, but we've learned that unless we have someone in the tent at all times, then someone else, someone we don't know, will claim it as his own tent, and we'll be homeless twice over. We lost our first tent that way, but since then, we've been vigilant. It's my shift when the girl comes. At first I only see the outline of her figure, which is more womanly than mine. When she crouches down in the triangle of the tent's opening, I see that her face is familiar.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello," I say.

"Lily," she says.

I say nothing and swat an imaginary bug on my arm.

"Nita," she says then, pointing to herself.

I remember—she was in my class at school. I'd forgotten her already. "I know," I lie.

My mother's legs appear behind Nita, followed by the bottom half of my sister. It's her turn to watch the tent now. Nita steps aside, and my mother ducks into the tent. "Suu doesn't feel well," she says. "She needs to sleep." Suu's face glistens yellow. She lies down in the tent on a little pallet we made from our bags and a blanket I found abandoned by some trees at the edge of the campgrounds.

A hole in the fabric of the tent lets some light in, highlighting part of Suu's face, turning the dark brown of her left eye the color of the weak coffee my mother makes and my father hates; the other half of her face is shadowy and dark.

"She probably needs something to eat and drink," Nita says.

"Yes, probably," my mother says. Everyone does. "You can go," she tells me.

"Come on," Nita says.

We walk together, our steps kicking up dust that lifts and floats and sticks to our feet and ankles and calves. "Did your family's house get burned, too?" I ask her. "Were there soldiers?"

"Did you know that Win likes you?" she asks.

Win is in our class, too. He's quiet and smart, and his mother keeps his hair so short that it looks like someone took a black paintbrush and made millions of tiny dots all over his head. He has dainty wrists with delicate bones. When he is nervous, he hides those tiny wrists in his lap or, with arms crossed over his chest, tucks them away into his underarms.

Here is my first memory of Win: we are playing hide and seek, and it's Win's turn to seek. He closes his eyes and counts. We all run off. I find

a plant with big leaves that I pull down in front of me. I wait and wait, until finally someone yanks the leaves away. “I see you!” Win says.

In my last memory of Win, he is walking me home after school one day. Suu is at the window, giggling.

“I think he’s handsome,” Nita says. “You’re lucky.”

“If I was lucky,” I say, “I wouldn’t be here.” We are far away from the latrines, but a wind carries over the smell of excrement. I ask her again about her house. “What did you see?”

“The same as you, I guess,” she says. “Your mother has the loveliest face. She doesn’t even look like a mother at all.” She reaches up to her neck and touches a thin gold chain, as fine as a piece of hair. How has she managed to hold onto it? When we arrived at the camp three days ago, a soldier, wearing the same uniform as the rat-toothed man from my village, demanded that we hand over anything valuable.

My mother has a gold ring that she tied with a string to her undergarments. My father gave it to her when they married. We are the only ones who know it is there.

The conversation continues this way, me trying to trap Nita into telling me everything she knows, Nita sidestepping each attempt as gracefully as a dancer raising herself onto her toes. She makes an observation about something we see or brings up one of the teacher’s old lessons instead. “Why do you think God chose seven different colors of soil when He created people?” she asks. “Why not eight?”

“Seven is a holy number,” I tell her. Everyone knows that, but I don’t say so.

“But why seven?” she persists.

“How would I know? God’s the one who knows everything. Ask Him.”

“I’ve tried,” Nita says sadly.

When I’m back in our tent, the sun has already begun to set, and it turns the camp golden. The light shoots into our tent through the little hole, like a thin, bright spear, and I sit underneath it. One time Christian missionaries came to our village, and they had pictures of Jesus and angels and other men in robes and sandals. Jesus and the angels had a halo of light surrounding their heads, glowing. Even though I can’t see myself, and the ray that seeps in is more slender than a finger bone, I feel like those pictures, just for a moment as I sit in the waning stream of light. Soon, though, the light is gone, and the tent is dark.

My mother sits cross-legged opposite me, and Suu lays down with her head in our mother’s lap. “Shhhh,” my mother keeps saying, even though Suu hasn’t said anything. My father isn’t here.

I think about what Nita said about Win. It’s possible that he’s here, and it’s possible that he’s dying or already dead. But I imagine walking home with him from school, back to our village, where the trees are all blooming: *swel daw*, *pone nyat*. They look like hearts, like the hooves of a

bull, like pearls. I imagine wrapping my fingers around the little bird bones of Win's wrist, and he smiles up at me, and I touch every dot of hair on his head, and my mother calls me inside because dinner is ready. *I see you*, he says.

That night, someone leaves us a present on the outskirts of the camp. In the middle of the night, while most of us sleep in our tents, someone dumps thirty bodies outside one of the camp entrances. The soldiers on watch claim they didn't see who did it. The bodies are bound at the ankles and wrists, and there are bruises and rashes from where they tried to maneuver out of the ropes while they were still alive. There are bullet holes in their foreheads. Some of them have slashes running down their chests, arms, legs, and the slashes burn with dried blood. I don't see the bodies—how they wait for us in a tangled heap, how the birds and bugs have already begun to swarm—but that doesn't matter.

After the bodies, my father and Nita's father make a plan to escape from the camp. This is all they will tell us, not how or when. "Soon," my father says when my sister and I ask. He looks pained. My mother nods and touches his hand. It's hard for him, protecting us—or perhaps what is hard for him is realizing that he cannot truly protect us after all.

When another couple, friends my mother has made in the camp, asks to join us when we leave, he tells them no. "Too dangerous," he says. But then he realizes that what is more dangerous is having other people in the camp who know that we are leaving, and so he says yes, fine. "But no one else," he tells my mother. Then to my sister and me: "You keep your mouths shut, too." And so we do.

One afternoon, when we ask my father when we are leaving, he pauses and says, "Tonight." That night we wait in the tent, nervous and edgy. We jump at every noise and cower every time the wind rustles the fabric of our tent.

Finally, we hear an unfamiliar man's voice. "Thien San?" the voice says. My father's name. He looks at us and nods. It's time.

The voice belongs to a soldier, a very short man we see often around the camp. The other refugees have nicknamed him Squatty, and his mouth is an upside-down *U*, and his ears sit abnormally low on his head, closer to his chin than they should be. My mother carries Suu on her back and holds my hand as we follow my father and Squatty through the camp. We pick up Nita, her father, and the other couple on our way. The moon makes us all silver. Another guard sees us as we approach the edge of the camp. Squatty gives a slight nod. The other guard looks the other way, turns his back on us.

"How?" my mother murmurs to my father, and even though that's all she says, I understand what she means: how is this possible? We are never invisible when we want to be, but in this moment, we go by, unseen,

ignored. How? My father only gives a terse shake of his head. It is nothing he will discuss. I wonder if my mother still has her ring tied to her undergarments.

When we reach the ocean, we see a ship. “Is that for us?” I ask my father. But he doesn’t answer. He is focused on Squatty, who motions for him and Nita’s father to follow him, and the three of them speak in low tones. “What are they saying?” I ask my mother, but she won’t answer me. I move over to Nita, who is nervously playing with her gold necklace. “What do you think they’re saying?” I ask her. I expect her not to answer, too, or to say something like, “Aren’t the stars so nice?” Or “That ship is so big.”

But instead, she says, “I think they’re talking about us.” I look back at the men, and Squatty keeps looking over. Not at my mother with her lovely face or the young wife of the other couple, but Nita and me.

My father’s face turns angry. Even in the dark I can see it. Nita’s father rubs his face with a large hand, closes his eyes. Squatty shrugs, looks at Nita and me. Smiles. I remember the man with the rat teeth in our village.

Nita is taller than me. She has breasts and hips already, a tiny waist. If her hair was clean, it would shine. When Nita’s father walks over to us, and my father calls my name, I know I am safe, although I am not sure from what, and I run away from Nita as though she has some sickness I might catch. I watch her unclasp her necklace and grip it in her hand as her father leads her to Squatty, but when she extends the necklace to him, an offering or a payment, he refuses it. Nita’s father begins to cry and does not look at his daughter even though she is crying now, too. She lets the necklace drop. Squatty pulls her into a dark enclave of scrubby trees. They disappear, and we are left only with the sound of waves and Nita’s father weeping.

I almost don’t ask my father what has happened with Nita, but I do anyway. All he says is, “Remember that nothing in this life is free.”

There are thirty-two of us on the boat, eight from our camp, and the rest are from another camp. My father says we’re in the Bay of Bengal. At school, we had a map where the countries were yellow, and all the water, of course, was blue. I used to trace the rivers backward and forward, letting my finger flow with the current out to the ocean or forcing the river back upstream, farther and farther north. I could trace the little dots of hair on Win’s head, create boundaries for new countries, if he was on the boat, too. Nita is, but she doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. It’s fine, though, because every time I see her, all I feel is relieved.

Sometimes the ocean is like a mirror, flat and still, with clouds skimming the surface, and if I peer over the side, I can see a watery, shimmery version of myself. On these days, the boat cuts through the water like a knife. On other days, the water pushes us up and pulls itself

away so we crash down, over and over again. On the deck, there's always a breeze that knots my hair, and when the wind blows it into my face, it sticks to my lips and tastes like salt. I'm lucky I haven't been seasick like my father. We think Suu is sick, too, but we pretend like she isn't, just in case people start to panic that whatever illness she has will spread. We mostly stay down below, and the quarters are close. There's nowhere to go but up to the deck, but the sailors only occasionally let us up there. Usually, I sit with my mother, sister, and father down below and watch things around me. There's a nursing mother whose baby seems too quiet. There's a teenage boy who doesn't look like he belongs to anyone. There's Nita, of course, and her father, both sad. Sometimes, too, I'll study myself—the ends of my hair, underneath my fingernails. I look at my legs, and it's hard to believe that these are the same legs I used to run around the village, to carry me to and from school everyday. It doesn't seem possible.

The first time I complain about feeling restless, my mother tells me we'll be there soon. She says we're going to Australia. "You can run around with the kangaroos."

"You mean hop," my father says, and this makes Suu smile.

We have very little food. It will run out soon. We are unprepared for life at sea. We tell ourselves that we are safe now—there are no radicals here, no government soldiers. It is only us. We pray five times a day, but no one is ever sure where Mecca is.

After a week on the boat, a man dies. But he's old. He wasn't going to make it, and he's one less person who needs food. That same week, the quiet baby is gone, too. This one hurts. My mother cries for two days after. "That poor woman," she says, and she pulls me close to her. Suu never leaves her side. The men throw the bodies overboard. First they ask the sailors, who say nothing but give a wave of permission. They know we will lose many more. And we do.

On day nineteen, the ship's motor breaks. We send a delegate from among us, an older man with freckles that drip down his sagging cheeks, to talk to the sailors. "They can't fix it," he says. "They don't have the right tools." We question him: how can this be? Who agrees to sail a ship without the proper equipment? What will happen to us? But the man has no answer. He holds up his hands, palms facing us, as if it to protect himself against the barrage of worries. "How could I know?" he asks us.

We languish for days. On one of those nights when we are stranded in the middle of the ocean, I remember Nita's question about the soil God used when he created people. Why seven different colors?

"Who can understand the mind of God?" my father says when I ask.

"Imams," I answer. "Prophets."

"Not even them," he says.

"Then why should we even try?" I ask.

“We were created to make sense of things,” he tells me, and I don’t ask him anything further.

My father takes me up to the deck on a balmy, still morning. After many hours hunched over a bucket, seasick, he throws up less now, but he’s grown so thin. His skin is loose and pale, and if he takes his shirt off, I could trace his ribs the way I traced the rivers on the map. My hipbones stick out like doorknobs. On deck, the sailors are scarce. We lean against the railing at the back of the ship and watch the birds swoop down and skim the surface of the ocean. My father pulls me into him, his arm around my shoulders. “Lily,” he says, and he takes a deep breath and is about to speak when we hear shouting from the other end of the ship.

My father takes me by the hand, and we run around to the other side. The sailors are facing the ocean, waving their arms back and forth above their heads, shouting. “What is it?” my father asks one of them.

“Can’t you see?” the sailor asks. He points, and my father squints. I squint, too. It’s a ship, a tiny speck on the horizon.

“Your mother,” my father says. “Your sister. Go tell the others.”

One of the sailors sends up flares.

“Do you think they’ll see us?” I ask my father.

But he doesn’t answer. I imagine the ship will sail alongside us, cutting smoothly through the sea, and we will cry out to its sailors and wave our arms and offer our bodies, our children, our sisters—we will give anything if they will save us, but we are invisible.

My father puts his hand on my shoulder. It is heavy, callused. We say nothing more and watch the bright flares as they arc against the blue sky and fall dark into the ocean.