

SALMA SALAMA

*Rain on a Dead Child*

It was midnight. Our government van had a permit to carry us from the corporation offices where we worked to our homes. We drove through torrential rain. In a flash of lightning, we saw a woman carrying something like a sleeping child wrapped in a blanket in her arms. With sadness in her eyes, she hailed us to stop. We stopped. Noticing her tears, I told the driver that we should take her in. The driver, whom we called "Uncle" Saeed, gave me a reluctant look; but he covered his head, got down from his seat, and opened the door. Crying bitterly, the drenched woman begged Uncle Saeed to take her into the van. She got in, requesting those inside to allow her to sit with them. Embarrassed, and in tears, she sat down, still apologizing. But then she changed her seat, covering the child so we could not see him.

When I asked her why she was standing in that deserted place so late at night, she only said "they" had dismissed her. Did she live around here? I asked. She answered, No! I asked if she had anyone with her, like her husband. She answered that her husband had been arrested. Why? He was accused because he belonged to the SPLO (the Sudanese People's Liberation Organization). I asked, "Where is he being held?" She answered that she didn't know. Where did she live? She answered, "I live in Marzoug." Marzoug is far away, at least twenty miles, I thought, with a thousand questions in my mind. I asked Um-Saeed whether we could break the curfew order and take this lady home. With a horrified expression, he answered, "Impossible!" Our permit did not include Marzoug, he explained, and at any time, the secret police might stop us, adding, "Madam, I beg your pardon."

Suddenly, we glimpsed flashlights and a soldier with a gun, yelling, "Stop, you there!" Um-Saeed stopped. The soldier asked for our I.D.s. We passengers showed our I.D.s and the soldier, using his flashlight, checked them. He then called on the child's mother to show her I.D. Her tears answered for her. "Get out quickly, hurry up!" the soldier shouted, starting to pull her out. I tried to get between them, but he pushed me away. The woman was crying

loudly, "This is a dead child! They ousted me from the hospital, because I couldn't convince them to bury the child on my behalf. I don't have the cost of his burial. I don't have anything. My husband has been arrested. I don't have anybody to help me!"

We all got desperate. I shouted to the soldier, "This is a dead child! The dead have a right to a speedy burial, don't they? Or are we just supposed to let them rot?" Then I must have whispered thousands of curses as the van started moving again, leaving the woman behind.