

**Balsam
Karam**

**THE
SINGULARITY**

A NOVEL

TRANSLATED
BY
**Saskia
Vogel**

Balsam Karam

SINGULAR^{THE}ITY

A NOVEL

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH BY

Saskia Vogel

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PROLOGUE

SAMPLE

Meanwhile elsewhere—just as the light turns green and the cars along a coastline prepare to leave the city toward the half desert and the mountains—more slowly than ever a woman crosses the highway, which, along with the corniche, is all that holds the ocean ever rising at bay.

The woman is alone, searching for her child.

Nothing in her face recalls what once was, and if someone shouts her name, she doesn't turn around and say *no* or *stop it* in the language no one here understands or wants anything to do with; if they stop, she doesn't meet their gaze, and if they say, *wait*, she doesn't come back with a *why* nor later *I have just as much right to walk here as you do, why can't you understand that?*

It's Friday and soon the city almost dissolved by the heat will fill up with tourists dressed in bright clothes and on a ramble through the food markets with fried fish and oysters. From the large galleria, the tourists as if from out of a hole will make their way to the museum quarter and the souvenir shops, and afterwards, once they've finished shopping, move on to the rose garden, the university, and the bookshops, to the corn vendor on the corner by the drooping palm groves, alone in the

sun, and the cats in repose, stretching out, waiting for the heat to break and for the sun to set.

Farther on—farthest on where a hill obscures the view and the road muddies in the tracks of digging machines waiting for work to begin—are also abandoned new builds made of pale concrete and steel girders and a small library where only students go.

Yes, right across the road, invisible to those at the university looking out across the green space and the faculties, stand the new builds half-finished, missing most of the walls to what could have been a living room or bedroom, a bathroom, kitchen, or storeroom, and that now gaping mostly keep the students shielded from wind and rain.

At night the students roll out their bedding on the concrete and each pushes their one bag all they have left against the wall, dozes off beside it. Then they wake to the sun and the morning haze and lug their bags across the muddy earth up to their department, cast a look around. At this time of day, no one but the cleaners walk the empty corridors and no cafés are open with discounted tea, coffee, and yesterday's sandwiches; none of the guards ask where you're from or what you're doing there and no one plants their backpack on the empty chair beside them, saying, sorry this seat is taken. The students wash under their arms and between their legs in the large bathroom at one end of the corridor, then take a seat in the armchairs by the door to wait for their first seminar, falling asleep and sleeping long.

Later they'll meet up around the fire and go over

how best to make this unfinished building a home—they'll discuss which walls are essential and from where they'll get the sheet metal and who among them is best at construction and where they can get hold of screws and drills. The students will talk and laugh and before bedtime open their bag and repack it, take out dry socks and a sweater and walk with their flashlight and books in hand up to their spot by the wall.

It's Friday a late summer afternoon and soon the beach now vacant will have litter spread across its sun chairs and parasol stands as the ocean draws back from the rocks and reeds; the ice-cream vendors will shove their broken carts up the hill past the palms and grill kiosks, and the taxi drivers will run a rag over the seats and the cracked windshields, will wait for men in suits to wave them down and with someone beside them ask to be driven away from the corniche. Soon, the tourists—just as they for safety's sake place a hand over their handbags and keep an eye out for the children who while waiting for work on the beach have fallen asleep sack and rake in hand—will climb the wide pavement along the twilight-bright corniche and the ocean view beyond words for those who can afford dinner and a little wine at one of the restaurants there. The tourists will take a seat and ask for sparkling water and maybe a large bottle of house wine, marinated olives with capers and garlic, and salted nuts to tide them over, reclining with the late summer sea in minor revolt and the sky pitch dark and dull above the soon over-encumbered corniche.

*

The woman searching for her child has been there, she knows what the corniche looks like, and tonight as every other Friday night since her child disappeared she will go back there and wait; she will watch the girls who appear out of nowhere with a mop and rag in hand, and follow them as they approach fresh spills and polish the floor to a shine once again just as the Missing One did.

She will search and look around the corniche.

Slowly endlessly tired she will wander up there—determined and clutching her bag like it's the most valuable thing she owns, she will sit on one of the benches outside the restaurant where her child was working soon before she went missing and keep the knife warm by passing it between her hands on the corniche.

It's the corniche she thinks of as the traffic light turns green and the shadows deeper than the day before render her invisible; it's the corniche and the girl and the children she sees as she steps out and slowly starts making her way across the road—it's the waiters in their black pants and black shoes, and the men with their glasses of beer who stop to shout as the children walk by.

Like any other day she means to continue to the square—to the razed lot they call the alley, and on to the place where the greengrocer is already stacking melons, stone fruit, and the coriander the Missing One always wanted to bring home—but she can no longer move, is stock-still in the middle of the road.

Today the world feels different somehow new and if she squeezes her wounds round and open, it doesn't matter if the pus seeps out yellow thick and if she loses her head scarf at the roadside where she in her tiredness has lain down to sleep, it doesn't matter if she gets it back—the air is both replete and empty and just as the woman perceives this she also senses the Missing One's presence and perhaps her smell across the road.

If she stands here long enough—if she stands among the cars, eyes and hands tightly shut in a prayer so intimate nothing but her wish pushes through—maybe the God who proffered but then took back this child will return it to her.

If she prays loudly enough *dear God* as the shouts from the cars resound and the great sun keeps burning unbounded *I pray to you with all I have* maybe something will happen that couldn't have happened before.

If she puts words to the unthinkable *of all my children* as she falls to her knees on the asphalt *she was the one I loved most* maybe something beyond comprehension can come to pass and the child will appear as if in a dream.

She waits, why doesn't the dream manifest?

In the heat her knees stick to the ground and go numb; alongside her the traffic slows to a crawl, then moves on.

*

In the cars children sit up and watch the woman—across her chest the shirt is gossamer and along her back a tear running down from one shoulder, her body already fading in the late summer heat, and across her trouser leg dried blood in black stains from thigh to ankle and out to her toes blue and swollen. She seems unfazed by the people who want her to move along, and when she turns around and fixes her gaze somewhere, it is as though she still sees nothing of this world.

Is she going to get run over, their children ask, is she going to die here on the road, they ask, and their parents say, I don't know, maybe she will, and turn away.

In the bag are the same flyers as always, and across her slippers worn ragged by the streets, the same broken straps that rub the back of her foot red, then fall off—around her neck one of the girl's shawls darker with each passing day and in her pocket the knife she carries with her wherever she goes in the city.

Later, when the slippers no longer hold, she'll walk barefoot to the corniche and the restaurants and up to the railing; later, when no one is looking, she will climb up and over to the sea- and sky-darkened cliffs.

Today something is different somehow stillborn and the woman feels it as she pounds her fists on the hood of the car that comes closest to her and presses a flyer to its windshield:

**Has anyone seen my daughter?
17 years old, missing since dawn on 1 May.
Help me find her, help me get justice.**

She wedges the flyer under the windshield wipers and doesn't turn around when the driver calls her back, doesn't care if he spits, and doesn't go back to hit him when he shouts that she is a slum rat, dirt.

She just keeps moving on and when later that same night she stops searching, hands and forehead bloody, you are standing nearby, looking out over the ocean. You don't see the blood, you see only the woman, and soon thereafter the woman throwing herself off.

SAMPLE