

# WRITE TO RECONCILE AN ANTHOLOGY

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## INTRODUCTION

This introduction is brief because the best sense a reader can get of what *Write to Reconcile* is about, and what it has achieved, is to read the works of its twenty three participants.

*Write to Reconcile* is a creative writing project born out of my belief that literature can contribute towards healing wounds and facilitating dialogue in post-war Sri Lanka. Fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction have a long and important history in developing and maintaining a civil, tolerant, and democratic society. Literature allows its readers' access to points of view, as well as cultural and political norms different from their own. Good creative writing creates empathy and a broadening of perspective and tolerance. In Sri Lanka, creative writing represents an opportunity to build bridges between its various communities. Because of the polarized situation that existed during the war, and unfortunately, continues to exist post-war, each community has come up with its own fixed narrative of the conflict and its place (always as the victim) within it. These fixed narratives are black and white. They leave no room for the incredible mixing and blending that has occurred between the various communities of this country; they leave no room for the fact that outside cultures, the various colonial powers, the Arab merchants whose ships stopped off at our shores, have also shaped and defined who we are; they leave no room for self-examination.

Fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction, when well written, are by their very nature committed to exploring the grey areas of human interaction and human life, simply because as human beings our actions and reactions are complicated and flawed. We don't exist in black and white terms. The nuances and muddiness of motives and interactions, as portrayed in good creative work, is precisely what is needed to bridge polarities and develop empathy between the divided communities in Sri Lanka today.

In late 2012, *Write to Reconcile* put out an island-wide call for applications from all Sri Lankans between the ages of 18-29, and also from teachers and professors of any age, inviting them to apply to be part of this creative writing project. The submission and selection process was rigorous: potential participants had to send in a piece of creative work, along with an explanation as to why they thought they would be good candidates. The project consisted of two residential creative writing workshops that were held in Colombo and Jaffna respectively, and an online forum after each workshop. During the workshops, which I conducted with the assistance of Nayomi Munaweera as co-facilitator, I taught the participants the tools and techniques of creative writing, and covered everything from fiction, to memoir, to various poetic forms. The participants also generated creative pieces through in-class exercises that were specifically designed to produce work that dealt with issues of conflict, peace, reconciliation, trauma, and memory. Participants also learnt the tools and techniques of editing.

I felt it was important for the participants to see their work in the context of other art, both Sri Lankan and international, that dealt with the issues we were tackling. As such, there were evening screenings of films from other troubled places in the world, such as Palestine, Chile, Sierra Leone, etc. There were also visits by local artists whose work dealt with these issues. Further, we organized two excursions. First, a cultural tour of Colombo, that was aimed at highlighting how Sri Lanka's older culture intersected with modernism in art and architecture. Secondly, a tour of Jaffna, which focused on the history of the North and the devastation the war has brought to its people.

For the two online forums, participants submitted two creative pieces, one per forum, for discussion. Supervised by me, the participants offered constructive feedback on each other's work. Following the end of the two forums, each participant selected one of their two pieces for publication, and I worked with them, one-on-one, to prepare the chosen piece for this anthology.

The works in this anthology reflect the various backgrounds and experiences of the participants as well as their commitment to writing from points of view different from their own — Tamil students writing from the point of view of Sinhalese characters and Sinhalese student writing from the point of view of Tamil characters. This imaginative inhabiting of the ‘Other’ is one of the most heartening aspects of this anthology. Despite the multiple experiences captured in this anthology, not all experiences are represented here. We put in a lot of effort to try and get applications from the South and East coasts but no suitable candidates applied. As such, the experiences of people from these parts of the country are not present in this anthology. We hope, in the next *Write to Reconcile*, to fix this imbalance, as well as bring in voices from the Sri Lankan Diaspora.

I teach creative writing at various universities, and I am frequently asked if the students’ work has in any way enhanced my own. My answer has always been, “No.” That is until *Write to Reconcile*. Working on this project and interacting with the participants—hearing their stories at the lunch and dinner tables, listening to their discussions—has broadened my own sense of what it means to be Sri Lankan. Their imaginative interpretations of the issues we face in Sri Lanka today have broadened my own creativity, by suggesting new and interesting approaches to writing about Sri Lanka. I hope your vision too broadens, as you read this anthology.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to our sponsors, The Royal Norwegian Embassy and The American Centre, as well as to The National Peace Council for giving our project a home. I am also deeply grateful to the wonderful team I worked with, whose efforts made this project a success.

The anthology as a whole does not have a glossary. Some participants, however, did include glossaries for their individual pieces.

*Shyam Selvadurai*

## ONE HOUSE: MEDITATIONS ON HOME, RETURN AND BREAKING SILENCE

*By Nayomi Munaweera*

In early 2013, I returned to Sri Lanka the country of my birth after staying away from it for almost a decade. There had been many factors that had kept me away but, by a beautiful serendipity of events, I found myself returning to launch my debut novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. By a further act of the gods I fell into a dream job as Shyam Selvadurai's co-teacher in his inaugural year of *Write To Reconcile*. For a young writer, Shyam's name itself is a totem. Years earlier, reading *Funny Boy* and later *Cinnamon Gardens* had given me the invaluable gift of seeing myself and people like me, families like mine, with accents like ours, located in text, on the page. This is the kind of rare homecoming that makes readers from small places rejoice in the idea that our stories too are important. In fact, stumbling upon the work of Shyam, Michael Ondaatje and others had planted the seeds of possibility, decades before I actually found the courage to write a word myself. So it was with great delight that I agreed to join Shyam and twenty-three unknown youth for the two weeks that would constitute *Write to Reconcile*.

As any émigré can tell you, return is a complicated thing. There are questions of belonging and home that will always haunt the one who has left. And when the particular location of return has undergone almost three decades of civil war, the questions are only that much more loaded. What is home? Where is it located? Can one actually ever return? With all these questions packed into my suitcase, I made my way across time zones to the other side of the planet.

Colombo hadn't changed much, here was the traffic veering around the innumerable shrines, the Buddhas with the glowing Las Vegas halos, the bleeding Christs, the soaring gods draped skywards on the kovils, a reminder that in this place, the simultaneity of faiths would always be both the greatest of strengths as well as the largest of threats. I had expected huge differences. Everyone told me I would be astounded. But, besides the new highway that zoomed from Colombo down to the Southern coast, the various



high rise apartment buildings on our formerly quiet lane and the lack of teenage soldiers stopping us at fifteen minute intervals, the city remained as it was in my memories, reminding me that perhaps the ancient in this place would always out-shadow the new.

In Colombo, I was returning to a house that had been pivotal to me in fiction, as in life. It was the old, white house, which figures prominently in early parts of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. And, although the book is fiction, it was this particular place I imagined when I thought of a house in Colombo, divided and ruled variously by feuding families, Tamils upstairs, Sinhalese downstairs; the house itself standing as an extended metaphor for the disputed nation.

My family had lived on this land by the sea for decades. To the American in me this was a thrilling piece of personal history. I had been brought to this house from the hospital as a newborn and lived here until we migrated to Nigeria when I was three. From Africa and later from America, from every faraway place that we made our temporary home, we would return to this house for a month out of every year. It was the earliest and most permanent place I knew, and my fondest memories were of giggling with fear and delight, as my cousins and I attempted to wedge ourselves into the narrow space between the house and the outer wall. My small body flat against the house, palms open against its side, heartbeat stilled, I felt contained and held by the house itself, in a way specific only to this place. It was my earliest memory of *home*.

Back in Nigeria, as we moved from city to village, I drew amateur, childish floor plans of this house incessantly. Here was the room in the back I shared with my parents, here was the kitchen where Ginchi Aunty held court, here was the bedroom shared by my childhood friend, Kosala and his family, here was the side table on which rested the big black rotary telephone which was my particular infant obsession. Each room carefully labeled by the names of those who had inhabited it. The act of drawing and naming was my constant attempt to remember, and in remembering lay claim to this particular patch of earth.

My family had left Sri Lanka in 1976. We had fled economic hardship, increasing evidence of the “trouble” to come and the cloying grasp of family that always exists in any small place. My parents had thought we

would be away for a few years before returning to the island for good. Five years at the most they had imagined. However, by the early 1980's it was clear that, from this point, war would determine the fate of the nation. Return would be a constantly deferred reference point far in the vague and uncertain future.

In 1984, due to political unrest in Nigeria, we took refuge in the third and final continent, America. At this same time, the Colombo house was rented out to a Tamil family. They took over the house and for years we were denied entry. On our yearly visits, we stayed with generous aunts and uncles. One family lived in Colombo and the other in Kandy, hosting us for the entire span of June or July (only as an adult can I gauge the generosity of those long visits and I am truly grateful for those opportunities). Around the mid 1980's the Tamil family stopped paying rent for the house. We were new immigrants in America, money was tight. We slept three to a room in a small two-bedroom apartment, struggling to make sense out of this strange and somewhat inhospitable place. I remember the late night phone calls to Sri Lanka, my mother begging for past due rent. Her childhood home had been lost but there was little we could do. As people who had abandoned the country to the nightmare that had come upon it, we had no say in what was happening on that far and troubled land. Even less claim to property rights. There was guilt, of course, guilt for leaving while others stayed. But also I'm ashamed to say, anger. Anger that something that had been a repository for such vivid and formative early childhood memories had been taken. And despite the knowledge that other people were losing so much more than houses—lives, children, parents, everything worth living for—the loss of the house also meant a loss of something which felt like belonging.

There were two events that I had never expected to happen in my lifetime. Two possibilities that felt more mythical than the sudden discovery of mermaids, or pigs winging their way gracefully through the clouds. The first was that the civil war in Sri Lanka would end and second, that we would ever return to the house. Suddenly, both things happened. In 2009, abruptly in my thinking—but really after a twenty five year bloodbath between the Tigers and the government, an estimated sixty five thousand people killed—the war was officially over. Peace had supposedly come to this serendipitous isle.

The year the war ended, the Tamil family who had occupied our house for about three decades left it and the house was ours again. In a causal conversation with a cousin I discovered that the Tamil family was from Jaffna. They had been forced out from their own ancestral lands and houses by war. They had taken our house because their own had been taken by the Tigers. Their misfortune had become ours.

It took me three more years to return. Walking into the house, everything was as it had been when I last left it at the age of ten, more than thirty years ago. While I had long outgrown the habit of making floor plans, the map of the house now emerged from a vague and vacillating mist of memories into reality. A real place, a location. A *Home*? Possibly, but also the site of so much disruption. Again I considered the Tamil family. Had they called this place home? In the course of their own dislocation, the loss of land, house, possibly family, and who knows what else, they had arrived here, and in doing so, taken our place.

This seems to me one of the many insidious effects of war: No one is exempt, and the repercussions widen like ripples through a still pool. But perhaps the most important distinction is one of degree. My family was on the very outer ripples of that pool. We had only lost a house, when others had lost everything. But to attempt to understand what has happened to all of us, to the nation, we must consider what has been lost. What has been the price of war? The list to me seems to include: Life, Identity, Children, Respect (of self and other), Virginity (of many kinds), Bodily Cohesion, Houses, Belonging, Rest, Ancestral Land, Innocence, Certainty, Love, Sleep, Trust, Parents, Family, Generosity, Safety, Friendship, and the Sacred.

Beyond this we must consider what we can do in the face of this loss. How do we learn to live beyond it? I firmly believe that to do so we must communicate about what has happened in every way we can: in words, in gestures, in art, drama, and with all the rest of the paltry, yet profound, tools that give vent to the suffering that has come before.

In this sense, *Write to Reconcile* was one of the most significant experiences of my life as a writer, a teacher and a Sri Lankan. For the first time I was faced with people, young people, telling stories of war. This is not a thing that people do easily or often. Trauma in most contexts is not easily discussed. In Sri Lanka it is often taboo. Indeed, during my visit, I was asked

by the forces that be, “Why are you still writing about the war when it ended in 2009, and is therefore a dead and buried subject?”

To me, the idea that, four years after the end of a decades long war, the conflict could be considered a dead subject — that silence and collective amnesia are necessary in order to “move forward” — is ludicrous. The suppression of truth and emotion is a dangerous thing leading to dysfunction, whether in a family or a nation. I believe that people need to talk about what happened across the divides of race, ethnicity and religion in order to understand what each community lost and gained. This has to happen before we can see each other’s common humanity again.

Indeed, judging by the vociferous anti-Muslim sentiment currently gaining ground in Sri Lanka, there is a very real threat that we are turning our animosity against a new “enemy.” If the lessons of the war are ignored, if we decide on a path of collective amnesia, then further catastrophe might well be in the nation’s future.

*Write to Reconcile* is a small but powerful push against the trend towards silence. We held two residential workshops, one in the capital Colombo and one six weeks later in the Northern city of Jaffna.

On one of the first days of the Colombo workshop, I stopped by the desk of a young woman from Jaffna who, on my prompting, read her poem out loud to me. I was unprepared for it: a story of a lost childhood, a craving for toys that other children who did not grow up in war had. She remembered seeing dead bodies, while running with her family away from bombs. I saw the tears pool in her eyes, I felt my own breath catch and I had to walk out of the classroom and into the bathroom in order not to cry in front of her. It was the most profound reminder that, although I had written about the war, researched it at length, other people like this young woman, entire generations in fact, had lived with its horrors for the majority of their lives.

After that, throughout the two workshops, I kept my ears wide open to catch the stories. After all, what is a writer but a stealer of stories. And from these participants I learned more than I could have ever imagined.

There was the English Literature professor from the University of Jaffna who held us riveted with tales of her eight years of nomadic displacement.

“We moved from place to place,” she said, “We slept anywhere we could, even under trees to escape the bombs.” She described the efforts to keep the university open despite all odds. She remembers typing exam papers on a typewriter shared by the whole faculty, the machine balanced on a pile of rocks. After the war ended, they moved back to the house in Jaffna and rebuilt it. She kept just one wall as it was, pockmarked by bullets, crumbling. “Are you angry?” asked another participant. “No,” she said, “How can I be? My whole family survived without a scratch. We were so *lucky*.” She keeps the wall untouched as a reminder of this luck, a talisman, a blessing.

There was the young Muslim man who told us about the frustration he feels when he goes into Sinhala owned stores. He looks Sinhala but as soon as he says his name, and the shopkeepers realize that he is not Sinhala, the suspicion rises. “Now,” he says, “I call myself Asanga. It’s easier.”

There was the young student who told us about her experience attending a youth conference. Men knocked on her door at midnight to question her about her involvement with peace activists. They were plainclothes policemen and they left her alone after some hours. But the story left a bitter taste in our mouths, reminding us of the power of the state and the possibility of bodily danger to those who choose to question it.

So we talked about war. What else did we do? We ate. A lot! Breakfast, lunch, dinner and two tea breaks, not to mention Rio ice cream and the most deliciously creamy faluda I’ve had in my life! In between all these meals, Shyam shared his wisdom about plot, structure, pacing and poetry, giving the participants the necessary tools to tell their stories. He showed movies from around the world and made everybody write, write and write. And then, our heads buzzing with his words, our writing hands cramping and stiff, we went to dinner. Over rice and curry, over bread and pol sambol, vadai, and biryani and watalappam, we got to know each other. And this, perhaps, was the most powerful thing. I heard a statistic somewhere which said that seventy percent of Sri Lankan youth don’t know someone from a different ethnicity. This means that people are locked into their own cultural belief systems, buying all sorts of ancient stereotypes about each other and denied access to people who share so much with them in terms of history, land, and common experience.

In these rooms, where twenty-three youth of all ethnicities, races and religions, mingled and lived together, I felt my own prejudices challenged and then crumble. I had not realized that I had certain distinct ideas about how Tamil people and Sinhala people and Burgher people and Muslim people looked, spoke and behaved. And quickly these assumptions were pulled apart. There were Tamil girls who “looked Sinhala,” there were Sinhala boys who “looked Tamil,” Muslim boys who “looked Sinhala,” Sinhala and Tamil people who were Christians, a participant who had come all the way from London, another who had grown up in the West but returned to Sri Lanka as an adult, and so many other permutations of difference and similarity.

I found that even I was, in fact, another instance of this jumbling of identity. One day in Jaffna, wearing a salwar kameeze I had bought at the market, I was approached by an earnest participant. “Are you Sinhala or Tamil?” he blurted. Caught off guard and intrigued I said, “What do you think?”

“Well your name is Sinhala, but you are dressed like a Tamil,” he said indicating my salwar and nose piercing (acquired in San Francisco, a good decade before). I realized that he had been unable to place me ethnically, as I too had been unable to ethnically mark many of the other participants. Moments like these demonstrate the shifting and sliding markers of cultural identity. They reiterate the degree to which the old stereotypes no longer hold true in the polyglot that is modern Sri Lanka, stereotypes that, perhaps, were unfounded from the beginning. The racialized center cannot hold and in this fact we can take hope.

For the Jaffna Workshop, Shyam, our amazing coordinator Amrita, her assistant Shiromi, and I, all took an old Sri Lankan Air Force plane to the North. The participants would come later, on the long (and freezing) Jaffna bus. I couldn’t help wondering what the plane had been used for a mere three years ago to which Shyam answered very undramatically, “It’s just a transport plane. Not a bomber.”

Jaffna was all long causeways over quietly lapping lagoons, huge skies and ancient kovils. Most of the project team and the participants had never been here before, the entire North of Sri Lanka having been closed off from the rest of the country for the majority of the war. Coming here

was another thing I had never expected to happen. In fact, for the majority of my life, the possibility of travelling into Jaffna (a mere two hundred and forty five miles from Colombo) felt more remote than travelling to almost any other place in the world. And now we were here, holding our workshop in the historic Jaffna library, a location that felt triumphant given that it had been burnt during the war, thousands of manuscripts destroyed. It is a place where one removes one's shoes to enter and, for this and other reasons, it felt sacred. Later we would venture into the former high security zone, where bombed out houses lined the road, and where some of our participants grew up. Our guide took us into a house that was being rebuilt just as it had been before the war, and this too felt sacred.

In Jaffna, I also learned that while as a child, I had been obsessively drawing floor plans of our house in an attempt to remember it, Sri Lankans (and I'm sure, multitudes of displaced people) all over the world had been doing a similar psychic activity. The artist T. Shanaathanan came to share with us his luminous work, *The Incomplete Thombu*, a meditation on displacement and memory made up of eighty floor plans of houses lost in the Northern war zones, along with stories told by those who had lost each particular house. T. Shanaathanan spoke of entire neighborhoods being destroyed, everyone gone abroad. He spoke of being the only one of his community left, of feeling like a solitary tree, roots deep in the earth, waiting endlessly for their return. I was reminded that there were people like T. Shanaathanan and others who had stayed through it all, who were turning trauma into art and remembrance, as a way to understand and dispel it, and they must be lauded and supported.

It strikes me that to be a writer is to be concerned with death, to be obsessed with ghosts, to be always aware of the history of the thing. These young writers may not be aware of it yet but this is the underlying pulse of the job. Ghosts follow us more closely than others, hoping perhaps that we will scent their story in the air and tell it. It is our job to shout over and over again, "Everyone who was here before has died. We too will die. You will die. I will die. Nothing will be as it was. Let me tell the story while I can." And perhaps the aim of all this awareness of death is to grapple with the questions, "How will we live, what will our lives mean?" I think these are important questions for all of us concerned with Sri Lanka. "What will be the matter of our lives after war? How will we integrate understanding,

tolerance and acceptance into something greater—into peace, even possibly kinship?”

There is one last story to tell. This one too purloined from a dinner table conversation. One night, a Tamil participant, a schoolteacher, told a group of us about going to an educational function in Colombo. At this function she met a Sinhalese teacher who wore a chain around her neck. From this necklace hung eight thalis. We fell silent, stricken by her words. A thali is the sacred marriage pendant given to a Tamil woman on her wedding day by her bridegroom, to be worn from then until the day she dies. Eight women had lost their most precious possession in unknown circumstances, eight women had been silenced and forced to surrender the most sacred of their treasures. Even if those eight women had not been killed, only extreme deprivation would have forced them to sell their thalis.

The participant continued, “But I don’t even think she knew what the thalis were. She must have thought they were just pretty pendants. She must have just bought the necklace somewhere.” This unknown Sinhala woman, if she knew, she might be just as horrified as we were by the thought of what hung about her throat. “What did you do?” I finally asked. “Did you tell her? Did you ask her where she got the necklace?” “No.” she said. “We smiled and looked away. There was nothing to say.”

The significance of this story for me lies in that moment of profound silence between the two women, both acting exactly as the time and place dictated. But what if there had been a space for these women to communicate? What if they had had a common way of talking about rupture, loss, grief, yearning, need and healing? A space for truth telling? What if it was possible for the Tamil woman to explain how it felt to see the thalis? For the Sinhala woman to offer her own story? After all, she has been rendered silent in this story. We do not know how the war might have carved her life. Healing is possible only by breaking the silence and challenging the collective amnesia, in telling our stories to the ones who have wounded us and who we have wounded. But for this, safe spaces are necessary and so far in Sri Lanka, these kinds of safe space are few.

While in Sri Lanka, I often thought about the Tamil family that had occupied our house. Had they too considered this house a *home*? Were there children born into this house who, having known no other place, considered



it as much home as I had? I will never know these people, but perhaps the sharing of space makes us intimates. The truth is that as Sri Lankans we are far more closely tied than we are separated. As someone who has spent the majority of my life in places where people often do not know what or where Sri Lanka is, this is abundantly clear to me. At the end of the day, we do really share one house. This house will always be the site of a shifting multitude, a house that is host to a confluence of histories, contentious feuds, and an outpouring of diverse creative and cultural expression that makes its way around the globe. It is a house to which we return, in our words, our memories, and our physical bodies – a house that must share its story.

I believe that the participants of *Write To Reconcile* are attempting to challenge the silence and to tell the story of this one shared house in their many and diverse ways. They are doing this by speaking of this particular place from twenty-three different perspectives, twenty-three different ways of seeing it. And, in this, we are their privileged and grateful audience.

***Nayomi Munaweera*** is a Sri Lankan-American author. Her debut novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, which tells the story of two families, one Tamil, one Sinhala living through the Sri Lankan war was published in 2013. It was long-listed for the Man Asia Literary Award and won the Commonwealth Regional Literary Prize for Asia. She lives in Oakland, California.

## THE FLAG

*By Shilohni Sumanthiran*

The hall was filled with the smell of sweat, fatigue and general irritation. As we entered, there was a rising hum of complaints as the prefects with badges ushered girls into the already overcrowded hall. The aisle was filled with grubby middle-schoolers forced to sit packed together on the floor. I slumped in my seat at the back, then bent over to wipe the beads of sweat off my face with the hem of my uniform.

“Why are we here ané? It’s so hot! Why are the fans off?” Sulakshi, my best friend, grumbled next to me as she lifted her honey coloured hand and roughly brushed away the short strands of hair that were pasted to her forehead.

“I don’t know.” I replied as I slowly closed my eyes, willing myself to a less crowded, less hot place. I was just dozing off when Sulakshi elbowed me.

“Thinuki Akki is telling you to wake up,” she whispered.

I opened my eyes slowly, took one glance at the tall girl who was glaring at me from across the aisle, and immediately sat up straight. The hall had suddenly become very silent.

“Looks like we’re going to watch a movie or something.” Sulakshi said as she indicated towards the stage.

I fixed my eyes on the screen, eager for something to relieve the boredom and heat. I was hoping they would show a good movie, preferably, a musical. But, instead of seeing Julie Andrews dancing on hilltops or Audrey Hepburn’s Cockney accent filling the hall, the President’s face appeared on the screen. Our principal stood up and gave the long-awaited answer as to why we were in the hall.

“Girls, the President is about to make his speech regarding the end of the war. This is a historical moment, so pay attention!” she announced, and then sat back down.

One or two girls exchanged surprised reactions at the news. I rolled my eyes, "I can't believe that some people don't even know that the war is over," I said.

"I know, right. My parents put up a flag the minute we won!" replied Sulakshi.

I felt my face give way to an involuntary grimace. She had said "won." For some reason the word didn't seem right to me. I had noticed many Sri Lankan flags hung over the balconies and roofs of houses, but our house had none.

The President had started speaking. I leaned forward eagerly, and felt a wave of disappointment when I realized that I did not know what he was saying. With the exception of rare words like "Dina" and "Api" the rest of the speech, being in high flown Sinhala, was outside of my comprehension zone. I slumped back into my seat. I could sleep in peace knowing that Sulakshi would nudge me the minute a teacher or prefect happened to look our way. We had an unspoken understanding - the sort of understanding that only years of friendship can build up. She could always tell if I was lying or being truthful. I, unlike everyone else, could tell when she was sad, and knew exactly how to handle all her moods. Our friendship was one of the main reasons I had never understood all the antagonism that apparently existed between Tamils and Sinhalese. We were like sisters despite our different ethnicities. Comforted by the knowledge that she would be on the lookout for me, I happily indulged myself with far more exciting daydreams. Now that we were thirteen, Sulakshi's parents had offered to take me with them when they went for trips to their beach house. We were planning to go in two weeks' time and I lost myself in imagining all the pleasures the weekend would bring.

Finally the speech was over and girls streamed out of the hall, abandoning the rule of walking one behind the other. Around me I could hear people talking about what a great feat winning the war was. They would now grow up in a paradise, safe from terrorism and danger. Many girls had clapped and cheered when the President finished his speech. I too snapped out of my daydream and joined them.

My group of friends and I ambled towards class together. Ashante skipped and jumped ahead of us, turning around every so often to make humorous, yet irrelevant comments like the fact that Mrs. Kusuthevenan's bright yellow sari made her look a lot like Big Bird from Sesame Street. Maheshi sleepily squinted in the sunlight and complained that Bairavi hadn't let her sleep properly during the speech, which of course started an argument between them. Sulakshi and I walked side by side, laughing as we watched the two of them bicker.

"Stop being so grumpy Maheshi. Today is a day to be happy! Isn't it great? Who would have thought that this would happen? Sri Lanka is now a safe country! We are all safe!" exclaimed Sulakshi.

I smiled in agreement and then, after a moment, frowned. "We don't have a flag up in our house."

The minute the words left my lips I wished I could have caught them and shoved them back in my mouth. My friends had gone silent, four pairs of wide eyes were on me.

"Well... I guess you are T..." Sulakshi started and trailed off as her well-bred Colombo 7 instinct took over.

"Tamil? That's not fair!" Bairavi yelled jumping in, "We are Tamil and we put up a flag! We're patriotic."

The girls nodded in understanding. I began to fiddle with my tie, not wanting to fight over inane things like the definition of the word "patriotism".

"So... what are you guys wearing for the party this Saturday?" Sulakshi asked, quickly jumping into relieve the tension. Ashante and Maheshi began to argue over which dress they thought Bairavi should wear and all attention was diverted away from me.

As we walked back to class Sulakshi linked her arms with mine. "Pushpa... do you have relatives who were fighting with the terrorists?" She asked tentatively.

Her eyes were focused on the ground in front of her and her hold on my arm got stronger as if she was scared that I would run away. I laughed. "Don't be silly Sulakshi! Besides you have met most of my relatives. They are not even sympathetic towards the cause of the LTTE!"

Sulakshi smiled slightly, but didn't seem convinced. "I just don't understand why you are not celebrating. Maybe you have relatives who joined but your parents haven't told you? That is possible you know!"

We were always meeting new aunts, uncles and cousins. "I doubt it," I replied quietly, not quite sure whether to believe my own words or not. Sulakshi realized that I was disturbed by the thought and quickly changed the subject as if to say it didn't really matter to her and it shouldn't matter to me.

As Sulakshi chatted away I thought back to how we had become friends. Most of us were friends out of habit, having been so since grade one. Sulakshi and I, on the other hand, had become close in grade 5. It was like we picked each other. One day Maheshi had been chasing me with a spider in her hand. Terrified, I ran up to Sulakshi, whom I didn't know at that time, and held her in front of me like a shield. Sulakshi, winking at me, quickly spun a lie about how touching that particular type of spider could give you an infection. Maheshi immediately dropped it, and I was safe. From that day on Sulakshi was my friend. We were a lot alike, and agreed on almost everything. When we didn't agree on something we would spend many an hour exchanging views, happily refusing to agree with the other. In fact, we spent almost every religion period in school sitting at the back of the class and having, what we liked to call, our long "philosophical discussions" on religion and such matters. I had formed many of my own views and beliefs as a result of these conversations.

I was walking out of school that day when I noticed that our school too had put up a national flag. As I recalled the many glorious stories that had been exchanged during the course of the day, I felt a sense of pride. The lion seemed to project that pride as it stood straight and firm, holding up its sword. He seemed to be guaranteeing a future of safety and opportunities.

I, for one, had never really felt unsafe even during the war. Colombo was more or less a haven. Once in a way, when a bomb went off or there were blackouts, I would be reminded that I lived in a country at war. But then once the hype died down, I would once again forget that I was in any danger. My Sri Lanka had almost always felt safe. That's what I would tell relatives and friends who had left in search of safer harbours. I had heard

many of my aunts and uncles rebuke my parents for not migrating. "It is a war torn country! You are not safe!" they would say.

My parents would echo my thoughts when they replied, "Colombo is very safe. We can't all abandon this country. If everyone who could afford it left, then what hope would this country have? Besides, you must go to the North and East if you want to see a war-torn country. Colombo has, and always will be, safe."

"To bring up your Tamil children in this country is asking for trouble! Paavam!" my foreign relatives would say, unwilling to accept my parents' words. "They have to go through so much racism and hatred."

I would now step in to defend my country, by pointing out that I had never been a victim of racism. They would fall silent at my words, but their silence was not defeat. Their sympathetic glances and lowered eyes made it clear that they did not want to force some truth on me that I did not yet understand.

It was rare that we congregated as a family at meals and my parents often referred to this as a key difference when comparing our lifestyles with their childhood. That evening, however, we all happened to be home and sat as a family to eat dinner. As we passed the dishes, everyone was talking at the same time, each person relating their own story. The dishing out of food was followed by silence as we ate. It was my chance to ask my parents about the lack of a flag outside our house.

"Appa, how come we do not have a national flag? Everyone else is celebrating!"

"Celebrating what? The hundreds of thousands of lives lost? The homes that were destroyed?" He stabbed his potato with his fork, shoved it in his mouth and then looked up at me, waiting for my reply.

I was stumped. No one had brought that up in school.

“Because we won the war?...” I tried, “...and because now no more people will die! No more homes will be destroyed! We will all be safe!” I finished triumphantly.

Amma smiled at me, “That is true kunju. We must thank God that the violence has stopped, for now. But, what about all the people who lost their parents and children to the war? How do you think they feel when they hear the firecrackers? Some people still don’t know if their families made it out of the war zone alive or not.”

I thought about what she said for a moment but then found that I still disagreed with my parents.

“But they must also be happy that it’s over and more people will be safe!” I answered. I fiddled with my fork. “We still won the war. There’s nothing wrong with celebrating the victory. Even school has put up a flag!”

“Just because....” Appa started, but was swiftly silenced by Amma’s warning glance. He focused his attention on his food and continued to eat.

“Who won the war kunju? Who is ‘we’?” Amma asked kindly as she passed the salad to my father, as if rewarding his show of patience with food.

“Sri Lanka?” I asked tentatively.

My older brother, who was seated next to me, snorted, choking for moment on his food. “It was a civil war, Pushpa! As in Sri Lanka vs. Sri Lanka.”

“I know that! But the government won nah!” I declared angrily.

My brother was about to say something back but my father cut him off. “Yes, the government won. What you are saying is also right.”

“Then why aren’t we putting up a flag?” I asked desperately. My brother’s comment was weighing on my mind and I couldn’t rationalize what he had said.

“In a war, there are no winners and losers,” Appa explained slowly. “There are casualties and there are survivors. Do you know why we never took sides in this war? Because, at the end of the day, both sides were Sri Lankan. Both sides had casualties. Both sides had parents who lost children to the other side. By using the flag as a symbol of the government’s

victory, you are excluding many citizens of the country from that victory. Now, because of that, the flag is associated with one side.”

My parents had always been very critical of the war. They had laughed at many decisions and statements of the government and in the same breath criticized the LTTE’s actions. I had often heard my mother say that the government was fighting fire with fire and that, at the end of the day, both parties were inflicting terror.

I frowned, unable to articulate my numerous questions. I still couldn’t compartmentalize all my thoughts and questions. Was it wrong, after all, to be happy at the prospect of peace? I wondered if maybe my parents were being too judgmental, too pessimistic.

Before I could dwell on it much longer my brother asked me to play football on the play-station with him after dinner. Soon the game had my complete attention as I desperately tried to lose by smaller margins. Matters of national flags and victory parades were easily forgotten as I took up more important issues like arguing over who got to be on the best team and whether we should be playing the game he chose to begin with.

The morning brought with it what I liked to call, “happy weather”. It was like being in a posh vehicle, viewing the world from air conditioned comfort. Clouds filled the sky, shielding the earth from the sun’s oppressive rays. The only problem was that rain seemed to bring with it traffic. All of Colombo seemed to have taken their cars out. The traffic was hardly moving in Wellawatte. Having nothing better to do, I found myself staring out of the window. A frail old man was opening up his little kadé for the day. There was a rickety orange three wheeler, with a tiny national flag, parked nearby. Now the driver got out and began to approach the old man, gesturing angrily. The old man just shook his head and continued doing his own thing. I watched in shock as the three wheeler driver came right up to him and gave him a shove, looming threateningly over the tiny grey haired man. I wished he would walk away or run into his kadé, but he argued back. I felt all my muscles clench as the driver gave the old man another shove. He gestured at his own three-wheeler and then at a neighbouring store. The man glanced at the big golden lion plastered across the front of his neighbour’s store. My car started moving forward. I kept my eyes on the old man for as long as I could. He seemed to be begging something of the driver.



I felt tiny droplets fall on my head as I walked through the school gates. This sort of weather always seemed to bring with it a sense of calm. The fiery red background of the national flag caught my attention. Blood red. The lion stared straight ahead, sword in hand, as if he was ready for battle. The wind tugged at the flag, turning and twisting the ends, so that the tiny strips of orange and green were hardly visible. I averted my eyes from the lion's face and continued towards my class.

The day went by as usual, with teachers occasionally asking us if we had seen the parades and kiribath parties.

I wanted to discuss my dilemma with Sulakshi, to tell her about the incident with the trishaw driver but I didn't feel I was able to approach her for a reason I couldn't explain to myself. I figured that Bairavi was probably the best person to approach. She came from a Tamil home. Her parents probably had the same views that my parents did. Besides, Bairavi was always very aware of what was going on. Whenever we wanted to know something we would ask her and she would tell us. My parents always told me that I should read the newspapers, like Bairavi, and be in touch with what was happening around me. Considering that she was always well informed she would probably help the most.

I approached her later that day and found her sitting in the cafeteria. "Bairavi," I started, "how come you have a flag at your house? Don't your parents feel that they are being insensitive?"

She looked at me in confusion, then glanced at the cafeteria door. "No. They are being patriotic," she stated stoutly.

Then before I could challenge her assertion that hoisting a flag was equivalent to patriotism, she got up and walked out of the cafeteria leaving her cup of hot milo behind. I was dumbfounded by her reaction.

I still needed to thrash out my thoughts with somebody and finally overcame my reluctance to speak to Sulakshi. She was the only person who really engaged with me on matters like this. I slowly made my way back to class where I knew I would find Sulakshi with her nose buried in a book. I tapped her shoulder lightly. She smiled and put the book away,

"What's up?" she asked.

I started pouring out all my confusion to her. "I don't understand Sulakshi, should I be happy or sad about the end of the war? And is 'win' the correct terminology to use? Or are we being insensitive to those actually affected by the war? You know, when everyone is on the streets, cheering and celebrating, do you think it's being insensitive to those who are still suffering in IDP camps, or to those who lost family members?" I stopped to take a quick breath. Sulakshi was staring at me, wide eyed. I quickly pulled up a chair, sat next to her and continued, "what I mean is, is picking sides necessary? Because that's what we're doing na? We're saying the government 'won'. Not Sri Lanka, since the LTTE cadres are also Sri Lankan. Right? But then again, I don't know...we should be happy. I mean it's the end of a war! And people will be safer! But there are all these other questions and I don't know what is right and wrong. I don't know...What do you think about all this? Surely your parents are also talking about it?"

I looked at Sulakshi waiting. She looked flustered. "I...I think we should celebrate..." she finally said.

"But why?" I asked her, irritated at her lack of engagement. She turned away from me and opened her book, only to close it again and turn back to me.

"Because, the government is the government of Sri Lanka Pushpa. If you were really patriotic you would join in celebrating our victory as a nation." She paused, her fingers furiously scraping away at the tipex markings on the desk. "That's what my parents say anyway."

She picked up her book and started reading once again. I stared at her. Sulakshi was one of the most inquisitive people I knew. She always asked questions, whether it be from teachers, parents or friends and she never let arbitrary statements pass without questioning their validity. This was very unlike her. "What's wrong with you?" My meek question was met with further silence and then a glare. I got up and returned to my seat, confounded and hurt at what had just happened.

We didn't talk to each other for the rest of the day, even though we continued to sit side by side. I tried cracking a joke once or twice but Sulakshi didn't laugh. It was the first day a teacher did not shout at Sulakshi and me for chatting in class. I tried to catch Sulakshi's eye a few times, but

she refused to look in my direction, bending over her work. The silence between us, this new cold and dreary reserve, seemed to engulf our friends too. Even Ashante, who was usually always laughing at something or the other, sat silently in her chair, glancing at Sulakshi and me every so often. I considered exchanging places with Bairavi, so that Sulakshi and I could both sit and listen to the lesson at ease but I didn't want to be the one to officially detach myself, especially since I didn't even understand why Sulakshi was acting so strangely towards me. After a while I stopped trying to meet her gaze. I pretended not to care or notice when she played 'bingo' with Maheshi and Ashante who were at the tables in front of us, leaving me out.

Over the next few days there was a strain in our relationship. We were being polite to each other, but not friendly. Whenever I tried to bring up our silent fight, she would wave it off, as if it hadn't happened. Finally it was unbearable and I decided to confront her. Finding Sulakshi was always easy, so one interval, determined to make peace, I made my way to the school library where I knew I would find her sitting in a corner reading a book. She was too engrossed in her novel to hear me approach. I tapped her on the shoulder and dived right in to what I had to say. "Is it because I brought up the war? It's okay if we disagree on it you know. We do disagree on a lot of things," I said quietly.

"No no, it's not that," Sulakshi replied. I could tell she was lying.

"Did you think about what I asked you? Do you understand why I'm confused?" Sulakshi stared ahead. I could tell that she wasn't sure how to react. "It's just that...you say one thing, and my father...well they think... otherwise."

"That's good, right? Then we can discuss it and I can have a better understanding!" I exclaimed happily. Sulakshi picked at the fraying corners of her text book. I watched her, waiting for her to tell me what her parents thought. But she didn't reply. My exclamation seemed to get lost in the space between us. I couldn't understand why this particular topic was not up for discussion and I saw that she could not understand my persistent need to talk about it with her.

"Just drop it. It's not even important," she finally said. "It's not like you figuring out how people feel and what people should do will change

anything na? So just drop it. Let everyone just think what they want to think.”

We both knew that her reasoning had no base. But her tone carried a pleading note. The subject seemed to cause her distress. I couldn't understand why, and by now I knew that she wasn't going to tell me. I realized discussing the flag hurt her, and so I dropped the subject and I started looking for answers elsewhere.

Little things, that had always been as they were, began to catch my attention more. Contrary to what I wanted to believe, people did associate primarily with those of their own ethnicities in our school. Sinhala and Tamil medium classes didn't mix with each other or with any of the English medium classes. We, likewise, only associated with each other. However, even within our English class, many of the Hindu Tamil girls hung out only with each other. Although no one left them out or was rude to them, no one really actively included them either. Individually everybody was civil and polite to everybody else, but cliques were formed along ethnic and religious lines. In the days that passed, I occasionally hung around with the Tamil girls in our class. Unlike Sulakshi they were all ready to say what they felt. Most seemed to come from households like my own, others like Bairavi had different opinions, and some couldn't care less. But whatever we all felt, we would very happily say, but only to each other. This change was a refreshing break from the coldness that now seemed present when Sulakshi and I were together.

Sulakshi had taken to being excessively polite to me, but she never seemed to say anything of importance anymore. I felt a rising irritation at whatever she did, and found myself snapping at her often, there being plenty of opportunities, since we shared the same form and often used each other's things. Eventually Sulakshi dropped her polite façade and started snapping right back at me. Our friends tried their best to laugh off my rude comments to them about how Sulakshi was singing all the time despite the fact that she couldn't sing, or that maybe if Sulakshi actually tried to make friends with other people they would stop thinking that she was a snob.

On my way to school one morning I noticed an alteration in the old man's little kadé. The three-wheeler driver had got his way. A tiny national flag was dancing in the wind.

A week after the President's speech, like two tectonic plates that are desperately trying to move past each other, the inevitable earthquake took place. Sulakshi and I were sitting in class without friends during the interval when Maheshi cracked a "Tamils equal terrorism" joke.

"You shouldn't say things like that! Not even as a joke! That's racism," I shouted angrily at her.

"Whoa! Chill out Pushpa, it's just a joke!" Maheshi replied apologetically. "Sorry."

"She was joking Pushpa!" Sulakshi slammed her hand on the dark brown wood of her desk. "It's the same way you crack jokes that associate Muslims with terrorism. That's racism too, you know!"

I stared at her in a shocked silence.

"You always want to think that Tamils are being targeted. That's the whole problem in this country! Tamils imagine that everyone else is out to get them and so they kick up a big fuss about everything." She was standing up now. Her left fist was clenched while her right palm remained firmly on the surface of her desk, as if it were giving her support.

I knew the words weren't her own. She was parroting what she had heard her parents say. I knew, because I had been doing a lot of that too recently. Yet this was a chance to have a proper conversation with her to clear the air.

"That's because Tamils are targeted in this country. As are Muslims," I informed her. I was glad that I had started listening to my parents' conversations recently and as a result had many examples at my fingertips.

"Fine. If you feel 'targeted' by me, then why are you my friend?" Sulakshi demanded.

Before I could answer, she spun around and walked out of class. Our other friends just stared at me and didn't offer any indication as to whose side of the fight they were on. Later that day I tried smiling at her, but she turned her head away, and resumed her recent habit of refusing to meet my eye.

Sulakshi and I avoided each other. We no longer sat together in the same row. My initial surprise at her reaction had slowly given way to anger at her for being so, as I saw it, prejudiced. Like the day after the President's speech, silence seemed to distance us. This time however, the silence continued. Anger and resentment towards Sulakshi for being so irrational began to brew in me. Sulakshi and Ashante had moved to the second row the very next period. Our friends seemed to be taking it in turns to sit with me and talk to me in the intervals. I began to realize that every day, one would be allocated to me, while the others stayed with Sulakshi.

It was Maheshi's turn to be my friend one day and I asked her, "Do you want to go watch a movie with me on Saturday?" The prospect of the weekend always excited me.

"I can't Pushpa. I'm going with Sulakshi and her family to their beach house!" Maheshi, unaware of the impact that her information had on me, continued to ramble on about how she couldn't wait for the weekend.

I stared at her. Sulakshi had never officially uninvited me. How could she when she was refusing to even look at me? I, on the other hand, had forgotten about the beach house, and my numerous plans for that weekend. I couldn't have expected to still go with Sulakshi. After all, we weren't talking; we could hardly even be called friends. I felt tears rim my lower lids. I looked away, hoping that in her enthusiastic account of what she planned to take with her, Maheshi wouldn't notice the few runaway teardrops that managed to get past my eyelid and roll down my face.

"Pushpa? Are you okay? What's wrong?" Maheshi asked as she leaned forward and tried to get a clearer view of my face.

"Nothing Maheshi. I'm fine." I smiled at her. I turned away from her, and watched Sulakshi, Bairavi and Ashante giggle as they poured over the glossy new pages of a magazine. "I'm fine," I repeated, mostly to myself.

Nothing much changed over the next few months. The hype of victory died down and people went back to their day to day lives. Colombo had hardly felt the impact of the war, and so a peaceful era started its reign with no drastic change to our lives.

Finally, one day my mother asked me why Sulakshi hadn't come home in a while. "We had a fight," I informed her. Ten minutes later I was sitting on her lap, like I would have five years ago, crying and relating the reason for our quarrel. I noticed though that she was smiling. Pride? Happiness? Understanding? No, it was amusement. That only served to make me angry. "It's not funny! It's serious!" I cried.

"I know kunju. Before I tell you how to fix it, can I ask you a question?" I indicated that she could and so she continued. "Well, have you stopped making Muslim jokes? And have you started noticing the discrimination against other races?"

I nodded. "You're a racist sometimes too." I informed her. My mother always made rude comments about the Sinhala race, but I had never once thought she was being racist until now.

She laughed and nodded. "We're all a little prejudiced in our own ways. The most you can do is to recognize that you're as bad as everyone else and try and minimize it."

"Sulakshi is being silly though, right." It was a statement, searching for agreement and approval.

"You never know darling. Maybe she is repeating what she hears at home. Maybe her parents have told her not to discuss it with anyone because it's controversial. Maybe she has a family member in the government, or who strongly supports them. You never know." She stroked my head. "Issues like this are sensitive. Even to the majority. It's best not to bring it up with friends."

"But then how can you change attitudes?" I asked.

"You are still small kunju. You focus on passing your Tamil paper first will you? And it's good that you have recognized your own failings. You can work on yourself. Once you grow up, you can change the world."

"Why aren't you and appa changing the world?" I asked.

"Some things are just too difficult." She sighed. "We must only take on the battles that we can fight." I noticed that she wouldn't meet my eye when she spoke and had instead found a spot on the ground to stare at. "Sometimes it's hard to step out of our comfort zone, kunju." She lifted me

off her lap and stood up to go make dinner. “Make up with Sulakshi,” she advised me as she left the room.

I hadn’t quite understood what she meant by a comfort zone and taking on battles. What I did understand was that she thought that Sulakshi and I could be friends without ever discussing the war and the conflict. I was beginning to wonder how close Amma and Appa really were with their friends. I wondered if one could actually be close to someone with whom certain topics of discussion were taboo. Amma seemed to think that it was a small thing, and now that the war is over, insignificant. But it didn’t seem insignificant to me. Sulakshi’s inability to tolerate my view and share her own seemed to sour our friendship and make it artificial. But maybe, just maybe I was wrong? If Amma and Appa could be genuine friends with people despite not sharing their feelings about the war, then maybe Sulakshi and I could too. Perhaps, I too would eventually realize that talking about it wasn’t all that important after all.

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## THE PAPAYA TREE

By Nikini Jayatunga

They hang there, taunting me, beckoning me with their brightness. The yellow papaya globes crown the trunk like they've been dipped in sunshine, the leaves fanning out in a satellite formation around the radiant centre. Sitting here by my window, they seem close; I could just reach out and grab one. When I last called this place home, years ago, I used to wish that I could sprout wings, float up and pluck a fruit clean off a branch. A child's idle daydream, but now I can reach them. I've already sized up the distances, planned my route. First, I'll climb onto the lip of the well, avoiding the loose stone where the heavy pail always bangs against the edge. From there I'll jump onto the garden wall, which skirts our land. The wall is high and narrow, probably no wider than 4 inches, but that's all I'll need. My balance is sound, my feet sure. It is not my lack of confidence that prevents me. Rather, what holds me back is the question, What would the neighbours say? Good girls don't go scrambling up walls to pick fruit, even from their own trees. That's a monkey's playground, or at the very least, a man's. Certainly not mine, with my already tarnished history.

I turn back to the small mirror in front of me with a frustrated sigh. *Foolish*. Impatiently my fingers work their way through my long hair, grasping, pulling, and twisting. I coil my braid on the top of my head, working quickly with the instinct of habit, and reach for a single pin to secure it in place. For a second, someone else stares back at me. A girl with determination blazing in the hard set lines of her face. Cold fire in her eyes. *But, she no longer exists*. It's funny how my hands still remember this morning routine, my fingers flying through the silken strands to bind and wind my hair on the crown of my head. All completed in thirty seconds flat; methodical, efficient, just like I've been trained to be. I guess it had been drummed into me like so much else. But I don't need to wear my hair like this anymore. I won't be running around in the jungle today, won't need to pile my hair up to keep it out of my eyes during manoeuvres, providing a welcome cushion for the hard metal helmet. The only manoeuvres I'll be exercising today are on a sewing machine. Released from the constraining pin, the plait unfurls and falls heavily down my back, a python ungraciously

tipped out of its basket. Already the nape of my neck grows hot, though the day is young.



“Navadini?” My mother calls.

As I enter the kitchen, she pushes a tin cup of tea timidly in my direction.

“Thank you,” I reply, hating the formality in my voice. “Did you sleep well?” I ask, desperate for something to say, anything to fight the silence that prowls on the edge of every conversation between us.

“Not so well. I was disturbed by the sounds coming from next door. The poor boy’s shouting woke me. Children get so frightened by their nightmares. And given what that family’s been through it’s no wonder he suffers from them.”

I gulp nervously. My own paralyzing night terrors leave me blanketed in a cold sweat; I choke down my screams every night for my mother’s sake. She doesn’t need to know what torments me in my dreams. She must notice the dark circles under my eyes, but she never probes. Even now, she just busies herself pottering around the kitchen, and for once I am grateful she doesn’t attempt to pursue a conversation. *Best not to dwell on the past.*

A sari blouse lies waiting for me at the battered but resilient sewing machine in the corner of the room.

“I should finish this order soon, I just need to tidy up the seam,” I say.

“Ah, good. Mrs. Indrakumar is coming to collect it later on,” my mother reminds me. “I’ll see if I can get her to give you more work.”

“Amma, I’ve altered every sari blouse that Mrs. Indrakumar owns. She can’t help us anymore. The poor lady shouldn’t be spending her money to give me something to do. She has her own family to think of.”

"I don't know why the others in the village don't come," my mother muses. "Yours is the only sewing machine in the village. And your work is fine. Very neat...." She tries to smile, though she can't quite meet my eyes. "Those Sinhalese soldiers...they taught you well," she finishes simply.

Yes, they did that much at least. I now know about seams, and darts and patterns, under-stitching, edge-stitching, stay-stitching, and every-other-kind-of-stitching. But I also know about AK47s, hand grenades, and Claymores. I know how to survive on wild plants foraged in the jungle, to camouflage myself with a palette of dirt and moss, to move unheard and nimble through the treacherous undergrowth. Other soldiers taught me those skills well too. But they won't suit me in my new "civilian" life. By learning to place a few stitches in a garment I have apparently proved that I can be successfully "reintegrated."

My bitter laugh earns me a disapproving glance from my mother. She thinks I should be grateful. My sewing can provide an income for my family and I. But I never asked to be a seamstress. *I never asked to be a soldier either, but look how that turned out.*

Anyway, a seamstress needs seams to sew.

"I'll ask at the temple too," my mother carries on, as much to convince herself as me. "Someone must have clothes that need mending."

"Even if they do, they won't give them to me." I can't help the frustration creeping into my voice as I struggle with the bobbin on this infernal aged sewing machine.

"Don't be silly, child," she chides.

"You've seen the way that people look at me in the village. They barely meet my eye, much less talk to me. Most people treat me like I have a disease!" *Maybe "terrorism" is infectious.*

"You've been away a long time, you know. And you've grown up so much. You're....different. They just need some time to get to know you again."

*They or you, Amma?*

"It's just..." I sigh. "I can't go back to being the little girl I was when I left. The girl that they remember, that you, remember. This is who I am now."

“Of course.” My mother clucks. “Who else could you be?”

*Who else, indeed?*



“I don’t know how you get the fit so perfectly!” gushes Mrs. Indrakumar, admiring my work in the mirror.

“If you know what to do it’s not all that difficult,” I reply modestly.

My mother beams with pride, and a little blossom of happiness blooms within me. It’s been a long time since that’s happened.

“Well, I know you’ll do just as good a job on the next order and—”

“Mrs. Indrakumar,” I interrupt, “you’ve done so much for me already, you really don’t have to ...”

“It’s not for me, dear.” She bounces on her toes excitedly. “It’s for Rajan. He’s been released from the detention camp.”

Rajan. Her son is coming home; no wonder Mrs. Indrakumar’s mood has been effervescent this morning. My mother, on the other hand, visibly deflates at the news, swaying precariously. I reach for her, worried that her legs might give way, and direct her gently to a chair.

“Rajan?” She whispers. “Did he say anything about...about Gopalan?”

Mrs. Indrakumar, too late, realizes her carelessness. “No... no, I’m sorry, he doesn’t know anything. He wasn’t even there when Gopalan disappeared.... you know that.”

“I know, I know,” my mother affirms, nodding desperately. “But they were best friends. I thought he might have known, he might have...” her voice falters. “He might have heard something about my little boy.” She’s pleading now. “Anything.”

“Amma,” I say as gently as I can, hoping to stem the tearful flood that is sure to erupt in a few moments, “it’s been years.... maybe we...”

“He’s your brother! How can you just forget him?” Her words sting.

“I haven’t. I won’t ever forget him. If we cherish his memory, he’ll always be with us.”

“But what if he’s out there somewhere?” My mother’s eyes shine with futile belief.

Mrs. Indrakumar steps in. “We could make another complaint? I’ll go with you.”

“We’ve lodged so many complaints. No one takes any notice. I’ve gone and spoken to every soldier in Joseph Army Camp and I still know nothing about what happened to my son. He wasn’t even political! He didn’t join the Tigers with Rajan and the other boys. He wasn’t mixed up in any of that. He just wanted to concentrate on his studies.”

“Amma, no one saw,” I say, trying to reason with her. “He wasn’t taken by the soldiers to the detention camp like Rajan was. He just... disappeared.”

“I should have protected him!” my mother wails.

“You did everything you could.” Mrs. Indrakumar ineffectually pats my mother’s hand.

Every cry from my mother frays my already threadbare nerves. The scene is beginning to resemble my nightmares, echoing the chorus of grief and loss that is my nightly serenade. Somewhere I know another mother is crying, grieving over another child. And I know I am the only one to blame for that. And I will never be able to forgive myself.

“We just have to accept it,” I say, my tone clipped and tired. “We don’t know what happened to him. We never will.” I press my fingers to my temples in an attempt to relieve the tight balls of pressure against my skull.

“No! I can’t believe that!” My mother answers, defiant.

“And I can’t keep chasing ghosts!” I rise, and move swiftly across the room.

“Navadini—” She tries to stop me, voice shrill, eyes wide in panic. “Navadini, where are you going?”

“Out. Just...out! Is that a crime?”

Mrs. Indrakumar stops me at the door. “Navadini, you know you shouldn’t go on your own.”

Wrenching my arm out of her grasp, I turn on my heels, my mother’s sobs following me out of the door until I pass through the gate.



The dirt road stretches before me, the horizon silhouetted by the dignified profile of tall Palmyrah trees. With only birds for company, I find some peace. Birds don’t judge me. Birds don’t look at me with hostile suspicion, or with disappointment for failing to win the war for them, or with anger for going to every length possible in the attempt. Or with accusation—the galling injustice that I live on, while so many others have not. Sacrifice in victory is glory, but in defeat it is nothing but wasteful tragedy. I see that clearly in the reproving eyes that look at me. Survival for me is its own form of punishment

I hate storming away from my mother, but it feels good to be outside. To be released from the cage of my freedom, away from her claustrophobic care and my brother’s phantom presence. I carry so many ghosts with me; my mind is like a cemetery. I see the dead often enough in my sleep, I cannot walk with them in my waking hours too. But I shouldn’t lash out at my mother. After father died and I left, Gopalan was all she had in the world for so long. If losing me hurt her, losing him nearly killed her.

A parent who has outlived their child. It goes against the natural order of things. But then so much about war does. And I have surely played my part in feeding that angry machine. I never kept count, as some of my comrades used to, didn’t string together a necklace of scalps in my mind. But I know that the fruits of my labour were many. I was nothing if not efficient. Men mostly, army soldiers, but others too, of all ages, sizes, religions, backgrounds. War doesn’t discriminate. All on the other side are equally the enemy. And combat was survival of the fittest. Kill or be killed.

When everyone’s hands are soiled, the stain is less noticeable.

En masse, in the movement, we cloaked ourselves in bravado, bathed in the conviction of our purpose, even took pleasure in the fearful shadow we cast, the respect we commanded. With every recruitment drive, every mission, it was easier to forget the names, forget the faces of the lambs we sent to slaughter. Easier to act and obey than think, than feel. It is only now that everything catches up with me, reflected ten-fold in my mother's grief-worn face. Now I find the victims' names and faces written across my mind, like gravestones. And foremost Vidya's, the little girl who haunts my dreams more than the others.

When I replaced her rag-doll with a rifle, I knew, with complete certainty that I'd sentenced her to death. No training, no time even to demonstrate how to fire and reload. Bullets were more precious than gold back then anyway. Just a quick tug to tighten the strap of her helmet, for all the good that would do her, and then a firm shove to push her in front of me, to put her small body between mine and the onslaught. At the end, just before the world erupted in dirt and smoke and limbs, she turned to look back, eyes wide as saucers, and a fleeting memory hit me then, absurd at the time, of Gopalan when he was young, barely walking, and our father telling us ghost stories during a power cut. The lamp-light flickered and Gopalan pulled the sheets up trembling, with just his eyes poking out, while I hugged him close. I felt Vidya reach for me, saw her mouth, "Akka," but her plea for help died as the whining shell rushed at us. There was the thunder of the impact, and a deafening silence as my world went black.

"Navadini?"

My arm twitches. The small movement brings me back to myself. I feel once more the ground beneath my feet, reliably solid, whole, and I release the breath that has lodged in my throat.

"Navadini?"

I didn't expect to hear my name called out here on this lonely road. I turn, slowly, still dazed, to see Pradeep, the postman, catching up with me on his creaking bicycle.

"Hello," I say politely, a little uncertain. I am not used to conversation and, since my return, I only talk to my mother and my few customers, (limited primarily to Mrs. Indrakumar). But Pradeep always has a

smile for me when he comes to the house to deliver the occasional letter for us. Just like he does now.

“Are you heading into the village?” he asks. “We don’t often see you around there.”

I shift uncomfortably. “No, my mother needs me at home. She...she doesn’t like to be left alone.”

He nods understandingly, and kindly inquires about my mother’s health. I ask about his wife, Maynaha, I think she’s called.

“She’s doing well, thank you. She’s finally got some supplies for the school, so hopefully she can start up the lessons again soon. It’s been long enough. Her classes won’t be as full as before, of course...”

I nod and try and think of a way to end the conversation without appearing rude. The road is deserted, but I can’t help looking around nervously. I can’t afford to ignite the rumours. A word of greeting at our door as he delivers the post is one thing. A conversation, alone, un-chaperoned, on an empty road is quite another. I already carry the label of being a Tiger, I don’t think my shoulders can bear the added weight of being a “loose woman.”

Thankfully he seems aware of the inappropriateness of our entirely innocent conversation and graciously says, “I should be on my way. Maynaha hates it when I am late for dinner.”

“Yes, my mother will be wondering where I am,” I add.

“Of course. Best not to be out on the road too late.”

“Oh, by the way Maynaha was admiring the sari jacket Mrs. Indrakumar was wearing the other day. She said all the praise should go to you,” he remarks offhandedly, while swinging his leg onto the bicycle and pushing off. “Maybe you could do the new school uniforms!” He calls over his shoulder. Then he’s off, humming a familiar tune from an old Tamil movie to himself as he goes. The heavy clouds of the past that darkened my horizon lift. I am left with the birds again, their song suddenly brightened by this unexpected kindness. I let myself imagine, the boys with little rucksacks, and the girls with red ribbons, bright at the end of their braids. A flock of white doves treading this same path to school, in uniforms made by me.





I lose track of time in my solitary ambling, content to feel the warm embrace of the sun on my skin. I shake my legs. Some exercise will do my muscles good after lying dormant for so long, deprived of the regular exertion that used to keep them in prime condition. Giving in to the urge, I break into a run. My feet drum the hard ground, my arms rise and fall methodically, piston-like, propelling me onwards. I lose myself in the rhythm, the purity of unbridled movement. I feel alive.

That's when I hear it. The steady rumble of a vehicle. It's travelling at a pace that means it can't be one of the few lumbering buses that service our district. Has to be an army jeep. That's the only other type of vehicle around here. I stop hastily, recovering my breath and cast my eyes around but there is no sanctuary on this open stretch of road. The jeep looms steadily nearer and I am trapped in its path. I feel dangerously exposed, the dying evening light projecting long shadows around me. I curse my aimless daydreaming, knowing I've let the hour get too late. I'm normally spared from this concern, as my "profession", such that it is, allows me to work from home. But now I face the menace that other girls must endure daily; now I recall the fear that choked my mother's eyes as I strode foolhardily out of our house.

When the vehicle is just meters away, my ears catch on the sound of two soldiers joking with each other in a casual intimacy of shared language and culture. A dust cloud billows around me as the jeep skids to a halt, and the two men emerge. Both sturdily-built, muscled, and, most importantly, armed. While speed and agility might be on my side, strength is definitely on theirs. Besides what's the point in running or resisting? More men would spew forth from the Army Camp to take their place like snakes from a Gorgon's severed head. Still I can't help comparing my odds.

I order my heart to still. *Don't show them fear. Then they own you.*

"You're the girl that lives at the end of the lane? Navadini Thangarajah?" one asks. I nod, keeping my eyes modestly downcast. "Well then you saved us a trip. We were just coming to see you."

I risk a glance upwards, surprised by the lightness of his tone. It almost sounds friendly. But this one looks green. No doubt he was lured by the glory and honour of the great Sri Lankan Army. Probably hoping to improve his marriage prospects. I bet every Sinhalese girl would love to marry a soldier. His older companion, on the other hand, is battle-hardened and dour. He wears the camouflage with ease, like a second skin. I suspect he would look rather uncomfortable in civilian clothes. *As I do.*

“Is anything wrong, Sir?” I don’t know why I even ask. This is the third time soldiers have visited me this month. But I must keep up my end of the performance.

“No, nothing is wrong. We just have to make sure our records are still up to date.” He trots out the same line that they all use. Checking records. Harmless. *At least for now.*

“You were in rehabilitation?”

“Yes. I was released on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012.” Factual, to the point. This is a well-rehearsed script.

“Why did you join the Tigers?” he continues, while his colleague silently scrutinises my face.

“I had no choice.”

“So you were forced to join?”

“Yes.” *Keep it simple. That’s the only thing they’ll understand.*  
*Absolutes.*

He looks at me expectantly. Not judgmentally, but with simple and seemingly genuine curiosity. Silence, it seems, can be as persuasive as threats.

“It was around the time of the Indian army. I was young. The movement was recruiting. They...demanded a contribution from each family,” I offer half-reluctantly, half-calculatingly as I wonder whether I should play up this angle of the story. The role of the unwilling innocent civilian forced into a life not of her choosing. Which isn’t too far from the truth anyway. “We couldn’t afford the two gold sovereigns or six thousand

rupees that they were asking for." Pause for effect. And then, in barely a whisper, "We had to pay in people."

Looking up I am rewarded by the disgust painted on the young soldier's face. *Maybe I should have been an actress.* His experienced comrade is unmoved, but this one is a captive audience. The cruelty of the "terrorists" appalls him. He's probably heard this story before—part of the wholesome propaganda diet he was fed. I try not to smirk at his innocence, so at odds with his uniform. He has picked the wrong profession.

"You were the only child and they still took you?" he asks. That question grounds my mental smile to a halt, reminding me to stay alert.

"No...I had a brother. He was just a child."

Best to close that door there. Lock my brother and loved ones away in my heart where the soldiers can't touch them. They don't need to know those details. That my father had been caught in the crossfire with a group of civilians, killed by a bullet as he tried to dodge the worst of the fighting between the Tigers and the Indian soldiers; that "the boys" had still come knocking, demanding we pay a higher price. Gopalan was even younger than me, sweet, good-natured. He needed my mother. She needed him. I volunteered for Gopalan, so that there would still be a man (well, a boy) in the house, a man to look after our mother, to carry on our family name.

Struggling slightly to keep my face in the passive mask that this scene demands, I study the ground intently. The young soldier, too, seems momentarily lost in thought. Perhaps remembering a sibling of his own, or the responsibility that comes with being the first-born. An impatient huff from his superior, as he lights a cigarette and draws heavily from it, prompts the younger man to return to the situation at hand.

Clearing his throat he continues, "Why did you stay with them so long?"

*Careful now.* I clutch my dress to clear my hands of the gathered beads of perspiration. I can't tell them how I excelled there, that I relished the doors that were suddenly open to me, drank deeply of the chance to receive an education that was beyond the means of my family, savoured the independence denied to women in my community.

"I...I couldn't leave. They wouldn't let me."

The soldiers look at each other for a moment, weighing my tale's verity in their gaze. It's a plausible line, one that must have been regurgitated by every Tamil that is subject to these unofficial interrogations. How does one distinguish between believer and conscript?

"And what do you do now?" the younger soldier asks.

"I sew. I was very thankful that I learnt this new skill in the rehabilitation centre." I spice this response with genuine feeling, hoping it will give my previous answers also the authentic flavor of truth.

"Ah good. It's good that they're teaching you something useful." He offers me a not unkind smile and, questions exhausted for now, turns to leave. My lungs push a sigh of relief through my chest but before I can release it the older soldier speaks for the first time, in a voice as rough as gravel.

"Did you make this dress?" Flicking away his cigarette butt like a bothersome fly, he steps closer, reaching forward to touch the collar. "It's.... nice..." His hand lingers a second too long, his fingers stray an inch too far down my chest. He must be able to feel my heart hammer a frantic staccato against my ribs. "Very nice."

His partner chuckles. "What, do you want her to make one for you too?" The senior soldier's lips tilt upward fractionally in an awkward smirk, but his eyes remain cold, calculating, mirthless. And fixed squarely on mine.

He warns (or threatens), "We have a new registration process. You must report to the civil office on Monday. Without fail."

I nod numbly. Satisfied, he turns and heads towards the vehicle. A lot more happens in the civil office than "registration". Or so I have heard. *But what choice do I have?* I swallow down the mounting rage within me, my fingers trembling like an addict suffering withdrawal. My craving is for the feel of smooth metal, the weight of barrel and bullet in my hand. I stare hungrily at the pistol that hangs leisurely at the officer's hip, the rifle slung across his junior colleague's back, a deadlier version of the satchel he must have carried in his recently forsaken student days. For a moment I imagine a single bullet flying, a red flower blooming in the back of the senior soldier's

head, ruffling the close-cropped hair that he must comb every morning with military precision.

As if sensing my desire, he turns abruptly to look back at me and I hastily drop my gaze.

“Your brother. Where is he now?”

Now I’m forced to improvise. There are no stage-directions for this question.

“I haven’t seen him for years. He went miss- ...he was separated from my mother when they had to flee the village.” The lie flows easily off my tongue. It’s a common enough tale. “He has not returned. We know he is dead.” I surprise even myself with the certainty my voice conjures.

“I see. So I trust you will not be taking part in this protest in Vavuniya for the so-called “disappeared”?”

I shake my head obediently.

“I hadn’t heard that such an event was taking place, Sir.” And I will do everything in my power to make sure my mother never finds out. “But it’s not something I would think of attending.”

He grunts his approval. “Smart girl. Keep using your brains and you’ll stay out of trouble.” I’m smart enough to detect the threat implicit in his words. He tosses a final warning as his colleague starts the engine. “Remember: Monday, at the civil office. I’ll be expecting you. Personally.”

I run all the way home.

My mother’s red-rimmed eyes show relief. She locks the door with finality behind me, her lips set in a grim line. But this is not the beginning of an argument. All the fight has gone out of her. The silence stretches between us. I don’t volunteer any information about where I have been. And she doesn’t ask.



Later, lying in my bed, and evading nightmare-plagued sleep, I hear the soft thud of an overripe papaw dropping to the ground. I could go and pick it up, but once I cut it open I know the flesh will be pulpy, the flavours off. Rotten. It will lie there, free but spoilt. And yet the crows, the flies will circle, salivating to feast on its flesh. They've taken everything else. Why not this too?

No. I make my choice in a heartbeat.

I slide my legs from under the sheets, place my feet on the cool clay floor. I pad stealthily through the rooms of our house, just one more ghost haunting its halls. Outside I breathe in the night air sprinkled with a hint of jasmine. I draw energy from the silence, the stillness, feel emboldened by the sense of possibility that nightfall and solitude have woken in me. In the silky darkness the dazzling radiance of those golden papaya orbs is not extinguished. If anything they seem to gain in lustre, their smooth skins reflecting back the moon's pearly light. Operation Papaya Tree is executed smoothly, though I jar my ankle just slightly on the descent. I clutch my prize close to my chest, exhilarated, acutely aware of the blood pumping steadily through my veins, my muscles quivering from exertion. Everything else recedes until there is nothing but this moment, this small victory. I push the clouds of the past, the future with its hazards, to the far edges of my mind.

Sitting in the dark kitchen, the ripe, plucked fruit before me, I know it was worth it. I draw the knife blade across its taut skin, swift and precise, like a surgeon making the first incision. Almost reverently, I scrape the slimy black seeds away from the fruit's centre, gently slide my spoon into the pliant flesh and extract a scoop of rich velvety orange. I indulge in the perfect sweetness of the papaya, let its flavours dance on my tongue and lead every taste bud in honeyed song.

***Nikini Jayatunga*** was born and raised in the UK, but has always remained close to her Sri Lankan heritage. She has served as President of both the youth-run charity Gecko Sri Lanka (formed in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami), and the Cambridge University Sri Lanka Society. She is currently a member of Voices for Reconciliation, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious voluntary group of young British Sri Lankan professionals, which works to facilitate dialogue workshops and promote discussion on reconciliation within and across Sri Lanka's different communities. Nikini's day job is in publishing, with the academic publishing house, Palgrave Macmillan, which allows her to cultivate her passion for great writing.

## THE HOPE THAT SURVIVED

*By Shan Dissanayake*

The stutter of the machine guns roared all around them. Silva hugged his daughter tighter in the trench, as if his embrace could guarantee her safety from the bullets flying about.

“Where’s Amma?” she sobbed.

“She’ll come soon. Close your eyes.” His heart beat in fear that the deafening sounds would damage his daughter’s hearing. He covered her ears and hunched himself over her to prevent sand falling on her every time the ground trembled. Only eight years old, he thought bitterly, and already exposed to this horror.

“Annamar,” he prayed, closing his eyes and picturing the black statuette of the village deity at home, “Annamar, please keep my wife safe.” He could not stop himself from imagining his wife’s dead body, her mangled face, and her blood soaking the sunbaked sand. He gave his head a rough shake and opened his eyes. He wasn’t sure she was dead. He should not be imagining such ill luck on her.

Six months ago, before the war broke out again, the atmosphere in their village of Puthukulam had been calm, the wind soft, the heat delicious on their skins as if there had never been a war. Yet there had always been one. The village was lulled for months by the temporary ceasefire; when it fell apart they woke up from their dream of normal life. The peace the villagers—both Tamil and Sinhalese—enjoyed had been so short-lived.

But what was happening now above the trench, he wondered. The Army checkpoint nearby must be getting shot at from all directions. They had been in line at that checkpoint when gunfire broke out between the Army and the Tigers. The crowd scattered and he ran with his daughter, his wife darting for the trench on the other side of the road, a quick look of panic passing between them. She couldn’t come with them, because a flood of people blocked her from reaching Silva’s trench. Running out of time while human remains were flying everywhere, she dashed to the trench on the other side. As Silva rushed for cover, he saw a Tamil girl’s head pop, a



Sinhalese child's leg sever, and an old woman's rib cage open, spraying the ground with flashes of red. It had been a storm of bullets.

Now, here were Silva and his daughter trapped in the crossfire, in a trench. His wife was stranded on the other side, hopefully under cover, safe from the hail of bullets. The trench Silva was in was about half a meter deep and only a few feet wide. There wasn't anyone else in it except Silva and his daughter.

Silva looked at his bleeding finger; the shrapnel from a mortar explosion had created a narrow but deep wound. He gently turned his daughter in his arms to see if she was injured. A patch of red covered her little chest, but thankfully it wasn't her blood. Silva sighed in relief. He had not realized until now how much he loved his daughter. He planted a kiss on her forehead. The ground shook yet again, pouring dust into the trench as something blew up nearby.

"Get down! Get down!" someone yelled.

Silva pressed his daughter closer to him, hunching over her even more to protect her. He kissed his daughter's cheek and looked at his bleeding finger again. A sick feeling lodged in his stomach. He resisted the urge to vomit. He could now feel his daughter's gentle heartbeat, giving him strength to survive. Despite the horror all around them, her heart's echo spread a tranquility through his body reminding him that she was named after her mother's sister, Shanthi, who had died in the war. A doctor who was never afraid to go to the warzone to heal patients. Naming their daughter after her was a way to show respect for the good doctor, and to make sure that she would never be forgotten.

Silva pressed his cheek against his child's. He could feel the tears that had wet her face. And then he felt a tear rolling down his cheek and mixing with his daughter's tears. He was thinking of his wife, Parvathi, and all the obstacles he had to go through to marry her, a Tamil.

Nine years ago the music from traditional trumpets had rung in his head instead of gunshots, Parvathi had sat next to him, adorned in a red garland and a burgundy sari decorated with gold embroidery, which made her look like the goddess Lakshmi. Her shy smile reminded him that it was worth breaking with his family to marry her.

The emotional bond he had felt with Parvathi, the first time he had met her, was instantaneous. They had met under inauspicious circumstances. Three compartments of the train he was travelling on had caught fire—the result of a bomb explosion. Tongues of fire fumed out into the sky from the carriage windows, making a thundering whooshing sound, like in a storm. The surviving passengers shrieked, terrified that the fire would spread to the rest of the train. Silva didn't think that he'd survive, but he had gotten out safely and then begun to help the other survivors. While doing so, he had come across Parvathi, who had crawled under a seat, and while helping her out he had fallen instantly for this wailing girl with her soot-smearred face. Three months later, they had married, even though both families had vehemently opposed it.

The day had vanished into the night and Silva and his daughter were still trapped in the trench. The crickets were chirping and an occasional gunshot rang in the air. Silva's body hurt like it was being stung with needles after lying in the same position for such a long time. But his daughter was sleeping quietly. So quietly that he sometimes feared that she might be dead, even though she wasn't wounded, and he kept listening to her gentle heartbeat to reassure himself.

Putting his daughter down, Silva peeped over the trench into the darkness around him. The crickets were still chirping, but there were no gunshots. A fire was burning far away and its light didn't reveal much except for the dead body of a middle-aged man nearby, his sarong slipped down from his waist, leaving him naked. The smell of the dead and the stench of burning tires wafted in the air.

Silva checked if his daughter was still sleeping, then he hauled himself out of the trench and crawled towards the trench on the other side of the road to look for his wife, making as little noise as possible. Even the rustle of the bushes in the breeze caused his heart to race. He felt terrified about leaving his daughter alone in the trench, but he had to check if his wife was alive. Shanthi should be okay as long as she slept quietly. But his wife could be wounded, bleeding to her death. The thought made him ill.

He narrowed his eyes to look at what was ahead, but couldn't see much except the darkness. As he groped along the ground, his hand touched a corpse. A flare of a rifle and a stuttering sound made him lie face

down, close to the corpse. When the gun was silent again, he crawled away from the dead body towards the trench, calling out as quietly as possible, "Parvathi, Parvathi."

There was an indistinct chatter in the bunker at the checkpoint some distance away. He wasn't sure if it was the Sri Lankan Army or the LTTE. And then a groan filled the blackness. Silva raised his head to listen, scared that it could be his wife. Then an even more frightening thought struck his mind. Could it be his daughter?

He looked back, still lying on the ground. The person moaned again and he realized with relief that it came from the opposite direction. He crawled forward trying to locate the groan in the darkness. His heart knocked at his ribcage, pumping doubt into his mind. Could it be a trap to lure him?

He followed the moan to the trench on the other side of the road. It was normal for Army checkpoints to have two trenches at opposite sides of the road, built especially for attacks like these. When he ran his hands down the trench to see who was in it, he felt the outline of cold bodies. They were all dead. Then again there came that groan, from underneath the bodies.

A flurry of whispers broke out behind him. He turned quickly, still not rising from the ground. Footsteps were marching in his direction. Whoever they were, they were also after the same thing Silva was trying to find: the moaning figure in the dark.

Fearing that it might be his wife, Silva rummaged through the pile of corpses in the trench and pulled out a wounded boy, toppling a corpse aside from the top of the heap. Judging by his weight and the size of his hands, he was about five years old. His lower body was naked. Silva quickly considered his options. He thought of taking the boy and crawling back to his own trench, but then the boy moaned again, and he realized that the boy's groans would give his position away. He couldn't sacrifice his own safety to save this child. His daughter needed him, as well as his wife if she was still alive. He gently released the boy onto the pile of corpses and crawled away in the direction where his daughter was. As he approached Shanthi's trench on the other side, he heard two loud gunshots silencing the little boy.

And then, another round of indistinct chatter. Was it Tamil or was it Sinhala?

If it were the Tigers, he might be able to fake being Tamil, as he was very fluent in the language, despite his Sinhalese roots. But what if they shot him right away in fear, thinking that he was an Army soldier trying to fool them? And what if... his heartbeat increased, and he knew that he'd rather remain silent in the safety of darkness. He slowly lowered himself into the trench praying that his daughter would not wake up and cry. His feet made a slight thud as he hit the ground and his heart beat faster in fear that the gunmen had heard him. His daughter was still sleeping soundly.

Silva's thoughts turned to his wife and now he couldn't refrain from softly sobbing. Was she one of those bodies in that other trench? The thought was unbearable. He couldn't identify any of those bodies; it was too dark. Rifles flared silencing Silva's lament. Whoever was out there was pouring bullets into dead bodies to make doubly sure there were no survivors. He felt his daughter move in his arms. They had to get away before it was their trench's turn.

"Shanthi," he whispered in her ear, "Don't worry. I'll get you out of here. And we'll live, I promise. Don't make a noise. Appa will carry you out of this place." He channeled all the emotions welling up inside him into the kiss he planted on Shanthi's forehead.

He crawled out of the trench in the darkness, hugging Shanthi against his chest. He began to hurry across the field of human remains, crouching occasionally to stay hidden from view. More than once he fell to the ground, because he couldn't see what was in front of him because of the dark. He only knew that the things he tripped over were the bodies of his fellow villagers. His only hope was that his wife wasn't among them. The gunfire was loud enough to cover the sounds of his falls. And Shanthi remained silent as if by instinct, wrapping her arms around his neck. Through the corner of his eye, Silva saw the flash of gunshots. In their flares, dead bodies slid in and out of sight.

There was a thicket of shrubbery ahead and Silva crawled through it and made his way through the foliage. Soon he had left the sound of gunshots behind and, as his heartbeats abated, he realized that he was in the

middle of the forest that was on their edge of their village of Puthukulam, about two miles away from the checkpoint. They had escaped. He had never felt a stronger sense of relief in his life.

“Appa, where’s Amma?” Shanthi asked.

Silva felt a searing shock go through him, and then he broke down, sobbing. Had he really left her behind? She could be lying there still among the bodies on the road, wounded. No, no, he assured himself, wiping his tears with the edge of his sarong. He had done the right thing. He had saved Shanthi. This was what Parvathi would do, too, if she was in the same situation.



It was a peaceful Saturday morning. As myna birds hopped in the garden, Shanthi played with her doll. The birds watched her as did Silva who acted as if her life was still in danger, even though the attack at the checkpoint had been days ago. He was always nervous and alert. Even the smallest sound disturbed him greatly and any unexpected noise that sounded slightly like a gunshot brought back gruesome images of what he had seen, greatly increasing his heartbeats. Whenever he heard his dog bark, his body would start shivering. It was still not clear who was responsible for the massacre. And thankfully, Silva and his daughter weren’t the only survivors. A man called Rajan had survived too, although his family had not. And Kulasekara’s son and daughter were released from the hospital today. The other survivors would trickle into the village if medical checkups for internal wounds came up negative, he’d heard.

In his gut, Silva knew that Parvathi was alive. Nobody had thought that Rajan would survive, but he had lived. And who would have thought Kulasekara’s father would be found? Parvathi had to be alive as well. She was stronger than them, and she had been further away from the shooting. Silva had done everything he could to find her. His savings had run out from trips to Colombo and back. He checked every hospital in the district, including the records of patient transfers. He registered a complaint about Parvathi’s disappearance with the police. He did not forget to pay ten thousand rupees

as a bribe to the officer in charge. Now all he could do was wait. But, despite all his efforts, he still felt somewhere deep inside of him that he'd done very little to find her.

The sound of the postman's bell at the gate broke into Silva's thoughts. He ran to him and snatched the letter from the scrawny old man in his khaki uniform. Silva tore open the envelope and held up the letter to read. As his eyes ran over the words, emotions weighed down his heart, and before long, he was on his knees lamenting like a child. His wife was pronounced officially missing and Silva knew from the years of this wretched war that this meant the authorities had really given up their search for her, no matter what they had said about doing their utmost to find her. Shanthi came running to him and he hugged her, never wanting to let go of her again, this child who was the product of Parvathi's and his love. He clung to her, drawing courage and determination from her warmth. No, he would not give up the search, no matter what the authorities believed. The only way they would make him give up searching for his wife was if they produced her dead body.

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# CHECKPOINT

*By Nushelle de Silva*

The morning commute to work on Marine Drive should have been so calming. As Radhika drove along she could see the blue-green waves of the ocean rippling towards a serene horizon dotted with ships and boats. The wakening sun glinted off her windscreen and the white-capped waves, edging the tiny clouds in the sky with pink and orange. The traffic was never as blaring and chaotic as it was on Galle Road, but sped forward steadily. She would have considered it her favourite road to drive on in Colombo, but that blasted checkpoint on the side of the road almost always managed to ruin it for her. Honestly, there was no good way to look from her car at those army officers – if she stared at them as insolently as they stared at her, they would pull her over. If she averted her gaze and stared glassily into the dusty road, they would *still* pull her over. She rarely ever won this game. You would think they'd recognise her by now, but no, she still got stopped and checked on a regular basis.

She could see the checkpoint in the distance this Wednesday morning – a small brown speck looming ever-larger. “Please, not today,” she said to herself as her foot hovered uncertainly over the accelerator. Refusing to give into her impulse to race past the checkpoint, she kept a steady pace and tried to compose her features into the Glassy-Eyed Gaze. Today would be the worst possible day to be pulled over. Her alarm clock had stopped and no one in the house had checked to see if she was awake. She had forgotten to iron her blouse the night before, and Mayuri had been in the bathroom for what felt like ten years. “Please, *not* today,” she muttered again. The black car a few hundred metres ahead of her slowed down in response to the khaki-clad officer waving his obnoxious stop sign, and Radhika felt a small surge of relief. They'd be so busy checking out the black car that they wouldn't have time to look at her and – dammit! No such luck. The Glassy-Eyed Gaze clearly hadn't worked any magic this morning. She slowed down a little way ahead of the black car. She didn't like looking at the actual checkpoint, preferring instead to stare at the rolling blue-green of the sea. It gave her a sense of calm.

She wasn't feeling particularly calm right now, though. Cursing silently, she turned off the ignition and rolled down the window. These officers liked to make you wait, it seemed. She bent down to retrieve her NIC from her purse, and felt her gold filigree earrings swinging in her ears. A fantastic day to have chosen to wear jewellery that allegedly made her look 'more Tamil', according to her friend Nayana. Thinking of Nayana increased Radhika's irritation, and she gritted her teeth thinking about that frustrating phrase. In school, Nayana's habit of unthinkingly blurting out statements had been a source of humour to the girls. Her predilection for naïve verbal faux pas had not diminished with age and time. She meant well, Radhika admitted, but she still sometimes put her foot in her mouth at unexpected moments – and now, twenty years later, it wasn't always as funny.

"You know Radhika, when you just walk down the street, I don't think anyone would think you are Tamil," Nayana had said just last week. "Especially when you don't wear a pottu or those big gold earrings. You have this – *fair* face. Not that all Tamils are dark. I mean..." Nayana's voice trailed off as her wide eyes caught sight of Radhika's icily inquiring face. Her bangled wrists abruptly ceased their jangling and she chewed her lip.

"These earrings were my grandmother's. She gave them to me as a gift."

"No, yes, of course! They're really pretty, I just said..."

Then there was that time Nayana had complained about not getting permission to get her nose pierced.

"Aiyo Radhika, appachchi is so old-fashioned! First, I thought I would get a second ear piercing and, after that, I *really* wanted to get my nose pierced like those Bollywood actresses. But he kicked up such a fuss. He said I shouldn't, because I'll also look Tamil. Oh wait, no, I didn't mean..."

Radhika would often complain about Nayana's inanities to their friends, who would just laugh at Radhika's grievances.

"Oh, come on, Radhika, it's Nayana we're talking about. Why are you surprised?"

"She's not really *racist*, idiot, she just has no verbal filter. Just says whatever she's thinking."



“Why are you making such a fuss, men? You remember what she said about Natasha’s haircut the other day?”

“Honestly, Radhika, no matter what Nayana says, she’s got a good heart. You know she’s there whenever you need her. Surely you can see that?”

Sometimes Radhika would manage a half-hearted grin and a mumbled word of agreement. She really *did* trust Nayana and considered her a good friend. Yet later, she would wonder angrily what stereotypes and assumptions about herself floated through the minds of other people who had learned to be so polite and politically correct, but whom she would never be able to depend on in a jam. And she was definitely in a jam now, stuck at a checkpoint by the side of the road, with her Tamil earrings and her Tamil nose-stud and her little Ganesh figurine on the dashboard. As though it made any difference whether she wore the earrings or not. That stupid little NIC alone made her life difficult.

“ID please, Miss.” The khaki-uniformed boy bent down to her level. Wordlessly she handed it over. To smile or not to smile? She felt like scowling, but what was the point? Although smiling didn’t always work either – then they thought you had something to hide. Honestly, this was like a warped game where some arbitrary person changed the rules all the time. On a whim, just to bloody spite you.

“Miss, birthplace is Jaffna?”

Radhika wanted to snap at him, “Oh don’t be so mock-respectful, you ass – I *know* you’re thrilled to bits about this. What else do you have to do in your boring life, sitting around in your salty little security box, than jump up and wave your stop sign around and harass Tamils who just happened to be born in Jaffna?” Instead, she took a deep breath. “Yes sir, but I have been living in Dehiwala for twenty-three years now.” She fought to keep her tone pleasant and respectful, but firm.

“Can I see driver’s license?” Did he sound just a shade disbelieving or was she being thin-skinned?

“Sure,” she said, fumbling in her purse. Strange, it wasn’t in its usual slot. Must be in the cubby-hole. She leaned over and opened it, rummaging

around, suddenly aware of a small coldness snaking inside her stomach. And then, quite clearly, she saw her driver's license on her dressing-table at home, where she'd carelessly left it after filling out that stupid renewal form. She should have just memorised the damn number by now. Crap. Crap. Bloody hell.

"Um, sir, I... I think I've left it at home."

His communicator beeped and, as he turned to listen, Radhika closed her eyes in irritation. She couldn't make sense of the crackling static – and she didn't see how *he* could make sense of those garbled commands either – but what was the bet he was being barked at by some shadowy higher-up to look out for a Tamil woman travelling to work in a silver Honda Accord, because she was *sure* to be travelling with a boot full of explosives she'd packed in last night instead of ironing her blouse. Oh, and she would be wearing really big gold earrings – the *Tamil* kind. And suddenly she was angry again. Didn't they see how bloody stupid that sounded? She worked at a blooming bank, for God's sake. At the rate she worked, there wouldn't be any time to *think* of a conspiracy plot, let alone actually execute the damn thing.

Her job at HSBC was prestigious and she enjoyed the work, but the real reason she has chosen the bank was because of what Raj Uncle had told her happened during the '83 riots. "When our colleagues heard about the burnings, they put us in the safe – we stayed there overnight. You can't burn a safe, no! I guess those racist pigs didn't realise we were that valuable to the bank." And so, as a teenager, she had resolved to work there, at that bank where Tamils were valuable. By then she was frustrated by the dozens of little injustices in school every day, tired of getting angry over how blind her own father was to the way he was treated at work. Raj Uncle was a senior executive at the bank now, and he had put in a word for her before the interview. He was another one who had stayed behind, but unlike Appa he had no illusions about the way Tamils were viewed in this country. He had a good job and deserved it, because he worked damn hard at it. That was all there was to it, and if ever things were to change he would leave. The bank was one of the few places where there were just as many Tamil figures of authority as Sinhalese, and Radhika resolved to someday be one of them.

“We have to see driver’s license, Miss. Security warning this morning.”

Shut up, *shut up*, she thought. Stop sounding so bloody apologetic. Of course, you’re *thrilled* about this. You *know* that there’s nothing wrong with me, regardless of any stupid security warning. I’m clearly wearing a red HSBC blouse!

“Sir, I left it at home. I’m so sorry. But I have my ID, no? Enough, no?”

She wondered how many Sinhalese girls could have gotten off scot-free by batting their eyelashes a little and putting on a baby voice. Seriously, it was ridiculous. But she wouldn’t stoop to that level, no bloody way.

“Sorry Miss, you have to fill the form. Open the boot?”

The sea breeze caught her hair and set her earrings swinging as she stepped out and opened the boot. Nothing there, *obviously*. The security officer motioned to her to open the back door of the car as well – *nothing there either, stupid*. Maybe she should just ask Amma to bring her license – but from Dehiwala? And shoot, she went marketing on Wednesdays.

Another officer, female, joined the first. Great, Radhika thought, just stand around making my life miserable, all of you. The girl took the ID from her colleague and began to diligently copy its number into a book. Suddenly she looked up at Radhika and put her head on one side.

“Miss? Radhika Thambirajah?”

“Yes?” What? What had she done now? Was there a suicide bomber named Radhika Thambirajah that they were looking for? Just her bloody luck.

“Father’s name?”

“Arul Thambirajah.” Why the hell did they want to know all about her family?

“Miss lives in Dehiwala no? Hill Street? Near the Cargills?”

“Yes – how do you know?” Should she have said yes so readily?

“Miss, I live down the same road no Miss. Malshini Apsara.”

Radhika stared at her blankly. For the life of her she couldn't seem to remember any Malshini Apsara. The security girl's beaming smile faltered a little.

"Miss, your thatha used to buy us the school books?"

Oh geez, this was *that* girl? Radhika remembered the yearly piles of discarded clothes and school uniforms that belonged to her and her siblings, sported by a few girls and boys down the road. Appa would buy schoolbooks for these charity cases, and give dress and shirt materials to them at New Year.

"Miss, can remember me no?"

Radhika blinked, nodded, smiled a little too widely. "*Ahh*, yes, Malshini Apsara! You lived in the house with the jambu tree. You gave us jambu sometimes when we came to - "

How on earth did you say, "when we came to give you charity clothes" in a way that didn't sound remotely condescending? But Malshini Apsara beamed broadly again, seeming to be completely unoffended by Radhika's Nayana-like blunder.

"Yes Miss! Tell your thatha I remembered him."

"Of course. He remembers you too."

And it was true. Appa took great interest in everyone and everything.

"Miss is known to me. She can go." Malshini Apsara turned to her colleague and wagged her head reassuringly. He looked at her uncertainly, and then nodded his head.

"Thank you Malshini. I won't forget my driver's license in future. I'll tell Appa that I met you today."

Slightly unsteady, Radhika went back to her car. As she turned the key in the ignition, she glanced at the small cheery Ganesh on the dashboard. Appa's gift to her. Appa so insistently naïve and optimistic that she wanted to shake him.

When '83 happened, they hadn't left, even though he had lost some of his friends in the riots, and many more were leaving in waves for Toronto and London. He had said, "If we don't leave, they'll realise we are innocent. If we flee, it will look like we are guilty. And we have a duty to this country. We can't just run away like that." Amma had said nothing to this. So Appa had spent his whole damn life at his government job, working harder and harder and always getting passed over for promotions in a department full of Sinhalese buggers who never spoke up for him. Sometimes he would come home with his brow furrowed, talk and eat very little, then retire to bed early. But those days were few and far between. Usually, he would relate the stories about his Sinhalese co-workers, celebrating their good news, children getting into university, marriages arranged to rich husbands or accomplished wives.

Once he came home and announced brightly, "Some good news! Jagath has been promoted to manager of our section. He is one of the most dependable people I know at the office."

Radhika and her family had stared at him bewildered. He had been hoping for that promotion himself.

When her mother pointed this out, he replied, "Ahh, well, Jagath deserved it. Our section is in good hands!"

"But Appa, isn't he the one whose brother is the divisional head?" Radhika had argued, irritated most by the fact that he was actually sincere in his happiness for his friend.

"Radhika, that has nothing to do with it. Jagath is an exceptional colleague, and -"

But she rolled her eyes and tuned him out. She didn't understand how on earth Appa could so comfortably call them all his friends, even that rotten Jagath Uncle, who had used his connections to be promoted over Appa.

On the weekends, Appa would take great interest in the residents of Hill Street, helping to organise everything from Avurudu celebrations to Christmas parties. And always he made his quiet contributions everywhere. Radhika knew there were quite a few Malshini Apsaras.

Yet, seeing his unbridled optimism and generosity only made Radhika more cynical, because his hopefulness was coupled with a maddening blindness, an unwillingness to call a spade a spade. She often felt that Appa's inability to accept these realities had made her more aware of those everyday inequalities, more outspoken about injustice, and sometimes, she feared, more tetchy and complaining. As she grew older, she found she was increasingly maddened by his steadfast refusal to admit how his views and his decision to stay had created difficulties and frustrations for the family.

When they were all still in school, her brother Jegan had come home one day in angry tears that another boy had made the cricket team.

"It's so unfair, Amma, I know the coach picked Shehan because his father is an MP. He was boasting about it all last week. But I've played better than him this whole year and I thought the coach would pick me. But he didn't! It's not fair, Amma!"

Appa intervened at that point and made everything worse.

"Son, you mustn't blame others in this way. Focus on improving your own skills."

"But Appa, that's what I *did*. I *know* how well I played."

"Well, then, son, you're sure to get a place next time."

"But Appa, the big match is in two months! I'll never get picked before then. And anyway I'll never *ever* get picked if people like Shehan keep getting chosen!"

"Son, I'm sure the coach knows what he's doing. I don't think he would have selected another boy just because of his father."

"Appa, I'm fifteen, don't talk to me like I'm ten. These things happen all the time! Or are you saying you don't think I deserved the place?"

Jegan had stormed off to his room, angrier than before. For a while after that he hadn't even wanted Appa to watch him in school matches. "Appa doesn't think I'm good enough, so I don't want him to come."

When her younger sister Mayuri, despite her good grades and

extra-curricular activities, had not been made a prefect, Radhika had pointed out that the staff voting system was flawed. "If Mayuri was in the Sinhala medium she would have had more teachers voting for her."

Appa had refused to accept the inherent logic of this argument.

"Radhika, that is a very thoughtless thing to say. I'm sad to see you don't appreciate the value of our mother-tongue, and see how beautiful and poetic it is. Perhaps I should give you that book of poems and –"

"But Appa, I'm not talking about Tamil. I'm talking about Mayuri's prefectship."

"Radhika, at this age you will think in this way. In a few years from now, you will be grateful that you have the ability to truly appreciate the richness of Tamil literature. And –"

"But Appa. We're not talking about the Tamil medium. I just said the system is really unfair for choosing –"

"Perhaps we can all go for that play next week, I saw it in the newspaper, perhaps then you will see."

Amidst his romanticism over Tamil culture, Appa seemed to have forgotten all about Mayuri's disappointment. It seemed that he completely failed to understand – or refused to accept – what being Tamil actually *meant* in this country.

He closed his eyes to how Amma was no longer quiet but silent, no longer accepting but mildly bitter. She read out loud long letters from friends abroad, pausing to look meaningfully at Appa, emphasising certain words.

*"It's a good life here. You should come."*

*"Jeya was promoted last week – he has only been there for a year but the manager has recognised his work. One thing, Mala, they're very fair-minded."*

*"Just writing to say that Gauri got into Oxford for Medicine! Full scholarship. The whole family is thrilled. We know you will be too."*

But Appa would intervene, making his same old arguments.

“Jeya was saying how Renu is always complaining that she can’t get any good spices. She gets her sister in Sri Lanka to send them! He said they can’t even get decent mangoes there.”

Radhika had opened her mouth to point out that perhaps Uncle Jeya would happily trade fresh mangoes for the respect he got at work, but Amma’s face had already hardened and the letter was put away.

Radhika had briefly considered becoming a lawyer in her early teens, but a conversation with Appa had soured her ambition.

“When I’m a lawyer,” she had declared, “I will take cases only for Tamils. And I will win all my cases!”

“Radhika,” he had replied, shocked, “what if there’s a deserving Sinhalese person who needs you to represent him? Or a Muslim, or a Burgher? If you’re working for equality you also need to be fair. We shouldn’t discriminate based on arbitrary labels.”

“But *Appa*, that’s what happens to *us* all the time. I’m only trying to fix it. And anyway, we didn’t start being all discriminating and racist. *They* did!”

“Radhika! Stop this *us* and *them* talk. Don’t – ”

“Appa, it would be great if everyone thought like you. But nobody does. *Nobody!* Sometimes you have to be realistic!”

“Please don’t shout, young lady! Do you think it’s so realistic to want to pick and choose your clients?”

“Do *you* think it’s realistic to go around pretending that our lives are perfect, and we don’t have to deal with racism every single day?”

Appa opened his mouth to respond, and then shut it with a snap. He pursed his lips, then said very quietly, “Go to your room, Radhika. I will not tolerate disrespectful children in this house.” Radhika fled upstairs and angrily punched her pillow while tears plopped on to her sheets.

She found herself confiding in Raj Uncle, who completely understood her feelings, and was so much more candid and easy to talk to. “I understand what you’re thinking, Radhika. But I’m not sure it will work out as you hope.



You're good at maths, have you ever considered working at a bank? There's more than one reason why you might like that." And that was when she had first heard someone talk about the horrors of Black July, and why Raj Uncle felt HSBC was one place worth working at.

"Radhika, remember that your first duty should be to yourself and to your family. If you go around trying to fix everything for all Tamils everywhere, you'll find yourself disillusioned very fast. It won't be just racist Sinhalese people you'll have to watch out for," Raj Uncle said, concluding his talk.

As she grew older and became more aware of the world around her, she wondered if she would have gone the way of Neelan Tiruchelvam or Lakshman Kadirgamar if she had stuck to her dream. When she questioned herself, she felt that she had made the right career choice, not just for herself but also for her family. Yet, despite the income she brought in that had greatly enhanced their standard of living, she sometimes caught Appa looking absently at her, with what looked like disappointment. She sometimes felt a nagging sensation that there was another path between the two that Appa and Raj Uncle wanted her to take. But what it was, she hadn't been able to figure out for herself.

Radhika gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. She wrinkled her nose, remembering her annoyance at the security officers at the checkpoint. If Appa had heard the angry thoughts circling in her head, he would have chided her in that exasperating way he had – "Now, Radhika, they are only doing their job. We should be glad they are so conscientious about it!" – and would have celebrated Malshini Apsara's kindness. She would never have heard the end of it. "What a nice and observant young lady Malshini Apsara is. She has really made the most of her opportunities and worked hard. It was a wonderful surprise to see her today!"

Radhika found herself suddenly filled with an inexplicable warmth for the old man with his good intentions and misplaced idealism, who in trying to hold on to what he held dear, had lost more than he cared to confess. She glanced wryly at the little Ganesh in front of her, smiling and optimistic like her father, and reached out to touch it briefly. As she turned

the key in the ignition, she realised that she had involuntarily asked for a blessing, not from the gods, but from Appa.

***Nushelle de Silva** grew up mostly in Colombo, but spent the first seven years of her life in Sydney, Australia. She also lived for four years in the USA while pursuing her undergraduate studies at Princeton University. Her preoccupation with the arbitrary nature of discrimination stems from her experiences of how she is, or has been, perceived in each of the places she has lived. Her story reflects her meditations on this theme. She will return to the USA in September to commence graduate studies at MIT.*

## THE SUBTERRANEAN

*By Amirthanjali Sivapalan*

The first thing that struck Kunan when he opened his eyes was the eerie silence. It took a few moments for him to realize where he was. Then he remembered how a plane had dropped a bomb quite close to the trench from where he and ten others were fighting. The artillery shells that whizzed past them had drowned the sound of the plane. Suddenly the trench had become a pit filled with dismembered limbs covered with mud and blood, the stench of burnt flesh and the clouds of sulphur dust searing through his nostrils and singeing his brains. The trench had crumbled pinning Kunan down by the weight of earth. Now, he was aware of his feet tightly encased by the debris. An image of tall Palmyrah trees standing in the derelict land, their tops severed off, flashed through his mind. A terrifying urgency gripped him as he laboured to free himself from the death trap in which he found himself. When he finally hauled himself out of the trench and stood up, it looked as if the world around him had been wiped-out; at least five bombs had been dropped in that area. He staggered towards the next trench. No one had survived in there. It was then that he found Shankar. He had been thrown out of the trench by the impact of the bomb. He lay there with both his right arm and leg twisted in an awkward position. There was a deep cut across his cheek and blood drenched his shoulders. But he was alive. It seemed as though it was just the two of them left alive on the face of the earth. Kunan knelt beside him and tried to lift him. Shankar blinked, "Kunan is it you?"

He nodded.

"Where are the others? Where are we?"

Kunan turned around to look at the wreckage. "It's only the two of us here," he said dryly.

Then he heard the drone of the plane once again and he fell to the ground with hands under his chest and chin, waiting for the plane to come sweeping down with vengeance. But it didn't. He looked up to see it gliding away, innocent against the bright blue afternoon sky. So many of his friends were gone in just one moment and he was still alive. The blast had brought a

kind of numbness that did not allow any room for grief. But the sight of the bomber, gliding so lazily against the bright blue afternoon sky brought him back to reality. A surge of emotion welled up inside Kunan. A wild scream came out of him; a scream of anger, helplessness and anguish. He picked up the AK47 lying at his feet and began firing blindly at the direction in which the bomber was retreating.

“I will bring you down!” Kunan screamed hoarsely.

“Are you mad? Stop it!” Shankar cried pulling at his feet. “Do you want them to come for us once again. Stop this craziness.”

He looked down at Shankar’s pleading eyes. It had been a foolish act. His firing had exposed them to the enemy. In a moment there was a shower of bullets. Snipers were moving towards them. Kunan picked up Shankar, placed him on his back and secured his friend’s hands around his neck. He started crawling away from the rain of bullets. Shankar let out an agonizing cry with every movement Kunan made, but he had to move as fast as he could. They were the only two who were left of their group and Kunan was not going to let go of Shankar. Kunan moved like a reptile on his belly and knees. Shankar’s weight pressed down on him. The intense pain he felt just below his right shoulder blade made him realise that he too was wounded. But he willed himself to move on. He must have covered almost half a kilometre before he felt it was safe for him to get up and walk. By the time he got onto his feet, Shankar and he were both worn out. Shankar was losing a lot of blood and, meanwhile, Kunan was bleeding too. It was getting dark and Kunan was thankful for the deepening gloom. Lifting Shankar on to his shoulders Kunan began walking, Shankar crying out in pain.

When the pale light of dawn slowly crept up the eastern sky Kunan was still walking. He had not imagined that this would be such an arduous journey when he set off the previous evening. Walking in the night had its own dangers and difficulties, but the day-time was worse. The long-forsaken vegetable and manioc plots hardly gave him the cover he needed. These familiar agricultural plots of his village, with their rich red soil, had been the wealth of his people giving back manifold for the hard labour they had put into them. But now the plots were dried-up caked earth, turning into dust

as the pitiless hot air swirled about. This was the landscape, to which he belonged. He had always felt that he was one with these trees and the fields until a few years back when the war had driven all of them out from here. To come back to this soil, to walk about freely in the same carefree manner as before, had been his perpetual desire in these years of exile. A thrill had run through his whole being when he got the orders to come here for the attack a few days ago. It pained him now to see the place as it was now.

Shankar's weight slung over his shoulders was making it very difficult for him to move faster, but Shankar's groans urged him on. A stabbing pain under his shoulder was making Kunan falter. He was not sure whether the dampness he felt on his back was his blood or Shankar's. There would be time to check it. But now the only thought in Kunan's mind was to find some comfort for his friend. Shankar, who had been asking for water in a feeble voice, was now silent. The laboured breathing of his friend told him that he had to find water soon. The water in the school well was always fresh and cool but reaching it was the problem.

Kunan cautiously entered the village leaving behind the desolate farmland. There wasn't a single building that had not been devastated by the aerial bombings and shelling. The *mandapam* of the temple had collapsed as if the sky itself had caved in; the decorated pillars lay shattered under the crumbled roof. The pink petals of the huge lotus flower which was made out of plastered cement lay crushed and scattered, like shredded flesh torn away from limbs. The massive tamarind tree that welcomed everyone into the village lay uprooted and sprawled, its roots dishevelled, the shops that nestled under its magnanimous shade stood like discarded empty cans. Further down the road, the statue of St. Anthony had been thrown off its pedestal, the saintly child who used to sit on his prayer book and blissfully smile at all those who hurried past on the busy road, now lay headless and armless. There wasn't a single house without at least one gaping hole where the artillery shells had blasted through it.

Kunan wound his way through lanes and footpaths. He couldn't take the main road. It was too dangerous; there wouldn't be much cover. He went instead through the plantain groves. It grieved him to see them so wasted, the best groves in this region. People from everywhere came here in search of the village's plantains, but now the fruits were all withered and

wasted. A couple of trees had a few scrawny ones and Kunan made a mental note about them. He would come back once he had attended to Shankar. It was becoming very difficult for Kunan to walk with the weight of Shankar pressing him down. He cautiously crossed the lane, went through a gaping fence and entered Thangarasa's compound. While all the big houses in the village were open to the sky, the thatched roof of Thangarasa's hut stood undamaged, though made derelict by months of neglect. Termites had found their way up the roof but it still held on, the thick layer of spider webs seeming to support the roof from caving in. Kunan wearily laid Shankar on the narrow veranda of the hut. His left shoulder on which he had been carrying Shankar had become numb. A menacing throb came from his wound. Thoroughly exhausted, he lay down beside his friend.



Upul had never seen the earth so flat. When he beheld it for the first time he had the feeling that the earth had slapped him across his face. The strong winds that blew did nothing to relieve the heat. The burning wind came like a whip that twisted around him. He hated the red soil that settled down on everything. His uniform was no longer green; it had changed into an ugly dirt colour for which he could not find a name. His black boots had lost their shine, and were covered now with solid red dust. He cursed himself for being in this place, seated on guard at this makeshift sentry point. Nothing moved as far as his eyes could see, only the wretched sweltering wind that churned the red soil.

Everything in Upul's own village was cool and green. The river that skirted their village had never gone dry and people from other villages walked many miles to his village during the dry season. Upul and his friends spent most of their free time in the river swimming, fishing, or just lying on the cool wet sand under the shade of the ancient Pipal trees that stood beside the river. He was always the one to lead their gang, the one to organize all the adventures that they had during the school holiday. He would take his friends deep into the forest. They would wander around the thick forest the whole day tasting wild berries, spying on birds and laughing

at the antics of monkeys. "Do you think there will be wild animals here?" they would ask timidly. "Might be," he would reply. "The other day I heard Mudalali telling someone how, on certain days he heard the voice of Karolis Appu calling out from the forest." Karolis Appu had been found dead in the forest. His death was one of the unexplained mysteries in their village. Upul enjoyed watching the frightened looks that came into his companions' eyes.

Once, they almost got lost in the forest and they had been certain that they would have to spend the whole night in there. It was Upul who heard the faint murmur of the river. He led them towards it and then there was no problem, for they walked along the riverbank all the way home. In the places where there was no embankment, they just swam with the current of the river enjoying the cool freshness of the water that invigorated them. Soon they were back in their village.



Kunan did not like the silence that surrounded them in the abandoned hut. He strained his ears, hoping to hear at least a faraway gunshot from the line of fighting. His old school was close by; he could get some water there. He tapped Shankar gently and said in a low voice, "You wait here I'll get some water from the school well."

Shankar gave a slight nod. Kunan was not sure if it was a response to him or if Shankar was moving his head in agony. Kunan left Thangarasa's compound and started to walk with care, keeping himself under cover of the trees and bushes. There was nothing but devastation around him. His mind found it impossible to comprehend that this really was his village. The compounds which were always neatly swept with the systematic stripes of the eekil broom, were now overgrown with weeds. The cattle sheds were all in shambles. It was a ghostly place with no signs of its former prosperity and fertility.



The idea of war and fighting that Upul had in his mind was far removed from the reality. The first few days at the front had been unendurable for him. When the tractor in which they were travelling hit a land mine and almost half of them were thrown up into the air in bits and pieces of crushed flesh, Upul had almost lost his sanity. He was so shaken that it had taken almost a week for him to gulp down a mouthful of rice. His commander had been quite sympathetic and he had altered Upul's duties. He was now put in charge of surveying the landscape. Yet, this was not something that Upul relished. He spent hours at a makeshift sentry point set up in a tree, on the lookout for anything unusual, any movement that was suspicious. He periodically touched in with the others through his wireless, but there was never anything to report.

He hated the landscape that lay around him — a ghost village with hardly any buildings that had not been hit by the artillery shells and bombs that were dropped from the skies. Throughout the day and night nothing moved. The only sound that could be heard was that of the bombers and the blast of bombs and artillery shells. Only the heat moved in this place, a heat he had never experienced before. It moved with such force that it was almost like a living being, its vengeance mounting with each passing hour. It seemed as though the heat was trying to wipe out everything from the face of the earth, scorching everything that existed. He sometimes felt that the entire landscape would burst into flame. The water he carried was the only source of relief. But today that too had not been enough. Not even half the day was over and he had almost finished the water. His lips were dry and his throat parched, the saliva in his mouth seemed to have dried up too. The image of the river back home and the villagers leisurely walking down to it, filling their pots to the brim with the cool water, kept flashing in his mind's eye. Rivers were non-existent in this part of the country. In the beginning it was something he couldn't comprehend. Wells were the only source of water; deep as if they were hiding the water from the sun's ferocity.

Upul's mind often drifted away while sitting high up on this platform in the trees. Incidents and people he had almost forgotten suddenly



surfaced, filling this stark void around him that nearly took his sanity away. His thoughts went back to the hunting trip he had taken with his uncle. He had pestered his uncle to take him hunting when he went into the deep jungles and his uncle's reply had always been that Upul was too young. "You need to be mature to be a hunter," he would say. Upul's uncle was the best hunter in the village and everyone looked upon him with respect. When Upul's uncle finally told him that he would take him along when he went hunting, Upul was elated. Not only was his wish going to be fulfilled but also his uncle had recognized him as a mature person.

One evening, Upul and his uncle started off on their hunting expedition.

"Will I be able to see elephants and deer? Are there a lot of jackals in the jungle?" he asked breathlessly.

His uncle smiled, "You like to see a lot of animals, don't you?"

Upul nodded.

"Alright we'll go to a place where you can see many. But you have to be very patient and still."

They started walking along the jungle path. The trees and the undergrowth became more and more dense as they went along, Upul breathing deeply the jungle air. Though they had started in the early part of the evening, it looked as dark as night in the jungle. Upul tried to identify the sounds of the different birds he heard. Many kinds of butterflies he had never seen before were settling down on the leaves. The path they were following took a sharp turn and they were now standing at the edge of a water hole. There were purple and white water lilies and a few beetles buzzing over the flowers. The wind made the lily pads fold up and flap like the wings of some water bird.

His uncle walked towards a big tree and Upul followed. He looked up to find a platform big enough for two people to lie down, high above in the tree.

"Can you climb up?" his uncle asked.

Upul nodded. He was so excited.

“Right, there you go.” His uncle gave him the lift he needed to begin his ascent, and Upul soon came to the platform built with thick sticks. His uncle, who had followed him, spread out a sack he had brought, creating a comfortable place to sit. Upul drank in the enfolding stillness of his surroundings. It seemed as though the quietness and peace of the forest were descending into his very self.

“You will see a lot of animals coming as the night falls,” his uncle said lying down beside Upul and looking out at their surroundings. “Now all you have to do is sit patiently.”

Patiently indeed! Upul had almost given up hopes of seeing any animals when his uncle nudged him. There was a slight rustle. Upul was about to ask his uncle what it was when he signalled for him to be quiet. Soon a buck with branched horns moved towards the water. It stopped for a moment at attention as if to weigh the situation, then moved elegantly towards the water and took a sip. It raised its head perhaps to signal that the water was safe to drink, and then the whole herd came out through the trees. Upul had never seen so many deer gathered together in one place. He leaned down, fascinated by them and their many sizes. Suddenly he looked up at his uncle and whispered, “Are you going to shoot one of them?”

His uncle shook his head. “They are thirsty. They have travelled a long distance looking for this water hole.”

His uncle’s reply brought a rush of relief to Upul.

Upul’s thoughts returned to the present. As he scrutinized the landscape, his eyes rested on a roofless building in the shape of two interlocking Ls that he was sure had to be the village school. It had about it the same eerie look of his old village school during the holidays, which would have all the benches stacked in a corner, the principal’s office locked up, the verandas and compound scattered with dry leaves.

Upul sent a “no change” message through his wireless and waited for the reply. The same message was passed to him from another post. There would surely be a well there where he could quench his thirst. It was just minutes away from his check-point. He would return immediately, it would barely take him any time at all. Upul slowly slipped down from his post and cautiously moved in the direction of the school building. He

stepped carefully on the road looking for signs of the tar being dug up and covered again. The tarred road was safer because you could see if it had been mined.

It took much longer for him to reach the building than he thought it would. From his treetop it had looked closer. It was a school for sure, but everything was in shambles. There was a gaping hole in the wall of the front building; the roof had come down on to the tables and chairs, crushing them into splinters. Upul skirted the main building. At the far end of the compound was the well. A bucket with a long rope attached to it lay there. To Upul it was the most beautiful sight that he had beheld in this wretched place. Soon, he was splashing the cool water on his face. The heat was gone, the silence virtually blissful. Upul gulped down the water, its coolness penetrating through his whole body. He cupped more in his hands and put his face into it, loathed to lift his face from this refreshing coolness.



Kunan walked along the crumbled outer wall of the school. At the far end, he knew was the school well. Thoughts of the well brought back a flood of memories both good and bad. For a moment he was lost in recollections of his father, of being carried on his shoulders on the way back from the temple festival. Kunan sometimes fell asleep cushioning his head in his father's thick curly hair, secure as he breathed in the redolent smell of the earth that always stayed on his father. It was his father who had dug this well, along with a few other men. The excitement Kunan had felt as the work started soon faded. His child's mind could not understand the time it took for the men to dig the well. In the evenings when his father was seated on the thinani sipping his tea and alternatively munching on a small piece of pangkatti, Kunan's persistent question was, "When will it be over, when will we get water?"

His father would say, "Soon."

But that did not satisfy him.

"How soon, one week?"

“No, more than that.”

“One month?”

“Can’t say,” his father would reply. “It depends on how soon Mother Earth will yield her blessings to us.”

Kunan loved to sit snuggled close to his father, feeling the cool freshness of his father’s body and his strong arms. One evening his father said with contentment, “Today we dug into the Maki. Very soon we will hit water.”

“You always say very soon. But the water never comes.”

“It will come. And when it comes it will gush out to give life and vitality to many for years to come.”

A couple of days later, his father and the other men let out an elated cry from deep down in the well. Everyone waited with excitement as his father slowly climbed up the crude steps cut into the earth. The Principal took the first sip of water and said it was nothing but nectar. Everyone who sipped the water was delighted with the taste and freshness of the water.

A pongal was arranged to celebrate this significant event. The loud blast that had been heard the night before did not in any way disturb the grand celebration. The whole village participated in the pongal held in the school premises. Kunan’s father and the other men who had dug the well were honoured by the Principal. The festival had reached its height, everyone joining in the sharing of the pongal, when suddenly the village became aware that the school was surrounded by the armed forces. The atmosphere of festivity and merriment instantly changed to dread and panic. Before anyone could comprehend what was going on all the men were forced into the waiting trucks. No one uttered a sound while the men were being taken; it was as if their words had frozen with fear. Only when the trucks began to move away did those who were left behind start to wail. They ran behind the trucks, engulfed in the dust that the rushing vehicles left behind.

Then the vigil started. The wives and parents of the men who were taken stood near the Army camp close by hoping that their men would be released. Some others went to the government officials and other influential

people who they believed had the power to talk with the higher Army officers.

Kunan too sat there on the dusty road in front of the Army camp with his mother and grandparents, his eyes straining to see if he could get a glimpse of any activity that was going on behind that tightly woven fence.

After a week most of the men came out of the camp. They were like walking shadows. When the wretched procession came to an end they realized that his father was not among the released.

Kunan shook himself out of his reverie and carefully stepped away from the debris of the wall with a sigh of relief. He had finally reached his destination.

He looked up.

For a moment they stood locked in each other's startled gaze, each seeing himself reflected in the fear-struck eyes of the other. It was as if their gaze had the power to bring everything to a standstill. The two soldiers became part of the heated stillness of the air. Then slowly they both stepped back.

Upul retreated behind the school building and waited for the sound of hurrying feet, the click, and then the defining explosion.

Kunan crouched beside the tumbled down wall, futilely taking cover behind the small bit that was still standing. He waited for the sound of the wireless crackling to give a warning to other soldiers and then the shower of sniper bullets from all directions.

It was a long wait.

The stillness of the air was undisturbed.

Kunan made a decision. Leaving the meagre cover of the crumbled wall, he went to the well threw the bucket in and drew out the water. In his mind, he could almost hear the sound of an imagined bullet speeding towards him. A chill going down his spine, he stepped carefully over the debris not wanting to spill even a drop of water. Then he began to walk swiftly away. He had to reach Shankar before it was too late.

Before he left the compound, Kunan turned back.

He saw the lone figure of the soldier coming out from behind the broken walls of the school building.

***Amirthanjali Sivapalan** teaches English Literature at the University of Jaffna. She lived in Jaffna throughout the war years. The two young men facing each other over the school wall near the school well is a true incident. All other incidents happened in various places and times associated with different people.*

# BREAKING NEWS

## A Futuristic Story

*By Shailendree Wickrama Adittiya*

The tree in the distance had hardly any leaves and those few leaves still holding on resembled fluttering yellow birds. The evening sun and breeze gave color and life to those golden survivors. It was beautiful and deceiving, both at the same time.

My eyes darted from the tree to the grey tar of the Maradana Road. The few vehicles that rushed along stirred the dust and startled the birds that were not the much-loved parrots and seven sisters, but the hated crows—black shadows that always managed to land their droppings on unsuspecting heads.

“Thambiya,” a boy’s voice said. I straightened my back. Thambi was a word we were told not to ever utter, an insult to a Muslim. But it could also mean little brother, I thought. Maybe it was an elder brother’s loving reference to a younger brother.

“Ehenam umba kawda?” Another voice demanded in Sinhala, further probing the other’s ethnicity. This was followed with a Tamil word, most probably an insult.

I turned to my left, where three bony boys stood at the bus stop. All of them were around nine or ten and dark in complexion. Their white shirts and socks were yellow with dust, their black shoes broken and dirty. The yellows, blues and reds of their once new school bags were faded, the ripped satchels heavy with books. The two boys insulting each other were both Muslims, their skullcaps resting gently on their heads.

Their language was scary to listen to, especially now, with the rising tension between the Muslims and the Senas almost a decade after the civil war. Little boys using such crude words made me question what kind of homes they came from.

The one without the skullcap, a pirth nool dangling from his right wrist, put his palms together, index fingers pointed outwards, and started shooting with his fake gun. “Dishoom dishoom.”

“Are you a Tiger or Army guy?” his friend asked.

“I’m better than both of them. I’ll kill all and rule the country.”

“Aney! You can’t even kill a fly, you po...-“

His insult was cut short as the other Muslim boy tugged at his sleeve. “The bus is coming men.”

They scrambled into a half empty bus, which creaked its way onwards.

I turned back in the direction from which my staff transport van always came. A few of my co-workers were leaving, waving and smiling as they passed me. I took out my mobile and checked the time. 5:10 p.m. About five minutes later the blue and white van came towards me. Seeing the “Maradana-Panadura” board was a blessing.

It had been a tiring day, stressful and frustrating. I found myself thinking of this morning, when for the first time I had felt like an alien in Colombo. Not a foreign country, not a faraway city, but Colombo where I had schooled and now worked. The one place that had always been familiar and comfortable.

My assignment that day had dealt with the makers and sellers of flower garlands near kovils. The newspaper photographer accompanied me to Mayura Street where I spoke to the sellers, while he took the photographs. The ‘click click’ of his camera was in tune with the awkwardness of the interviews. My Sinhalese was a bit rusty, something I shamefully had to accept. Their Sinhalese was worse, accented heavily by their Tamil intonation, and I had felt embarrassed asking them to repeat many times, what they had just said to me. I managed to get the story that I needed yet I was left with this feeling of shame that I could speak in English confidently but my command of Sinhalese was poor and my Tamil non-existent. Learning about colonization at a young age and later, the way Sri Lanka was treated by Europe, especially during the war, I had grown to hate the British.



I was so comfortable speaking English but sometimes misused it, like many people of my class, to put down those who couldn't speak it.

It was too cool the next morning to go out and my cozy bed, with its haphazard mess of blanket and pillows, was a very inviting place to linger in. Five days a week of hectic work left me drained of energy and I rarely went out anymore. Yet, a promise was a promise. Finally, having got a day off from work, I had arranged to meet with a very close friend from school for lunch. It seemed like years since I last saw her, both of us in our white uniforms, rushing from one class to the other.

While walking to the bus stop, a vehicle raced over a puddle of water, some of which splashed on me. The bus while not suffocating and full, like a 154 bus during school hours, still had no vacant seats. My mood was further worsened by the terrible bus music that was blaring making the conductor's shouts seem like mere whispers.

Finally getting off the bus and pushing through people walking towards me, I was able to take a deep breath and calm myself. As I turned in to a road that led to the vast and almost grey sea, I called Anya, who I knew would still be on her way.

"Hi! I'm stuck in traffic and will take fifteen minutes more. At the least!"

"That's alright, Anya. I'm early anyway. I'll go to the bookstore then."

"Ah yes, much better. I'll text you when I get there. Also, my cousin will be hanging out with us for half an hour or so. Is that okay?"

I had heard about her many cousins and even met one, a pretty, quiet girl of fifteen or so. Assuming it would be her again, I told Anya it was no issue at all.

The air conditioning of the bookstore was set low, cool to keep customers from sweating but not low enough to make them uncomfortable. I browsed through the books, knowing I would not be buying any. They were too expensive and I preferred the secondhand bookstore in Wellawatte, the fragrance of old books suffocating but homely.

The ‘bing’ of my phone brought me back to the real world. Anya. As I left the store, I was greeted by the bright sun that burned my eyes after the gloom of the bookstore. Walking down the road to the pizza place Anya and I had agreed on for lunch, I couldn’t help smiling as I looked back at our friendship. My smile was replaced by a mostly curious frown when I entered. Anya was sharing a table with a tall, lanky man and I imagined the worst. She had done the one thing she had promised never to do—abandon a friend for a lover. It slowly dawned on me that this was her cousin. Anya saw me and waved me over.

“Hi! Oh my God! Long time, no? And this is my cousin, Rahul. Rahul, my best friend, Hiranya.”

Rahul smiled shyly and mumbled a greeting. He was fair, unlike Anya, and his clothes had that foreign smell about them. Already there were small red blotches on his arms where mosquitoes had feasted on his blood. His dark hair was combed back, which made his face look longer.

I smiled back, wondering if it was my presence that made him tongue-tied. To me, he seemed quite intimidating, his height and sharp face adding to that feeling. Yet, on second glance, I liked the open and earnest expression on his face. He seemed like someone you could spend hours talking to.

“What happened was this. My stupid uncle had made plans for Rahul to come to Sri Lanka without informing most of the family. Aiyo! Utter chaos. He’s off to meet some relatives from his father’s side. His uncle will be here in thirty minutes or so.”

As we waited for our pizza, thin crust spicy chicken for Anya and cheese for me, Anya filled me in on her cousin’s story as he sat in awkward silence. Rahul was Anya’s relative from her mother’s side. One of her cousins, in the way Sri Lankans consider all relatives cousins, aunts or uncles. Somewhere in the 80s or 90s Rahul and his family had left the country for Canada, and Rahul had now returned after his mother’s death, having completed his studies. His father too had died, but a while ago. Anya had never known her aunt and uncle and their deaths meant little to her.

Throughout this story, Rahul looked nervously at his fingers, his discomfort clear. He lost his discomfiture, however, when Anya told him

about my job, “A journalist, our Hiranya is. You’d think she’ll write at least one article about me, but we aren’t important enough.”

“A newspaper?” he asked. Rahul’s Canadian accent was somewhat hard to get used to.

“Yes, I just started a few months ago though,” I said.

“Okay you two manage alone for a while. I really need to use the restroom!” Anya said, grinning.

A few seconds of silence followed before Rahul asked me what kind of articles I wrote. I explained that I did all kinds of stories, but what I specialized in was stories about the lives of everyday people.

“That sounds amazing. I love to write too and I don’t tell many people but I have a blog.” Rahul said this as if no one would expect him to be a lover of words.

“Really? I do, too, though I tend to neglect it. Do you read a lot? Usually reading and writing go hand in hand.”

His eyes lit up. “I love it and brought a good collection of books to read here. What kind do you usually read?”

“Mostly legal thrillers, though I haven’t been reading much lately.” He was about to say something more, but Anya’s return stopped him short. A few minutes later, Rahul’s father’s brother came to pick him up. Anya and I were left alone.

“So what were you two talking about?” Anya didn’t want to waste a second.

“Aiyo! What men! Nothing. He just asked me about the stories I write.”

“You know, his story is quite interesting too. Wait will you, I’ll ask him if he’d like to be interviewed by you.”

I looked at her, waiting for an explanation. Rahul’s story didn’t seem any different to the hundreds that left the country during the war.

“Well, when Rahul’s mother, I think she was Vishwa Aunty, got married to his father, the family was against it. They were in love and

whatnot, but one was Hindu, the other Christian. Even worse was Rahul's father's job. Some government thing, which meant he had to work in Jaffna. So Vishwa Aunty was disowned, and they had no real place in this country. In Jaffna, people hated Uncle and Aunty because they didn't support the separate state idea. Rahul has been through a lot, and I'm sure he will tell you all about it."

Things happened fast after that. A few days later, Anya called me to say that Rahul was willing to share his story with me. The newspaper editor too agreed, and before long, I found myself sitting with Rahul at a tea shop. Customers were allowed to spend as much time here as they liked so long as we bought something, and usually these something's were quite high priced.

I was so engrossed in the book I was reading that I didn't notice Rahul walking in to the tea shop.

"Hello," his voice was soft and nervous.

"Oh, hi!" I put my book away with a smile.

"A bit late, aren't I? Just can't figure out how to avoid traffic jams here."

"You'll get used to it. So shall we get on with your story?"

He looked around shyly. "Well, you are the writer so where do you want to start?"

"Can I first have your full name?"

"Rahul Sooriyalingham." It was one of those rare moments when I was reminded that Anya was in fact Tamil.

Rahul sunk into his story, the words flowing easily, as if he had talked about his life many times before.

"I was born in Jaffna. Amma, Appa, and I lived there till I was maybe ten and then the bombing started. Our neighbors decided to join the terrorists and the school I went to was bombed. Appa was laughed at for not joining the Tigers. He didn't believe in wars, and he wasn't about to pick sides. They wrote 'Death to Luxman' -Appa's name was Luxman- on our wall,

and one day officials from the LTTE came to our house and shouted at him. We left a week later.”

“Colombo was different,” Rahul leaned forward and ran his hand through his hair, “It wasn’t as dusty. It had this garbage smell though, at each corner there was something rotting away. The Tamil was different too and then there were so many Tamils who didn’t know their language and who spoke only in Sinhala and English. We settled in the Wellawatte flats and were happy, for a while. Then the war moved into Colombo. Our Sinhala friends distanced themselves from us and our Tamil friends thought we were traitors. Appa was asked to assist in so many LTTE missions. Relatives and people at work, they wanted him to carry parcels or smuggle certain things. When this became a threat to us, Appa, who was broken by these harsh demands, decided we should leave. We fled to Canada, herds of us. Families from all over the country, it didn’t matter if you were Sinhalese or Tamil. Everyone wanted to escape. Appa was already very weak when we left and he died the first winter there. Amma and I lived on in Canada and didn’t want to return. Not even when we heard Appa’s parents had been killed, or later when Amma’s family was shot. They were from Kandy and weren’t affected for quite some time. We were never told who the murderers were. Not that knowing would have given them life.”

There was a moment of silence. Then I asked, “Rahul, how come you never got back to Anya and them? They are after all family.”

He explained that he was a very distant cousin of Anya. He had seen no need to return and had only been told about his still living relatives a few months ago. “Anya would have told you about the family issues. I never met any of them before. We lived so far away from those we called family, first in Jaffna, and then in Canada. It was always Amma, Appa and I. Even during our stay in Colombo, Amma’s pride and Appa’s shame stopped them from contacting anyone. As I grew up, Amma showed me photographs and talked about her childhood. It wasn’t until her death that I felt the need to find these people I called family.”

“Okay. But why are you back now?” I was curious but I also disliked people who left the country using the war as an excuse. Once the skies were clear again, some of them came back demanding their old homes and jobs back.

“Amma died last month and I was hit by how alone I was. No blood there, no blood here.”

“But this is still home.” He nodded.

It was unfair. Those who ran away to foreign countries and those who lived in those war zones acted like victims, the only victims. Yes, they were under threat — they saw the bullets, felt the shudders of the bombs — but they acted like Tamils were the only ones to suffer. We too lived each day in fear, not knowing what to expect. Going to school was like walking through a minefield, or playing a game of minesweeper. One wrong move in the wrong place and boom! a bomb would go off. But we stuck it out; we couldn't just leave the place we called home

I swallowed my dislike, my anger. Lashing out at him wouldn't solve anything.

“I know you think I only care about Sri Lanka now that I have no family in Canada,” he said as if reading my mind. “That's not it though. When my father died, there was no money coming in. Tamil friends in Canada offered to help us, but they wanted much more in return. They wanted us to join various organizations that supported the Sri Lankan Government. We were both offered jobs if we agreed to listen in at these organizations' meetings and gather information for the Tigers. But we refused them and made do on our own, working at stores for small pay.”

My heart softened. It wasn't easy to be torn between choices. He could have chosen a life full of luxuries, a good job. Yet, he had chosen the rough path.

“My mother insisted that I don't drop out of university to support her. Somehow I managed, studying and working part time jobs. I worked at a second hand book store for quite some time. That is when I started reading a lot.”

He told me about the various customers, mostly old men who stayed on for long conversations, instead of buying any books. I gave him the names of the second hand book stores I loved spending my time in.

“We could even go together sometime,” he suggested and I nodded.

Rahul and I met again a few days later, and it felt as if a comfort and ease had grown between us. It was almost as if we had known each other all our lives.

He took out a battered book from his bag, and flipped through the pages. “Read it. It’s the diary I kept when we left Jaffna and then the country. Terrible language and writing, but it’s the truth. A kid’s story.”

He handed me the notebook. The cover read “Rahul’s Property! Stay Out!”

The first entry was dated mid-1995 and was neatly filled with child’s writing. Slowly his handwriting went from neat to sloppy, the color of pens changing as did the length of the diary entries. As I flipped through I caught sentences and phrases—*“This war is just stupid!” “I hate Appa! And Amma! They are such cowards!” “We are leaving. I hate this damn country” “Canada is much better. I’ll never leave” “Arun Mama asked for money. Appa shouted at him, said something about him having no shame.” “I think Arun Mama is a terrorist”*

Rahul’s diary painted an amazing picture of him and the emotions he felt towards the war — anger, hate, depression, confusion. His story was so raw and so honest: Vinodh, the Sinhalese student in his art classes in Colombo who once beat him up for being Tamil, Sam, the girl who turned him down because of his skin color, his mother fighting with his Arun Mama in Canada, because he accused her of being a fake Tamil.

“Listen to this, Athammee,” I said to my grandmother as I sat in her bedroom on a chair reading the diary. “My life feels like being at the bottom of a deep well, whose waters the rays of the sun don’t pierce. Day after day, I try to see out of this darkness. But I see nothing, and only seem to sink deeper into this darkness.” I was silent for a moment, then I said quietly to my grandmother, “I wish I could write like that.”

“Duwa, don’t say that. What’s that book anyway?”

Taking the book with me, I joined my grandmother in her bed, where she had been enjoying an afternoon nap.

“It’s Rahul, Anya’s distant relative. I’m working on an article about him. He gave me his diary to read.”

“Where is he from?”

“He’s originally from Jaffna. Left for Canada during the war.”

“So he’s a Tamil.”

“Aiyo Athamma! Don’t always bring those things up. He’s an amazing guy.”

“Everyone’s nice. But don’t forget that some aren’t suited to our family.”

I asked her what she meant by that.

“These Rahuls of the world will take you out and whatnot. And then they’ll just go off as soon as things get serious. And if he’s from Jaffna, then his parents will never approve!”

“It’s just for an article, Athammee. I wasn’t planning on getting married to him or anything. And I’m sure he won’t even remember me once his story is published.”

“That’s what people always say. But before you know it, you’ll be taken away by his witty comments and whatnot. He’s your friend, yes. Don’t let that change Duwa.”

I looked at Athammee, a frown forming on my forehead. Our friendship didn’t go beyond the article, and would end when I was done writing it. Yet, having said that to myself, a doubt formed in my mind. He was Anya’s cousin and so I might very well see him again. The thought did not displease me.

Two weeks later, the article was published and I was quite happy with it. Rahul called to thank me for it and said he would drop by the office to thank me in person.

When he arrived, the receptionist informed me and I went out to meet him. He stood up from the sofa where he was sitting, grinning. He looked somehow younger in his powder blue t-shirt.

“I loved it, I don’t know how to thank you,” he said.

“I am glad. I just hope I did it justice.”



“You wrote exactly what was in my heart. It was almost as if you had made it your story.”

“Rahul, I should be thanking you, for sharing all those memories with me.”

Before he said good bye, I remembered his diary. I had read it many times, and still enjoyed going through the entries. I went back to my desk and took the diary out of a drawer.

I slipped the note I had written earlier between two pages, “*Dear Rahul, this is worth publishing. A Rahul version of the Anne Frank Diary. I hope you go far in life. Good luck!*” I walked back to the entrance and found Rahul sitting on one of the plastic chairs. He seemed to be deep in thought, looking out at the graying sky.

“Rahul,” I said, to get his attention. He stood up, and turned to face me. I handed him the diary, and he flipped through the pages. He grinned when he saw the note, even though he didn’t read it.

“Thank you. And I’ll hopefully see you soon?” he said, smiling at me, a hopeful look on his face.

“Yes, yes,” I said, suddenly flustered by his intent look. I offered my hand to him as if to say I must get back to work. He shook it, still holding my gaze, then left.

I walked back to my table, now oddly wishing he had stayed a little longer, that I hadn’t been in such a hurry to bid him goodbye. We had become quite close over the many cups of tea we had shared and I was realizing that we had bonded over our long conversations about writing and reading. Yet, remembering the conversation with my grandmother, I tried to push Rahul to the back of my mind. As I went about my day, a feeling of emptiness took hold of me.

One of the most anticipated events each year is Avurudhu in April. I love the food, gifts, and rituals. What I loved the most though, was the boiling over of a pot of milk; new pot, new firewood and new milk, a new beginning for most. Kids and adults alike would count the seconds to the auspicious time and the fireworks would inform the country to perform this ritual. What

happened a few days later was very much like this ritual. The milk had been bubbling for quite sometime, and boiled over with a call from Rahul.

“Hey, it’s me,” he said.

“Oh ya, hi,” I said, silently cursing this new awkwardness that seemed to have crept over me.

“So what do you say about meeting for coffee?”

“Well, for one, Sri Lankans don’t meet for coffee. We meet for tea.”

He sighed. “Okay, can we meet for tea then? Now that the article is published, we can maybe... talk.”

“I’d love to but I don’t think I can.”

“Okay. Not what I expected. But can I know why?”

“Well, Amma will blow a fuse and it’s complete-“

“Why would your mother blow a fuse? Because she doesn’t know me?”

Silence. How could I tell him?

“It’s because I’m Tamil.” His voice sounded tired and deflated.

“Not really. It’s just that...”

“I get it. And to think people still think like that.” The line was silent, and then the beep beep beep of disconnection.

Peace is a mocked-at word. It’s like a man’s handkerchief. Very few carry them now, yet for those who do, it’s a comfort knowing the cloth remains close to your heart. Sadly, peace is like the monsoons too. It comes, cleansing the world and then leaves, only to return later. We had a time of peace and then we had a time of uneasiness. The Senas took over, publicizing and highlighting the differences within us all. Some believed the country was a Sinhala Buddhist country and had no room for anyone else. Other ethnic groups didn’t want to accept they were a minority and so must know their place. Everyone forgot that, despite the racial and religious differences, we were all Sri Lankans.

The days grew more silent. Not the silence during the war when lights were switched off early and people spoke cautiously to each other, not knowing whom to trust. This new silence was of the kind where one small movement could shatter the peace.

And shatter, it did.

“Ten dead in Pettah. Police swear a thorough investigation!” The News headlines screamed. “Explosion kills five, injures thirteen in Dehiwala!”

People hoped they weren’t the same bombs and explosions that had haunted Sri Lanka for nearly three decades. Suddenly the foreigners, trying absurdly to bring us all together, scattered away like scared mice. CNN and BBC took up their anti-Sri Lanka jobs. The accusations against the country, which had started to collect dust in a corner, were brought up again.

Standing at the bus stop, I watched the leaves scatter across the deserted road, the dry leaves settling, then another gust of wind hustling them along, like an overbearing mother chasing her kids to school. The bicycle shop owned by a Muslim had closed down, the place where we bought lunch too. It was no surprise. Conflict makes us suspect everyone, even the man you always bought lunch packets from and even the man at the secondhand book store who knew your favorite authors. I looked back at the faded yellow building where I worked. That place had become a second home to me; the doors that constantly squeaked, the cockroaches that ran across the floor and the people, old or young, who shared a love for words and stories. The tension in the country meant that journalists and writers couldn’t afford to expose the truth anymore. Returning to this shabby building to fill pages of a newspaper didn’t seem a possibility for me, at least not in the foreseeable future.

I began to rarely leave home. Amma didn’t want me traveling, especially into the heart of Colombo. Offices started shutting, prices started rising and chaos invaded our already chaotic country where people moved around like ants. As I whiled away my time, I remembered how, during the war, cartoons were interrupted every few minutes to deliver breaking news. I would be watching a cartoon, the foreign characters speaking in Sinhalese, when the red of ‘Breaking News’ would be followed by dead bodies,

scattered debris and blackened buildings. The cries and wails of victims would take over the chatter and music of the cartoon characters.

I switched on the TV, and selected a Sri Lankan channel. The five o'clock cartoons were on; a dubbed Japanese animation where the characters were speaking in high pitched voices, fighting and killing.

"Kids watch this crap?" I muttered. Athamma joined me, sitting in the arm chair next to me. I changed seats, sitting at her feet, leaning against her legs. She started massaging my head.

"What's this cartoon, Duwa?"

Before I could answer, the scene of flying rocks and dying villains changed.

"Breaking News!"

I picked up the phone without thinking what I was doing, then stared at it realizing that I was intending to call Rahul. Yet, now I hesitated unsure what I wanted to do, unsure if I could pay the price for where my feelings might take me.

***Shailendree Wickrama Adittiya** is a freelance journalist whose love for writing stems from her passion for reading. She comes from the background, culture and society that her story is based on.*

## A THOUSAND MEMORIES IN STONE

*By Shruthi Waduacharige*

The radio was on and Appa was listening to it pressed against his ear. “Anything newsworthy?” I asked while I flattened dough on the plate to make roti for dinner. Appa loved roti, even with just his few remaining teeth he managed to enjoy it. “Maghal they are saying that there is going to be an attack on Jaffna town tonight.”

As if on cue I heard a loud commotion outside. All our neighbors were leaving their houses whilst talking about the current situation. My husband Ram came into the kitchen, “Vasugi pack a few things, we need to leave immediately,” he said while hurriedly buttoning his blue checked cotton shirt. In his haste he missed a button or two. “They say that the army is going to launch an attack in Jaffna because they believe there is a LTTE presence here,” he explained as he walked out.

I immediately ran to our children’s room to wake Saratha and Raja up. “Amma what’s happening?” they asked in unison.

“We have to leave for a while,” I said as I began to pack a bag with some of their clothes and essentials. “Appa, get ready,” I called out from the room. There was no reply.

“Amma, exactly where are we going?” Saratha asked as she crammed her favourite rag doll into the bag.

“To a friend’s house, Maghal,” I said as I zipped the bag with some difficulty.

When all of us had gotten ready, we came out to find Appa was still seated on the cane chair, his faithful radio pressed against his ear. He had switched from news to one of his all-time favourite Tamil songs. “Appa we have to go,” I said urgently.

“I’m not going,” he replied.

“What?” I asked shocked. “You have to come, you can’t stay here, they’ll bomb the place down tonight.”

"I'm old, I can't be going from place to place at this age. Let me die in my own house at least."

"Uncle can you please come?" Ram said with forced patience, then softening a little he added, "At least think about your grandchildren." Saratha and Raja both looked at their grandfather sadly.

"Appappa, please come with us," said Raja. "Who will tell us bedtime stories about all those kings and queens of long ago?"

"Please come with us Appappa," they both pleaded.

"Vasugi it's getting late," Ram urged me as he peered outside the door.

"Appa please don't be stubborn," I pleaded almost in tears.

"Vasugi it's six o'clock. You know they said that the attack will be at night, we don't know the time but they may even attack any moment now. There is nobody around, everyone else has left. Can we please go?" Ram was angry now.

"You go. Let me just stay here," said my father as he patted Saratha's head.

We heard a loud noise in the distance like tin sheets being battered with heavy stones. The children screamed and hugged Ram in fear. "Uncle you have to come with us, it's not safe to stay here anymore. Please don't be stubborn." Another shot rang out.

"For goodness sake Vasugi let's go," shouted Ram.

"But how can I leave Appa and —"

"What about Saratha and Raja?" Ram demanded cutting me in mid-sentence. Appa got up and hugged me. "Vasugi please go I'll be fine." He gently pushed me towards the door as another shot was heard in the distance.

"Uncle, I know you don't want to leave this house, but at least for the sake of your daughter and grandchildren please come with us," Ram pleaded.

I held Appa's hand as tears streamed down my face. He looked at me lovingly but his eyes were full of sadness; the same sadness that I often saw when he spoke of my mother. It broke my heart to see it again. "You know

I can't leave this house my girl, it's the only memory I have left," Appa said. He let go of my hand and stroked the cream coloured walls lovingly, a small smile on his face. He was here but his mind was somewhere else. I could see it in his eyes. I hugged him tight knowing I could not argue with that. Ram gave Appa's shoulder a tight squeeze.

"Uncle, are you sure?" he asked again. My father nodded. Then with a final look at Appa we turned and hurried towards Ram's van. The children ran ahead and got into the back while Ram threw our bag into the trunk. We got into the front and, with the bang of his door, Ram started the vehicle. Appa stood at the front door, bent and old. He wore the blue and white striped sarong that I had given him a few years back. It resembled the one Amma had given him, which he still kept to this day, torn and tattered though it was. Ram started the van and began to reverse out of the driveway. Appa turned and began walking to his cane chair on the verandah. The last glimpse I had of Appa, as the van pulled out of the gate, was of him sitting in his chair, the radio against his ear. I shuddered as we set off up the road.

We drove really fast. We could hear the noises closer now. Fear, anxiety, guilt and sadness overwhelmed me as I hugged my children and stared at the road ahead. It started to rain. "Damn," said Ram in anger, "just what we need." He slowed down, driving carefully through the blinding rain. The van jerked as we heard another loud bang in the distance behind us. I turned to look and saw a tiny speck of fire in the distance blurred by the rain. *Was it my house?* I offered a silent prayer to God Shiva to keep Appa safe.

As we drove along the road the rain started to batter against the windows of the van like a hammer pounding on a nail. It felt as if the rain would pierce through the window and attack us. I looked at Ram. "Do you think Appa will be okay?"

He did not reply for a long time, then eventually he sighed and said "I'm sorry Vasugi, I'm not sure." I let out a sob. Ram was brutally honest sometimes. But I preferred that to false hope. Tears and rain blocked my vision and now all I could see was a blur ahead of me. I could hear the loud sounds of mortar, still in the distance but seeming to draw nearer. It was as if we were being chased and would be caught any moment. Ram held my hand

as he guided the steering wheel with one hand. He squeezed it, as if to say he was there with me and he understood. Ram was never one to show emotion. Saratha and Raja on the other hand were full of questions and talking non-stop regardless of whether Ram and I paid any attention to them. “Amma is that a bomb?” “Appa will the van stop in this rain?” “Do we have to stay at your friend’s place for a long time?” “I wish I had brought a book,” “We’re hungry!” After a while Raja said quietly, “I wish Appappa had come with us.” I turned around this time and gave them a reassuring smile, although my heart was breaking inside.

As the van sped along jerking frequently because of the potholes and road bumps, my mind went back to the days when Appa used to tell me about Amma. She had passed away when I was five. After a violent attack of pneumonia and weeks of suffering she had finally succumbed to the illness. All of that is a blur in my mind, a chain of images defined by a lot of crying, anxiety and urgency on the part of the adults around me. Appa never married again and he took care of me with much love. Yet, it was difficult growing up without a mother. I missed her every time I blew the candles out on my birthday cake, I missed her when I met Ram, I missed her when I got married, I missed her when I became a mother, but most of all I missed her when Appa, thinking he was alone, would cry repeating her name over and over again. Sometimes I still find him doing this.

In those rare moments when Appa spoke about Amma, his face would light up like never before, and his eyes would glisten with tears. There was such joy in his voice as he told his favourite story of how they had built their house together, recalling moments of disappointment, enjoyment and nervousness while the house was built — their little disputes about what colour to paint the wall, or if they should have three bathrooms instead of two. My favourite one was when Appa vividly described Amma falling into a newly dug hole and limping the entire day, indignantly refusing any help from Appa. Each time he told them, the stories of building the house became longer and more elaborate. “We were both so young, our entire lives stretching ahead of us, and building our own house was exciting,” he would say. “That was one of the best times I had with her. This house is not just made of bricks and cement. It holds a thousand memories of your mother.”



We were at the outskirts of Jaffna now heading towards Point Pedro. Finally it seemed like we were making some progress and were out of danger. Raja had moved to the front with me and was fast asleep on my lap. Saratha was fully stretched on the back seat with her rag doll on her chest. We saw quite a few people heading towards the Northern region, on bicycles, or in vehicles, some even on foot. The rain had stopped and now a slight drizzle started up again. One woman was carrying a screaming child who refused to be held by her, and tried repeatedly to slip out of her grip. A man, who seemed to be her husband, trudged behind them, slightly hunched, carrying a big bag on his shoulder. Ram stopped and asked them if they would like a lift. The woman looked like she wanted to get in but the husband put out a hand and held her back, saying, "No, thank you." The woman in her rain-soaked red sari looked really disappointed. I gave her a sad smile as Ram started the vehicle once again. I guessed the husband didn't trust us. I couldn't blame him. More and more it seemed like everyone was on their guard.

As we sped along the road we saw two figures further ahead, one standing by a tree and the other crouched on the ground fiddling with a motor-bike. It clearly looked like they were having trouble with it. "Should we stop and see what's happening?" I asked Ram.

"Well I don't know. *They* seem suspicious," said Ram always the skeptic.

"And why weren't the previous family suspicious Ram?" I asked him impatiently.

"Because they were a family, that's why. With children."

"Okay, but what if they need help and what if they are trying to escape just like us?" I asked him as we drew closer to the figures, who I could see now were a man and a woman.

Ram stopped on an impulse and tooted the horn. The man came forward. He was middle-aged, short and stocky, with curly hair and a thick mustache, his green shirt soaked through because of the rain. The woman looked much younger and she smiled as she adjusted the bag on her shoulders and pulled on her pink silk blouse which was pasted to her body,

as was her peach colored skirt outlining her thin figure. "Trouble with the bike?" asked Ram.

"Yes," replied the man in an odd accent. Not exactly the typical Jaffna Tamil. "It just stopped, refused to move another inch, and has a mind of its own," he added, laughing as he kicked the bike gently.

"Where are you headed?" asked Ram.

"Not really sure, away from the bombs I guess," said the man smiling. I liked him. He seemed to be in an awfully good mood at an awfully frightening time. I smiled at the woman. She smiled back and I looked at Ram trying to convey through my stare that he should ask them if they wanted a lift. He came to his senses and asked them if they would like to join us. They readily agreed and got into the van.

Once we had set off again, the man said, "I'm Rohitha." Ram and I exchanged a look. *A Sinhalese! And he knew Tamil!* As if she had understood our non-verbal exchange the woman hurriedly said, "and I'm Malar."

"I'm Ram and this is my wife Vasugi".

"Your children must very tired, they haven't woken up once since you saw us," said Malar.

"Yes, I guess this whole experience is taking a toll on them," I said as I stroked Raja's head, playing with his black curls.

"So Rohitha, what's a man like you doing here?" asked my husband too bluntly.

"A man like me?" asked Rohitha and laughed heartily. "You mean what's a Sinhalese man doing here?"

"Uh, yes I guess so," said Ram a little apologetically.

"Well, love I suppose," he said. "This girl next to me, I'm married to her." I turned to look at Malar and caught her giving him an annoyed look. "She wanted to come see her family. We actually live in Colombo with mine."

"So Malar, were you able to spend time with your family?" I asked her.

“No, the moment we got here, we had to leave town because of the current situation.” She fiddled with her gold cross pendant. “I hope my parents and sister are safe.”

Ignoring her worry, because he was afraid it would get me fretting even more about Appa, Ram asked Rohitha, “How do you know Tamil so well?”

“My Tamil friends back in Colombo taught me and Malar only made it better,” he said as I caught a glimpse of him through the rearview mirror, giving her a peck on her cheek.

I was suddenly reminded of Appa and felt a sickening in the pit of my stomach. A tear fell down my cheek as I remembered how, every day, until I did my Ordinary Levels, he would drop me at school with a kiss on my cheek, and pick me up in the afternoon faithfully, a packet of my favourite mango pickle in his hands, as he stood by the gate waiting for me to run towards him. He did not want me to ride a bicycle like the other girls did. He was scared I would go and knock myself somewhere. And here I was, leaving him behind. “Ram, I want to go back to Appa,” I suddenly said.

“Vasugi,” Ram explained, as if speaking to a child, “you know it’s not safe to go.”

“But I have to,” I insisted, now in tears. “I can’t leave him. I can’t. Why did I agree to leave him, why?”

Ram sighed as he slowed down. “Vasugi I know it’s hard, but you have to think of our children.” I kept silent. I did not know what to do. Somehow in my mind I could not justify what I had done. I was a terrible daughter. I should be burning in hell right now.

“These are difficult times,” Rohitha said, after a while, breaking the silence. He smiled sympathetically at me.

“A useless war... or rather an unnecessary one,” added Ram.

“One just feels so helpless at times like these,” said Rohitha.

“What can we do but sit and watch men killing each other?” asked Ram.

“That’s true. My act of rebellion against the whole system was marrying Malar. Of course I love her,” Rohitha smiled at her and held her hand. “But it was unheard of in my family and the village I came from. This was my statement to whoever cares to see and listen.”

Malar looked at him with a smile that lit up her whole face. After a moment’s silence, she added, “I hope Appa and Amma are okay.”

“I’m sure they are,” Rohitha reassured her.

It was very late in the night and we had now reached the house of a friend in Nellyady where we thought we would be somewhat safe. We all got off from the van and stretched ourselves as our bodies had gone numb after the long drive in the cold. We walked through the gate towards the house surrounded by mango trees. Saratha and Raja walked in front rubbing their eyes, still half asleep. The first time I had met Ram was at this house. We were both friends with Arul who lived here, and we had met each other during a dinner to celebrate Arul’s birthday.

It wasn’t love at first sight but it happened eventually—months of idle chit-chat that finally led to Ram confessing he liked me and would like to pursue a relationship. I was fond of him too. He was odd in certain ways, not too expressive but I think I made up for both of us. I would talk for hours and he would reply with a few words. Not because he was angry or upset but because that’s the way he was. At first I was worried, but then he would do things to make up for his lack of talking, and those things would mean much more. Like once he traveled with me all the way to Colombo just so I could attend a seminar and stayed there for four days with nothing much to do until I was done, then brought me back to Jaffna. He was a thoughtful man and I knew he loved me. After three years of getting to know each other, celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, getting to know relatives and finally feeling like we were both stable enough to get married, we did. It was a beautiful ceremony, simple but beautiful.

The path from the gate to the front door was lined with pots of Ixoras. As we neared the door, it opened. Arul and his wife Seetha came out smiling. They had no doubt heard us approach. Arul came down the front steps and took the bag from Ram’s hand. Seetha smiled at us from behind

him. "This is Rohitha and Malar," said Ram introducing them to Arul and his wife Seetha. He explained how we had met them. Saratha and Raja were wide awake by now and restless.

"Please, come in," said Arul as he took the bag from my hands as well.

"Please have something to eat," said Seetha as she pointed towards the dining table. "The dinner's gone cold but I'm sure you must be starving."

Arul, Rohitha and Ram were in deep conversation about the situation. Seetha inquired about Malar's family as she showed her to a room where she could change from her damp clothes. I wasn't that hungry but the smell of the chicken curry was inviting. "Kids do you want to eat?" I asked them but both Saratha and Raja were glued to the TV that was playing one of their favourite cartoons. Not even hunger would make them turn away from the TV now. I stood up from where I was sitting on the sofa and went to the table. Roti. I had just made roti for my Appa a few hours back. I pulled out a chair from the table, sat down and wept. Nobody disturbed me but I could hear murmurs in the background. My heart ached for Appa. I hated myself for leaving him behind. I wanted to go back. Eventually, as my tears subsided, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up. It was Rohitha. I gave him half a smile. He pulled out a chair and sat in front of me. "I heard about what happened from Ram. Don't worry I'm not going to tell you that everything's going to be all right, and I'm not going to ask you to stop crying. You are only human, you can do whatever you want to express how you feel." He took a plate and served himself a roti, some chicken curry and some sambol that looked really spicy. "Two years ago my brother died, fighting for this country. He asked me before he joined the army if he should and I readily agreed. Seemed like a noble cause then." "When he died I blamed myself, then I blamed the country, then I blamed the Tamils, and after a full circle of blaming everyone it came back to me. But you know what I realized? All that hatred and blaming was pointless. We are stuck in the middle of a senseless war, all of us victims in one way or the other. Sooner or later it might be even you and me. Dead and gone. Just like that."

I looked at him a frown forming on my face unable to comprehend why he had suddenly decided to tell me all of this. I realized it was a senseless war. But there was more to the war than only people dying. The trauma, the guilt, the helplessness, the loneliness, all of it was overwhelming.

Why did I have to struggle with leaving my father behind? Why was I being tested this way?

The next morning I was restless. I had to go back and see if Appa was okay. I couldn't just idle here while I didn't know what was going on. I went to look for Ram and found him sipping tea on the front porch steps. "Ram can we please at least try to go and see what's happening? I can't wait like this anymore," I asked.

"Alright," he sighed after a moment. "Let the kids stay here, we'll go and see and come back." He stood up from the porch steps. I went to our room and got ready.

Saratha and Raja were quite content at being left behind as they were once again glued to the TV. The adventures of the previous night momentarily forgotten, they did not oppose us leaving without them. Arul and Seetha understood my need to go back and find out what had happened. Malar and Rohitha were going to come with us part of the way. They took their bag with them, as they would not return if everything was fine at Malar's home. Arul assured them that they could come back anytime they wanted. As we said our goodbyes a lot of things were left unsaid; our questions, fears and confusion hung in the air. We got into the van and left with Malar and Rohitha. We drove in silence back to Jaffna, dropping off Malar and Rohitha on the way at a relative's house. They would go with this relative in his van to check on her parents.

As we drove on, my hands were sweating as I twisted a piece of string I had picked up from somewhere. At one point we had to stop as I was feeling nauseous from nervousness. I got out the van and threw up my breakfast. I got back in crying because I was angry and frustrated. Ram held my hand. It was his way of telling me he understood. That's what he did when my friend Ratha died during childbirth, when Appa had been ill for a month because of a virus, when I lost the first chain that Ram had bought me. I hated it when people tried to console me when I was upset. Ram didn't. He just held my hand and that was all that I needed. I loved him for that.

Closer to Jaffna Town I saw many houses and streets damaged. Some houses were burnt to the ground while some others remained intact

for the most part. There was no one in sight. No bicycles streaming down the road, no groups of children playing in their gardens. There was only an eerie silence. It was an unbearable sight, all the things and places that had been familiar to me for a lifetime now transformed into black, sooty, charred objects. But closer to home the damage was far less, and this gave me some hope. As we entered our neighborhood I saw Appa's favourite dog, Trishaw, sniffing a stray packet of milk. He was named Trishaw by Appa because one of his paws was injured and he limped on the other three. I closed my eyes as we neared home, a hot bile rising up my throat. Two years back, one night Ram had not returned home from work and the same bile had arisen in my throat. It was a tense time in Jaffna because of the war. By nine o'clock I was covered in perspiration, walking back and forth, tying and untying a knot at the end of my sari. At eleven o'clock he returned. He had been at a friend's house. His friend had been assaulted by someone and he had helped take him to the hospital.

I felt the van stop and still kept my eyes shut dreading what I would see. Ram switched the engine off and I finally opened my eyes. The back end of our house was somewhat destroyed. The front remained intact for the most part, the big garden still full of Ixoras and Shoe Flowers. I got down from the van breathless and rushed towards our house calling "Appa are you there?" The door was wide open and was swaying slightly to the wind. I hurried up the front steps, past the verandah with its black cane chairs. Two of the chairs had fallen far from where they usually were, blocking the front door. I pushed them aside and walked into the living room with its brown settee set. Some tiles from the roof had fallen down, because of the impact of shelling. I looked around to see if anything else was damaged. Most of it seemed intact. I felt scared to go further into the house. Though, so far there seemed to be hope, none of this proved that Appa was alive. Wouldn't he have heard the van coming? Countless times when Ram and the children and I would go out and return, Appa would be at the door having heard the van. Why hadn't he come now? Was he asleep? Oh how I wished he was only asleep. I forced myself to walk down the dimly lit corridor. Ram who had joined me now, held me by my hand as I walked forward. At one point I just stopped and sobbed into Ram's chest, while he stroked my back. Finally I reached the end of the corridor, a journey that seemed endless. It led to a small open courtyard. There seated in his cane chair, the radio pressed

against his ear, was Appa. I ran to him. He saw me and his face lit up with surprise and delight as he got up and hugged me tight. I withdrew from his embrace eventually and he held me by the waist. "Appa I'm so glad you are okay," I cried, tears streaming down my face. I was shaking with relief and excitement. He only smiled and patted my back. "Weren't you afraid even a little bit?" I asked him.

"Afraid? I'm only ever afraid for you my child, but you were safe. What else did I have to be afraid of? I stopped fearing for my life the day your mother died, that part of me died with her." I looked at him with pleading and sadness. He tapped his radio. "I can't seem to get the channel I was listening to yesterday, do something." He thrust it at me with a smile, wanting to avoid my plea. As I adjusted the knobs a clear voice rang out from the radio, "This is yet another warning for citizens to evacuate Jaffna town and the surrounding area...." The hostilities were starting up again. I looked at Appa, my eyes begging him. Appa sat down in his cane chair. I sank heavily to the floor and Ram came to squat by me, holding my hand as we heard the distant sound of mortar starting up once more.

***Shruthi Waduacharige** comes from a family of mixed parentage. Her mother is a Tamil from Batticaloa and her father a Sinhalese from Matara. She has seen, heard and experienced their different cultures and ethnicities. Although she has a deep understanding of the two ethnicities, she has had no direct experience of the war. Her writing is entirely inspired by what she has heard from those who she has been privileged enough to meet and get to know through Sri Lanka Unites, the youth reconciliation movement with whom she is a volunteer.*



## POEMS

*By Rathika Kalirajah*

### TO A BUDDHA STATUE UNDER A BO TREE

Why do you not open your eyes?  
Why do you not ask questions?  
Or hear the cries of the needy?  
Or punish the tyrant?  
Why do you not get angry?  
Why do you not restore peace?  
Or safeguard the innocent?  
Or the faith of your forefathers?  
Why this deep silence?  
He smiles at me.  
"If I talk it will be Pusa\* not Pujas for me."  
**\*Pusa -a detention camp in Galle.**

### INSIDE THE COFFIN

Knock Knock ...  
Please open the lid.  
I am alive though  
bullets shattered me.  
I am flooded with blood.

Darkness scares me.  
I am suffocating.  
I am crippled.  
I need brightness.  
If I survive so do others.

Please help me,  
I need to live,  
I'm Peace inside the coffin.  
Knock knock...

## **A GUN SPEAKS**

The tip of a pencil writes poems,  
my tip takes away lives.  
You are carrying me like an infant  
but I will take your breath away.  
The fault is not mine.  
Had you thought for a while before firing,  
a mother wouldn't have lost her child,  
a daughter wouldn't have been widowed  
before her mother,  
an infant wouldn't cry for breast milk  
nestling against its mother's corpse.  
If I could,  
I would shoot,  
not others,  
but myself.

## INDEPENDENCE DAY

Incalculable people like bees around a hive  
 Nationalism, a lamp in everyone's heart  
 Dutiful soldiers marching smartly along  
 Everyone clapping with unabated enthusiasm  
 President hoisting our flag with pure hands  
 Eagerly we wait for his inspiring words  
 National anthem sung in both languages  
 Devout clergy of all religions in a single row  
 Everyone reveres the government like they do God  
 No need for security checks, no need for guards,  
 City adorned with fluttering flags  
 Endless blank bullets fired into the air  
 Dancing children of every culture  
 A festival that's celebrated across all religions  
 Yeah, what a gift this day is to all.

*"A Tamil boy shot by a mob near Jaffna Library,"*  
 the TV shrilly declares,  
 disturbing my Independence Day dream.

***Rathika Kalirajah** was born in Jaffna and raised in Trincomalee. Her parents were originally from Trincomalee but due to the war were displaced to Kondavil, Jaffna. Her primary education started in Kondavil but the unstable situation in the Northern part forced her family to return to Trincomalee. She has been following a general degree program at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka, offering English as a subject. She really loves to write poems.*

## HOMework

*By Nifraz Rifaz*

“I’m nothing but a loser. A foolish, spineless loser. A shame to my race, a shame to my religion. What sin did I commit? Why wasn’t I born into a Sinhala family?”

Mansoor looks tearfully at his newly naked face in the cracked bathroom mirror, red razor patches on cheeks where they cut his beard so roughly, “Why was I born in this stupid land?” He flings the fifty rupee attar bottle, bought from the Dewatagaha Jumma mosque, creating another crack on the mirror. The fragrance of jasmine spreads across the bathroom. Jasmine is not his favourite perfume, cinnamon is. But jasmine is what he can afford to buy. If he bought the cinnamon bottle, he would have to walk home, to Ratmalana, a ten mile walk, getting baked in the scorching sun. “Why was I born in this stupid land?” he asks himself again.

Today had been a curse from the beginning. A nine-hour long overnight water cut meant Mansoor couldn’t have a bath or iron his clothes this morning. The day had felt as long as the A9 road, drizzling all the time, rain drops touching the ground, mixing and mingling with dust.

He worked at a jewelry shop spending most of his time rubbing, washing and polishing rings, bangles and earrings of different sizes and shapes made of gold, silver and platinum. He restored them from mucky black to their original sparkling beauty, as if he was a mobile washing machine at Dehiwala junction. Dehiwala had dozens of jewellery shops on either sides of Galle Road like spots on a slithering snake. The owner of Jayasinghe Jewellers, Jayasinghe Mudalali, was kind enough to lend Mansoor a small space to set up his temporary hut in front of his shop. Here Mansoor kept his red plastic water basin, borrowed from Damayanthi Akka next door, a bar of Lux soap, a few wires and some batteries to clean the discoloured jewellery. The hut was an intrinsic part of the shop, like cardamom is to watalappam.

Mansoor had studied up to his Advanced Level in eight different schools in three different provinces. He obtained 3 simple passes at the Advanced Level examination. “Alhamdulillah,” he thanked the Almighty all

the time. For, being self-employed, he was at a better place financially at thirty two, than the numerous unemployed graduates out of university. His work day started at ten in the morning, when the garbage trucks reached his boarding house and he ended work at eight, when people dumped their garbage on their neighbours' doorsteps discreetly.

It was eight in the evening and the doors to Jayasinghe Jewellers were shut. Yet, Mansoor's hut was still open as he waited for a tardy customer to pick up a bangle. Thirty-one customers had come today, checked the price tags of the gold and promised to visit the main shop on another day. Nobody bought a single item. On the other hand, Mansoor was lucky. He had thirteen customers and they all got their gold polished by him. Eight hundred and twenty five rupees: his day's collection. Not bad. Mansoor was a born businessman just like his ancestors. Doing business and making money was in his blood.

In the meantime, he was learning English at a tuition class in Maradana every Sunday morning from Saravanan Sir, a Tamil master, born in Jaffna, now living in Wellawatte. For the past two weeks, Mansoor had been working on his latest assignment like a busy waiter working at Saraswathie Lodge, no time to eat, no time to rest. He also had to collect money to pay the monthly tuition. His current business was barely sufficient to make ends meet. But he had no other option. A good score in English would secure him a good job. He juggled work and studies, keeping a pen and paper all the time under his basin. He reviewed the lessons he has done in his head while working, but also thought about his homework project. He gradually mastered the habit of multi-tasking. Sometimes he would mutter English songs to get familiar with the language. Sometimes he would attempt to talk to Sinhalese customers in English. No one in his family spoke English, except Kadeeja, his fiancée. He was supposed to show the latest assignment to her tomorrow for correction.

Saravanan Sir had become an important person in his life. Mansoor felt he had to please him to get a good score. Once he had polished his wedding ring free of charge. Then he had offered a discount from Jayasinghe Jewellers for his daughter's wedding. Mansoor was sure the latest assignment would bring him good marks because it was about something dear to Saravanan Sir's heart.

This fateful day the Esala moon, that was nearly full, rose like another white street light bulb above the Dehiwala flyover. Red and blue neon lights glimmered through the darkness like multi-coloured fire flies. A sudden thunder shattered the Dehiwala sky. “Where is this man?” Mansoor wondered looking up the dark road waiting for the customer.

A haggard beggar, with an angry face appeared from the darkness, spread two thick cardboard papers on the pavement, fell down, stretched his legs and started to snooze next to Mansoor. The raindrops dripping from the border of Mansoor’s white kurtha created ugly circles on the beggar’s shirt.

“Can you move a bit further?” he asked the beggar politely.

“No I can’t,” the beggar shouted at him. “This is my sleeping spot. I sleep here every day,” he screamed. He pushed himself in further, leaving less space for Mansoor to stand under the shop awning.

“I don’t care. This is where I work,” Mansoor shouted back.

“I hope you don’t work in the night,” the beggar fired back and closed his eyes tightly.

Mansoor felt like shit. He didn’t want to argue with a filthy beggar. He moved further out of the beggar’s way and looked up and down the street, hoping to see the tardy customer. The rain didn’t seem to be ceasing. The beggar was fast asleep oblivious to the rain, the noise of Galle Road shutting down.

“Oppan gangnam style... oppan gangnam style...” Mansoor’s phone rang loudly. “Mansoor, Are you at home?” Kadeeja inquired over the phone.

“I’m still at the shop.” He wiped his face dripping with rain water, which came in despite the awning. “I’ll reach the boarding house in ten minutes, I’m waiting for a customer so I can return his bangle,” he continued raising his voice louder, battling with the rain. “The Man — “

“What? Can you say it louder?” Kadeeja asked.

“The man wanted the bangle today itself. Maybe I’ll wait for another five minutes and go home.” The sleepy beggar, disturbed by his voice, glared at him. Mansoor rubbed the bangle with his rough palms and wanted to punch the beggar in the face. Instead he felt the intricate carvings of the gold

work again. Sensual and soft like Kadeeja's hands, not that he had touched them. He wished he could give this bangle as mahram, the legal dowry fee to Kadeeja, on their wedding day, hopefully next year. But he had no money to buy one, unless he stole it.

"The wedding is tomorrow, the auspicious time is at seven am," the seventh customer of the day had told him, possibly the groom. Mansoor looked like an honest person, the kind customers trusted with their valuables. He had a long beard with black curls that covered his ugly acne scars, like a bandage wrapped around a soldier's jaw covers a wound. He was also thin like his attar bottle. Slim bodies don't show real age, he thought, like his face didn't show his real pain. His sharp nose, large eyes and red lips made his female customers attracted to him. He wore black eyeliner painted around his eyes like many Muslim men and women did. It made his eyes cool and calm. His uniform was a white cap like an egg hopper shoved on his head and a white kurtha shirt and pajamas. He wore it everywhere, to weddings, to funerals and even to the market when he shopped for halal food. He resembled an Arab living in Sri Lanka.

There was a patch on his front pocket like a scar where he kept his bottle of perfume, the oil always leaking onto his kurtha shirt. People sometimes thought he was a terrorist plotting a bomb, like the Taliban who bombed those Buddhist statues in Afghanistan. "That's bullshit. I don't have any connection with anybody like that in the Middle East," he once told a customer who teased him about his suspicion with a smile. "You always work with batteries and wires," the man retorted. "Well, do you need your ring polished or not?" Mansoor shot back.

The time was precisely 9.15p.m. but the night looked like midnight. Mansoor put his hand into his trouser pocket and took his perfume bottle out. He sprayed it on his wrist and massaged and tamed his beard by combing the hair with his fingers. His beard smelled like jasmine now. Bored, he took his wallet out and counted his money. He organized the notes in order. Then he took out a rolled up set of papers from his back pocket. He tried reading but it was dark, the street light dim. He took out his phone and tried to flick on the torch. But the battery was about to die, so he turned off the torch. The time was 9.40. "Shit," he swore at the delaying customer. Rain water dripped through his body. The night became darker.

“Oppan gangnam style...” It was Kadeeja again

“I’m coming,” he screamed into the phone furiously and switched it off. He was so tired waiting for the customer that he did not care if she was going to be mad at him for being rude over the phone. The beggar, drenched in water was in a deep sleep. Mansoor too was very wet, his red underwear visible now through his soaked kurtha.

10.15. A bright yellow light flashed over him. He glimpsed a van, a white van drawing near. In the headlights, his red underwear glimmered like a hot chilli.

“Hmm... Finally...” He told himself combing his beard with his fingers. Mansoor, fully wet, was angry and he strode towards the van through the rain. Two men got out of the van. Mansoor could see their faces. Neither was the man who had left the bangle. These were two different men, one tall and the other short.

“Ado Thambiya!” they roared like furious lions, as they came up to him. “What are you doing out at this time?” They grabbed him like a toy and punched his face.

Mansoor started to run towards the road. The taller man, who had long hair, followed and grabbed him by his shirt collar. Mansoor pushed his hand away. But the man was strong. He grabbed Mansoor’s arm and twisted it. The other man, short with a pencil moustache, grabbed him by the beard and punched him in the face.

Mansoor screamed for help. Nobody seemed to be around, except the huge billboard of Aishwarya Rai, bathed in gold, smiling at him. The beggar watched this entire scene silently through half closed eye on his wet cardboard.

“Please leave me alone!” Mansoor clasped his hands together and begged for mercy. “Please,” he repeated four times. The taller man grabbed him by his shirt. Mansoor pushed him away and tried to escape but the short one kicked the back of his left knee and he fell.

“Allahu Akbar,” Mansoor screamed with pain, begging for divine intervention. “Allahu Akbar!” He struggled to his feet. “Leave me alone!” He



screamed breaking the silence of Galle Road. “What have I done, who are you?”

They snatched his cap and threw it far away. The cap fell at the feet of a white Buddha statue one block away, like an Araliya flower offered for worship. “What are you doing?” Mansoor cried.

They grabbed him and tried to give him a body check. “Don’t touch me,” Mansoor tried to push them away but the two men were stronger than him. They ripped his kurtha shirt and punched him again in the face. “Allah!” Mansoor shouted, bending over in pain. They dragged him towards the white van. Mansoor tried to kick them but they shoved him along, staying out of the way of his feet. They got him into the van and threw him into a seat.

“Who are you?” Mansoor whispered helplessly.

“Answer our question. What are you doing out at this time?” the tall man demanded.

“Why should I answer?”

They squeezed his neck.

“I was waiting.”

“Waiting?”

“Yes... waiting,” Mansoor shot back.

“Waiting for what?” They pulled his thumb and pinned him further on the van seat.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Yes, it’s our business, it’s our fucking business.” The short man pulled Mansoor forward by his beard, eyes to eyes, nose to nose, chin to beard, and then punched him on his right cheek. The beard gave him a grip on him and Mansoor was helpless, like a rat in a trap.

A popular Hindi song was playing on the van radio. “*Oh Priya... Priya...*” Mansoor had watched the movie at home, the actor in the song weeping for his lost love. Suddenly the driver, who had remained silent all

this time, turned down the radio. The van became silent like the Muslims get silent when they hear the Azan five times a day.

In the silence Mansoor dared to ask, "Are you the police?"

"No," the driver, replied, his red eyeballs almost popping out of his face.

"Then who are you?"

"Owners of this land," all three said.

"Owners? I'm an owner too," Mansoor replied.

"Well you don't look like one." The tall man punched him again. This time his nose started to bleed. "Allah help me," Mansoor sobbed.

"Look at his beard, disgusting," the tall one said to the other two.

"You don't know me."

"Yes we do," the short one said scratching his bald head. "Let us see your ID," he continued.

"Why should I show you?"

"Shut up. Now give us your ID." The tall man grabbed his hair.

Mansoor spat on him with anger.

"You filthy dog!" The short one squeezed his neck again.

"Get that thing out." The tall man snatched him by his beard once again and forcefully grabbed his wallet out. They searched his other pockets too and discovered his Sri Lankan national ID, a small glass bottle, that looked like a cyanide capsule, eight hundred and twenty five rupees, a dead mobile phone, a roll of crushed paper and a gold bangle.

"What's this?" The short one unfolded the paper. The other grabbed the bangle and the phone, put it inside his pocket and read the ID.

Mansoor snatched at the paper. The tall man pushed him back into his seat and began to read out his ID. "Name, Mansoor Ali Fakrudeen. Date of birth, 1982 September 12. Place of birth, Jaffna."

"Jaffna!" the other two men looked at each other.

"I knew it, a Jaffna Thambiya!" The short one banged at the shutter.

Another long silence came upon the van.

“What the hell are you doing in our land?” the driver inquired. The man with the ID punched Mansoor in his face again. Mansoor fainted like a goat sacrificed to God.

He regained consciousness to find one of the men shaking him and screaming, “Wake up you bastard!”

“What is this?” the tall man demanded.

“A letter.” Mansoor could barely talk, he was so weak.

“Dearest Prabhakaran” The men read the first line of his letter.

“Prabhakaran?” They were shocked. “Dearest Prabhakaran... What the hell is this? You Bastard.” The men banged at him again. “Are you a spy?” The tall man looked around for something to tie his mouth with inside the van. He spotted a torn seat belt lying behind the driver’s seat, grabbed the belt furiously and tried to tie it around Mansoor’s mouth. Mansoor moved from side to side to prevent him from doing so. The tall man, grabbed his hair, pushed his head back with one hand and wrapped the belt around his mouth with the other hand. His lips were sealed like an envelope. The tall man then read the note aloud like the male news presenter on national TV.

“How are you doing Mr. Prabhakaran? Hope you’re in a good health? How is your family? Give my regards to your wife and children? So Prabhakaran, if you are wondering who am I and why I am writing a letter to you, I’m Mansoor from Colombo, well actually from Jaffna. I’m writing this to you because you are my hero. People call you a terrorist. Even the Tamils, your own blood, may hate you. I don’t care, because for me, you’re a man with courage. You are leading a war for more than three decades in Sri Lanka. I really don’t know how you do this. How do you run this war fearlessly like an elected president? How do you fight against a country that has a powerful government?”

The short man grabbed the letter from the tall man and continued reading silently, his lips mouthing the words. Mansoor watched them, certain that they thought they had found a spy, a Muslim spy working for the LTTE.

“Looks like he has had direct contacts with Prabhakaran,” the driver said.

"I know," the short man replied, looking up from the letter.

"I knew it. These Muslim bastards! Disgusting! They are all traitors. We should ship them all to Saudi," the tall one said.

"Saudi Arabia," the driver agreed, "where they hang people for no reason."

Mansoor wanted to tell them the truth but the seat belt was wrapped around his mouth so tightly he could not make any movement. He wished he did have the courage of Prabhakaran, the man with a thick moustache who challenged the system. Mansoor would have loved to grow a huge moustache just like Prabhakaran and his favourite movie star, Kamal Hassan, the South Indian film star. He had watched all his movies in the camps in Puttalam and Beruwala. Now he doesn't watch them anymore because movies are haram, prohibited, and will not let you enter heaven. "We were right, you bastard. We knew who you were and we were right." The tall one slammed his fist on the roof.

Mansoor turned his head from side to side, making pleading sounds. He wanted to tell them he had been born in Jaffna, thirty years ago and lived there with his parents and two younger sisters in a big house.

The short man continued reading the letter aloud. "Both of us are born in the same country, Mr. Prabhakaran, but why are we not living together? Yes, you chased me and my family from my home town, but you didn't kill us. You fought for your people. You were brave. I wish I had the courage to fight for my own race like you. You were a great asset to your people and our country. Why couldn't we fight together?"

"How dare you say that?" The tall man punched him in the left cheek.

"But Mr. Prabhakaran, is this fight worth it?" the short one continued reading. "Aren't we fighting for a piece of land, Mr. Prabhakaran? Correct me if I'm wrong. I'm just like your son, still learning about the world. Why are we fighting with each other? Is it just for power Mr. Prabhakaran? Tell me, does power give us happiness? Or are we just fighting for land? If land gives us happiness, I will be getting thirty perches of land in Beruwala as dowry, from my fiancé, a land next to the sea. But I'm still not happy. Mr. Prabhakaran, there have been a lot of people who have ruled the world with power in

the past. You know, I studied them at school for history, in eight different schools. Are those powerful people living now? No. There are hundreds of countries in the world but for what reason are we born in this country? Did you decide, or did I decide? No. I love this land because I was born here. That should be the reason in your case too. We should have the right to do whatever we want to do in this land, it's our land."

"Bastard, planning to plot a war against us, ha?" The tall man pulled the seat belt from his mouth.

"Don't hurt me... please," Mansoor gasped. "I have no connection with him. I mean, he's already dead. The war is already over, why are you teasing me. Let me go."

"Shut up!" The tall man lifted his hand threateningly and Mansoor became silent.

The shorter man continued reading. "Mr. Prabhakaran, is this war that we are fighting really worthwhile? One day when we die it's just the grave that will shelter us. And it's just a very small space. Isn't it? On that day, if we could talk, we would definitely blame ourselves for wasting our time as humans living in this land, fighting. Mr. Prabhakaran, that's all for now. Wish you good health and happiness. That's what we humans are all looking forward to in life. So I wish you the same. Good health and happiness. Yours' faithfully, Mansoor".

Mansoor had doubts about the apostrophe on the last line, like he had doubts about his ownership to his birth land.

"Can't blame you, should blame our fathers for letting the Tamils and Muslims live in our land, and letting our women marry them," the short man said disgusted.

The letter had ended. But there was another page after the letter: *Saravanan English Centre, Maradana. Assignment number 2: Write a letter to your imaginary hero. Word count – 800. Submission day – In 2 weeks*

Mansoor watched the realization dawn on their faces. He could have written about Prophet Muhammad who brought peace to the world or Mahinda Rajapaksa who brought peace to the island or his father who sacrificed his dignity to bring peace to his family. They were all his heroes.

This was his English homework. He had to pass and he knew Saravanan Sir was fond of Prabhakaran. He had hoped Saravanan Sir might not notice his errors and grant him full marks.

“Fuck,” the men swore at each other. “Waste of time.” But how could they apologize now? That would be a defeat, a shameful defeat for them, he knew. They were of the majority and he was of the minority. How could they apologize? They crushed the paper and threw it out of the window. The white papers spread across wet Galle Road. A recording of a Buddhist chanting on a loud speaker broke the silence. Nobody understood what it meant, it was in Pali, an extinct language. The chanting ruled the silence, though there was a court order, banning loud speakers between certain hours. But who would question the Sinhala Buddhist majority? They make the laws and break them, Mansoor thought.

The angry men set his wallet on fire with a lighter and tossed it out of the window. The short man tied him on the van seat and spat in his face. The spit formed a thick white layer around his beard like coconut pudding. The tall man grabbed his neck and sliced his beard off with a knife. The driver sprinkled car washing liquid on his face and ran a rough razor along his skin. The other two stripped off his remaining clothes. And all this time Mansoor did nothing, all the fight had gone out of him. He was as lifeless as a corpse being prepared for a funeral. They opened the van door and pushed him out. He fell on the pavement in front of Jayasinghe Jewellers. The tall man stepped out briefly, spread the attar over his own wrist, shoved the bottle inside Mansoor’s underwear and disappeared again into the van, inhaling the jasmine smell. Loud speakers were everywhere, preaching peace and harmony in an unknown language, and breaking the law of the land. The van left.

Mansoor Ali Fakrudeen, shaved and stripped, modernized, lay on the pavement, naked except for his red underwear. A young man, with no beard, no bangle, no mobile phone, no clothes. He looked like a Sinhala man lying on Galle Road. Finally he was a true Sri Lankan. Like the majority, like the beggar.

He raised his head and saw the glare of the white van becoming smaller. The beggar was still fast asleep, safe and sound, snoring. The wet cardboard bed had dried. Mansoor rose like a ghost and limped his way back

home, a four mile walk. A flag was half hoisted near a lamp post. He grabbed the flag and wrapped it around his tortured body. Cars and vans cruising along Galle Road had no time for him. Street dogs howled at him at the main junctions. He reached Ratmalana in thirty minutes.

Now Mansoor, looking at his reflection in the bathroom mirror again, is reminded of the water well at his Jaffna home, how he would shatter his own reflection by throwing stones into it and making ripples. That Jaffna home was big and had a large garden. Yet, he always wished his house was small, like a play house, so he could play in it with his sisters all day long. Mansoor's father had a jewellery shop in the Jaffna bazaar, Mansoor Jewellers. The shop was named after Mansoor himself. He was only five years old when their family was asked to leave Jaffna, one Friday.

Friday had always been a special day for them. They cooked Jaffna chicken biryani for lunch, the chicken coming from the family farm. It was a big family lunch. Men closed their shops early and children came from school early on Fridays for Jumma. They would go to the Jaffna Fort and fly red, green and blue kites on the ramparts under the evening sun. His father had gone to the mosque for the one o'clock prayers that fateful Friday. The mosque had been packed. It needed expansion and the trustee board was collecting money for construction work.

While his father was at the mosque, a group of five men entered Mansoor's home. His mother had just added the chilli powder to the chicken curry and Mansoor was playing with his two sisters, Zohara and Zanooba in the garden. He had climbed up into the mango tree in the front yard to search for mangos for them and make mango pickle in the evening. Suddenly, the men pushed the metal gate open and entered the compound. Zohara and Zanooba, who were underneath the tree, ran inside the house. Mansoor stood still in the mango tree.

"Who is in?" The men banged at the door. Mansoor's mother emerged from the front door, wrapping her black shawl around her head.

A dark man in a white sarong, who appeared to be the leader, raised his hand towards the Jaffna sky and commanded Mansoor's mother, "Leave this place, immediately."

“But... nobody’s at home,” she told him calmly. “Can you wait until my husband returns from the mosque?”

“No we can’t. Leave now,” the other four men roared at once.

“But... where?” she asked them politely.

“That we don’t know.” One man looked around and spotted Mansoor up on the mango tree.

“But?” his mother protested.

“It’s an order, leave now,” the leader insisted.

“Please,” she begged, clasping her hands.

“Ok. We will give you two hours,” the leader said after a moment.

“Two hours?” his mother gasped.

“Yes. Two hours. That’s hundred and twenty minutes.” The man loosened his sarong and wrapped it tight again around his waist. “Two hours,” he repeated. “That’s it”

“But...” his mother protested again.

“Hope you understand Tamil and what we said,” the man shouted. “Leave this place if you want to live. The choice is yours.”

They banged the gate on their way out. Mansoor had watched the scene holding the mango branch tight with fear. His face was bathed in sweat like a melting candle. Both his trouser pockets were filled with red mangos. He took one out of his pocket and threw it impotently at the gate, as if at the men. The ripe mango burst open with a loud clang.

“Mansoor come here,” his mother cried, beckoning him down from the tree. “Run and fetch your father.”

Before he could go, however, his father returned home. He had already got the news at the mosque. The chief priest had instructed all Muslim men to leave their home town for their own safety. Mansoor’s father was furious. Yet, he was helpless. He couldn’t risk his family’s lives.

“I buried all my jewellery in our courtyard. Twenty-six pounds of gold,” Mansoor’s mother told the lorry driver on their way out of Jaffna.



“They asked us to take all our valuables and leave in two hours. How dare they say that.” Mansoor would hear this line often in the years to come.

“Allah, please answer my prayers... punish those men. They should rot in hell.” She burst in to tears. “Aameen!”

“Let it go. I’ll buy you new gold,” Mansoor’s father said to comfort her. “Gold you can earn. Life you can’t. Be thankful to God for granting us life, I’ve left behind a gold shop, a flourishing gold business just for you.” His father would say this many times in future years.

They left Jaffna and moved to a resettlement village in Puttalam. Mansoor loved the transition. He didn’t understand why the men had made his mother so unhappy. For a small boy it was all a great adventure. He enjoyed his nine hour journey in the small lorry with five more families to Puttalam. He discovered a new territory in the island, a land full of donkeys. Mansoor had never seen so many donkeys. Mansoor and his family lived in the resettlement village for nearly eleven years. Then, everything changed. Mansoor was sixteen by then. He had no human friends at the camp. Donkeys were his friends. He would talk to them, he would also take them to the water tank nearby after school every day.

“Mother, I’ll go feed the donkeys in a while, I’ll be back in one hour?” he had said that fateful day.

“Mansoor, No... Not today, Mansoor, perhaps tomorrow. It’s not safe out there. I hear bombs and gun fire.”

“But... don’t we always hear that?”

“Listen to me son. I don’t want to lose you. Not today, take them out tomorrow.”

“But mother!”

She ordered him to skip his daily tour but Mansoor would not do that. He wanted to please the donkeys. So, he discreetly took them to the water tank.

While he was happily talking to his friends, however, he heard a series of blasts from the direction of his village. A thick smoke covered the area.

Mansoor left the donkeys and ran towards the village like a mad man, crying out in terror. He imagined his mother's screams, Zohara's cry, pictured Zanooba's fear-filled face. He remembered that his father had been resting on the cow dung floor in their small hut, when he left home that evening. "Ya Allah, Save my family!" he begged. He entered the camp and stopped in horror. Houses were burning, the disfigured dead bodies of men and women lay on the ground like meat on chopping boards in meat shops. As he rushed towards his home, he saw legs on roofs, hands on trees. "Umma!" Mansoor cried as he reached his hut. He cupped his face with both hands. His home was no more. It was all ashes. His entire family had been killed and buried in the ground within minutes by a bomb dropped by the Army.

He cried like a child for two days, wishing he had stayed back and died with them.

"She'll never forgive me," he cried to the donkeys, who were now his sole companions, his family. "She'll never forgive me."

The Army commandos apologized on national radio, three weeks after the tragedy, saying they were sorry, that it was an accident. The survivors in the camp blamed the government and glorified the LTTE, despite what they had done to them. "Prabhakaran would never kill the innocent," some survivors said. After the bomb attack, Mansoor lost faith in all people—Tamil, Muslim, Sinhala, the LTTE, the Government. He turned religious, grew his beard and gave up movies. Allah was his last hope.

"What am I going to say to the man, the Sinhala groom about the bangle?" Mansoor thinks as he gingerly touches his cut chin. He wishes he could trace his life back to Jaffna and unearth the gold his mother had hidden. Twenty six pounds of pure gold, thirteen hundred thousand rupees. A boy born with a fortune ends up with nothing. Fate.

It has taken him nearly ten years to grow this beard and now it too is gone. Face itching, he wishes he'd actually written the letter, eight years ago and posted it to Prabhakaran. He bangs his wounded wrist against the bathroom mirror. Itching, punished, ashamed. The smell of jasmine perfume continues to spread its sweet odour through the bathroom.

***Nifraz Rifaz** was born in Galle and bred in Colombo. A past student of Royal College Colombo, he works at a bank and pursues his higher studies in English Literature, Business Management, and Journalism and Media Management. Nifraz became a writer by accident and writes for local magazines. He sets his story in the backdrop of post war Sri Lanka and his characters reflect the ups and downs of an unequal society that he is very much a part of.*

# IT WAS MY HOME, THEY WERE MY FAMILY

## A Memoir

*By Ayodhya Krishani*

The home I lived in since the day I was born, was on a mountain top and we had a view of the temple of the Tooth Relic, Kandy Lake and Kandy town, all surrounded by green hills. Built for twin sisters, it was a big two-storied house divided into two vertical sections. The two sections of the house were exactly of the same design: a living room, two downstairs rooms, two upstairs rooms, two bathrooms, two balconies, each facing Kandy city, and two outer staircases on either sides of the house. Each living room had an arch-shaped altar built to keep objects of devotion. In our living room, we kept a statue of Mother Mary and a statue of Lord Buddha side by side. We offered flowers and lit a lamp every day to the Buddha statue; we kept a light burning by Mother Mary. Upstairs, where my family lived, the two sections of the house were not entirely separated. Connecting the right and the left sides was a long corridor and the common kitchen. The corridor was our fun-run area. My brother used to dart through the corridor pressing his head against the corridor walls after he'd had a haircut. He said it always felt great.

Our home was full of people, my grandparents, my aunts and my uncles often staying with us. There were always tenants to whom we rented one of the downstairs rooms. These tenants were unique, each with their own diverse cultural habits and ways of life, their own distinct personalities. We did not own the house. One of our relatives in Colombo had given it to us until we built our own house. Other relatives also stayed with us until they moved to new places. For each one of them, the time came to leave. It was a different feeling when each one left because each one of them had touched our lives in different ways. At least, I felt differently each time. Then, it was time for us to leave too. The house was never ours. But it was my home.

The time in which we lived in that house was an era of many happenings. Not many of them good. It was the late 1980's and I remember, as a seven year old girl, seeing corpses not in coffins, but in the Kadugannawa valley and floating in the rivers. I saw young men

looking down at the street from classroom windows of schools. They were undecided. Undecided about what awaited them out of those prisons, which had sometimes been their former alma-maters. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) youth movement and their armed struggle against the State, left a terrible mark on the South. In the North, the Indian Peacekeeping Force was putting an end to the remnants of peace that remained between the communities. Their mission was to bring the insurgency led by the Tamil rebels to an end. All in “good faith.” There was terror all around us. But we still had the big house and many stories: stories of fear, of sorrow, of pain, but also of care, of laughter and of love.

Among the many relatives who lived with us, Aunty Priya and her husband were special. She was a Sinhala teacher at a school in an area called Maradankadawala in Trincomalee. Her beautiful dark complexion glowed like melting dark chocolate. Always dressed in a neatly draped sari, her long black hair tidily plaited, she carried herself with grace. Her voice was steady, loud and clear, well-suited for a teacher I thought. We always wanted to visit them in Maradankadawala, but it was unsafe for us they said, and anyway they had plans to move elsewhere. They spoke all three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English fluently. Once, when I sat next to her, she told me how difficult the nights were because groups of armed men and women would come periodically to ambush the villages in Maradankadawala.

“There were many times we had to run to the jungle nearby and stay on treetops to escape the attacks on our village. Our house was quite isolated and we lived quite far from our neighbours. Sometimes, the neighbours would come to warn us about rumours of attacks.” She would sigh and fall silent for a moment, lost in those dreadful memories. “Sometimes, we left our home at night as a habit. Even when there was no need.” She laughed and I laughed with her. “We were too scared to take any risks. It was not a matter of how well we spoke Tamil or Sinhala. You did not know who might knock on your closed doors at night.”

One question that I often asked her was, “Aunty Priya, why do you still stay there, why do you not take a transfer to another part of the country which is safer?”

“We cannot leave the children,” she would reply. “They really want to study. Even when we have spent the night in the jungle, the children still

come to school the next day. They really want to study,” Aunty Priya would add again, her gloomy face giving way to a smile at the thought of her school.

Aunty Priya and her family, however, did finally move to Colombo from Trincomalee. She was concerned about her daughter’s and her son’s education as well as their safety, and the day to day effort of living under such a threat was a great burden. They loved the land, the people and the life there, which had made it hard for them to leave. But they could not go on living in fear.

For me, Aunty Priya’s stories were just stories of adventure happening in an almost imaginary land. Later, as the war in Sri Lanka got more real, I felt deeply for my aunt and her family. I felt we had done very little to understand their situation. We wanted to know very little, for we had our own struggles in life, the grind of schooling, tuitions we disliked, my parents’ financial problems and the cost of living that they often said they could not keep up with any more.

Then it was the Premakumars who became our tenants in the room downstairs. Mrs. Premakumar was a teacher and her husband a dispenser. I was the only one left at home after school, with just the servants to keep an eye on me. When the rest of my family was out during the day, my parents working, my siblings at various tuition classes, I used to linger around Mrs. Premakumar. She was a beautiful, tall, slender woman who always wore sari and had a pottu on her forehead, her hair neatly plaited like my Aunty Priya’s. On special occasions she used to put flowers in her plaited hair and wear brighter saris. When I asked why she wore such colourful saris and put flowers in her hair, she said that she was going to the kovil to pray to the gods. Mr. Premakumar was thin and of medium height. He had a small face and a beaming smile, and I have never seen such sharp and glittering eyes.

Their room was always clean and neat, the polished floor glowing, the smell of paint thinner giving a sense of newness. Mrs. Premakumar knew how curious I was about their customs. I was fascinated by how they sat on the floor and ate their food, something which my mother would never allow me to do. Mrs. Premakumar kindly offered to allow me to sit beside them on the floor and enjoy their food. We could barely communicate for I knew little English and no Tamil at all, while she could speak only in English and Tamil. She used to cook a dish, that was her favourite, ghee rice and a ghee

vegetable curry, all the extra ghee making it special. She would offer that special dish to me with much love, so I could not decline it, even though the taste and smell were not to my liking. But I loved idly with its colourful and spicy curries. She knew that was my favourite and always fed me her delicious idly, which my mother didn't have time to cook, nor the recipe for.

The Catholic Priest in our neighbourhood had requested us to keep the Premakumar family for a few weeks until they were settled properly in Kandy. My mother offered them the room happily as she would do to anyone else. Mr. and Mrs. Premakumar came with very few bags and no kitchen-wear, not even a cup to drink water. They bought everything while they were with us. Though they had come for a few weeks, they ended up staying with us for more than two months as they could not get the job transfers they had hoped for. Although they had been married for a few years, they didn't have children and they would jokingly say that they would like to adopt me.

All was well until our neighbours grew concerned about their presence in the neighbourhood. There was a man who had appointed himself in charge of everyone's wellbeing. His name was Rodni, a man whose untidy shabby clothes and awkward gestures irritated me for some reason. Every day after school, when I walked along the long shady road with beautiful Esala trees and giant Mara trees, he was one person I didn't want to meet. People told many stories about him. But I was not sure whether these were true. They said he was a butcher at the farm that Fr. Neil managed. They said he always carried a knife with him and his shirts often had spots of blood on them.

One day my mother and I were on our way back home from the grocery shop and we were just about to turn from the main road into our lane, when Mr. Rodni appeared around the bend of the main road ahead of us. Noticing us, he hastened his pace. "Ah, Mrs. Ariyaratne, I have a serious matter to discuss," he shouted at us from a distance. My mother stopped and waited.

As he drew near, he said, "Those tenants in your house, do you know them well?"

“Premakumars? Yes, I know them,” my mother replied in an authoritative tone, looking sharply at him. “They are here just for a short while. Besides, Fr. Neil introduced them to us. Why, what is the matter now Rodni?”

“Oh! Not that there is any problem. But, as you know, we cannot trust anyone these days. Specially coming from the North. Better if you can get their background checked and perhaps their police report too. I’m saying this for your own good. Anything is possible nowadays.”

“Ah, I think you are over-reacting,” my mother snapped. “They are good and kind people. I have known them long enough and I talk to them more than I do with you Rodni. Maybe you should talk to them too and get to know them better. A man like you, ah, I never thought you lived with such fears.” She dragged at my arm, waved Rodni away and walked past him with a bitter look and pursed lips. If I was my mother, I would have punched him in the face.

“They are Tamils. Must be up to no good,” he shouted as we continued on our way.

My mother was angry and that night I heard her telling my father, “I wonder how Rodni got this brilliant idea of keeping the neighbourhood safe.” She told my father that she had no intention of telling the Premakumars about this.

But Rodni succeeded in his mission for, as the days passed, the thought of what he had said began to haunt her. She was scared for our safety. She was a teacher too. She was not at home to look into everything our tenants did. This very thought troubled her. Finally, my parents felt they had to tell the Premakumars about the concerns of the neighbourhood.

One day, when I was sitting on the balcony, I saw Mr. Premakumar returning from town. My mother saw him too and went hastily to talk to him. He smiled at her in that sincere, humble way of his.

“We hardly meet these days,” my mother said coming down the stairs on the outside of the house.

“Yes, yes. That is true. But we always have little chit-chats with that young lady,” he said with a smile pointing to me on the balcony.



As I peered down from the balcony, I could see that my mother was uneasy. Her clouded face was not something I had seen very much in my life.

“I don’t know how to tell this,” my mother said very reluctantly, rubbing her palms together, “but, a few people have told us that they have concerns about your staying in our neighbourhood, Mr. Premakumar. I think people are scared of just about anything these days, given the troubles all around us.”

She could not look at him and I could see how confused she was. Mr. Premakumar felt her unease. Without keeping her uncomfortable, he quickly replied with a smile, “I was wondering anyway why you didn’t talk to us sooner about this. Fr. Neil already told me about Rodni and his concerns. As you know, we are here for a very short time. We could not get the transfer to where we intended. So, we have decided to leave for Batticaloa soon. We are really sorry for the trouble you are going through because of us,” Mr. Premakumar added.

“You are no trouble at all Mr. Premakumar,” said my mother with a sigh. “To be honest, more than our safety now we are worried about your safety. People are fearful of the unknown, and some people just want trouble.”

Mr. Premakumar was silent. My mother looked up to see what I was doing.

“It is a tragedy Ms. Ariyaratne. In the past, we all lived without any thought of the land and where we belonged in it. Now, every minute we are reminded of this. Not only the Tamils. Sinhalese too. This seems to not be getting better but worsening day by day. We have become mere pawns in a bigger game.” He gazed out at the scenic mountains. “But, I’m sure we will keep our ties no matter what. These children bring us hope,” he said smiling at me.

The day soon came for them to leave. Packing was very simple for them. They left with the little luggage they had brought, the same as when they had arrived at our place. But, they were happier. Mrs. Premakumar was pregnant. They said it was the luck of our place. They went to Batticaloa, to a new home, not in the North, but in the East.

They visited us once, bringing my favourite food, idly, as well as sweets with mostly unfamiliar names. By that time they were blessed with a baby girl. Mrs. Premakumar said it was because of us that they were blessed with a child.

At the end of the visit, they said they would not see us again. It was too difficult to travel all the way, and too risky for them to come with their child too. Though my mother wanted to visit them she too was scared and she did not want to take the risk.

When they left my heart sank. But they had to leave.

All those people who passed through that house in Kandy—they came, we shared, and we all knew we would part sooner or later. Taking or leaving a memory.

I remember a home, a home that gave shelter to many, a place that offered much to life. A meeting point, that we too, one day, finally left.

*Ayodhya Krishani was born and bred in Kandy. She was inspired by many writers while following literature courses and found that art and literature can help people to love one another and make peace. She believes that the genuine expression of aesthetics helps the reader to empathize with the experience of another. Her story is based on real-life characters and incidents, though some aspects are fictional.*

## THE TWO WARRIORS

### An Excerpt From A Historical Fantasy

*By Vasika Udurawane*

It was the best day of Buddharaja's life. He and his friends were young and happy, maybe a little bit foolish in a way. They were having as much fun and excitement as they possibly could with a few lady friends beside the banks of the Kala Wewa, one of the largest irrigation reservoirs south of the city of Anuradhapura. Suddenly, Buddharaja found himself scouting around the rocky outcrops by an outlet of the tank, scanning the horizon. He was bathed in sweat, and was relieved when the clouds blocked out the sun for an instant. He kept looking anxiously over his shoulder. Where were his friends? Why were they not around? Buddharaja looked down at his young hands. They were thick with blood. What... what evil thing was this? He shrieked as he felt himself growing bigger, muscles bursting through his clothes. Blood flowed from the sky, reddening the water of the Kala Wewa, just like his hands. He shouted at the heavens, trying desperately to wipe off the blood, to escape from this hell.

The waters receded, his young, lean body receded too, as did all the blood on his hands. His hands! He sat up in bed and stared at them: gnarled, yellowed, blistered and burned. He felt his creased, puckered, scarred face and his beard, as he looked around his tent—at his own creaky bed with its rough, ample covers, at his own weapons and armor stacked in a corner. He glanced at his hands once more. Chola blood. It would forever cling to him, the blood of his enemies.

"Tamil beasts..." His voice was weary. "By the Gods, I'm done." As he got out of bed, he shot a look again at his armour, his wonderful battle jacket, leather with an iron frame, his mighty sword. The steel was polished every day to hide the fact that there had been blood and guts across its majestic length. He strapped it all on.

He emerged from his tent and looked around at his men, already preparing for battle. Everywhere, soldiers were polishing, sharpening and testing their weapons, some were praying silently for luck at the makeshift

shrines. His officers were already issuing commands here and there. Defeat was not an option.

The trumpeting and thunder of elephants, the blowing of conch shells and horns raged over the hot, parched plains of Rajarata. The royal army pushed northwards towards eternal glory, eternal unrest or eternal peace.

“True, the Chola forces hold forts from the Principality of Rohana, right into Jambukolapatuna, but we’ve been annihilating most of them anyway. It’s a shame we can’t get to the port,” said Buddharaja to his two companions, as his horse trotted nervously at the head of the forces. Beside him rode two young warriors. They were fresh out of the village of Jivakkagama, just two foolish young men who had been intoxicated by the so-called glories of war. Buddharaja looked at the two of them disdainfully. They seemed to be struggling now to keep their fears bottled up as best as they could.

They listened intently to the old commander as he said, “But who told us that this war would be that easy anyway?”

Nobody.

That was true.

“The king himself might be in sight of our destination,” the older of the two young men said. His beard blew merrily in the arid wind. He had not trimmed it since last week, and now he looked more like a wild animal than a man, his skin thick with sweat, grime and dust. Buddharaja knew that the young man had not shaved because he wanted to look like him. Even as he thought about this village idiot, Buddharaja groaned. At least they were not all such fools.

The old soldier’s mind dwelt on the men being enlisted for this battle. Common thieves, ragtag bands of rebels, ex-soldiers, and landless farmers, all joining the elite royal warriors of Rohana and Rajarata in one common cause.

“Eager, stupid, useless,” were the terms he used for these men. He muttered the words under his breath, as his battle-weary eyes scanned the

horizon. The Chola forces were now arriving, and they were coming in fast from the ancient capital which they had left in ruins.

“So they’ve crossed the Kadamba River,” he mused, stroking his beard, as he halted his troops near a grove of drought-adapted bushes. This was not the easiest territory to work in, and he knew it. This scrubland, this tangled maze of prickly grass and shrubs, was what his people had called home for thousands of years. When he thought of all the years he had once lived here, his heart wept for the old city, wept for Anuradhapura, its richness and glory now lost in the mists of time. The home of legendary Lankan kings, it was now no more than the encampment of these alien warlords. Taking down such a mighty force would not be easy, but that genius, the daring King Vijayabahu of Rohana, had been working tirelessly, defeating troops of the enemy encamped in numerous places throughout Lanka.

Snapping back to reality, he shouted, “Keep it together now, keep it together!” spooking his horse. It whinnied and almost reared up, but he steadied it expertly, pulling on its reins and whispering in its ear. Buddharaja raced around to the front line of his army with all its standard bearers and unit commanders. The stamping of the approaching Cholas echoed, like distant thunder, across the plains.

The Cholas had already unfurled their banner, the flag of their Emperor Kulottunga, the flag they’d held for centuries; their snarling tiger on a burning orange background, fluttering in numerous places among the front ranks. Thick scrub flanked the Cholas on the right. The dry season was in full swing, clouds of dust rising with every footstep taken by both the attackers and the defenders. Now, the Chola force was beginning to split, the left wing branching off from the main body of the army, and the right wing branching off towards an area of much thicker shrubbery. Buddharaja observed them. “The right is for backup, isn’t it?” he mused for a second, as his standard bearers shifted uncomfortably, making room for horsemen with immense swords.

The Cavalry was soon lined up, and, at the sound of the conch, they began to charge. All of Lanka’s best riders were surging across the dry thicket, further clogging the air with clouds of dust as they held up their gigantic swords. They glared viciously at the enemy through the slits in their

helmets as insects buzzed around, stirred up by the perpetual motion of the galloping horses. Buddharaja watched the Chola army approaching with eagerness.

And then it struck him. Something was most definitely not right here.

The Sinhalese cavalymen had by now lowered their massive swords, and were engaged in a pitched battle with what appeared to be the front line of the Chola force. They fought for different overlords under different banners, but all of them had one thing in common. When they were cut, they bled, and when they bled, they did so in torrents. Line after line of cavalymen attacked the Cholas. Their swords skewered the enemies and their horses through their bellies. Blood and entrails spilled down in foul red streams, as man and animal got caught up in the fast paced slaughter. Curses and orders in Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali, Hela and a number of other languages were hurled through the air, as Buddharaja racked his brains, scrutinizing the battle through narrowed eyes for what was amiss. Then it hit him.

“Sivapalan,” he snarled through gritted teeth, as he advanced slowly. The rest of the Sinhalese troops followed him, raising thunderous battle cries, beating their shields and battle jackets with their spears as they all raced towards the Cholas.

That monster Sivapalan was not here to guide his forces. And now Buddharaja saw to his dismay, that the front lines of the Cholas had ploughed a hole, dead straight in the middle of the Lankan front lines. Of course, the Cholas still got impaled on the gigantic swords of the Lankans, but what good was that going to be? He raced around, shouting, giving orders, doing whatever he could, rallying his troops as the weight of the Cholas kept bearing down on his army. The right flank of the Cholas was just waiting, waiting for its moment. Angrily, Buddharaja kept his eye on them. Why weren't they engaging his forces yet?

“Sivapalan, what sort of game is this?” he snarled through gritted teeth. He had been told a lot recently that he was too old for the battlefield now, and he was finally seeing why everyone said it. Buddharaja felt the weight of memory crush his mind as he watched the Chola army tearing into his formations. But this was not the time for thinking.

The left flank of the Cholas had finally engaged with the left flank of the Sinhalese army, and now the two sides were decimating one another with no clear margin between victory and defeat. Buddharaja searched for his lieutenant and his other officers everywhere, but found no sign of them as man after man fell before him. His eyes became so full of sweat that, for an instant, he was blinded.



“Away from me, you fool!”

A messenger had just brought bad news of late reinforcements, and Sivapalan took pleasure in kicking the man out. He’d pitched camp in Brahmanatitta, one of those diminutive backwater village areas that nobody would find important unless they were actually eccentric strategists like him. He lowered his mighty bulk into a chair in front of his chess board. Facing him was his brother, a pitiful, quaking wreck of a man who should never have left the soft touch of his wife. “We are living in the grip of complete fools, Chandrasegaran,” he told the younger man. His scarred face, and his blind left eye were the only trophies that he’d gained and actually kept from all his conquests far and wide.

“Well then....I....if we can go away and live somewhere else....I believe,” began his brother, but Sivapalan raised a hand to silence the coward.

“We can’t. Man’s duty is toward his fellow men and his country.”

“What about a country run by an Emperor who wants to conquer the world?”

“At least he is not mad, my brother.”

“Not...what....? Brother, we don’t need to be under the Emperor any longer if we just get out of the Empire!” shouted Chandrasegaran.

Sivapalan never took his brother seriously, a man who spent almost all of his wife’s family money on jewelry and perfume—so much perfume, in fact, that it sometimes made Sivapalan gag when he visited

Chandrasegeran's house. "Now now, my little brother, let me tell you something," he began, holding up one of his soldiers on the chess board. "War is not the homebody's game, especially not the homebody sitting across from me, unable to see that"—he put his soldier piece down with a thud on the board—"so much is happening around him. He who never has his eyes and mind open, can never do battle. I have eyes everywhere. There are men on the battlefield, special warriors who stalk during the dead of night, and who know how to do their job well. I have a hundred such men, and they bring me fair tidings. This battle is going well. We can get to Mahatitta and receive our reinforcements... late though they may be."

Chandrasegaran sighed. "You've made your point. Now stop being dramatic, brother! Tell me, how sure are you of victory, anyway? What in the world is even happening out there?"

"I see with my mind, don't you know?" A sneaky smile crossed his lips.

"What?" Chandrasegaran glanced at the chess board. "Now then, I..."

"You know," Sivapalan continued, "you never realized that your king was in danger until I knocked out your second elephant. And even then you were so focused on me that you didn't see with your mind." He tapped his head knowingly. "War is deception, little man." Pulling up his dhoti, Sivapalan made himself more comfortable in his chair. He looked at the sullen Chandrasegaran and smiled at him grimly. "Now, what about another game?"

"I still do not understand why you are not out there with your men," said Chandrasegaran as he set up the pieces for the next game. He paused a moment, gazing at the questioning expression that Sivapalan had on his face. "I do not mean to doubt you, I just..."

"Brother, war is not just deception, war is a race....a race." He grasped a chess piece, and knocked off another of his brother's pieces. "And a race is always won by the calmest and strongest mind. My mind versus that of Buddharaja, it is. All those with swords and shields, horses, chariots and elephants, are merely there to help the two of us."

"Buddharaja and I..." thought Sivapalan.



The first time the two men had met had been in the southwest of Lanka, in the province of Dhakkinadesha. Sivapalan, fighting under the leadership of one of the best commanders who'd been posted to the colony, had, along with the occupying Chola forces, taken over an old fort. It was unnamed and forgotten. It had not been that important to anyone, but, if their leader saw some use for it, then the soldiers were ready to take it and defend it.

Most of the men, unfortunately had been young, and fresh out of training. All the experience and leadership of their officers and all their prayers for victory, could not have prepared them for the battle they had to fight. Least of all, deal with a siege to their fort.

The archers had been lined up, the gates had been blockaded, and in theory everything appeared to be going well. But Sivapalan, positioned on the wall with the archers, saw that it was a losing battle. The Sinhalese lions were flinging their iron grapnels like powerful, monstrous claws at the battlements, as he stood there, at the edge of death itself. The enemy was scaling higher and higher and even though the Chola archers released volleys of arrows at the Sinhalese, the enemy just raised their shields above their heads and pushed upwards. Battering rams pounded the gates while the trumpeting of an emerging elephant brigade was heard clearly in the distance. The attackers were even shooting flaming arrows at the defenders, and this had been going on for quite some time now. Various parts of the fort were on fire. The elephant brigade reached the fort. The massive beasts rammed the gate open and stormed the fort. The beasts with their swishing trunks flattened the Chola troops who were running helter-skelter in all directions.

On the battlement wall, the Chola commanders were having a hard time trying to keep their men from running away. There wasn't enough room for a pitched fight along the battlements, and soldiers from both sides were falling to their death. Seeing a Lankan soldier attempting to cut down the Chola banner, Sivapalan had engaged the man in a duel, but finally paid the price, as his opponent's sword sliced him. The blood spurted from his forehead and he fell to the ground. "Help me, somebody!" he groaned weakly as he tried his best to crawl, blood messing his vision, and choking him.

Another grappling hook was launched and a Sinhalese commander appeared on the wall.

He held a banner proudly fluttering in his left hand, and he gazed down at the fallen Chola, clutching his bloodied face, screaming in pain as he searched for his comrades. At least thirty-five or so, it seemed, and with the powerful physique of a wrestler. To the injured Sivapalan, the Lankan leader seemed so calm, so reserved, that it felt like the man could tackle anything in his path. He seemed like Lord Sakra himself come down from his heavenly abode. This man was shouting at his men, but with affection, and this great feeling of affection in his eyes was reflected back in the eyes of every one of his soldiers. They were confident, brutal, efficient and powerful. Sivapalan saw the Sinhalese commander swinging his sword in a perfect arc, directing his men towards the East wing of the fort.

“Is this what war really is? Oh, in the name of Siva, this is idiocy, this is chaos, this is....this is not war!” Sivapalan stained the stone floor with his blood as he pushed himself along with his hands.

The Lankan battlegod came to stand before him. Sivapalan looked again at the man, scrutinizing him through his bloody vision. He saw someone, queerly enough, who was pretty vulnerable. “You are a liar..,” he groaned through gritted teeth, getting up on one knee, “and that... that... that pose of strength, that... persona you always have... it will never help you to win any wars, my friend. We have your miserable Lanka, it is Mummudi Chola Mandalam, and it is ours now, in the name of our Emperor Rajendra!!!”

“Well, what is your strategy then?” questioned the Sinhalese commander, tapping his sword against his thigh, eager to finish him off.

Sivapalan smiled. “Guess.”

An immense blow came from behind as a Chola comrade struck the Sinhalese leader in the back. The commander yelled out as he keeled under the force of the heavy blow. His mouth leaked blood as he collapsed beside Sivapalan, who was taken away, grinning victoriously.

With the fall of their commander, the Sinhala troops lost their confidence and the Cholas beat them back and out of the fort. The Chola commander ordered another wave of his troops to follow them outside, and they attacked the fleeing enemy. Many had been taken prisoner, and those who hadn't, were left to die of their wounds on the battlefield. A Chola victory once again. Perhaps now they could rest easy for a while.

Sivapalan's face was sore from the injury as the old doctor tied him and the other men down onto their tables. He prepared the Ayurvedic potions in large numbers. Herbal medicines and potent painkillers, all mixed together for operations.

"Your injury is severe, Sivapalan," said his doctor, "but not life threatening. I advise you to rest awhile, at least till there won't be any suppuration of the wound. Really, I —"

"And what makes you think I'll listen to you? I mean, look around you." He gestured to where the wounded men lay stretched out on beds, groaning in pain, praying to the Gods that they would survive. "They are all dying. Is this real war? Is this how we fought King Mahinda, that foolish alcoholic, all those years ago? At that time, we used our heads, didn't we? Well, we need to stop running into battle like a group of fools. Why else did we come so close to losing today?"

His commander had come up to where Sivapalan was and he listened, his face beginning to wear lines of rage. "What are you saying, you bloody Shudra?" he snarled at Sivapalan. "Do you know how we can win this war? We use our brains, we use our strategies, but most of all, love your men, your comrades, you young fool! And the next time, learn before you talk."

"Ah, but my lord," Sivapalan said, smiling disdainfully as his face was bandaged, "do you even know why you are here? Why you rose from a normal fool in the ranks to who you are now?"

"That's enough..."

"The love you show your men to encourage them to fight is not enough. I wish to be a man who fights with his mind. To be a man like the Lankan who stormed our fort? Why not?"

With a roar, the commander struck Sivapalan hard in the face, making the others gasp in shock.

The young warrior, his wound reopened, still continued, "War is deception...little man."

“Sivapalan, that’s enough!” shouted a friend of his as he helped Sivapalan off the table. “Sir, my friend doesn’t know what he is talking about. He....he apologizes for his foolishness, so...”

The commander’s face was still a mask, as he watched Sivapalan being led away. Whispers followed Sivapalan as he walked down the row of tables, thinking of the siege that he’d been a part of. His first siege.

“Harihar, I’m fine,” he said softly to his companion, then made a sudden turn when they were out of the ward, speeding up his pace into a jog.

“Look,” said Harihar, hurrying after him across the fort courtyard, “whatever you’re planning to do, I can tell it’s going to end in disaster. And anyhow, isn’t that...” he looked at the building Sivapalan had veered towards “...where they hold the prisoners? What are you doing?” He tried to grab his friend’s arm, but Sivapalan just brushed him off.

There was a network of ancient and dusty cells in the building, some rat infested. Buddharaja sat in one of them, his face and arms badly bruised, the pain throbbing through him. He got up and went to the cell entrance staring beyond the bars, bloodshot eyes scanning the area, while toying absently with his fingers. “You,” he grunted as he saw Sivapalan come towards his cell.

“Comfortable?”

Buddharaja snarled.

Sivapalan leisurely continued. “Thought so. Well, so tell me, how does it feel to go from being the head of the attacking force to whatever it is you are now. A new low for you, or as low as you can get?”

“What do you want, you stupid boy?”

Sivapalan smirked., “I can see how much you want freedom, and these guards are my friends. That little is guaranteed, but, I think there’s something that you need to tell me. Who are you?”

“Not your concern.”

“All right.” Sivapalan felt slightly deflated as he pursed his lips thoughtfully. “What do you think of war in general? Do you listen to your heart or your mind, Commander?”

Buddharaja jerked his head back, surprised at the strange question. Their eyes met for a moment and the young Chola held his gaze, something frighteningly cold in that face. Buddharaja backed away. He went to sit on his bed, staring at his clasped hands. After a moment, he heard the bolts being drawn back, the creak of the door as the young soldier entered. The Chola came to stand in front of him and Buddharaja finally glanced up at him.

“What do I listen to, you ask? Fine question. Nobody’s asked me that in a very long time. And why should I tell you? We aren’t on the same side! But...” He was silent for a moment, his thick eyebrows knit. “Listen, you need to put your own life on the line. You have to put yourself in the shoes of others, understand their pain every time they pick up their weapons. Do you know, Chola, how many young men I have trained? And how many died during their very first battle? The battles that we told ourselves were all to... to liberate what we call our land?” He breathed heavily thinking of poor Lanka, scratching his beard. “Well, I’m beginning to wonder whether Lanka can be called our land anymore. But look, if I didn’t care about those men, I wouldn’t make a million strategies to protect them, to help them win, would I?”

The young soldier looked at Buddharaja like he was straining to comprehend his words

“But wait, so you say that a brilliant strategist needs to love his men? Heart and mind can never unite on the battlefield, you’re just deluded. Love for anyone, or anything, is a distraction, a thing that takes away the power of concentration when formulating the mathematical possibilities of battlefield strategy. Tricking your enemies is part of the plan, isn’t it? Isn’t deception part and parcel of war?”

Sivapalan saw the Sinhalese leader’s expression had become blank, unreadable as he shuddered slightly, turning towards the wall opposite him. “I have to be right, right?” He smiled, running his fingers through his hair.

“Who is this boy?” Buddharaja wondered. “How can he say that he has absolutely no love for anyone? Was he referring to himself as he spoke

this... terrible truth? The Gods help me if and when this boy becomes a general.” He scrutinized the Chola, whose arms were crossed against his chest. He was slim and flat-muscled, a vicious, lithe leopard waiting for the kill.

Sighing, Buddharaja said at last, “Yes...deception and war do go together, my boy.”

The Chola soldier smiled again, but behind the seeming warmth of his smile, was only deathly coldness. Buddharaja uncomfortably shifted his weight on his bed. The form of the young man before him seemed to shift, altering, and suddenly Buddharaja was imagining him as the devil Mahasona, with its cold, crimson eyes, staring into his soul.

“Well?”

Buddhrajra snapped back to reality. The Chola soldier stood by the cell door ready to leave. “Put your feelings aside old man, and one day you will fight like a true soldier. That’s what I believe in. Well, of course,” continued the soldier, stretching to his full height, “I could let you out, but I don’t mind having you around, Commander. Not one bit.”

He walked out, leaving Buddharaja shivering on his bed of straw, as the air grew colder and colder and the wind louder and harsher. That young soldier held the keys to his freedom. Now what?

Finally, he prayed himself to sleep.

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## THE DAWN FOR A LITTLE GIRL

*By Lavanya Paramanathan*

The sun had just finished lifting its face over the Palmyrah fronds, sending its long slanting rays over the roof. The air was still moist and damp after a heavy rain last night. There were birds flying over the palm leaves singing and whistling louder than at any other time of the day. I was alone in my own world, busy with making mud cakes, when I heard Amma calling out for me. Her voice came from the kitchen. I heard her footsteps coming closer and she appeared in front of me staring anxiously down at me, hands on her hips. "Didn't you hear me, Meera Kutty?"

I looked up at her and bit my lips to show my lack of interest in answering her call.

She knelt down, pulled me towards her, placed her hands on my shoulders and continued. "Do you know Meera Kutty, your Appa is coming to Jaffna in few days. He is coming to be with us for a month. I want you to welcome him warmly." I stood pressed against her, indifferent to her news. She was talking about things unfamiliar to me and far beyond my world.

The news that Appa was coming back left me neither happy nor sad. My small world consisted of only Amma and me. Appa had always stood outside this world. He was a stranger to me, a mere shadow. Even though I was six years old, I had no memory of him. Amma had showed him to me in their wedding photos. He had bright eyes, thin lips, thick eyebrows and a bushy moustache. In each photo he stood beside Amma with a benign smile on his face. Whenever I saw my parents' wedding album and whenever our relatives looked at those pictures I never hesitated to thrust my index finger on Appa's face, touch his bushy moustache and blurt out, "Appa." Amma's face would beam brightly.

Amma told me often how much he loved me and wanted to hold me in his arms. How he had loved to feel for my heartbeats when I was in Amma's womb. He wanted to have a girl child and his dream came true when I was born. Then why did he leave Amma and me when this miserable war was going on all around us and our lives were at stake?

I recalled now a fight last month with my friend Anu next door, when we were playing our game of building sand-houses. It was Anu who started the quarrel. "See, my house is the most beautiful one," she began pointing at the tallest sand-house. "My father often tells me that he will build a great house just like that for me when I am older."

I felt a strange stirring in my heart on hearing the word "father" and didn't say anything. Anu, sensing I was uneasy and determined to get a rise out of me, demanded, "What about you Meera? You have no father, then who is going to build a house for you?" She tossed her head proud of having a father of her own.

"I have a father. Amma told me he lives in a foreign country."

"Oh, your father has run away from you."

The breath felt crushed in my chest. I got to my feet and ran home.

Later, when I came across Amma, still in the kitchen, I asked how Appa would arrive.

"He will be coming to Colombo by plane, and then by ship to Jaffna." Amma answered.

"Will Appa come by the bomb-throwing plane?"

Amma stood still. My question had brought tears to her eyes, which she wiped with the back of her hand. She cleared her throat, "No, my Meera Kutty, Appa will not come in a bomb-throwing plane."

I was not satisfied with her answer. I had been seeing aeroplanes since my birth. They permeated our beautiful blue sky, disturbing its serenity. At night, whenever I heard a plane invading like a monster, it felt as if the moon and the stars would break into pieces and fall on our heads. How could Appa arrive by a plane that did not throw bombs, since every kind of aircraft I knew brought bombs?

Airplanes reminded me of the bunker in the courtyard of our house. Every household had this underground structure to provide safety. It had been dug deep in the red soil and stacked with sand-filled bags on top of it. When we heard the monstrous noise of a plane roaring far away, Amma



would take me by the hand, and we would hasten towards the bunker descending into it as fast as we could. We lay there, Amma clutching my head close to her breast, my hands around her waist. Amma protected me like a mother hen spreads her wings and protects her chicks when she sees the impending danger of a vulture in the sky. When the sound came near and the aircraft passed our home I would feel Amma tighten her hold and her bosom would heave up and down. I always loved to be caressed by her in such a way. We lay there till the thunderous sound of the plane died down.

Sometimes I played tricks with her, especially when she was busy with her household chores. I would hurry to her and shriek, "Amma I can hear the approach of a plane, come let's hide in the bunker." I would clap my hands to my ears to shut out the loud noise of the plane as if it was shattering me completely. Amma would pretend to believe my tale and act according to my wishes. I ran and descended into the bunker while Amma nonchalantly followed. I laughed and laughed and laughed believing that I had made a fool out of her and she also giggled in response. Sometimes, I played a game of jumping into and climbing out of the bunker, with my friends.

Amma took me to the nearby Amman temple to pray for the safe arrival of Appa. She also asked the priest to tie a blessed thread on my arm to ensure my safety. She took me to look at the huge statue of Amman in black stone, wearing a lemon garland and red sari. The statue was armed with various weapons, one in each of her twelve arms. Amma had told me that she was 'Shakti', the universal mother who embraces all living things in the world. I was fascinated by the word, 'Shakti' and when I pronounced it I felt some power in me, recalling the fierce goddess.

There was a great scarcity of food because of the war, these days. All the roads connecting Jaffna to the rest of the country were closed, making Jaffna an isolated prison, Amma had told me. The only transportation was by ship. Both people and goods were stuffed into the cargo ship which reached us only twice a month. Food was available in the black market and I often heard

Amma complaining about the escalation of prices and that we could afford to buy things only if we sold our jewels.

Once when we were at our village store buying food, I nearly lost my chain. A hand behind me rested on my neck and gripped my gold chain. I let out a loud shriek and Amma turned and struck the thief's face with her handbag. She held me close to her and I saw the red-hot fury in her eyes as if they were the eyes of Kali, the goddess of destruction.

For me, Amma was the manifestation of "Shakti" She stood for the two different forms of "Shakti" in my small world. When she took me in her arms and hurried to the bunker in order to safeguard me, she was "Shakti" the goddess of creation. When she struck the thief who had tried to harm me, she was "Shakti" the goddess of destruction who never failed to ward off evil.



Appa arrived at last. It was on a Sunday morning when mist hung over the house and a cool breeze was blowing gently. I was still in bed. Amma woke me up and said excitedly, "Come Meera Kutty. Appa has arrived. Come and welcome him. He is eagerly waiting to see you. Hurry up!"

I got out of bed and walked towards the bedroom door, eyes half closed, the sleep still in them. Appa was standing in the living room with that same smile on his face that I had seen in the photographs. My sleep filled eyes could see his figure dimly as if he was standing in the mist. He stretched out his hands and waited for me to reach him. There was something majestic on his face that fully awakened me. His moustache. The thick black stretch of hair neatly trimmed, dangled above his thin lips. I had never seen such a magnificent hairy thing in my life. Neethan Mama had only a thin patch of hair under his nose and Kamal Mama had no moustache at all. I hesitated to go closer to Appa. Amma pushed me gently forward and I bumped into him. Appa lifted me gently and kissed me on the forehead. I kicked him in the somach, letting out a loud cry to show that I wanted to be free. I kicked him hard again because now I was suddenly angry with him for

leaving us. He let me down. I hastened towards Amma and hid myself behind her skirt. When I glanced at him, I found him still standing there with that pleasant smile on his face.

“I think you are tired after your tedious journey. Go and have a bath, I will prepare the breakfast,” Amma told Appa. Her voice sounded young and energetic. She looked beautiful and full of life.

“Yes, it was a terrible journey and I came across so many check points from both sides. It is really a difficult thing to get into Jaffna these days. Yet it is worth it to see my lovely wife and beautiful child.” Appa gave a short laugh, placed his hands around Amma’s shoulders and drew her to him.

After breakfast, Amma told me that Appa wanted to show me something wonderful. He had asked me to come to Amma’s room. She led me there. He was seated cross-legged among a pool of toys and chocolates. I gazed in amazement at the toys I had never seen before, at the chocolates I had never tasted.

“Come Meera chellam, come and take whatever you want.” He beckoned to me. “Everything is yours. I bought everything for you, for my dear child,” he finished with a twinkle in his eyes. Amma’s face glowed and brightened with hope for she was sure that my father would win my love.

The plastic helicopter caught my eye and I pointed my finger towards it, fascinated by its yellow body, black wheels, orange tail and wings. Appa with a look of joy took it and placed it in my hands. I ran swiftly towards the courtyard taking my helicopter with me, holding it over my head as I ran all around the house. The helicopters, which I often saw tearing our peaceful sky were unreachable, flying far above my head. But here in my hand was my own helicopter. It would never throw bombs and I could play with it.

Over the next day, I found I had an overwhelming desire to touch Appa’s bushy moustache, to feel the dense black hair pricking the soft skin of my fingers. One afternoon, I found him lying on an easy chair asleep. I stalked nearer. There it was, the magnetic thing lying calmly under his pointed nose.

My trembling fingers reached for it. I was startled by Appa's laugh and his firm grip on my hand. I twisted away but he patted his lap still holding on to me. "You want to touch Appa's moustache? Come." He pushed his face close to mine and grinned.

I stood there for a minute, unable to decide what to do. Finally, I ran away.

Appa told me the next day that he would draw a moustache on my face if I wished. The idea of bearing the most desirable thing about him on my own face thrilled me. I permitted him to draw the two lines with a black pencil, starting from the point under my nose and ending at the corners of my mouth. He took me to the room and showed me my image on the mirror. "See how you look," he said jovially with a broad and mischievous grin that lit up his face.

I looked like a foolish comedian and my face made me laugh shamelessly. Soon I was lost in peals of laughter.

Appa promised to make me a toy of a man's face with a moustache. He said it would be great if the toy was made out of the seed of a Palmyrah fruit. He found a big fruit, removed all the flesh, washed it and put it out in the sun to dry. I pestered him, asking him to make the moustache-doll immediately. I wanted to make it my sole playmate. Appa calmed me down saying that the fibre should dry as hard as the leaves so that it would be easy to comb the hair and twist the moustache.

Appa's presence brought a change to the atmosphere of our home. Amma was now much happier and there was a lightness to her that I had never seen before. That line that was always in the centre of her forehead had vanished. When I used the bathroom, I was aware of his presence, as one of the racks was now filled with his perfume bottle, powder, shampoo, soap and shaving cream.

One day, when I saw his wallet on the table in Amma's room, I opened it. There was an image of me in there, kept with loving care. The photo must have been taken when I was a four month-old baby and Amma must have sent it to him in Saudi Arabia. I imagined Appa living far away from home constantly looking at my photo and taking it along with him wherever he went, as if carrying me with him.

As time passed, I grew to love Appa. I loved to play thief and police with him and I always insisted he give me the role of policeman. I strutted around the house, swinging the stick, which I kept behind my back. Upon finding the thief, I would give him a blow on his head and jump up and down shouting, "I have found the thief!" But sometimes Appa moaned in pain when the blow landed too heavily on his head.

I finally asked him the question that was nagging at me. "Appa if you love me and Amma so much, then why did you go away from us?"

He gazed at me silently for a moment, then lifted me and placed me on his lap.

"Meera Kutty, I never wanted to be separated from you. When I married your Amma, I was working at the Kankesanthurai Cement factory. As a result of this terrible war, they closed the factory and I lost my job. I could not find any work here. I had to leave you and Amma, had to move to a foreign country and earn a small sum of money so that both of you could lead a better life here. When I left Jaffna, you were just a tiny baby in Amma's womb," he finished with a long sigh, his eyes wet with tears.

My eyes were misted over with tears too. Appa had crossed the sea for my sake. He had led a hard life in Saudi Arabia for my sake, and he did this to ensure a better life and a bright future for me. This separation was a painful thing for him too.

Most of the time when Appa was at home, I clung to him, sitting in his lap whenever I could. I loved to sit there while having meals or when reading. Appa often told me funny tales. When I giggled, the skin of my cheeks always wrinkled and fell into soft folds, and he liked to hold me close and push his face into the soft folds of my cheeks, tickling me more, enjoying the way I laughed. I loved touching his moustache and its slight prickle on my soft cheeks.

Appa had been with us nearly a month when, one morning, as he sat reading a newspaper on the veranda, and I lounged on the floor near him, lazily rubbing the wheels of my helicopter on my cheeks, a jeep-like vehicle turned the bend and rushed towards our lane, a hoarse voice on a loudspeaker blasting our ears. It was an announcement. Urgent news! Appa put down

the newspaper and walked towards the gate, wrinkling his eyebrows. Amma hurried to the door with a water pot in her hands. I could not understand the loudspeaker message that echoed in every corner, but the grave expressions that roughened my parents' faces was enough to tell me that the message was a serious one. As they listened to the news, I saw the happiness on their faces blow away like the chaff at harvest time.

My parents said nothing at the time, but later I heard them discussing the news and I learnt that the announcement was a call for a public meeting that was to be held in the nearby school playground. The commander in charge of the area wanted to meet the people. It was important that at least one person from each household should assemble at the meeting.

"I will go and attend it," Appa told Amma. "You take care of the child and stay at home."

"These bastards...what do they want from us?" Amma burst out in anger like crackers on a fire. "Last month they demanded two gold sovereigns from each family. How can poor people bear it? I had no choice but to give away the child's bangles. If they really mean to struggle for their own people then why do they make them suffer? There is no more meaning to freedom!" She hurried into the kitchen.

When I woke up after having a short nap, I could not find Appa and felt frightened that he had gone to that foreign country again. I went to find Amma and asked her where he was. She told me that he had gone to see his brother at his home. I thought about the announcement, their conversation and their panic-stricken faces, and I wondered whether she was lying to me. Later, I noticed that Amma was restlessly walking up and down, constantly gazing at the gate and waiting for his arrival. What was actually going on between them?

Appa was wearied when he arrived, his face darkened with despair. He stood on the veranda, his legs like logs of wood unable to move. Amma drew a chair near him, signalled for him to sit down and went to fetch a tumbler of water. As he drank the water, he noticed me standing near the doorstep worried. He winked his eye at Amma to catch her attention, then drew her gaze towards me. Amma nodded in affirmation. "Meera," she said,

“go and play with the toys Appa brought you. I will bring you dinner in a few minutes.”

With unease rising in my chest I went into the house. It was clear that something serious was going on between my parents. What was the meaning of the signal Appa passed to Amma, which made her nod? I made up my mind not to go and play with my toys but to listen to their conversation. I crept back towards the veranda and hid behind the front door.

Amma was the first to speak. “What did they say? Is there anything serious?”

Appa said nothing and shook his head.

“What? What is it?” Amma’s voice was husky.

“The boys, these damn hooligans, want one child from each household to join them and to fight for them.”

“If we have no grown up children...”

“Then the father should go.”

Amma looked dumbfounded. Her head bent like a faded lotus flower in the evening. Gradually she let herself fall to the ground. She sat supporting her head with her hands, motionless like a sack of rice heaped in a corner. My head was buzzing with questions. Who were these boys? Why did they want Appa to join them? What would they do if he did not join?

The next day, we heard the loud noise of an airplane tearing through the clouds, leaving white lines in the blue sky. Appa picked me up and, along with Amma, we hurried into the bunker. When we were in there, Amma said fiercely under her breath, “What hell of a life is this? How can we save ourselves between these two ruthless forces ready to grind us from both sides, one in the sky and the other on the land? I feel like an areca nut caught between the blades of a cutter. No way to escape.” I stared at her. Who were the two forces Amma meant? More and more questions grew in my mind, pinching at my happiness and calm.

It was peaceful that night and I fell asleep very early. In the middle of the night, I heard voices whispering close to me, as if in a dream. Appa coughed and said, "Every day the situation gets worse. How can I leave you and the child to succumb to miseries in this horrible place? I should re-think my return to Saudi."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Amma whispered, "If you stay here for few more days then they will come and take you away at gun point. Do you want to give us such sorrow? You should leave Jaffna before Maaverar Day. If anything worse happens after you leave, I will go and take shelter at Kavi Akka's."

I opened my eyes wide in the dark.

The next day, when I awoke, I went out to the veranda where I always found Appa having a cup of coffee, but he was not there. I rushed to Amma's room and saw that the table where he kept his things was cleared. His suitcase that had stood in a corner was gone. I rushed into the kitchen and found Amma. "Where is he? Where is he?"

She held me tight.

"Appa left before you woke up. He did not want to bid goodbye because you would cry, and he had no courage to bear that."

I burst into tears. Amma tried to hold me close to her but I pushed her away in disgust. I ran towards the room where Appa stayed. I could hear Amma crying behind me, "Appa will be back with you again after six months. We will write to him often and ask him how he is."

I was hot with anger at her, as well as with Appa. Both of them had hidden the day of Appa's leaving from me. I saw the dried seed of the Palmyrah fruit at the corner of the room waiting to be touched to life by Appa's hands. It was lying there beside the bed, with coloured pencils and a comb, only the eyes and eyebrows painted. The moustache, my favourite thing, had not been added. Where were his promises about the moustache-doll?



By the moustache-doll, I found a note written by my father.

Meera Kutty,

Appa is very sorry to leave you again. When I come the next time I promise you I will complete the doll. Be a good child to Amma.

Loving kisses from Appa.

Taking the note, I went to sit by the window. Hot tears rolled down my cheeks and wet my blouse. I understood that I should not blame my parents for my pain. This stupid war should be blamed. It was this war that had made Appa a stranger to me earlier and had now taken him away from me again.

After I had calmed down a bit, I opened the window and looked out at the garden. A cuckoo bird sat leisurely on the branch of the mango tree and it began to sing in its metallic voice. Amma came to stand behind me, her hand on my shoulder. "The song of dawn," she said, gesturing to the bird. "One day there will be a peaceful dawn in our lives. One day this cursed war will end and we will enjoy the delight of peace and a happy reunion with your father. No more separation."

### ***The Glossary of Tamil Terms***

Akka- Sister

Amma- Mother

Amman- The Goddess, the consort of God Siva

Appa- Father

Mama- Uncle

Kutty and Chellam- Terms of endearment

Maaverar Day- War Heroes' Day

Kali- The Goddess of destruction

Shakti- The Divine Feminine Power

***Lavanya Paramanathan** was born and brought up in a traditional Tamil family in Jaffna. She went through the trials and tribulations of three decades of civil war, and has a great aversion to war and violence. The story and its characters were born out of her harsh experiences during the war.*

## FOR LOVE

*By Shalini Abayasekara*

When I was born, my mother called me a “miracle baby.” That’s because I had almost died inside her womb, died even before I was born, because my sister’s body had been larger than mine and had clamped me down. Just a few more minutes and I’d have stopped breathing, and my mother wouldn’t have given birth to twins. Akki would have had to face life all on her own.

Though she’d come out first she was the weaker one in many ways. In school she always needed me to stand up for her. She was reserved and very quiet. Slow to anger. I was talkative. Outspoken. Bold. Once when a girl at school laughed at her for falling during PT I got so angry I could hardly see in front of me.

“Hoo hoo! We saw your panty!” Ishara had laughed—that “stupido” who always made fun of us, especially of Akki.

Akki had gone red, her lower lip trembling.

“We saw your panty, and it’s so ugly, we saw your panty, and it’s so ugly,” the girl continued to chant in a sing-song voice, as Akki covered her face in embarrassment.

Suddenly everything was just red! I stepped in front of Ishara and gave her a thundering smack across her stupid mouth. I could *smell* the fury within me.

The next thing I knew, I was being pulled away from Ishara by our class teacher, who cried, “What do you think you’re doing?” and gave me a smack across the back, which I pretended didn’t hurt. She kept me in the sun for two hours. But I didn’t care. I’d given Ishara tight and my sister had stopped crying.

That was when my name changed. I was now the “fighter” and my job was to protect my sister.

People say twins have a bond that no one else can understand and they’re right. So we stopped explaining long ago what we meant to each other. But I’d like to write it once more, the story of our bond, of our

life together. That bond between twins is like knowing someone so deeply that, just looking at your twin's face, you can tell exactly what he or she is thinking. It's like caring so much that the slightest pain that person goes through hurts you like a thousand stones hitting you. When that person is sick you feel sick too, and when she laughs, it's as if you are laughing inside and you see your smile on her face. It's an inexplicable, magical feeling. It's like, if you could, you would gladly lay your life down for the other.

One of the fun things about being identical twins was the ability to fool people. We often played tricks on our friends, and sometimes even on our teachers. Once Akki caught a cold the day before the school carnival, where she was scheduled to do the announcements.

"What shall I do?" she frantically asked me. Being the Junior School Captain, she'd had this job allocated to her quite some time ago.

I smiled mischievously. "You know...we do look alike...and sound alike..."

"What do you mean?"

"Aww, come on. You jolly well know what I mean. Stop trying to be such a damsel in distress!"

Her eyes widened. "You're *serious*?" I just smiled. "What if we get caught?"

I kept on smiling.

She came up to me and gave me a bone crushing hug. "You're the best!"

I admit when the day came I *was* rather nervous. Akki had this unique way of walking with her hips moving out this way and that ("superfunny," I used to call it to annoy her). I had practiced it for many hours all around the house, with my parents looking rather curiously at me. I had smiled in front of the mirror and said, "Good evening. I welcome you to our annual December carnival." I had practiced putting on her innocent expression in case the teachers came and had long conversations with me. When I was leaving Akki winked, "Keep calm and act me,"

Everything was going perfectly. I had walked in Akki-style to the podium, had spoken gently and politely to all the students and teachers,

and had announced quite well I thought. Then, as I was finishing the vote of thanks, I suddenly couldn't remember whether I had to mention my name and post or not. Shoot! I'd forgotten to clarify that! I had no time to think and suddenly, without realizing what was happening, the words came out of my mouth: "I, Samadhi Jayasekara, Junior Vice Games Captain, thank you all for making this event a success." Faces turned towards me in surprise and I stared back, stunned at my own stupid mistake. Let's just say that, for a while, our badges of School Captain and Vice Games Captain were removed and all weekend outings forbidden.

After O'Levels however things changed. Not, of course, in our relationship with each other. We were still close as ever, but we were no longer in the same class. Akki was doing Biology and I was doing Arts. "Arts? *Aney* why? Pramodhi is also doing bio no." I got sick of this comment I heard constantly from relatives, teachers and other nosy busybodies. I felt like saying, "It's only stupid people who do Bio and then mess up and switch to another stream," but I just kept my comments to myself. I didn't want Akki to hear and get hurt, and I knew how badly she wanted to be a doctor. She was often tensed up trying to solve sums late into the night, while I read *Macbeth* or *Pride and Prejudice* and dozed off. One day I even found her in tears over a graded paper she'd got back with two marks out of twenty.

"Hey come on," I said trying to cheer her up, "You're the brainy one. I know you can do it. One day, I'll be coming to my rich doctor sister for medicine." But she didn't smile, just gave a tired sigh. "I'm useless", I heard her mumble as I left the room.

I gradually began to see a change in her. I'd get up in the morning to hear her sing in the shower now—the kinds of silly, mushy songs we'd laughed our guts out over not so long ago. She used to be so "last-minute," but now she spent hours trying to figure out what to wear just to step out to the grocery store or to go for classes. She would stay in her room for ages and sometimes I'd hear her even *lock* the door, something we hardly ever did. Suddenly she was over-anxious about the random pimple on her face, trying a hundred and one ways to get rid of it, including going around the house with pieces of komarika stuck all over her face, looking like a walking cactus plant. She suddenly became conscious of her weight and announced one day that she would be going to the gym nearby.

“But what about your classes?” Ammi asked in a worried tone.  
“Surely you don’t have time now to go to the gym?”

I must say that I too was rather puzzled. And a teeny bit hurt. After all, we’d done almost everything together so far. Why hadn’t she asked *me* to join her? Or was she jealous of my slightly more slender figure? I couldn’t bring myself to ask, but glumly watched as she scooted off to “work out” the very next week.

“What’s gotten into your sister?” Ammi sighed. But I could only shake my head in bewilderment.

One day, I opened her door to get a story book and she screamed at me, “Can’t you knock, Sam?”

“What? You know I never knock and *you* never knock when *you* come in. What ON EARTH is wrong with you?”

She didn’t say anything but she still looked angry, as if I’d walked in on something really precious, really *personal*. Something she couldn’t even share with me.

Just then her phone rang and a sudden alertness leapt into her eyes. Her fingers curled protectively round the phone but instead of answering the call, she cut it. She was red like when she used to get bullied but, this time, I didn’t know the reason.

“Fine!” I snapped, feeling betrayed. “Don’t ever come to me again for help. If that’s what I mean to you...*whatever!*”

I was about to open the door when I heard some movement behind me and her hand rested on my shoulder.

“Sam, please,” she whispered. “Don’t be mad. Come in, I need to talk to you.”

I was about to say that I wasn’t her punching bag to be used whenever she wanted but the look on her face, half-scared, half-hopeful, shoved the words back in my throat. She was once again my twin needing my help and what could I do but give it?

I sat down on her bed and looked at her, waiting.

She turned very shy, fumbling and fidgeting for words. "I...I...need to talk to you...I have something to tell..."

"So tell me, will you!"

"Can't you guess?"

This was going too far. I got annoyed. "Hey, you tell me now or I won't lend you my skirt for class tomorrow."

She simply smiled, not a bit shaken by my threat and came closer to me. I could smell her excitement mingled with the honey and peppermint body lotion she'd used in the morning. "I have a boyfriend," she whispered.

I sat up straight. And stared at her. Like a fool. "*WHAT???*"

"Mmm...yeah..." she was pink as a marshmallow now. I still hadn't collected my wits. So many feelings were battling within me: surprise, disbelief, amazement, excitement, hurt.

"And you never told me?"

"I'm so sorry, Sam. It was so hard for me to keep it from you but...I had to."

"What do you mean?" I was dying to know details of this mysterious guy but I still wanted to let her know that I was mad at her, just *mad* for not letting me in on the secret.

"I was scared...he asked me not to tell anyone. Not even you."

"But...why?" I asked confused. After all, she could have told him that I was not the kind who went around blabbing secrets, especially my twin's.

"He's scared...we're scared..." Akki whispered, "because he's a Tamil."

I looked at my sister and she looked at me and we waited in silence. We both knew what it meant to fall in love with a Tamil these days and in our family. Thathi, an ex-army officer, was so anti-Tamil that he'd even forbidden us to go to Tamil sari shops saying that the money might be going to the LTTE. Ammi came from a staunch Sinhala-Buddhist family who thought Tamils were a nuisance to the country and prevented the Sinhalese, the "true people of the country," from getting good jobs. They didn't like me having Tamil friends and got annoyed if I wanted to have them over or even spoke too much about them.

“I met him a few weeks ago and he’s so...so sweet...” She seemed in a daze.

“Oh man, I can’t believe it. You having a guy? Still, you *should* have told me.” I tried to sound stern again, though it was hard to keep it up looking at my sister’s dreamy, love-sick face.

“Aney sorry, Sam. You won’t believe how many times I wanted to. But he kept on saying we’d tell everyone after the war ended just to be on the safe side.”

“*If* it ever ends,” I added cynically.

She ignored my comment and continued. “You know what happened? He had come to drop his sister at Bio and, as I came to class, I found them talking in front of the classroom. He looked so cute! He’s kinda dark. You know I have a thing for dark guys right? He was wearing a light blue T-shirt, denims and sneakers. Had signs of a small beard too. He was smiling at his sister Aruniya with such a cute, adorable smile that I thought he had to be her boyfriend, and found myself wishing that he didn’t have a girlfriend. He kept coming to drop her and pick her up every day and then, one day, I heard her call him Anna. So, though I didn’t dare hope too much I now began to wonder why he came every day. I mean, it just couldn’t be for protection ‘coz there were days when her parents came to pick her up and *still* he came. And he seemed to look in my direction a lot and wait till I arrived at the class to leave.”

“And then?” I got closer to her.

“One day Aruniya came up to me and said, ‘My Anna really likes you.’ I didn’t know what to say! You can imagine right? I just said ‘What do you mean?’ and she said ‘He wanted me to give this to you.’ It was a note...a note saying he’d been watching me for a while and that...that...wait. She fumbled in the cupboard. “I’ll show you the letter.”

I had never seen a real love letter before. I was too thrilled to speak.



Dear Pramodhi,

I know this is rather old-fashioned and you must be wondering what this is all about. Let me explain. That first day I was with Aruniya and you walked into the class, I saw you look at me. And I saw how beautiful you were. To be honest, I couldn't take my eyes off you, and from that moment I've always come to your class for reasons other than shepherding my sister. Seeing you makes me feel so happy, and the few times you've smiled at me have given me more fulfillment than ever before. Don't think I am making any judgment simply based on looks. Finally, unable to keep it in, when I told Aruniya of my feelings for you (there, I said it), she was thrilled and told me that, out of all the girls in the class, you're the one she particularly likes, and that you are a very nice, kind, loving person, always helping students who have difficulties with their studies. She said such good things about you and they have only left me a man who is hopelessly in love.

Arun.

I looked up at her: I didn't know what to say. "What did you tell him?" I whispered.

She gazed at me and then shrugged her shoulders as if to say she hadn't really had a choice. She too had fallen irretrievably in love.

I met him for the first time when I went to Akki's class. He was just as she'd described—tall, dark and handsome like the fairy tales say. He had a slight Tamil accent which Akki told me she was crazily in love with. There was a ragged gash across one of his elbows, which he said was the remainder of a wound he had received at a basketball tournament.

"Hi," I said shyly. Now that I'd finally met him I didn't know what to say. I just kept smiling, hoping it would make up for my lack of words!

*He* seemed very much at ease. "So you're Pra's sister," he said smiling. "I'm glad I'm finally getting to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

I shook the outstretched hand, wondering what he must be feeling, seeing the identical image of his girlfriend right next to her.

As if he could read my thoughts he blurted out, "Man, you both look so much alike!"

Akki smiled. "That's why we're called 'twins' no, Arun." She spoke softly, almost as if it was a secret. She got closer to him and he put a gentle arm around her. I could see the love in his gaze as he looked down at her. "Mmm...hope I don't mistake one of you for the other, someday!"

"Urgh, no!" I joked. He caught my eye and, seconds later, we were all guffawing.

I have to admit, they looked really cute together. He seemed a nice guy too. When I went to meet Akki, I often saw him helping an old man or woman use the crossing opposite the Bio class. And once, when a guy in the class injured himself, Arun took him to hospital. I felt they were perfect for each other; she with her gentle, caring heart, he with his ever-ready helping hand and warm smile.

Akki no longer hid things from me and we became a threesome; she, her boyfriend, and I (Aruniya kept away most of the time, perhaps warned by her big brother not to interfere too much). Of course I didn't join them in *everything*. I could see that Arun was very possessive and wanted his girlfriend all to himself. Once Akki said that he'd even told her, "If you leave me I would kill you and then kill myself. I could never live without you." I gasped when I first heard this; it looked as though Arun was serious, I mean, *really* serious about Akki. I wasn't sure if even she realized how serious he was and I wondered if she really was ready for it.

I admit it was kind of hard for me at the beginning. I would want Akki to go shopping with me and then find that she had a date with her man. I would go to her room sometimes, wanting to talk about some silly crush or the other, and see her glued to the phone, her eyes two stars, oblivious to my presence. Sometimes I would see a half-smile on her lips for no apparent reason and know that he'd said something "sweet" she couldn't repeat. Now she belonged to him and, though I'd known this would have to happen someday, it was still hard to fully accept that the two of us were no

longer one solid unit no one else could penetrate. She had her life and her happiness, and I was not going to be the one to impinge on it.

But that didn't mean I didn't keep a close watch on him to see if he was treating her right. Whenever Akki seemed upset, my first question would be whether he'd said anything to hurt her, but she seemed to be completely happy and at peace with him. Only once did she say, with a disturbed look on her face, "I think Arun is really hot tempered."

"Why?" I felt a bit worried.

"No, it's just that...you know ne, Pawan kinda likes me. Yesterday he told Arun he loved me more than Arun did, and Arun got so angry he almost whacked Pawan's head off!"

"Oh gosh! Poor Pawan!" I couldn't help laughing. Pawan was at least a foot shorter than Arun, and I could just picture him getting hammered by the strong and serious Arun. "You'd better not enchant any more guys," I joked. "They'll all have their heads chopped off!"

I won't write about how we did our A' Levels because that would take too much time and, to be honest, I really can't be bothered right now. Nothing that interesting happened anyway. The post A' Level period was such fun! We went swimming, dancing, on family trips and spent hours shopping. And since there had not been a lot of trouble in the recent past, our parents didn't mind us going out as long as we were together.

One day, there was a knock on my door and Akki came in. She was breathless.

"What's up?" I asked examining her closely.

She closed the door and locked it, then said, "Arun asked if I'd like to go for a movie."

"Movie? Just the two of you? You lucky pig, how romantic!" I couldn't help feeling kind of jealous. Of course I was happy for her, I was, but I felt it was unfair too. *I* was the one who usually loved going to the movies; Akki preferred to watch them at home, lounging on our sofa. I wished, at that moment, that I had a boyfriend too.

“No, no, not just the two of us. I told him you love going to the cinema and he asked you to come too. It’s all going to be on his account!” She was positively beaming.

In the cinema I sat next to Akki, and Arun took her other side. This time Aruniya also joined us, and she sat on my right. If ever a guy turned back and even *seemed* to look in our direction, Arun would immediately tighten his embrace of my sister as if to show that he and he *alone* owned her. From time to time, from the corner of my eye, I saw Akki resting her head against Arun’s shoulder and once, when I turned sideways to ask her something about the movie, she was absorbed in an exchange of whispers with her guy.

“Hey,” I joked, “you two better concentrate on the movie.” She just turned and gave me a punch, then snuggled closer to Arun, while putting her tongue out at me.

“Gosh,” I made a face. “You two are worse than a romantic movie.”

Since my lovesick sister was fully engrossed with her man, Aruniya and I found ourselves thrown together. She turned out to be quite a nice girl, I must say. I learnt that she loved swimming just like Akki and I did, but didn’t have anyone to go with. “You can come with us,” I suggested, forgetting for a moment that my parents may not be happy with us taking a Tamil girl along. And if they knew her relationship to us...man, that would not be nice.

I turned the conversation to future plans, telling Aruniya of my dream to be a writer one day.

“Wow!” she said in an awed tone. She apparently wanted to go to India for higher studies.

“But why?” I asked. “You might get into uni here, no?”

“Appa doesn’t want me to stay. He says it’s not safe.” She looked around nervously. “With all these riots happening on and off and the war in Jaffna...he says it’s not safe for Tamils in this country. He wants Arun to go with me as well, but Arun doesn’t want to. He got really angry the last time Appa brought it up.” She glanced in Akki’s direction as if to hint at the reason for Arun’s refusal, then leaned closer to me and whispered, “He says he feels

like running away and living on his own sometimes, because of the way our parents keep going on at him about India.”

I began wondering what my sister would do if Arun had to leave. Looking at her smiling face and eyes brimming over with love, I suddenly felt scared for her.

It turned out to be an awesome outing, except for the fact that we had to keep looking to see if any people known to our parents were around. We went to Pizza Hut for lunch (another treat!) and it was funny to watch Arun get annoyed because the waiter brought a wrong order for Akki, a pizza with cheese.

Arun pushed the steaming pan away and cried, “I don’t want this. Bring me what I ordered.”

Akki put a hand over his. “It’s okay. It’s okay, I can have this.”

“But...” Arun was still angry.

“No no, seriously. It’s fine,” Akki said. Then she blushed. “The only reason I ordered one without cheese was ‘coz I want to get thinner, so that I’d look nicer...for you. I actually *love* cheese.”

“Oh my silly Pra.” Arun put his arm around her and held her close. “You know I love you just the way you are. You don’t need to change anything okay? I don’t *want* you to change.”

Aruniya and I exchanged glances that said “Man, here goes again!” The poor waiter, after staying a few more seconds, looking as though he wasn’t sure if he should remain or not, finally left. After that, the meal went merrily and Akki, I could see, couldn’t wipe that smile off her face.

We were a little late getting back home and I wondered whether Ammi would ask anything, but she didn’t. Seeing my parents’ smiles as we entered our house, I felt guilty.

“Hey...what about Ammi and Thatthi?” I asked cautiously the next day, after she’d just finished showing me a shiny silver ring on her finger.

“Oh, things will figure themselves out,” said Akki who hated any sort of disruption of peace.

“You can’t just say that and wait you know. They’re bound to find out sooner or later and it’s best if you tell them rather than *them* asking *you*.”

“I know...” she sighed. “Even Arun has been wanting me to tell them. He told his parents a few days ago. They were not very happy, but didn’t forbid him from meeting me. Just told him to be careful and keep in mind the situation nowadays. It’s just that...I’m scared...if Ammi and Thathi don’t like him...he’ll be so heartbroken...and so will I...I love him.”

“I know, Akki.” I got closer and held her tight. “That’s just why you need to tell them so that you won’t always be scared someone will see when you meet. Once you tell them it’ll all be fine. They’ll understand.”

All the same I had my doubts. Arun being a Tamil...I didn’t know what would happen.

However, it turned out that our dilemma was soon solved. Some days after the film, we were summoned to our parents’ bedroom. Akki was shivering in fright. I squeezed her hand but was too scared to speak, in case it came out wrong.

We entered to find our parents seated on the bed. Thathi looked angry. Ammi’s face was hard to read. We lingered by the doorway, not sure whether to go in or not. My eye started twitching.

Then came the bombshell. “I want to ask you both something,” Ammi said. We waited silently. “Do either of you have a boyfriend?”

I kept my gaze on the ground. An ant was making its way into a crevice on the floor. It seemed so lucky.

“You need to tell us, girls,” Ammi continued.

Though I was wishing Akki had told my parents before all this came up, I felt very sorry for her. I knew how much she loved this guy. I slowly raised my head and looked at her. She was looking at me as if she needed my “okay” to go on. I nodded.

“Yes.” Her voice was surprisingly clear. “I have a boyfriend, Ammi. I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time, believe me, but I just didn’t see when...and how to. I’m so sorry...”

My parents looked at each other but didn't show any emotion, just the slightest sense of being ruffled. They'd always been like that. They were not the kind who yelled, hugged, and jumped up and down in ecstasy when you did well at an exam. They would just smile.

"How long has this been going on?" Thathi's stern voice interrupted my thoughts.

"A few months, Thathi. About nine..."

"And you never told us?" Ammi sounded more hurt than angry.

"I'm sorry, Ammi. I really am." Akki was beginning to sound tearful. "I really wanted to but I was scared with my A' Levels coming up and all that, that you'd get worried and...angry."

"You think I'm not angry now? You think I'm not worried? You don't know how I felt when Auntie Seetha called me one day and said she'd seen the two of you going into MacDonald's with a boy. Some dark, lanky looking fellow. Imagine what people must be thinking, seeing you two prancing around like that. If you'd told me, we could've discussed it and maybe even asked him to come *here*. You girls think nothing of your reputation these days. In my time, of course, we never went anywhere with a boy unless we were engaged."

"How old is this fellow? What is he doing?" Thathi butted in.

Akki's eyes sparkled as she began speaking of him. "He's twenty two and works at a bank. He left school after O' Levels, qualified as an accountant and then joined HNB. He's been there for—"

"Do you know his family background? His future plans?" my mother interjected.

"Oh yes," Akki went on, "Aruniya is really nice. His sister. She was in my Bio class..."

My gaze had switched to Ammi. I watched as the revelation gradually dawned on her face. I had little time to feel scared before it came.

"*Aruniya*??? But that's a *Tamil* name. He's a...a...you mean he's a *Tamil*?" The repulsion on her face was frightening. It was as if she'd just realized that a bar of chocolate she had eaten was actually cow dung.

Akki didn't answer. I think even if she had, it wouldn't have been heard. Thathi's fists were clenched and white. "Are you out of your mind?" he bellowed. "Have you forgotten everything we ever told you? Everything about how these Tamils spoil and corrupt our land? How the LTTE are always thinking of ways to infiltrate and destroy families? For all we know, this fellow could be a LTTE spy. And my daughter, *my daughter*, goes and starts an affair with him, an affair!" he spluttered.

There were very few times I'd seen my father angry, and it had never been this bad. Akki was looking down, too afraid to speak.

"That's it," my father said in a firm voice. "We trusted you and let you go wherever you wanted, but hereafter we won't let you go out alone. That goes for you too." He nodded in my direction. "We don't want you following in your sister's footsteps." He walked out banging the door behind him.

Ammi was a little more sympathetic. She went over to Akki who was now sobbing. "We'll talk about this properly later," she said as she pushed a curl behind Akki's ear. "Your father's too angry now. Go wash your face like a good girl and come to dinner."

Things didn't get any better. A few days later I heard sobs from Akki's room and found her with swollen eyes. I could see she'd been crying for well over two hours.

"They asked me not to see him again," she whispered, then broke into sobs once more. When they subsided, she told me of the chat my parents had had with her. They would never consent to her marrying a Tamil. Besides the prejudice they had against the race, they'd warned Akki about the danger of "hobnobbing" with Tamils too much these days. There had been an unexpected bombing right here in Colombo, quite close to the Parliament, and the tension was spreading. A bomb had gone off close to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy too, and all Buddhists were apparently on the warpath. All of a sudden, people had stopped frequenting Tamil shops and we heard that some had even been burnt. People were scared to walk on the road and there were whispers of an impending curfew. I suddenly realized that my Tamil friends hadn't phoned me much, lately.

"If only this war would end...then Arun and I would be able to marry in peace."



“You really think...even if it ends...they’ll let you?”

We looked at each other. Since we both knew the answer we didn’t need to say it out loud.

It was hard to see my sister walk around like a zombie. She stopped her visits to the gym, to dancing class, to the cinema, and just curled up like a withered leaf. The shine in her eyes was gone and she dragged her feet to the dining table, as if eating was the hardest thing ever. I once tried to talk to Ammi, to see if she would just give it a shot; just meet Arun *once* to see if they’d let her continue. But, as I’d expected, it was of no use. “Don’t talk to me again about it” she said tightly, adding, “you should’ve known better than to hide it from us.”

I kept wondering but didn’t like to ask Akki if she’d told Arun the full story. I knew she had told him *something* because they no longer met, but I wasn’t sure if she’d told him there was no hope...unless they ran away or something. I felt scared each time I thought of his finding out there was no hope, because I knew how serious he was about her.

A few days later, I woke up to the sound of scurrying footsteps. “There’s been trouble near the Gangarama Temple,” Ammi said, as she came into my room. “It’s quite serious and Thathi was asked to come because of his experience.” She looked worried and I started feeling worried too. But, to reassure myself as much as her, I said loudly, “Thathi’s often called like that, no? He’ll be okay.” Ammi just held me tightly and then went off saying, “You better have a wash now.”

On my way to the bathroom I was accosted by my sister. She was all dressed up in new body-clinging dark blue pencil denims and a lemon green silky top. Perfectly matching earrings glinted through the waves of her hair, and she was carrying a green handbag. Lip-gloss accentuated her lips. Some of the old flame had returned to her eyes.

“Listen,” she whispered urgently, “Arun said he *has* to meet me somehow and that he doesn’t know what he’ll do if he doesn’t. I haven’t seen him in so long. Now since Thathi’s out of the house, and Ammi’s too worried to keep an eye on me, I just want to go out for a short while, to meet him.”

My eyes widened. This was not such a good idea.

“Sam, you’ve got to help me. You’re the only one who can. Keep Ammi busy so that I can slip out. Clean your room with her or something. I’ll make something up when I come back if she asks me. With this riot happening people won’t notice us much, and this is the only chance we’ve got. He’s already waiting for me near Food City.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew my parents would be furious if they found out, but I felt bad for Akki too. In the past weeks, she had looked like a trapped animal whose life was slowly ebbing away. And, like she said, this was probably their last meeting.

I took a deep breath. “Alright, but don’t take too long okay?”

“Thank you so much, Sam.” She hugged me tightly. I could hear her heartbeat, smell her thrill, and yes, the inevitable honey and peppermint perfume.

“Pram,” I said, “be careful.”

She knew I used her nickname only when I was really serious. She looked at me and smiled. “I love you, Nangi.”

And she was gone.

I sighed and went to the kitchen to play my part.

Two hours later Akki still hadn’t returned and I began to feel uneasy. The lie I’d told that she was painting in her room couldn’t hold for much longer. Ammi and I were doing a thorough cleaning of my room, and a couple of times, she’d had to ask me to pay attention because I was unconsciously gazing out of the window, wondering where Akki was. Now the room was almost done and Ammi was getting restless.

“Where *is* Pram?” she asked irritably. “She shouldn’t be cooped up in her room all this time. She can stop painting now and come and help you clean up.” She marched to Akki’s room, pushing me aside. She knocked. No response. She opened the door and we walked in together. Of course the room was empty, empty as my mind, because I had absolutely no idea what to say. The curtains fluttered dolefully in the breeze and the bed looked almost too neat, with its carefully folded sheet and plumped up pillows.

“Are you going to tell me what this is about?” Ammi asked quietly. The reproach in her voice was almost too hard to bear. Suddenly I knew I had not done the right thing by letting Akki go.

The sound of Thathi’s car coming up the driveway shook us both. We heard him enter our house. I was hoping his return would take away some of the fear on Ammi’s face but she continued to look frightened, as we went to meet him.

He took a towel from the bedroom near the front door and made his way to the bathroom. “Things are rather bad,” he said in a low voice, brushing dust off from his shirt and wiping the sweat on his face. We followed him. “A group of Tamils who had apparently thrown rocks at the temple were arrested and some others came to protest. Things became ugly and suddenly someone started firing out of nowhere. A couple of people got injured too. The police had to come and fire tear gas. You know how these people get worked up no...Malki?” He looked up having got no response from my mother. “What’s wrong, Malki?”

Ammi’s voice was barely audible. “Pram has gone out. And I don’t know where she is.”

“Today? Is she out of her mind? She could be shot, for heaven’s sake!” The fear in my father’s voice, a brave man who’d once fought in the Army, made mine a thousand times more real. “You don’t know where she is? Why she went out?”

Let Arun fly a kite, I thought. This was no joke. “She said she was going to meet Arun for the last time,” I told them. “She was planning to meet him at Food City but I don’t know where they were going afterwards.”

“We have to go and get her right now,” Thathi said grabbing his phone. Then he stopped. “No, you both wait here. You shouldn’t be going out in this chaos. I’ll go with Sumedha.” He went to phone his best friend.

I badly wanted to go with him but was too scared to speak. I’d done enough damage already. “I’m...I’m going to come right?” Ammi asked tentatively, following Thathi to the car.

He turned around. “Better not,” he said shortly. Then seeing her frightened, teary eyes he softened.

“You stay home with Sam, Malki. It’s not safe...” He realized I was listening and stopped. He gave her a quick hug and patted me on the shoulder. “We don’t know how long this will take. You stay here. I’ll let you know what happens.”

We watched as he got into the car, and a few seconds later he left.

Ammi and I didn’t know what to say to each other. Going into my room, I looked at my phone in despair. We’d been trying and trying to call Akki, but an annoyingly calm recording said, “the Dialog you called has not responded. Please try again later.” I couldn’t get through to Arun either. When I called Aruniya, she said in a scared voice that her brother also hadn’t returned and her parents were really worried. I tried Akki one more time and slammed the phone on the bed in frustration.

Ammi spoke to my father every few minutes on the phone, but they didn’t seem to be having any luck. I felt so angry with Arun! He should’ve known better than to get Akki out on a day like this. He should have made her stay at home if he really cared... I gulped. A small, sneering voice inside me said, “You should have, too.” I started crying.

Thathi came back at about six o’ clock, exhausted. From his face I could see that he had almost given up; he looked so broken. I felt weak from worry and fear. My parents were not talking and the lunch things were still on the table. I didn’t believe in God but I couldn’t help whispering a prayer over and over again, “Please let her be safe...please...” Each time the phone rang we jumped. And we waited, hoping for a knock on the door and Akki walking in with her dimpled smile saying, “Sorry, guys. I’m a bit late.”

But nothing like that happened. After forcing some food down our throats, just for the sake of some “energy,” Thathi went out again. This time we managed to convince him that we should go too. He was too tired to protest. Sumedha Uncle had been with us right along and the police also came this time. We stopped at each house near Food City, near the temple where the riot had broken out, and near McDonalds, where the two of them often used to hang out. At every stop, we asked people if they’d seen a girl and a boy, a fair girl of medium height and size, with straight hair and a birth-mark on her chin, and a tall, dark boy maybe wearing a silver chain.

No one seemed to have seen them. Aruniya had stopped answering her phone, but their house wasn't hard to find. With the high-up position Thathi had had in the army, information was fairly easy to get. We made our way to the Jeyechandrans around 10.30 that night, following the directions we got from one of my father's contacts. A plain-clothes policeman came with us. I could see the hatred mixed with tension in Thathi's face. Ammi seemed half-dead with pain and anxiety. I knew it was stupid, but I was just wishing, hoping against hope, even praying, that we would find Akki there, safe with Arun.

We crossed the porch, rang the bell, waited a couple of minutes, then rang again. There were sounds of shuffling and a dark man, probably in his late fifties, opened the door and stepped out.

"What is it?" He seemed annoyed at being disturbed at this time of the night.

"Where is your son Arun?" The plain-clothes policeman asked.

The man's face changed. He looked suspicious. "Who are you?" he asked. "What do you want with my son?"

The policeman took out his ID and shoved it in the man's face. "We are from the police, see? A girl is missing and we think your son is connected. A *Sinhala* girl," he added meaningfully.

The man visibly tightened. He looked at each of us and his gaze seemed to stop at me for a bit longer than usual. I felt eerie and wondered if he'd ever met Akki or seen a picture of her. I didn't think so. If he had, he would have probably thought I was she. I looked around tensely and suddenly spotted Aruniya and a woman who was probably her mother, waiting some steps behind Mr. Jeyechandran, their faces white and drawn.

"I don't know," he said abruptly. Then his lip trembled and his face convulsed into fear. "I don't know, *mahatthaya*, I don't know. We have been waiting for him since the time he went out in the morning, and he still hasn't come back. Didn't send any message either. And we can't contact him on his phone."

The policeman was getting Arun's details when Thathi leant forwards and whispered something in his ear.

“This mahaththaya wants to see inside your house,” the policeman said, and, before Arun’s father could answer, Thathi brushed past him and went inside. Ammi trailed behind, her eyes full of tears. The man didn’t say anything, just watched as my parents entered his small home. I stayed outside not wanting to have to talk to Aruniya or see anything that reminded me even *more* of the web Akki had gotten herself entangled in, so unaware. Ammi’s voice cut through the darkness, brokenly shouting, “Pram! Pram! Pramodhi!” as she moved about the house.

The next day, when we still hadn’t got any news, we gave a notice to be put up with a picture of Akki, asking people to contact us if they got any news of her whereabouts. It seemed strange to see a picture of someone just like me up on a wall like that.

A day passed and still there was no news of Akki. Her disappearance was even broadcasted on TV, as a special favour for Thathi. But nothing happened. And, after a day or two, this just became part of the news one heard during war times. My parents and I were all ghosts mechanically going from one thing to another. Even the announcement that the A’ Level results would be out soon, didn’t shake me from my daze.

On the third day, we got a call from one of Thathi’s friends asking us to come immediately to a spot about an hour away, some place near a dilapidated house. I was shivering so much, it was difficult to even get into the car. As we neared the place, we saw a crowd of people gathered. I jumped out and ran towards them, fighting my way to the entrance of the house. Then I stopped. A body lay on the cracked floor within, covered by a sheet. The sheet showed a few faded blood-stains and was placed lightly over the body, as if wrapping it too tightly would hurt the body. Even before the cloth was removed, I knew it was my sister.

There were gashes across her body. She was swollen and a wound on her head was caked with dark red blood. Her left arm lay at a strange angle. Through her matted hair, I could see those earrings. Earrings he had probably given her. I fell by her side and started sobbing. Then heaving. Retching.

Looking at that beautiful face, now so still and unreachable, I realized that I’d subconsciously known all along that she was gone. It was as

if in Akki's last "I love you," she had said her final goodbye; as if she'd tried to tell me she wasn't coming back, even though she herself hadn't known that. We are, no, *were*, twins after all.

It is too painful to write what happened next and, after all, what's the point? It's not going to bring her back. Ammi fainted as soon as she took a look at the body and Thathi's face became a weird, cold white. The funeral was held two days later and there was hardly room to move, with so many school friends, teachers, and Army officers crowded in our small living room. The death was put down to head injuries, possibly from a heavy instrument. No one knew for sure. We could only assume that she would have been hit by some passing rioters. There was nothing in the house that could have injured her badly enough to kill. Arun too was still missing.

A few days later, the policeman who'd gone with us to the Jeyechandrans came over. From my room, I could hear the low drone of his conversation with my parents. I couldn't figure out what he was saying and I just didn't have the strength to get up and go to the living room. Part of me didn't want to. It was too hard.

Right after he left, there was a knock on my door and Ammi came in. I continued to sit on my bed staring ahead, waiting for her to speak. She too sat on my bed. "They've found his body."

"Arun's?" My voice was trembling.

"Yes, putha."

I started crying again. I couldn't control myself. It was just too much. Had they been killed together? Had he seen how she died or had he been killed first? Or had he...had he been a spy for the LTTE, like my father had said? A suicide bomber? All sorts of crazy thoughts raced around in my head. "Where did they find him?" I whispered.

Ammi came close to me and put her arm around my shoulders. "Near Maradana. About half an hour away from where Pram," her voice broke, "was found." She told me that the body had been thrown into one of those old, abandoned sheds adjoining the railway station. Apparently it was severely bruised and there were marks around his neck that indicated hanging. A hotchpotch of fingerprints covered the body and it was hard to

know who'd been involved. But one thing was certain; it was the body of a young Tamil man, dark, tall. A man with a gash across his elbow.

One day, about two weeks later, unable to stop replaying in my mind the way she had died, I decided I just *had* to go and see the place one more time. I was walking towards the old house, now with weeds sprouting from the sides, when a woman came up to me and said, "Are you the girl with the boyfriend?"

I thought I'd heard wrong and asked sharply, "What?"

She seemed a bit uneasy. "Sorry, I mean, are you the girl who came about two weeks ago with a tall, dark boy? I hope you are okay now." My jaw suddenly tightened. What was this woman saying? Had she seen Akki on the day of her death? Did she think it was me? Had she seen *how* my sister had died?

"Just...just tell me what you know," I stammered. "I'm her sister, please."

The lady seemed to be really scared now. "No, I'm sorry. I think I made a mistake. It must have been somebody else."

"No!" I screamed. I was desperate. I couldn't let go of this chance to know. "You're talking of my sister. She's dead. *Dead!*" Then I whispered, almost in tears, "You have to tell me."

"Dead?" The woman's face had gone white. "You mean he *killed* her?"

"Who killed her?" My thoughts were running in so many directions, I thought my head would burst. "Please," I begged, "you have to tell me".

The woman was looking this way and that, as if searching for a way to escape, but she seemed to have realized I wouldn't let her go without the truth.

"I was visiting from Kandy," she said in a scared voice, "And had come to check on a house in this area that we had bought. It was then that I saw this girl who looked so much like you, going into that old house with a boy. The boy seemed really angry and was shouting. I think I caught the words, 'Just because I'm Tamil.' The girl seemed to be crying."

I tensed, feeling more and more confused...and frightened.



“I didn’t want to interfere but felt worried because the boy looked so angry. So I thought I’d wait a while in my car. But then, when neither of them had come out, even after about half an hour, I left. My husband called wanting me to come home soon, because he’d heard on the news that things around here were getting heated up. I thought the couple would’ve left the house another way and I too left, not wanting to get caught to the traffic and those rioting groups. I was thinking to myself *how* some young men treated girls these days. I’ve often thought of the girl and hoped she was ok. I felt bad, because I didn’t check in on her,” she added.

“And you didn’t tell anyone?” I whispered. “Do you know how much we searched for her? How hard we tried to find out how she died?”

“How could I have known? I don’t live around here. I didn’t even know that there had been a death. I see young couples having arguments all the time. I didn’t know...”

Her story only bewildered me, and made me wonder whether Arun had ever loved Akki at all. Had his threat been real? Had he killed her because she told him they had to split up for good? And then had he killed himself? Had it really happened that way? Was that how she had died? I felt I would go crazy without knowing. I felt anger...and hatred. He had ruined everything. *Everything.*

When I got home, I immediately told my parents what I’d heard and we went to the police. We told Thathi’s friends in the Army. The police spoke to the Jeyechandrans, but they had nothing more to tell us. I felt so angry and then guilty, each time I thought of how I’d let Arun, yes, even *helped* him walk in on our happy family and take away the person I loved most. Then I’d start feeling sorry for Arun. He had lost her too, we’d all lost her, because of this wretched war. And he had also lost his life.

We went for countless counseling sessions on handling trauma, getting over loss, and all that crap. But it didn’t help. Ammi broke down completely the day the A’ Level results came and we got to know that Akki had gained entrance to the Medical Faculty.

I was given sleeping pills to put myself to sleep, but no one knew that I dreaded sleep, when she would come to me in my dreams and cry out

asking me why I hadn't protected her. Or when I would see her body lying on the ground, bruised, scarred and swollen.

Now, four years later, I am still tired. Tired of this pain, this constant feeling of loss. Recently it was announced, amidst almost insane jubilation, that Prabhakaran was killed. People were running and jumping on the road as if they'd gone mad shouting, "Prabhakaran malaa, api dan dinuwaa!" The town was full of fireworks and free distributions of kiribath. But who cares? I lost my peace a long time back.

I stare at the moon. Night has fallen and soon she will come and ask me over and over again why I let her go that day. She will cry till I want to scream, till I want to tear my heart out and give it to her. She will remind me of the times we used to laugh together on this same bed, fight together, sing songs together. She will haunt me till I wake up, take my diary, and write down for the hundredth time, the story of my twin: "For Love".

***Shalini Abayasekara** is from Kandy and is a recent graduate of the University of Peradeniya. After her parents started to read to her as a child, she developed an enjoyment for reading, and subsequently took up writing both prose and poetry. She sets her story in an atmosphere that contains attitudes and prejudices she occasionally comes across in her daily interactions.*

## MY DAYS ARE NUMBERED

*By Saambavi Sivaji*

The sun is scorching outside. It sends its angry rays through the window. Rays that once gave me warmth now irritate me. I look through the windows. Sutha walks towards the gate; her head slowly disappears into the crowd.

Being a man of thirty-five, I am not supposed to cry, yet I can't control the pumping emotions inside my heart. I can't control my tears. I want to wail, "Why was I given a severe punishment like this? Is it because I married Sutha without her parents' blessings?" I am not a thug or a murderer. I am an ordinary man who wants to live happily with my family. But I am no longer the Suresh who never cried, just a patient in the Maharagama Cancer Hospital.

Sutha, my loving wife who lights up my horizon visits me every week. My kids Raji and Ramesh are always expecting me back home, asking Sutha a number of questions everyday—"Amma where is Appa? When will he come back?" Their innocent hearts do not understand that their father will never come back. When Sutha visits me next week, will I still be alive?

My eyes rest on the grey clock and my mind travels back to my university days when I met her. It was in October 2000 and I was in my second year at Jaffna University, doing a special degree in Economics. We, the seniors, were sitting on benches, looking forward to the arrival of the first year newcomers, especially the beautiful girls.

The first year students approached the premises fearfully. Boys and girls neatly dressed, trying to avoid the searching eyes of the seniors. A gang of seniors were at the gate bullying a group of newcomers. A boy was ordered to remove his shirt and circle a tree near him. Some boys were riding bicycles with helmets on their heads inside the university premises, a form of ragging invented by Vinoth to embarrass the new boys. A broad-shouldered boy was standing in front of the Parameswaran Temple on one leg, both hands above his head, like an ascetic. A group of girls were ordered to propose to the boy circling the tree.

My pals spotted one girl. "Hey blue churidar, come here."

A girl slowly drew near us, her hands tightly grasping her books, drops of sweat on her forehead. She was very pretty. Her big round eyes rolled up and down with fear, her face with its chubby cheeks reminded me of the pictures of angels I had seen in my childhood text books. A feeling of warmth sparkled through me. I wanted to look into her eyes and lose myself in them.

Vinoth, known to be a strict senior, demanded, "What's your name?"

"Su- thaa"

Sutha – a lovely name that echoed in my mind.

"Place your books on your head and do ten warm up exercises. If the books fall on the ground you should repeat it. Your exercises must include bending down with books on your head. Your time starts now, come on do it quickly."

Sutha looked at us pleadingly.

"Come on girl, if you don't do this you have to run around the entire premises with a load of books on your head," Vinoth shouted.

Sutha started crying. I wanted to punch my pal.

"Machan let her go," I said to Vinoth.

"What! We haven't started ragging. Come on girl, do it will you," Vinoth snarled.

"Sutha go to your class." I couldn't believe my words.

She looked at me thankfully and walked quickly away. I avoided the stares of my pals and walked behind Sutha like a veil following a bride.

Soon I was Sutha's devotee and I finally wooed her and won her love. Our love story was well known in our university. "Suresh – Sutha", you can find our names everywhere – on the desks, benches and trees.

Sutha did a special degree in English literature and introduced me to her world of writers - Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Frost, Shelley and Keats.

It was difficult for me to understand her world as I was very poor in English. But Sutha nagged me to learn the language.

Often we would sit under our favourite Banyan tree, the gentle breeze embracing us, a pigeon cooing in the branches, and Sutha's curls gently moving as she instructed me. Her cheeks glowed in the sunshine.

I did the English exercises grudgingly, feeling burdened by them.

"Come on Suresh," she would say, "why are you so stubborn? Please do this one."

"Sutha we have only thirty minutes to love. I'll do this as homework, please?"

She would squeeze my ear lovingly. "This is classwork. Quickly do it," she'd say stroking my hair and squeezing my ear again.

I would do the exercise to receive more caresses.

Vinoth and his gang often passed us and he would crack jokes saying, "Machan, why Shakespeare? Come and shake a beer."

We would burst into laughter.

Sutha taught me English every day for fifteen minutes. She covered reading, writing, listening and grammar. Soon I was able to understand her world. She narrated to me the poems and short stories she studied, moving her hands, widened eyes full of expression. I gazed intensely at her eyes as she talked and I began to love Shakespeare's famous tragedies, especially "Romeo and Juliet." Sutha was my Juliet. I put her on a pedestal and worshipped her as a goddess.

When we finished our University career, I joined a bank as a clerk. Sutha continued her academic career. As usual, problems arose when we decided to marry.

I had loved her, forgetting that we were living in a highly caste-conscious society. Sutha belonged to an orthodox Hindu family which gave priority to caste. Her parents would never agree to this marriage as I belonged to a lower caste.

My ancestors were fishermen. My grandfather went to sea and fished. Appa studied engineering at Peradeniya University and settled in Colombo. When we were living in Colombo I knew nothing about caste and divisions. But Jaffna taught me that I belong to one of the lower castes – the fishing community. Our conundrum did not look like it would ever be solved.

One day I received a letter from Sutha.

Dear Suresh,

Appa's friend came to our house yesterday and informed him of our love affair. I think he saw us together somewhere. Appa is furious. His eyes are like flames. He slapped me and said, "You idiot, have you forgotten your pedigree? How dare you be in love with that low caste bastard. This is a well-planned trap to mix with our caste. Are you trying to bring disgrace to my family? Never ever imagine you can marry that scavenger." He does not allow me to go anywhere and is planning to arrange a marriage for me. Suresh please do something.

Ever loving,

Sutha.

After I got over my initial shock at this sudden development, I worked out a plan with my pals and relayed it to Sutha through her friend. A week later, we were sitting in a van and waiting for Sutha near her house. In the darkness, I saw a figure coming softly down the front path. It was Sutha. Their gate was locked, so we helped her jump over the wall. Sutha hugged me, tears trembling in her eyes. We got into the van and hurried away. The next morning we got married.

At our marriage, I looked into Sutha's eyes and promised, "You are a princess to your parents. But from today onwards you are my queen. I'll adore you with all my heart. I'll never ever make you cry."

Sutha's eyes twinkled like stars as she smiled at me. I lifted her off her feet and hugged her.

Now I am a dried up river, thinking of those moments. What bloody sin have I committed to arrive at where I have?

I take my eyes away from the grey clock, to find Ranil, another patient in this ward, in front of me.

The ravages of cancer are apparent on him. He is bald. His broad shoulders indicate that he was once a strongly built man, but now his skin sags, his eyes are puffed up and his lips are dried and cracked. He was given chemotherapy last week. Cancer cells have developed even in his liver and his condition is more precarious than mine. I am surviving with blood transfusions. Although he is suffering, he always tries to be cheerful to make me happy. He is the most cheerful person I have ever met. Unlike me, he is a bachelor with no one to think about. From the first moment I met him, his face has always seemed familiar to me, though I have never met him before coming here.

He hands me a handkerchief to wipe my tears.

“Have you had your lunch?” Ranil asks trying to distract me.

“If I eat will I live longer? My fate is decided. I don’t want these meals.”

“Come on man, I am going to eat yours.”

Ranil slowly takes my plate and starts eating. I ignore his teasing.

Where does he get his cheerfulness from? It is ironic that it is this man from a different race and religion who tries to cheer me up even though he too is suffering.

“Aaah...” Ranil rushes for his water bottle and drinks a gulp. “I munched a green chillie.”

“Have you been to Colombo?” Ranil asks as he carefully separates the green chillies and puts them on the side of his plate.

“Yes I lived there, but....”

“But, what?”

I stare at the ceiling. I loathed the Sinhalese after the 1983 riots. The atrocities committed to Tamil families can never be forgotten, the fear filled nights, the intense inner pain was intolerable.

Ranil waits for my response.

“Your people chased us from Colombo.”

“My people.... I have no people, no religion, no care, and no worries.”

“I am talking about your identity. People who have the same identity as yours chased us.”

“Yes it was true, but it was an organized act by some nasty politicians. Don’t blame the innocent citizens. How many Tamil families were protected by Sinhalese? They gave shelter to innocent Tamils.”

“Shelter? What the hell, we were not given shelter anywhere.”

“Didn’t you have any Sinhala neighbours?”

“We had. Our next door neighbours were Sinhalese. But they remained silent when the thugs entered our house and set it on fire.”

Ranil gets up and washes his hand at the sink. He comes to sit on my bed. “I am sorry. Where did you live in Colombo?”

Ranil wants to dig into my past and I am happy to give vent to my feelings of hatred. “We lived in Wellawatte.”

Ranil moves his lips, mouthing the name. My mind is so absorbed in the past, I barely notice him.

“My Appa was an engineer at the State Engineering Cooperation. Amma, Appa, my sister Kavi, Kumar Uncle, my Amma’s brother, and I lived a comfortable life. Our next door neighbours were the Jayawardene family. They were caring, helpful and considerate neighbours. We celebrated festivals together. Amma and Dinali aunty always exchanged their special festival food. The Jayawardenes never missed celebrating Diwali and Pongal with us.”

Ranil’s eyes widen and he murmurs something but I barely notice, lost in my story.

“My sole play mate was Wije, the Jayewardenes’ son, a chubby little boy with a round face and curly hair. He was fairer than me. He was a lover of chocolates and spicy items. As a result he was blessed with a little tummy.



We teased him, calling him ‘tummy boy.’ He was one year younger than me. Wije came to our house on weekdays and I was at his house on weekends. Wije ate at my house and I at his. We built little mud houses. Wije had a kitchen set and we made mud rice and curry. He was the cheerful leader. When making mud rice and curry, he was the one who led. He would say, ‘Suresh, bring water quickly, no don’t put mud now. We’ll do it later.’ ‘Wije I want to add some mud,’ I would beg, but he would insist and I always obeyed because even his orders were cheerful.

“Kumudini Aunty, Wije’s aunt, sometimes joined us, helping to make mud cakes. Wije and I were sometimes taken to Wellawatte beach by Kumar Uncle and Kumudini Aunty. We would cling to their hands and loved the evening walks. We would carefully cross the railway track and step onto Wellawatte beach. The evening sun, at that time, was slowly embracing the calm sea. The beach and rocks were crowded with people. An old man walking on the shore, always greeted us. A few children would be playing in the sea, splashing water on each other’s faces, umbrella lovers cuddled together behind the shrubs and bushes. Wije and I would start building sand houses while Kumar Uncle and Kumudini Aunty sat on a rock and talked. In between chatting, their eyes rested on us. They would hold hands and Kumar Uncle would sometimes move Kumudini Aunty’s curls behind her ears. She in return adjusted his collar.

“Once, when they were sitting like this, Kumudini Aunty suddenly started crying. Wije and I gazed at each other alarmed, as Kumar Uncle wiped her cheeks with his hands. We turned our heads from them and concentrated on our sand house.

“That was the last trip to Wellawatte beach with them. After that we were not allowed to go. Amma warned me, ‘Suresh, Appa is angry with you, don’t upset him.’ Wije and I felt that our families were not like before. Appa and Jayawardene Uncle talked less.

“Kumar Uncle introduced a new game to us called letter-passing. ‘Suresh give this letter to Wije, he will give it to Kumudini Aunty. She will send a reply tomorrow through Wije, and Suresh bring it to me. Remember this is a secret game. The important rule of this game is that the letters must not be shown to anybody. Keep this secret.’

“The letter-passing game was very interesting. We ran up and down passing the notes. One day, Malini Aunty, the shop uncle’s wife asked me, ‘Suresh, what’s going on between Kumudini and Kumar? Affair?’ The word ‘affair’ was new to me. I shrugged my shoulders and ran to Wije to clear my doubts. Wije rolled his eyes when I said ‘affair.’ ‘I don’t know Suresh.’ Wije curled his lips, dismissively.

“A few days later, it was the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. We wore new clothes and decorated our house with flowers. Sweets and fruits filled our table and Amma and Dinali Aunty exchanged sweets. Later, Wije came to our house and lit crackers with me. Everything was going well, when suddenly we heard a roar. Jayawardene uncle appeared with Kumar Uncle, his hand grasping his collar as he dragged him up our front path. Amma ran to rescue him. Jayawardene Uncle shouted angrily and pushed Kumar Uncle towards us. ‘I caught him red handed.’ ‘What happened?’ Appa who had come out demanded. ‘What happened?’ Jayawardene Uncle replied. ‘He was trying to abuse my sister.’ ‘Mind your words I was talking with her,’ Kumar uncle cried, raising his voice. ‘You rascal, were you talking?’ Jayawardene Uncle retorted. Appa stared at Kumar Uncle angrily, then turned towards Jayawardene Uncle. ‘Why are you shouting here? Go and warn your sister. The fault is on both sides.’ Jayawardene Uncles face became red and he cried back, ‘You Tamils are schemers. You are trying to creep into our family.’ ‘Ha!’ Appa retorted. ‘We don’t want a relationship with your family. Kumar will not disturb your sister anymore. I will be responsible for that. You’d better go and keep an eye on your sister.’ Jayawardene Uncle grabbed the crackers in Wije’s hands, threw them away, then took his son’s arm and hurried back to their house.

“Wije and I were not allowed to speak to each other. Appa ordered me, ‘Suresh, don’t go to that Sinhala house. Always remember you are a Tamil, a minority race. You can never mix with them - those domineering tyrants.’ But Wije sneaked from his house and came to see me. His eyes were filled with horror. ‘Suresh, Thathi told me not to speak with you. He slapped Kumudini Aunty. She is crying constantly. Her condition is so pathetic. Thathi says Kumudini Aunty and Kumar Uncle are in love. The letters we exchanged are their love letters. Thathi scolded me severely for being a go-between. He is going to send Kumudini Aunty to Kandy and planning to get her married to her cousin. I don’t think I can meet you and play with you anymore.

Whenever I get a chance I'll run to see you. Bye.' Wije ran away and I watched his head disappear into the trees. He never turned up. That was our last meeting. A few days later, Appa sent Kumar Uncle to Jaffna.

"The black days of July 1983, that put an end to our existence in Colombo, came a few months later. The shop uncle came early morning and warned us that Tamils all over Colombo were being attacked, their houses prey to looters who set them on fire. We locked our doors and stayed inside the whole day. Our house was filled with fear and trauma. Amma began chanting all the mantras to the Gods and Goddesses. We huddled together in our shrine room. It was midnight, then two o' clock. A loud bang on our door shook us. I held Amma's hand tightly. Another loud blow! My heart was pounding and we were all sweating. My sister Kavi started crying. Amma closed her mouth and held her tightly. We heard harsh male voices outside. '*Kowtha athula? Dora arinda.*' One final loud blow, our door cracked open. My hands shivered. Throat dry, I closed my eyes. A group of men were searching for us. They shouted, '*Eliyatta varella.*' The sound of footsteps drew near. The door crashed open and the men were in front of us, laughing greedily. They were like ferocious lions eagerly staring at prey. All of them had big iron sticks and swords. They dragged us from the shrine room. We wailed helplessly. A big fat man put his sword on Appa's neck. We sobbed loudly and Amma knelt down, pleading with him. '*Sshhhhh palayang eliyatta.*' He gestured for us to leave. One man took us outside our house and ordered us to stay near the gate. He stood guard over us. The other men threw all our possessions into the middle of our hall, poured kerosene on the pile, then lit a fire. Our house burned and turned into ashes in front of our eyes. Our possessions and treasures gone forever. I looked at Wije's house. They were inside, but no one came out to us, not even Wije. And so we fled to Jaffna as soon as everything was normal, in search of peace and familiarity."

Ranil's gaze is fixed on me, as I return to the present. Tears glisten in his eyes. He moves closer and takes my hand.

"Suresh I am your Wije, your childhood pal who failed to embrace you when you were in danger. My pet name was Wije. Ranil Jayawardene is my real name. So I introduced myself as Ranil to you. My parents died years

ago. I remained single. Kumudini Aunty married her cousin. He was an Army soldier. He died in the war. How is Kumar Uncle?"

I am wordless. I can't believe my ears.

"Kumar Uncle never married," I finally say. "He was fed up with the government and the majority race. He joined the LTTE. We don't know what happened to him."

We look through the window, digesting the truths we have revealed.

A volunteer group who comes to help cancer patients, is chatting happily with the other patients in our ward- a Tamil man, a Sinhala girl, and a Muslim woman. I look at Wije. He smiles slightly, both of us understanding the same thing.

Kumar Uncle and Kumudini Aunty could not marry because of race, I struggled to marry Sutha, even though we belong to the same race. But people, in the end, are the same when death is at their gates.

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## FAIRY TALES

*By Vindhya Buthpitiya*

We scuttle through the charred remains of the town like hermit crabs in search of homes, the estranged peninsula heat we had long ago bartered for the British cold, bears down on our clammy backs. Appa and I find our house, now in ruins. It no longer speaks the intimate vernacular of home, but lolls on our tongues like an uneasy foreign syllable.

Appa enters the house in resolute silence, as I sit on the front step with Amma by my side. I watch Appa trace his nervous, trembling fingers over each crack, ball bearings spattered on the walls like a contagion of acne. Our mango tree is long gone, and in its place stands a disfigured barren stump mourned by the falling red flowers of the frangipani tree. The walls are flayed, revealing brick-red flesh and cement grey bones. An infection of gangrene hued moss gnaws its way over the scant tissue of the blue chunam walls. Saplings that creep out of seeds discarded by nocturnal bats weave dressings over inflamed wounds. The rooms are hollowed out, Margosa beams caved in, crushed and scorched. The breeze crusted with the mineral tang of the sea and the petrol fires that blackened the outer walls, no longer smells like home.

At dawn and dusk, in the years we lived here, the thick, smoky fragrance of coconut oil and jasmine incense would rise from Amma's loyal brass lamps lit to the Himalayan pantheon; many-headed, many-handed, and benevolent with their gifts. Her melodic prayers crowned our courtyard house like a halo.

I did not mind the daily ritual but my sister Taru despised being compelled to recite the prayers. She did not believe in sacred words, fidgeting as Amma painted our foreheads red, yellow and grey with blessings and, thereafter, rewarded us with the syrupy saffron Jalebi she kept hidden in an old milk powder tin. If Taru's budding defiance troubled Amma, it did not show. The cadenced thud-thud of Kamalini Ayah pounding dried chillies and the creaking pulley of Appa's well bath rhymed at odds with each other, as we prayed each morning. Sun-dappled patta saris rippled on the line against the background of barren sand that crept towards the

lazy blue-green waters. The kovil bells would ring and the sun circled the sky.

Amma no longer smells like honey oranges and sandalwood talcum, but of purple orchid and white lily funeral wreaths. We have brought her back home, my-honey-orange-and-Gokul-Santol-scented Amma; ashes in an urn draped in a Kanjivaram silk the colour of peacock feathers.

Appa and I fumble in each other's company, tentative and taciturn. The reality that we have nothing to say to each other has grown into an uncomfortable habit over our years in London, punctuated with brief phone calls that are clumsy duty-bound exchanges.

I was convinced that I had grown accustomed to the distance that had fermented between us. But, in the years that I spent working the cash till at the GoodLuck Cybercafé in London, I grew achingly aware that I had no one left to peer and exclaim at my stop-motion self through faltering Third World internet. As I collected reluctant pound coins from the hands of human debris, who, like me, had washed up on First World shores in oversized woollens, with hand-me-down dreams pinned to our sleeves, I grew aware that we were brethren in homesickness. We had learned to coexist with the bilious prickle of nostalgia that curdled and bristled through our insides. Vanished affections lingered like spirits in the corners of our eyes; forgotten native names irksome at the tips of our tongues. Each day, a confusion of lips would fondly call out hellos into blinking screens, earth coloured faces and dark eyes sometimes stained with the liquid nostalgia they could not contain.

It was among them that I encountered Juderaj. Eelam, a state to call our own, rang in his ears like a heavenly orchestra, kindling ferocity in his heart. His earnest amber eyes would comb through GoodLuck's foundlings for the hues and intonations of our homeland. "Looking for work? A cheap room to rent, you ask? I know a family from Amparai in Wembley that will take you in. Send your family money? No problem — my friend Siva will take care of it."

Juderaj spun a tenacious spider web of kinship among us. From Valvettithurai to Kattankudy, we sought out the reassurances of his brotherly, island-inflected kindness. He often invited us to Rasa's, a dingy crawlspace in

Tooting, where they served steaming bowls of Odiyal Kool he swore would make our grandmothers envious. He was generous with the crisp twenty-pound notes he lent to the newest in our group. "Until you find your footing. I will speak to Saraswati about a job." In those evenings we spent, picking at plentiful thalis, I learned how Juderaj's family was gunned down by our enemies as he fought for our land on the frontlines. How, after shrapnel from an errant Jony mine had ripped through the flesh of his left leg, he fled to Italy on a boat and found his way through the continent to Britain.

"They couldn't break me and they won't break our people." Pink satin scars of survival rippled triumphantly on the tea-coloured skin of his crashing fist, his limp notched with the victories that were not only his own but of *our people*. "They will kill us all! We are fighting for what is ours. A land where our people, the Tamils, can be free from the cruelty of the Sinhala state!"

He waxed poetic about resistance and homeland and we grew hungrier for the zest of his words.

Juderaj, the patron saint of the boat people.

Juderaj who also fought our enemy alongside my sister.

When I mentioned this in passing to Appa, for lack of anything to say during a particularly uncomfortable obligatory phone call, he was furious.

"HOW DARE YOU," he roared, his anger undulating through the telephone wire. "They took her from us."

Taru, the rebel, was his favourite. "A Feminist Revolutionary," she called herself. Her long braid folded under a Baker Boy Cap, she cycled to meetings in dim university rooms littered with second-hand books dissected by second-hand intellectuals. She argued scarlet politics and ideology, her kohl-rimmed eyes shining with vigour. In those years, when the ferric stench of the skirmish drifted to the sleepy folds of our town, men and boys began to disappear into the night and out to The Cause. Then one evening, we lost Taru. The sugary promise of liberation drew her out of our house and into the human-powered war machine that tore through the jungles; a many-headed, many-handed beast that trampled, bloodied and razed the earth it

sought to claim. Appa's grandiose dreams for Taru's academic trailblazing were hampered by The Cause.

Appa decided we would move to the capital before they came for me. Spectres of shame and anger scratched at his composure and he bled out exasperation at any mention of my sister by Amma, who no longer knew sleep or happiness.

"But how can we go when we know she's out there? What if she wants to find us?" Amma wailed. "She is all alone."

"We have raised her blind! Indulged her fantasies, when we should have stopped her from cavorting with these dangerous ideas. She was playing with fire and we stood by and applauded her intelligence. Now she has shamed us. Do you think any good is going to come of this so-called revolution? The gods will turn their backs on us for letting our daughter kill our own people." Appa's words were weighed down with fury. "She has brought a curse on us. A curse on our people!"

The troubles would soon pass, he asserted as we squeezed into the backseat of an old black taxicab groaning under the weight of Amma's brass lamps and stone pagoda wrapped into patta sari bundles. As we drove away, my face and palms were smashed up against the dusty back window. Our garden whirled behind us like a batik-clad dervish in the northern sun, green grass spangled with fuchsia Hibiscus, red Frangipani, and white Mallika. Lustrous tunnels of golden sunlight delved through the jade leaves of the mango tree, juicy yellow fruits swaying perilously in the wispy afternoon breeze. A mental postcard to be looked at in another life that was divorced from the saline air, sun-drenched mangos and the smell of blood-red Frangipani. We had left it all behind in the hands of callow gun-bearing young men who were fighting on our behalf. The tart tingle of cumin-scented idli and Jasmine incense sticks disappeared into the silver ribbon of the A9 like smoky peninsula mirages.

Melancholy nipped and clawed at our unsteady feet in Colombo. As the war spun its madness, the government's hired guns frequently trampled through our Colombo annex and tore apart Appa's papers and Amma's almirah, the smooth butts of Kalashnikovs pressed into our temples. Amma's



hysterical cries often filled the house when she learned of deaths in our town. Appa glowered as she murmured questions about my sister into the telephone, from those who had stayed behind.

“She is my child,” Amma sniffed into the receiver’s mechanical ear. “How can I not ask if anyone has seen her?”

“She does not want to be found and she is no longer our child,” Appa would declare loudly to no one in particular.

It appeared that Appa and Amma had forgotten me, inaudibly suspended in the burdened space between them. Sometimes I slipped out to the beach, over the rail tracks that meandered past our house, to play in the surf and conquer the jagged rocks. In that small annex in Colombo, Amma grew frail, Appa grew cold and neither one noticed my absences. While Amma tearfully prayed to her gods, Appa zealously wrote letters to diluted branches of the family tree and unkind embassy personnel who might help us with a golden ticket; a visa.

“There is no space for our people in this country.” Appa paced furiously, dictating letters to me. “They want to kill us all!”

The memory of those entreaties rested in my fingers for long after: *I fear for the lives of my wife and child. We are live human meat thrown into the cages of hungry beasts shackled to politics and greed. Tigers and lions, they are starved for blood and it won't be long before we are murdered. Please help us.*

We had spent nearly two years in Colombo when we learned that Taru had made the inevitable sacrifice. We journeyed as far north as we were allowed to travel for a last glimpse of her mangled body in a town at the threshold of what The Cause promised us: a homeland bounded by twists of barbed wire, where we would be free. Viscous, mustard coloured scabs had burgeoned across her crushed heart-shaped face, her torn, shrapnel-riddled limbs blossoming ruby and sapphire like the wedding jewels she would never wear. Her long-lashed almond eyes were lifeless, the embers of The Cause finally extinguished. That was the only time I saw Appa weep, his ragged, harrowed bearing giving way to the shrill, distressed keening of a wounded animal. An eerie silence fell upon Amma whose heart and mind

soon crumbled into perennial misery, or her *illness*, as Appa whispered to appease the enquiries of our concerned landlady.

There would be no funeral, nor any answers to the questions that bloomed on the grapevine. He brushed off queries from family and erstwhile friends, resentfully wearing the dishonour he believed Taru had brought upon us.

Upon returning from Taru's hasty cremation, we found Amma's revered pantheon of many-handed, many-headed gods robbed of their benevolence, broken to pieces and discarded at the bottom of the garden.

Amma howled in despair, and Appa icily chided her that her gods had been dead a long time.

"Who will protect us?" she whimpered, forehead bruised by the vigour with which she slammed her head repeatedly onto the concrete floor at the cracked feet of her idols, her long black hair in a dishevelled tangle of disgrace.

"Your gods don't care for us. We are already a cursed people," Appa snarled.

I was sent away to England some weeks later with Pettah pavement suitcases and oversized woollens, Appa's and Amma's dreams pinned to my sleeve. Amma did not have tears left for goodbyes. Taru's ghost flickered in her glassy gaze.

I only learned of Amma's death in a brief phone exchange three months after I had started working at GoodLuck. "It was her illness. You need not bother coming to Colombo. We finished it quickly," Appa said dispassionately before he hung up, without waiting for a response. Even though sorrow swiftly pierced through my heart, I knew we had lost Amma the night Taru disappeared. On the tenth day of mourning, I shaved my head as custom dictated, rinsing bleeding nicks with dishwashing liquid and icy water. Although Juderaj had shunned his God and saints, he accompanied me to the Tooting Amman Temple where I lit an oil lamp not in devotion, but because it was what Amma would have expected.

A few weeks later, Appa telephoned to say he had been in London several days and was staying with a second-cousin until he found work.

It dawned on me that we had turned into strangers, when I felt no affront at this slight. I could only imagine how he had uttered the last of his practiced answers to the toneless prescribed interrogation at Heathrow. His unrelenting attempts at securing asylum were finally realized with the quick concluding stamp on his passport. I was grateful that he did not ask to stay with me in the dismal basement flat I shared with four strangers.

“The things I have to listen to in this place. I don’t like these London Tamil politics, those involved acting like they lived through the war,” Appa said, when he phoned to inform me that he had found a job as a cashier at a Jaffna grocery store, his Chartered Accountant certificates tucked away in a cardboard box with his meagre belongings and Amma’s ashes. It had been a couple of months since he had arrived in London and, even though I meant to ask him about his search for work and lodgings, I had not got around to calling him.

“What do these fools know?” He continued in disdain. “Propping up dead relatives like puppets... calling them martyrs! It’s a shameless bloody nonsense.”

“Taru was a martyr,” I found myself parroting Juderaj’s ardour at Appa. “She died in the name of the homeland!”

On those evenings Juderaj and I had wept and bristled over the fate of our people, I had begun to believe, to feel my loss ripening into rage.

“Your sister had an extraordinary way with words. She carried the campaign on her shoulders — a true revolutionary nationalist,” Juderaj praised her. “She was not a sheep like these ones here,” he joked gesturing to the GoodLuck foundlings. “Comrade Taru was as fierce as a wronged goddess!”

I was baptised into The Cause by the apotheosis of my sister.

“She fought for Eelam. She was fighting for us.” I found daring in the promises of Juderaj’s slick, hypnotic patriotism. “You are a coward. A self-righteous coward!” I admonished Appa’s bitterness. Our estrangement had by now given way to reproach on both sides.

“It is people like you with your big bloody dreams that have allowed us Tamils to be murdered!” Appa cried.

Appa and I did not speak for a while after my accusation. Months trickled past, bringing news of our burning, bleeding homeland, goading new fervour among us. Juderaj led the charge, persuading our foster city to take notice of The Cause. Yet, its death rattle had begun to echo even in the streets of London; its many hands axed, its proponents departed or bleeding.

News from home trickled into our ears like venom, and I could no longer bear to hear the horrors that came pinned to the sleeves of new faces that washed up from the island. When the news told us the war had ended, our leader maimed and killed, I could barely conceal my momentary lapse into relief.

“FAIRY TALES!” Juderaj bawled to a stunned audience at GoodLuck. “We are so close and they are ... they are trying to destroy our morale. FAIRY TALES!” It was the first time I had seen Saint Juderaj falter, his sly patriotism perturbed by the gruesome television reports that flashed before us. “The leader lives! He has spoken to me himself!” He regained his poise, but the tremor in his ragged foot did not lie.

The furious human vines that curled below the London underbelly told us The Cause was still breathing. Mismatched stories imparted in whispers and audiovisual detritus shaping a geography of intrigue multiplied into compelling conspiracies. “Genocide!” The word rose from crestfallen whisper to roaring rhetoric, as Juderaj rallied men and women under red flags with snarling tigers. “Our people have been murdered by the hundreds and thousands, devilish phosphorescent gases and mushrooming fire bombs razing and barraging the earth that was rightfully ours!” he lashed out at our gatherings.

“FAIRY TALES! We betrayed and killed our own people!” I imagined Appa bellowing in response.

In the days that passed after our defeat, I thought about phoning Appa a few times, but I did not want to give him the satisfaction of sensing my tardy realization.

One afternoon, several months after the war had ended, Back-Office Bill, once known in my village as Karuppiah Balendran, announced loudly that there was a phone call for me.

“Hello?” I called out, apprehensive of the unknown that could snake up the receiver’s coiling cable.

“Mahan? Amitesh?” Appa was still in the habit of shouting into the receiver, although he only lived twelve miles away in a sparse Hounslow bedsit. The ways of the island do not leave him, and he does not mind.

“Yeah, Appa. It’s Amitesh, you a’right?” Thick London foibles had begun to spoil my island-buffed Longman’s English Grammar.

“We can go back! I hear we can go back!” I had not heard joy in his voice for so long, I was confounded.

“Go back where Appa?” I asked uncertainly.

“Go back to our home, mahan. We can finally take Amma back *home* like she always dreamed.”

There was a time our land knew silence and laughter that sifted through the crackle of dry Palmyrah leaves and the tinkle of bicycle bells; a home where the ocean furred and unfurred in a dependable purr as we slept, awoke and played. Years later, I breathed in this perfume in a bowl of warm payasam bullioned with plump sultanas at Rasa’s, mustering up the slowly dimming sensory remains of what we had lost. Who we had lost. The ghosts of the martyred joined me in my corner booth. Together we pried apart the heavy grey pelt of London clouds for a glimpse of a tropical postcard we keep lodged between our heartstrings. It was not simply the blue chunam walls, the fertile mango trees and the green glass ocean, but a contested, bloodied dream fettered to the inhabitants of an ideological menagerie. We could not throw around the word “home” carelessly.



After many hours of tracing his sorrow-stiffened palms over the walls his forefathers had built, Appa joins me on the step. “Your Amma, she died of sadness,” Appa finally utters. “Her heart and her mind were eaten away by that great sadness she carried around.”

He picks up the urn and holds Amma’s ashes against his belly.

I wait for him to reveal more but he ends the conversation repeating with clinical certainty what he said to polite neighbours who had gathered at her wake, “She died of sadness, you see.” He never divulged to me that she had walked deeper and deeper into the ocean, breathing in water that filled her lungs until she could no longer inhale. They found her many days later, I gathered from those who called me in commiseration, bloated indigo and tangled in seaweed, caught in a fisherman’s net like a sun starved mermaid, her finest yellow Kanjivaram silk in tatters, her body toss-tossed against the fierce rocks upon which I used to play unmissed. Nor did Appa reveal that, before he secured passage to London, he had wept for days, surrounding himself with the patta sari bundles of broken deities Amma kept under the bed, begging them now for hers and Taru’s return.

An inky star-speckled darkness had begun to blot across a ruby and lilac watercolour sky, while the emerald ocean ages into moon-stippled silver. Bedraggled catamarans, curls of lacquer flaking off their salt-hardened hulls, dither on the rising and falling folds of water. Gone are the men who once cajoled them into the seas. Their wooden bellies once filled with quivering mercury fish and whiskery lapis prawns, now riddled with barnacles and limpets.

Taru and I played in those boats, as Amma watched, all of us waiting for Appa to return from work. Small feet teetering on the splintering edges, newspaper hats askew and hands shielding eyes, we called out into the horizon like one-eyed, peg-legged pirates. The sweet, tender flesh of purple Palmyrah fruit scooped into our mouths as we gurgled with the illogical laughter that only children know, as we tumbled in the talcum sand or chased spindly-legged golden crabs into their secret burrows.

That was the home The Cause promised us, the idyll of our peninsula to keep all to ourselves, like a happy secret. I know now it cannot be.

Appa and I allow ourselves a further moment in the quiet darkness, watching the relics of the sun-bleached coastal town retire into the night, the faltering blinks of Petromax lamps flickering within the skeletons of long neglected houses. With the strike of a match, the kerosene hisses life into the mantle of our lamp, the flame flaring sodium and blue against the hot glass. Electricity is the broken promise that the handful of returnees knew not to expect.

The prehistoric polyps, ground into calcium dust by wind and water, are now beleaguered with shrapnel and weathered shards of human bone. I cannot bring myself to dig my toes into the sand to feel the minute yellow crabs scuttle against my sole, or the pinch of the razor clams against my toes. Soundless mines lurk beyond the blockaded Palmyrah grove, buried beneath the hot peninsula sand.

Yet, we are finally home. Appa and I, in a congregation of mourning with the ghosts of people we once knew, each one disappearing into the brittle husks of their Petromax-lit houses to visit the living who have returned. Appa slips off his black rubber slippers before going down to the water. I follow him, recoiling at the feel of sand and metal against my toes. Homeland rings hollow in my ears, like the carcass of this house. An overwhelming sadness washes over the anger I cultivated in these years of exile and I allow myself to cry. I think of Juderaj's spirited sermons abruptly rendered meaningless in the face of everything we have surrendered and everyone we have sacrificed. This potent ache of sadness rises to my throat as I gingerly dip my toes in the water warmed by the sun and stained with loss.

Together, Appa and I scatter Amma's ashes into the tranquil blue waters, in the place that was once our home.

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## POEMS

*By Sarmatha Santhirasegaram*

### **INSURRECTION NEEDS RESURRECTION**

On the dark night  
of April 4<sup>th</sup> 1971, she,  
like Florence Nightingale,  
hurries to ward seven,  
where the police inspector lies,  
attacked  
by a mob,  
utopian and fierce,  
provoked to violence  
by the rape and murder  
of Kataragama's Beauty Queen,  
frustration  
turning  
to uprising,  
upheaval.

Teeth of turmoil  
stabbing human flesh,  
tongue of guns  
tasting human blood.



She is like a breath of air,  
pure as snow,  
bright as sun,  
voice soft as silk.  
When she opens the door,  
the room is silent.  
Like a jasmine flower  
falling toward mud,  
she enters that dark room.  
In the light  
from a corner  
she sees  
the inspector  
shot  
dead.

Strong arms wrap around her,  
the silence shattered  
by her scream,  
as she is wheeled  
from one to another.  
Her  
pure  
white  
uniform  
becomes  
red.

She shrills,  
*You devils, are you not ashamed!*  
But insurrection  
needs  
resurrection.

### **KAVADI \***

The beats of the Thavil,\*  
the music of the Nathaswaram,\*  
are resounding for Kavadi,  
one group singing,  
another chanting *Arogara \**

Children eye him.  
A commander of the war  
balancing a Kavadi  
on his shoulders.

He is strong as a bull,  
struts and sways to his own rhythm,  
his pride  
burns  
a red flame.  
He sweats  
like a man in court.

*O God!*

I whisper,

*May his soul get salvation*

*from all his sins.*

\***Kavadi** - a kind of penance

\***Thavil, Nathaswaram** - musical instruments

\***Arogara** - a chant

## **RECONCILIATION**

Fresh Nil Manels bloom in crematoriums.

New carpet roads direct us to unknown horizons.

Golden sunbeams spray newly paved courtyards.

In the portrait on the white wall, a gentle lion,

on its hip an innocent lamb,

lies under a large Na Tree.

They feed our hunger,

nurse our hurts with therapy,

teach us to smile, to dance,

to act, to hide.

We learn motor mechanics,

bridal make-up,

welding,

sewing, masonry, art.

We learn patience.

Our children will work towards peace

not butchery, we say.

Then we look at each other, and then into ourselves.

Bring your ledger on judgement day to get true justice!

## **THE ISLAND OF DEATH**

We are preparing to make Yaham,\*

our only armour against fate.

We hover around the Akni Kundam.\*

*Here pass the ghee.*

Someone brings fire-wood,

*Put these into the Akni Kundam.*

Widows, orphans, the handicapped

still wait for new homes.

Through the thatched roof

raindrops fall upon the new-born baby,

his mother puts out a clay pot to save the drops,

tears rolling down her cheeks.

Graveyards,  
bloodbaths,  
disappearance and rape,  
are simply what's done in a bloody state.

The pearl of the ocean,  
the paradise of earth,  
an island of death.

In front of Goddess Amman with her Soolam,\*  
we set fire.  
It blazes up with scorching flames.

We are learning to make fire,  
our only armour against fate.

- \***Yaham** - A Hindu ritual for universal peace
- \***Akni Kundam** - A vessel used for Yaham
- \***Soolam** - Armour of Goddess Amman

*Sarmatha Santhirasegaram was born and brought up in Jaffna. She is an undergraduate in English Literature at the University of Jaffna. She has experienced the war since her childhood and wants to capture the pain and sufferings of the underprivileged through her poems.*

## ENDURANCE

*By Arivarasy Muthulingam*

Our village kovil was a place so holy that hordes of people visited it often to have the Arul of Lord Muruga. He was the God of miracles, and everyone pronounced His name a hundred times daily. When all our hopes were dead, he revived them and provided a new lease on life for His devotees. His grace was always with us.

The kovil was built on a grand scale with money from former villagers who now lived in foreign countries, and who continuously supported extensions and refurbishments to the temple. As a result, our temple's prestige increased because of its fine statues and artwork. The image of the elephant-headed son of Shiva, Pillaiyar, was on the shore of the temple tank, from where he cured many sorrows. All along the temple walls there were paintings of Murugan with his two Shakthis, Shiva dancing upon the flames of fire, and the Arththanarishwarar — Shiva in his embodiment as half Shiva, half Shakthi, his wife. There was also a granite Lingam and a massive statue of Lord Nataraja funded by a London millionaire.

The greatness of our temple was most apparent at the Car Festival, when devotees came from all over to attend. My cousin Sanjeevan and I looked forward to the festival and were full of restless energy in the days before, as we strolled through the temple lanes to see the preparations. Sanjeevan's father had also donated money to install sixty-three saints and a huge Nandi carved out of stone, mounted on a platform. We often stopped to admire it.

As we walked along we commented on the preparations.

"Do you know Bala," Sanjeevan said, "This year I plan to come to the festival all day. I'll arrive in the morning and stay until evening. What about you? Won't you come with me?"

I was already fed up with his endless talk about the festival. He talked about nothing else. We stopped to scrutinize all the work that was going on there.

“No, no, I can’t come in the mornings,” I said with a teasing grin. “Mornings are times for swamis like you. I will only come in the evening, when all the fun starts.”

“Did you know,” he said ignoring my taunt with a little smile, “the kovil poojari told me that this year drummers and musicians are coming all the way from India?”

I tried again to get a rise out of him. “You take karate classes and want to be the future karate champion. I don’t think that will fit with your career as a swami.” I giggled but he grinned tolerantly and squeezed my shoulder.

From childhood, Sanjeevan was my idol because he was so gentle and kind. He was two years older than me and I wanted to imitate everything he did. When I started combing my hair by myself, I divided it on the right side just like he did. In the literary association, when I spoke, I tried to imitate his manner of speaking, modulating my voice as he did. He was good in both sports and studies, while I was weak in them.

Our temple chariot had been carved by a famous Indian architect. The ornamental plating on the chariot, its elegantly carved spire, its red flag flying, the great python-sized rope that drew it, were all thrilling to see during the festival. As the chariot was drawn around, the crackle from the fireworks attached to it and the bursting smoke from incense sticks, made the crowd ecstatic as they surged forward to see the Gods in the chariot seated on a silver peedam, each god wrapped in red cloth, and then decked with countless fabulous ornaments.

During the Car Festival, Sanjeevan and I wore veshti with holy ash on our foreheads. He was more pious than I. He fasted and ate vegetarian food all through the festival days. When the famous Arumugasamy with six faces and twelve shoulders was presented to the devotees, Sanjeevan would fervently sing the invocation and shout the chorus, “Haro, haro, Mahadeva.” When the various divinities in bejewelled splendour were carried around by the devotees in perfect rhythm to the musical instruments, Sanjeevan joined the uproarious crowd as they shouted, “Karthikeya.... Aro Hara, Murugaaa Kantha,” their cries piercing the firmaments to reach the kingdom of Muruga, who looked down on us with His ever-smiling face.

Standing next to him, or following the shouting crowd, I felt ashamed of my lack of devotion. To hide my feelings, I would tease him saying, "Looks like you might be a big swami in the future."

When he ignored me I would say in a mocking tone, "Why are you so pious? What will it get you?"

"God is great, Bala," he would reply. "His power can save us from our enemies and give us much strength to withstand difficulties. One day you will understand all these things."

The thing we disagreed about most was the kavadi during the festival. The men who were on the flying kavadi or bird kavadi had small spears through their tongues, or a spear through their cheeks. The other type of kavadi involved hooks stuck into the backs of the devotees. Ropes that extended from the hooks were pulled by another, who walked behind the devotee or rode behind him on a decorated tractor.

This mortification made me think about the cruelty in religion. "Machan," I would say to my cousin, "why are these people torturing themselves? What does this pain achieve?"

"*Mmm*," he would say with a superior sigh, "you don't understand. Those devotees who perform Thula have a degree of will power, determination and commitment you and I lack."

"If we have to inflict pain on ourselves to please our Gods, aren't they cruel?" I enjoyed seeing Sanjeevan struggle to find a satisfying answer to that.

"One day you will understand everything about God," he finally said. "The kavadi symbolizes the need for endurance in our life. This endurance comes from our faith. It is belief that sustains our minds."

Later we would wander through the festival ground, arms around each other, pointing out and marvelling at the large coloured balloons in the air that bore advertisements for sari and CD shops. They swooped and swirled like the bright skirts of Kolattam baton dancers. There were numerous shops, restaurants and magic shows. We also silently admired the women dressed to show off in their expensive saris, their beauty enhanced with jewels and interesting hair styles. Smoke eddied out of the kadalai cart



and we would stop to buy some gram, roasted in hot sand. I was content to wander constantly among the crowds, but Sanjeevan always directed me towards the pirasangam, where there were dramatic enactments of myths and the epics.

In the days after the last festival, our village suddenly changed. The war that had been going on all around us, but had so far kept its distance, finally came to our village too. Soldiers suddenly arrived and set up a temporary office. Everyone was thoroughly checked and inquired into, one after another. An atmosphere of silence pervaded the village. Instead of the ringing of temple bells, the most frequent sound was the tread of soldiers' heavy boots on the road, their eyes watchful, their guns pointed as they walked.

One day, Sanjeevan came to see me.

"Did you know, Bala, this morning many young boys were arrested in a round-up? Our poojaka's boy was arrested as he was travelling without an Identity Card."

"*Mmm*," I murmured worried, "that is why Amma is always checking whether my IC is in my pocket."

He sighed. "Now we are frightened to even step beyond the compounds of our houses. Those soldiers have their eagle eyes on us boys."

I didn't reply, feeling very frightened by his words and his worried expression. The threat that was all around us was circling closer and closer, the soldiers crowded together around our village like a swarm of caterpillars with their green camouflage uniforms. They squatted or stood in neat rows along both sides of the road, silently smoking beedis.

Hemmed in by their presence, people were afraid to talk even with people in the neighbouring houses. The transition from day to night was a fleeting twilight, and then the darkness came suddenly as it always did. But now the darkness, rather than bringing relief from the heat, frightened us. Village doors were securely fastened at twilight, and dogs howled and barked continuously. Every night, at some point, jeeps roared into the village, raising a cloud of dust. Torches...flares...flares.... and headlights; the plaintive cries of lapwings raising the first alarm even before the dogs began

to howl. We were not able to sleep at night, and often sat huddled on a mat in the living room. Anxiety kept our eyelids open, although the darkness pressed against them. Amma would furtively lower the wick of the lamp which was under the dining table when the jeeps roared in, so the house would be invisible in the pouring darkness. There had been no electricity in the village for some years now. We used the lamp sparingly when we ate or to find our way about the house. By now, we were used to wandering in the dark, each household object a familiar landmark.

One night, as I lay in my bed unable to sleep, I overheard Appa whispering something to Amma in the kitchen. I got up from my bed quietly so that my little sister, with whom I shared the room, would not be disturbed, and I crept into the living room. I went to the window, drew aside the shadowy curtain and looked at the dim outline of the landscape of fear outside. There was no one to be seen. The shadows of leaves drifted like fish on the windowpane. Appa called to me softly from the kitchen and, when I went to him, he whispered, "They could be anywhere, behind the house, or on their way along the road. Don't let yourself to be seen by anybody. Did you know that Sanjeevan was arrested this morning?"

His words were like a blow to my head.

"Appa, how... where was he arrested?"

"He was on his way home from his karate class. A bomb blast was heard from the direction of Kannathiddi Junction. But, mistakenly, he assumed it was from the Navalur Junction and he thought he would be safer if he took the turn towards Kannathiddi Road. His fate was written at that point. They were in a rage at everyone and took him into custody."

"Why didn't that foolish boy stay in the master's house and come back some hours after the bomb blast?" Amma said, shaking her head.

"Why do you talk so thoughtlessly?" Appa replied. "The curfew started at 6p.m. So, how could he come back home after a few hours?"

My heart clenched the way a rat leaps from the ground at the first touch of a cobra's fangs. I began to sob loudly, tossing my head this way and that like a poisoned dog struggling to die.

We went to visit his house the next day. It was like a funeral home, people gathered in mournful silence.

Sanjeevan's mother started to cry aloud when she saw us. "Oh! Kadavulee... why is this terrible thing happening to us? I would have made padaiyal at your doorstep. If you wanted to have our son's life you could have taken the lives of both of us." She sighed for a while, then said, "You know this time was not good in his horoscope. Saturn was in the last house which might bring death anytime." She began to sob again. "God didn't show any mercy towards us."

His father, in his grief, had lost all hope and kept saying, "The only chance we will have to meet Sanju will be in heaven."

This added to his wife's grief. Amma tried to soothe them both by telling them not to worry, God would not leave them so desperate.

The temple bell was ringing for the evening pooja and Sanjeevan's mother roused herself to get ready. "This is the only thing I can do to pacify my heart."

I rushed home and got ready too. This was the first time I got ready for temple without my mother having to force me to get dressed and attend. Yet, when I was at the temple, every image reminded me of Sanjeevan and his pious words about God.

"Bala, come and pray to all these navakirakas," his mother said, beckoning me over. "They are responsible for our fate. Whether we survive or not, good or bad, all depends on them."

I went around the navakirakas nine times, murmuring, "Save my cousin's soul." I made poojas in his name. Then I went to Sandeswarar, because Sanjeevan always reminded me, when I was strolling with him around the temple, "If you forget to pray to Him, finally, all your prayers will be spoilt and will be of no use." My eyes welled with tears as I thought of his words, and how happy I had been standing next to him before this statue.

Weeks passed. There was no sign of his release.

“How many dreams his parents had for him, their only child,” my parents often said to each other. “But now all is spoilt. Whether he is alive or lying somewhere a corpse, we don’t know.”

Sanjeevan’s father sought help from high officials. Despite days spent in various army camps and government offices, there was no result. His mother was on the brink of madness. She wandered along the roads in search of her son during the day, her evenings spent going from temple to temple, praying to Pillaiyar to show mercy on him. Thoughts of Sanjeevan’s fate made my mind feel as if it was entangled in chains. I became very angry thinking of the murder, rape and torture all done in the name of freedom and justice. Just as a society hired butchers to kill its animals, these cruel hands were hired to murder innocents.

Once curfew began, it was very difficult to get food. One evening, I accompanied Amma to the cooperative shop which was near the temple pond. Everyone had one mission—to buy as much rice, sugar, dhal and vegetables as possible. The sacks of rice emptied fast and the vegetables vanished within minutes. Unlike on other days, there was no one at the temple pond diving, bathing, swimming, washing clothes and scrubbing one another’s backs. As I looked at the pond, I recalled how Sanjeevan and I enjoyed bathing in it, both of us diving over and over again into the pond.

My attention was diverted from my memories, hearing someone mention Sanjeevan’s name.

“Aiyo, paavam I still recall him in his veshti, holy ash on his forehead,” an old man said. “Why are the innocent taken up to heaven?”

I had drifted towards the man in shock and Amma, seeing my face, came after me. “What have you heard about Sanjeevan?” I whispered.

The man looked guilty seeing Amma and my distress. “What have you heard?” I insisted.

“The authorities say they released him some days ago...” The man looked at us. There was no need to say anything more, because we all knew

what this meant. Sanjeevan was no more. He had been killed and his body disposed of.

Amma and I turned away in a daze.

On our way home, as we rounded a bend in the road, Rajan, my batch-mate was standing by his fence. "Do you know the young Brahmin priest of our temple was arrested?" he called to us.

There was nothing I could say to him.

Life became meaningless for me. There was no warmth in human contact. The hours passed and there was nothing much to do. We grew silent. We tried to do regular things, waking, cooking, sleeping, but it all required much effort on our part. We grew tired easily and lapsed into long silences. I wanted to run away, to escape from this world. Yet, that would be a coward's choice. Also exile would make us strangers to ourselves, and we would lose our identity.

One evening while we sat on the verandah talking, we heard the sound of gunshots in the distance. A neighbour hurrying along the road called out to say that the Army and the LTTE were fighting. Already some buildings had been shelled. There were rumours spreading that the Army was moving into our village and it would become a battle ground, so everyone was getting ready to move to the temple. Amma asked me to pack some biscuits and water while she searched for her jewellery and money. Father wrapped them into a cloth and hid the bundle behind the almirah. Taking the food and a few pieces of clothing, we hurried from our home.

As we drew near the temple, there were unceasing gunshots in the distance, and we saw in the darkness that there was some great change to the kovil. When we reached the entrance, we were shocked to find that the front gate of the temple was burnt. We entered to discover that the Vasantha Mandapam of the temple had collapsed. The walls had been reduced to ashes to prevent the guerrillas from advancing. The decorated pillars with their beautiful sculptures, the wall paintings of Lord Muruga with his two shakthis and Lord Shiva dancing upon the flame of fire were shattered under the debris. The sculptures of Shiva and the sixty three saints were not in

their niches. The silence was awful. The cry of an infant for its mother's breast was stifled. Finally someone lit a small chimney lamp and I saw a sea of silent faces in the strange translucent light, hundreds of people lying next to each other on the bare floor of the courtyard, where there hadn't been any damage. A woman began shouting that her husband had been shot dead. I began to make my way around the temple, staring numbly at the destruction.

Lord Shiva, who was showered in litres of milk everyday, had now been thrown off from the pedestal and lay on the floor. The upper left hand which held Agni, the fire signifying the final dissolution of form, stuck out into the air. His left foot, that used to be raised elegantly over the demon that symbolized evil, was now broken off. His whirling locks representing the endless conquest over death were shattered into little pieces.

People were passing by the statue without paying any attention to it. The chariot stood silent in the moonlight like a monster gazing at me. How Sanjeevan and I had loved to climb and play with the sculptures carved in the chariot during our childhood. Our favourite had been the big wooden horse. Now it reared into the air, minus its forelegs. The chariot, unaccompanied by its ornamental plating, festoons and red flags, seemed like a Palmyrah tree shaven of its foliage. The only image intact was Kali in her niche: Shakthi, the eternal power of the universe—creator, preserver and destroyer. In that terrible darkness she terrified me, standing for all evil with her furious red eyes, brandishing the heads of the giants she had slain, wearing a string of skulls around her neck.

Temples and kovils were present in every nook and corner of our land. But what was the use of them? All sorts of carnage had taken place at the junction of Chemmani, even though there was a Pillaiyar temple at that corner. Were the Gods blind and deaf to our suffering? How many people carried kavadi in fulfilment of their vows. How many of them performed penance, rolling their bodies along the kovilveedhi, clothed in veshti. How many offerings had our women made to Amman to sustain their thali forever. But, why were our Gods always silent? Did they also prefer death?

As I asked myself these questions, my mind went back to Sanjeevan's words about kavadi, and how it symbolized the need for

endurance in our life. This endurance came from our faith. It was belief that would sustain our minds.

I noticed now that a broom stood in a corner. I went to get it and began to sweep up the debris around me, perhaps for myself, but also to honour my cousin.

### ***Glossary of Tamil terms***

Ichashakthi, Giryashakthi - Forms of shakthis

Kali - Goddess Amman

Kavadi - A ritual of penance performed to fulfil vows

Nadeswaram, Thavil - Musical instrument used in temple festivals

Padaiyal - Offerings to Gods, such as food and fruits

Thali - A pendant given to a Hindu woman upon marriage. Symbolizes she is a wife.

Vasanthamadapam - The main hall of the temple

Veedhi - Kovil road

Velvi - Sacrifice of animals

Veshti - Traditional white long cloth tied around the waist

***Arivarasy Muthulingam*** was born and bred in Jaffna. She is currently studying English Literature at the University of Jaffna. She feels that images in religion teach us that the way to endure suffering is to have faith. Yet, she also believes we must not blindly follow religion. These ideas have shaped this story, as they have her life in Jaffna.

## KALI'S GAZE

*By Sonali Wanigabaduge*

### **One**

*Viswanathan Dharmalingam, LL.B (Jaffna)*

*Attorney-at-Law,*

*Notary Public & Commissioner for Oaths.*

That was the sign that hung outside our house on a tall pole overlooking the garden, by the grey iron gate, shaded by my most favourite tree, the mango tree. Appa was very proud of his legal ancestry. His Appa was a lawyer, his Appa's Appa a judge. I was to be the fourth generation lawyer and carry on the Dharmalingam legacy. You see Appa was a good man, although his towering height and his raging moustache suggested differently. The sweetest thing about him was his love for his family. He had met Amma only on the day of their wedding, but they had grown to love each other and tolerate each other's eccentricities with great understanding. I was their bright hope. Although most parents preferred sons to daughters, I was always loved more than Anna, getting the biggest piece of fish at the lunch table, and the tastiest and ripest mango during the season. Most of my school friends were married off by sixteen or seventeen, Appa and Amma (whom I called Momo) had different plans for me. Even when I was only three feet tall, Appa would drape me with the cloak he wore to courts, telling me that, one day, I would be their savior. I looked ridiculous, walking around in a black cloak that was twice my size and height, but Appa would beam with pride and say I was born to be a lawyer.

We used to be happier when Anna was at home, but Appa sent him to London to study for his Barrister's, after selling all the other property we owned. Four million rupees and five years later, Anna sent a two page letter saying law was no longer his passion, in fact it had never been. He didn't come back. For an entire year Momo cried every day. She only stopped after Anna sent a parcel with a note saying he had settled in Manchester and was happy there. Two years later he sent photos of his simple kovil wedding ceremony to a thin pale white woman. With it were photos of a beautiful



brown-eyed baby who seemed to be about two years old. After that, Momo slowly got back to her usual self, despite the fact that Anna had kept his wedding and child a secret from us, since his first year in London.

Anna's last note to us had a photo showing him working in a bakery. He had aged slightly, but he had a triumphant look on his face, kneading bread. My mind wandered back to when Anna and I used to play nursery when we were kids. He'd never eat the insides of the loaf of bread. Instead, he'd open up the loaf and carefully make a ball of the baked flour. Then he'd make smaller balls, and knead them into different shapes, and call himself a bakery man. It had taken all this time to figure out Anna's passion. Well, at least he was happy now.

Appa never spoke about Anna. We never knew what went on in Appa's mind, how he would settle all the millions he had borrowed by mortgaging our properties. He wouldn't be brought down by emotion.

After all that drama with Anna becoming a bakery man, instead of a dignified barrister who would carry on Appa's legacy, we settled back into our ordinary lives, minus Anna. Our most significant material possession was the seventy perches of land in Jaffna town, within walking distance to the library that I often frequented. On twenty perches, Appa had built our house with a garden. Appa said he was saving the remaining fifty perches to give as my dowry, and he grew Palmyrah trees on it, and put all the income we got from it into a local bank. We weren't all that rich, still stuck with paying the debts incurred for Anna. Appa was so stubborn that he refused to take a cent of what Anna sent — which came in two hundred pound denominations every three months. The notes were all sent back to the Manchester address. After a while, Anna, realizing Appa was lost to him, stopped writing and sending money. Life moved on peacefully, and though we weren't an adventurous family, never having gone on trips to the great Colombo—to see films at the famous Savoy or eat at KFC which was advertised so much on TV—we still managed to live a comfortable life, and most importantly, we were happy.

## **Two**

“There are two types of people in this world; those who divide the world into two types, and those who do not.”

That was one of Appa’s favourite quotes from the legal scholar Jeremy Bentham. He’d often say it out aloud whilst seated in his large armchair where, every afternoon, he’d have his thirty minute siesta. I honestly couldn’t see what Appa’s fascination was with Bentham, a fat bull-dog like man, whose statements didn’t make much sense to me. I mean, I could come up with better quotes. Appa’s incessant quoting had an ulterior motive I thought: the hope that I’d grasp his passion for quoting fat British men. Fortunately, I didn’t.

In addition to all the quotes, Appa taught me that racism and separatism were tactics used by those with political ambitions to control and dupe the masses. He had an apolitical stance, refusing to take sides on the Sinhala-Tamil issue that was ravaging certain parts of the country. We would often see bits and pieces of the conflict on the TV news at night. As we watched, he would often quote his favourite Karl Marx line, “Religion is the opiate of the masses.”

In the evenings, I used to often take a walk by myself, passing Kali Amman’s Kovil. I always wondered what it was that people prayed for so much. We weren’t a religious family, more spiritual. Appa was too learned in books to believe in a single religion. Whenever I questioned him on religion, he would philosophically quote from his favourite fat man Bentham: “Stretching his hand up to reach the stars, too often man forgets the flowers at his feet.” Then, realizing I hadn’t understood, he’d elaborate. “Radho, when I have you and your Amma by my side, what else do I need?”

With these thoughts in my head, I walked about two miles, passing shops and bazaars, tempted to buy a chicken kottu from a nearby shop but reluctant because of all the smelly looking men ogling me. Yet, they all knew whose daughter I was, and dared not even make a passing remark at me. So I walked, with my head held high, happy I was my Appa’s daughter. Maybe Bentham was right. I should be happy I had flowers at my feet.

### *Three*

“Ganna Ganna Vasana Sampatha! Koti pathiyek wenna!”

The din the lottery ticket seller was making, yelling at the world to buy a winning ticket and become the next millionaire, coupled with the noise of the ubiquitous Colombo crows, carried through the makeshift curtains made of old cardboard boxes, which were inserted at the windows and the dusty grills. The combined cacophony awakened me from my dreamless sleep. As I opened my eyes, there were fat mosquitoes waddling around me, having sucked my blood through the night. “Come come, take our blood also. What more can you take away from us anyway,” I thought to myself.

The stench that came from the Wellawatte Canal by the roadside made it impossible to even think of breakfast. Today, it was a measly loaf of bread with dhal curry and an egg for me and Appa to share. My mother, whom I no longer thought of as “Momo” but rather the more formal “Amma,” didn’t eat well anymore. She wore no jewelry except for her wedding ring and went about her work with a hollow expression on her once animated face. Amma had even stopped wearing her pottu. She looked empty without it. Empty.

Meals were now a miserable affair. Not like those days when Amma’s deliciously succulent crab curry would waft through the sweet Jaffna breeze all the way to Appa’s law chamber. If he had less than four clients, he’d always invite them for lunch—a habit that annoyed poor Amma. Yet she loved Appa’s jovial ways so much that she hid her annoyance as she served rice and crab curry to the litigants.

“Radho, eat your breakfast please,” Amma said, trying to reason with me, having seen the look of disappointment that crossed my face momentarily, and mistaking it for my feelings towards the meal before me.

I sat and ate. I no longer tasted food.

I was used to what life had become. An empty meaningless existence — just like the bread and dhal curry I gobbled down. We had fled our lands two years ago; Appa was no longer a legal counsel with a thriving practice.

All of Appa's books had been burnt to the ground. We saw the Legislative Enactments that Appa used to consult for every case, the Evidence Ordinance that belonged to his grandfather, the trophies he had won at school as Captain of the Debating Team and Moot Society, Appa's oath-taking photo which he was so proud of, all go up in blackened, kerosene-smelling flames, along with everything else in our home.

Amma, once so beautiful, with her intricate Manipuri saris, her bangles she'd inherited from her mother, Amma with her love for ancient Tamilian literature, was now an entirely changed person.

The effects of loss were visible in Appa as well. His face now sagged, and he went about his daily chores hunched and unsmiling: a stark contrast to my old Appa. He had stopped talking about the lush greenery that the British, Dutch and Portuguese couldn't get enough of, the legal scholars like Jeremy Bentham; stopped reading about the great ancient rulers of this country. He'd stopped reading the newspapers, which he'd read cover to cover before, seated in his coir armchair with wooden carvings.

My dreams of becoming a lawyer, just like Appa, had also been shattered. I didn't really care, I had no choice even if I did care. I told myself I was grateful that I had my Amma and Appa with me—my flowers beneath my feet. I managed to provide for them by taking up a job as an assistant at a nearby Montessori.

The place we lived in had two rooms separated by a cloth curtain. We paid Rupees four thousand monthly for this space, it was the best we could get at such short notice.

I wasn't much of a children-person, and my tasks as Montessori Assistant included mainly taking the little brats to the toilet to clean up their vomit and to open and close their lunch boxes during the interval. I got paid five thousand rupees for the entire month. Appa and Amma never left the house other than going to the nearby boutique, owned by a fat Sinhalese man with a constantly torn banyan, who chewed betel leaf. He'd talk to me nicely while balancing his betel spit in his mouth whenever I went.

"Ah, daughter, Vanakkam." He'd beam at his effort at achieving ethnic harmony with these few words of Tamil he knew. "What you are wanting?"

“Nespray packet,” I’d say, pointing to the smallest packet of milk powder.

“No problem Sri Lanka,” he’d say cheerily.

His catch-phrase.

#### ***Four***

I was feeling unusually temperamental when I walked out of the Montessori that day. I had snapped at a couple of brats and one of them started bawling, after which he had thrown up his lunch. A batch of fresh vomit was the last thing I wanted to clean up. I’d seen my brother leave home never to return, I’d seen my house burned to the ground, my mother and father lose themselves in the loss we suffered, our family name, our lives, our smiles all gone. I’d had enough and I was not going to touch or clean up any more vomit. I just wasn’t.

The Montessori Principal happened to walk past at the exact time the child was vomiting, without me helping him. I was blamed. Humiliated. He called me the most incompetent worker they had ever had, a disgrace to the fine name of the school and not good enough for this institution. Then he went on to tell the class teacher that he was never going to recruit “village girls” like me for the Montessori hereafter.

I listened to his piercing words in complete shock and embarrassment, feeling trapped as I couldn’t retaliate. I kept my head bent as if to show my penitence, because I knew that if I lifted my eyes, he would see my rage and I would be sent home with no job, making my family lose the only income they had.

As I left the Montessori that day, I was thinking of my little grape patch back home, one that I’d secretly started growing in the back of the garden when I was small, inspired by an English short story Appa had once read to me about a little girl who’d grown a vine of magical grapes which, when eaten, would make all one’s problems go away. I loved those grapes. That was where I went when I needed to be at peace. The grapes with their tangy taste, their maroon tinge and fullness, would help me reflect on life and its vagaries (my Appa’s posh English words). Every time I ate a grape, it would make me smile.

The Colombo sun was making me sweat right through my clothes. There was no grape patch here, but I needed desperately to be alone. Our rented shack was only a five minute walk from the Montessori but I did not want to return to it. For the first time since we fled our burnt house and were bundled into a lorry that took us from our home to the Colombo shack, I decided to take a walk. My heart beat fast as I reached into a payphone booth and called Amma's mobile phone to tell her the first lie I had in all these years. "*Amma, naan 1 hour late aahum... Extra work...*" Amma acknowledged my statement with a monosyllabic "okay," and hung up the phone.

I had bought one hour, to compose myself, to calm down, to cry, to weep...but where would I go?

I got into the next bus that came along. I wasn't nervous. I felt, for some strange reason that I would know where to get off. I gave a ten-rupee note to the bus conductor and looked away. He shrugged and didn't attempt conversation. Just like I wanted. Five bus halts later, I got off. I walked around for a while and found my place: The signboard read "*Badra Kaali Amman Kovil.*" How ironic, I thought. I'd walked past the same goddess's kovil back home in Jaffna hundreds of times, without a second glance or thought. But today, in strange and lonely Colombo, this was going to be my salvation.

I felt as though I was in the opening scene of a Tamil movie, with Surya as the main actor, the heroine entering the kovil, her pretty feet touching the kovil floor. The enchanting music playing in the background, getting louder and louder, with trumpets making the mood more and more intense. I snapped out of my reverie. The bright reds, blues and greens of the women's saris as they flocked around the goddess statue, coupled with the sweet fragrance of incense and camphor and the familiar inflections of the language I'd loved and heard spoken my entire life, were all around me. They ushered me inside. I inhaled deeply. The atmosphere enveloped me with its fullness, its transcendental beauty.

Finding contentment was what I wanted to pray about and ask Kali Amman to grant me today. Kali, the Goddess of Strength. For such a long time, I had not raised my hands together in prayer. As I knelt to do so, I found I was crying — I who hadn't cried when the men in police uniforms

stormed into our house while we were eating that night three years ago, ransacked our house at gunpoint and threw to the ground all our photos and crockery that lay neatly stacked in a cabinet made of the finest teak, Amma's dowry when she married Appa. I hadn't cried when we were thrown out while Amma and I were still in our nightdresses and housecoats, Appa in his sarong and shirt. I didn't cry as I watched those men pour petrol over our dining table. We watched our house, that Appa had built over twenty years ago, the garden he'd pruned with his own hands, we watched it all burn, flames rising higher and higher into an already battered sky of black smoke.

Flames. My blurry eyes took in the *katpoomam*, the fiery camphor that was being offered to the devotees who had gathered for the daily pooja. The women at the pooja reminded me of moths attracted to a flame. They were blindly gazing at the statue clasping both hands over their heads, loudly chanting "Arohara," repeatedly. Some were falling to the ground in worship, whilst the Aiyar agitatedly chanted incomprehensible mantras, holding up fire to the goddess and throwing flowers at her. It all seemed so intense and yet, as I watched them, I wasn't so sure it was the right thing for me to do. Now I almost wished I hadn't come here. There was no God I could turn to, no temple that could help me, no priest. I was alone, these were just statues. I roughly wiped off the tell-tale sign of my weakness. Tears are for Tamil film heroines, I thought to myself in anger, heroines with their pretty lipstick and saris.

Seated in a corner, I watched about a hundred people, mainly women with *pottus* and holy ash smeared on their foreheads, walking about the temple, having finished the pooja.

I felt a pair of eyes on me; I looked around but saw nothing except men and women, busy in prayer. Someone clutched my hand from behind. "Don't bloody talk," a gruff voice whispered in my ear. Everyone else was caught up in prayer, and I dared not scream. With his fist still holding my arm, this man, whom I dared not turn and look at, led me past the statue of Kali, past the praying women and men, to a quiet area in the kovil. I blindly went with him, too dazed by the overload of emotion the day had brought. My captor let me go and I spun around to get a look at him. He was about

twenty six years, angry with a furrowed expression on his bearded face. The unkempt hair did nothing to make his appearance less intimidating.

“You bloody Sinhalese-loving bastards,” he hissed, “serves you right to have ended up in this hellhole of a city. It’s fate that I had to meet the daughter of the great Dharmalingam who dared to appear against our Eelam in court. Why are you looking confused? Why are you giving me that expression? Don’t you remember sitting in the audience, looking at your father in awe, as I and two of our people were put in prison three years ago... Don’t you remember my face? You haven’t changed. I swore to myself that I will take revenge on your whole family, and it’s God’s will that I met you here.”

As I stared at him, the memory of who he was came back.

In our home, every man was welcome — whatever his caste, creed or religion. Appa was only concerned with upholding the truth. It was this belief of Appa’s that prompted him to take up a very controversial case which all the lawyers in Jaffna had refused to take on. A case involving three suspected LTTE cadres, brought before the Court for their alleged involvement in abducting a child as part of their recruitment drive. Appa bravely appeared for the missing child and his parents, and unflinchingly made his submissions to Court. The Counsel who represented the men had no chance against Appa. We watched in Court as the three young men, boys themselves, angrily eyed Appa, for having the nerve to be Tamil and still appear against the LTTE. And as I watched the proceedings in court, I was aware of one suspect who looked at Appa, then at me, as if trying to memorize our faces to take revenge. Now, years later, I was staring at this very face.

Though he held my arm fiercely, I noticed that his eyes darted around nervously. We were not in Jaffna and he was not as in control, as he pretended to be. Though we were at the back, hidden in the shadows of some pillars, all I had to do was scream and he would be in trouble. I’d had enough of keeping my mouth shut, and all the Tamil films I had watched came back to me as I, with a single sweep of my hand, slapped the unsuspecting bastard.



“You should be ashamed of yourself,” I lashed out at him in a fierce hiss. “Going against your country! Does your mother approve of what you’re doing? Can you sleep at night? Shouldn’t you be providing for your family, instead of being a damn terrorist and wrecking people’s lives? Shouldn’t you be educating your siblings? Don’t you have any younger brothers? You want them also to be terrorists like you and spend the rest of their lives in prison cells? Don’t you want your mother to smile and be happy? Is she smiling because you’re a terrorist?”

His expression had changed, something almost like amusement entering his eyes. This only made me angrier. “Are you married? You want your wife to be a widow? What about children? You want to have children and then go and blow yourself up and have them grow up without a father? And your wife a widow? Who will provide for her? Will your terrorist organization give her a pension? Will you die honourably? What will your children say if someone asks them where their father is? It’s because of foolish idiots like you that we can’t have peace in this country. It’s because of you that I can’t walk on the road in peace. You are a bloody disgrace to the Tamil people.” And with that, I was done.

Exhausted. Burnt out. Finished.

The man now spoke. His voice was calm and collected. “Are you happy where you are now? Where are your houses, your lands, your father’s hard-earned money? What does he have to say now about *his* country? Did your State save you? Does your father smile now? What about your mother? How about you and the luxurious life that you used to live? What about all that?”

I had no answers. I felt defeated having my life reflected back to me like this. It made me feel weak, victimized. I hadn’t had breakfast or lunch that day, and with everything that was going on, I felt faint. I pushed past him to leave, but then suddenly a dizziness took hold of me and I lost consciousness. He caught me as I fell.

I came to myself on an examination table, a comfortable breeze from a ceiling fan blowing over me. I could hear voices talking in English a little distance away. “Will my fiancée be ok, doctor?” asked that man’s voice.

“She’ll be fine with some rest,” the doctor replied.

I opened my eyes and saw the man and the doctor at the doorway. Across from me were charts and diagrams of various parts of the human body. I was in a dispensary. I tried to rise quickly but now an overweight nurse, who had been standing behind me, appeared at my side, looked at me kindly and asked me to lie down. "You have to rest for longer, Madam," she said.

As she gently pushed me back on the pillow I looked again at the terrorist. He shook the doctor's hand and then came back to me.

"Can I...can I have your cellphone, I need to call my parents."

"You've only been out about ten minutes," he said to reassure me. "We're at a dispensary just near the kovil, and I brought you here immediately after you fainted." He offered me his phone. I took it, but did not make the call.

As I silently watched the ceiling fan turn round and round, tears began to trickle out of my eyes, pooling around my ears.

"My name is Rajan," he said, sitting at a respectful distance away from me.

I wanted to thank him but I was too embarrassed. So I closed my eyes.

He took me home in a three-wheeler. I asked him to stop at the top of the lane. "Are you sure?" he asked worried. "I don't think you are in a fit state to walk."

"No," I said firmly. "At the top please."

He gave me that bemused look again, and signaled the driver to stop when we got to my lane. As I got off, he asked, "Will you come to the kovil tomorrow?"

I didn't say a word, I just walked away.

### **Five**

Amma got all our horoscopes read when we were in Jaffna. I remember her coming home one day looking flustered. She didn't say a word, but looked at me with a strange expression on her face.

*"Ennadaaaa Amma"*? I jokingly inquired what was the matter.

"We will be moving to a new location. You will do something dangerous that will put all of us in danger." Amma looked at me accusingly as she said it.

Appa and I were eating roti with bananas fresh out of the garden, and we both burst out laughing at how absurd it all sounded. I just went and hugged my darling melodramatic Amma and smiled to myself at how perfect life was.

### **Six**

My lies were getting more and more elaborate by the day, as I invented different excuses that kept me late at the Montessori. After work, I'd run to take any bus that would go past the kovil.

At the kovil, conversation seemed like the most natural thing. Amidst the din of the pooja and the myriad voices seeking divine blessing, we had found our voices. I didn't believe in a separate state, or in Eelam, or in recruiting child soldiers, and he didn't believe in a majoritarian regime, or in a section of society being made to unquestioningly adhere to the will of the majority. And yet, somehow we had found a way to connect, despite our differences. Throughout the time I spent with him, I was aware that I was going against Appa and Amma, and that I was meeting a possible criminal. They would be horrified to learn that Rajan's years in prison had not dimmed his zeal for this cause, that he was still a cadre, here on what was no doubt a terrible mission. I did not ask what his mission was and he never told me. I didn't want to know. What was important to me was that it felt right to be with him. Rajan was my savior, who I had found when I was about to lose my mind, having lost all else.

Bit by bit, through our long conversations at the kovil, we got to know each other. We mainly argued about life, politics, dreams, and the

future, as the two of us imagined it, which was very different. But this arguing brought us closer to each other. He told me how his world fell apart when, seven years ago, his younger brother was found dead in a paddy field near their house in Ottamavadi, Batticaloa. This had made him join the Movement.

### ***Seven***

It was a Saturday. I told Amma I had concert practice at the Montessori. I washed my hair carefully with a five rupee Sunsilk shampoo sachet. Rajan loved the smell of jasmine and I spent three hundred and fifty rupees of my salary to buy a jasmine-scented perfume from a nearby store, which I now sprayed on myself. He had told me about the jasmine plant outside his window when he was about five years old. He had lost his Amma to a snake-bite when he was little. He told me how his Appa would, every morning, religiously pluck one single sweet-smelling jasmine, and place it in front of his Amma's photograph.

I was nervous about the way I looked, as I waited for him by the side of the road in Wellawatte. The town was brimming with crowds, some on their way to the supermarket, or the street fair where there were cheaper choices for the less discriminating shopper.

Twenty minutes went by and he did not arrive. I had no mobile phone, and realized that I didn't know where he lived, where he was coming from, or even what he was up to right at that very moment. I was scared, and felt afraid and alone. I had no way of reaching him and I worried for his safety. An ambulance whizzed past the noisy road. Vehicles gave way. I could only stare. Why hadn't he given me his number? Why hadn't I given him my address? I couldn't lose the one thing I had.

Wearied by my thoughts, I lost track of time and space, and stood by the road, oblivious to the tears that trickled down my face. I was so lost in my misery that I didn't notice him standing in front of me, until his strong rough hand that had held guns, took my own and he said, "Did you think I wasn't coming?"

He was amused at my tears and I shot back, “Well, I don’t care. I can easily go to the Wellawatte police station and report my missing boyfriend!” He laughed and touched my hair.

We boarded the bus and sat down in the seat behind the bus driver, which is usually reserved for clergy. We didn’t talk, silent. I felt safe with him next to me. My Rajan. The bus stopped at a halt and two Buddhist monks in their yellow robes got in from the front door of the bus. I instinctively got up, offering my seat, and lowered my head respectfully. Rajan merely sneered, and didn’t budge. The two monks patiently waited. I gave Rajan my outstretched hand and forced him out of the seat. We got off at the food shop at the next halt still holding hands.

This was the first time we had held hands in this way, walking along the road, and I found it funny how it had taken two Buddhist monks to bring us closer. When I told him this he scowled, but I could see he too was amused, and when I laughed and nudged him, he grinned. After that we walked in silence. I had never felt so peaceful before, so protected and sure, even though I was walking in an unknown city with a man I barely knew, whose profession essentially involved intimidating people, training boys and men for war, fighting and killing other men. The thought of what he did, however, had no effect on me. I was already beyond the stage of ordinary reactions and ordinary emotions. Even the understanding that my life was now in the hands of a man wanted by the country’s police and armed forces did not alarm me. I tightened my grasp against his sandpaper palm and stopped thinking.

Soon we were hungry and we went to a Tamil vegetarian restaurant we were passing, called Saraswathi Lodge. It was well past lunchtime and so, when we ordered dosai and the sambar-gravy that comes along with it, the waiter told us, “Madam, only potato curry available,” in his Colombo Tamil dialect.

Rajan’s face turned sour when I suggested that we have it with the dosai. “That’s such a Sinhala dish,” he scoffed. I signaled the waiter to bring it anyway and I quietly poured some “Sinhalese potato curry” over his “Tamil’ dosai,” smiling. He ate without uttering another word trying to look annoyed, but failing to fool me.

***Eight***

Amma and Appa had noticed my smiling, and my humming in the last week. Amma sniffed the faint jasmine perfume in the air that day, when I returned from seeing Rajan.

“Appa, Amma, there’s something I need to tell you,” I said in a reserved tone as I sat down with them. Then, for the first time in a long while, I talked. I told them how much I hated three year old kids. Amma listened with a hidden smile on her face. I told them that, one day, I would do my law exams. Appa looked on with interest. I told them about the importance of talking. And that we needed to stick together. Then, I told them about Rajan. After I had finished Appa nodded, looked at Amma and me, got up, went into the tiny room that he and Amma shared, and closed the curtain behind him. Amma, who had a shellshocked expression on her face, now spoke, saying something she had never said before: “Kali Maa. Enakka shakthiya tha!”

She was appealing to the goddess at whose temple I had met Rajan, asking the deity to give her strength to face this situation. It should have been ironic but, instead, I found I was crying. Soon she was crying too and we held each other tight.

***Nine***

I was waiting for Rajan near our kovil, smiling to myself. Three months had gone by since I had told my parents about Rajan. At home, there was a silence. Appa barely left his room except for meals and I noticed a stack of old English newspapers under the bed. I guessed that he had started reading again. Amma, who had never been religious, had taken to praying to a newspaper cut-out of Goddess Kali. They seemed to have found their own forms of salvation.

As for myself, I had found a reason to start living again. It was Rajan who had found me some law college notes which I was studying, every free moment I got. Having quit the Montessori, to work at a law firm as a research assistant, had been the best decision I’d made after Rajan. I found that my mood was always good, and that I was passionate about my work.

**Ten**

Although I no longer had a reason to hide with Rajan, he still had to be very careful. Our meetings had to be always carefully planned and there were times when I didn't see him for a while, without his offering any explanation. Even though he didn't say it, I knew that his silence was for my protection. There were things it was best that I didn't know. Sometimes he was very late showing up, and sometimes he did not show up at all. But now I knew and accepted that his Cause kept him away. How ironic that, in an unsafe world, it was a terrorist who made me feel safe.

And now here he was, with his backpack, my hero, my Surya, who I'd noticed was starting to make an effort to look more decent and less rowdy, his beard and hair trimmed and neat. I knew the little changes he was doing were for me, and it felt nice.

He came up to me with a smile full of hope and love, and I took his hand in mine, also smiling. Feeling at peace in a country at war, I turned towards our kovil and he followed me... both of us walking through the gates into Kali Amman's outstretched arms.

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## THE DEAD BABY

*By Pawan Madri Kalugala*

A dead baby is a terrible thing.

It lies on your bosom, a palpable dead weight, warm, and smelling faintly of sour curd. Curled up in oblivion, like a skinned cat, warm and confiding; such a young, animal-like thing. So pure, so innocent, you find it hard to breathe.

She could still feel his weight on her breast, milk-warm and young, the soft cream skin breathing life. The spindly curls like spun silk, dark but tinged with burnished gold in the morning sunlight. The shape of his small body curved into a ball, still seemed to hang in the air, a vacant arc. His cooing milky laugh still echoed in her ear, the gurgle of happiness rising from his young throat like bubbles from a river. And that soft hair brushing her cheek like down, so painfully soft and precious. She imagined those flimsy strands of hair floating, like smoke in water, in the dark abyss below—and the bile rose to her throat.

On her skin, the soap suds smoked and dried, leaving a vague sense of something lost. She gazed down at her fingers, white and shriveled like boiled sausages, or the raisins her mistress had taught her to soak in rum for the fruit-heavy Christmas cake. He had always loved Christmas cake, the baby. They would warn her that the rich, heady cake was not good for the child, but she would pinch a small piece and sneak it into his mouth, just for the pleasure of watching him gurgle with delight and drool over the sweet sticky mess. How the chubby cheeks smeared with sweetness would smell afterwards, like brown toffee, and the little mouth open in his toothless laugh.

Her feet on the cold stone were wet. The hot sun filtered down through the leaves of the Beli tree, drying her damp skin, but she shivered. A hot, humid breeze sprang up, raising vapid clouds of dust. She watched with fascination, trapped inside the long slanting rays of sunlight, the little motes of dust borne skywards, ascending to heaven. Along the mossy rim of the



well, a row of red ants scurried, busy with their everyday lives. The damp moss moistened with well water was cool against her bare feet.

She peered slowly over the edge of the well, into the liquid black darkness below. The water swirled thickly, wet ink. On the inside of the well, clumps of fern in bushy clusters clung like wild, strangled heads of hair. A dragonfly flitted over the water and a slow ripple appeared on the surface in sleepy circles, spreading out and finally disappearing into nothingness. She saw herself reflected, a faceless black shadow in the cool, placid mirror, the feeble sun gleaming like a silver disk overhead.

A gurgle bubbled up from underwater, like a quiet laugh. She was heart-sick. But a great weight had lifted itself off her chest and she knew the other baby, *her* baby, was happy at last.



She was washing rice at the sink. Red rice, Kekulu they called it, the fine pink grains oval-shaped. Before you boiled the rice, you had to wash off the dust and grit that remained from the harvested fields, till each grain emerged glistening and clean, a smooth gray bead speckled with irregular streaks of red. And these, when soft-boiled into rice, became a nutritious wholesome meal with curries of vegetable and meat thickened with spices.

It had only been a few months since she had come to this house. When the Army and the Police had reached their village, they were met with a mere blackened skeleton of walls and beams, where the tiny rural village had been, the thatched houses still smoking up to a humid sky, like burnt-out volcanoes, exhausted. In the midst of smoldering ash and the charred remains of edifices, lay the bodies, their dark blood mingling in pools. The air was rancid with burnt flesh, and fresh animal blood only half-dried in the heat of the fire. Men, old women, dogs, children — the LTTE had not left a single being alive. She had been lucky, they said. Bleeding from the gaping tear in her hacked stomach and stone-still as a corpse, the Tigers had left her for dead. She still remembered with what infinite tenderness the soldiers lifted her body from the bloodied remains of her home and, when

they realized she was breathing, how some had fallen to their knees and wept.

She had lain on the hard ground as they tried to stem the blood spurting from her womb, her eyes gazing up into the endless black sky, where a dozen stars glimmered in pinpoints of hard, cold, silver light. She did not feel pain. Her eyes were covered in a film from the stinging smoke. The thick gray ash choked her lungs, but she continued to gaze, unblinking. In the eerie orange glow of the dying fire, she could see the last flames lick greedily at the endless sky. Around her the crackling of dry coconut leaves, and, once in a while, the occasional pop of something bursting in the heat.

They had sent her to Colombo when her wounds had finally healed, promised her a new life away from the horrors of the old. What could she have done back there anyway? She was the only one from the village who had survived, and where the little cluster of thatched clay houses with coconut-leaf roofs had once been, there was now blackened earth marked crudely with the graves of the dead. So all the way from Medawachchiya they had sent her, and some ladies had found her this house, where they said she could work for a good pay. It was to be her new home. They had heard she loved children, they said, and the family had a bouncy, eighteen-month-old baby that needed looking after.

She washed the rice, her fingers sifting through the hundreds of grains. Hard and compact like small seeds. Once. Then drain away the excess water, a dirty pale red. She turned on the tap and let the water run into the cool metal bowl, filling it three-quarters full of clean water again. Then she immersed her hands in the bowl, sifting the rice grains, soaking, rinsing, washing.

Suddenly she paused and stared down, fascinated. Her hands were submerged up to the wrists in the bowl of rice water. In the murky red-gray depths her white hands trembled, swollen out of proportion, like skinless octopuses. And the water was red; thick, dirty red. Like washed-off blood.

From the kitchen where she stood working, she could hear the master and mistress on the verandah, conversing in comfortable tones as they sipped their steaming cups of tea. Their voices were low but, unknown to them, the sound carried through the quiet house. They only spoke Sinhala

when they were alone like this. Never when they had company. Then they always spoke in English, which she only barely understood from the few stray words she had picked up at school. Their clipped accents, accompanied by boisterous, affected laughs, grated unpleasantly on her ears. They even spoke to the baby in this affected tone, cooing and fussing over it in the foreign language. But now the baby was tucked in its cot, sleeping, and so they were conversing in their native tongue.

“She’s a silent one.” The mistress’s high, nervous voice was thin, like the distant drone of an insect, and she had to strain her ears to catch it. “Rather a strange girl, don’t you think? Keeps to herself and scurries along the walls with her head lowered as if she was afraid of her own shadow. I have barely heard her utter two words since the day she came!”

She gave a start as she realized they were talking about her. The master’s impatient reply followed, in his low, gravelly rumble. “Adey, so what if she’s a silent one? Doesn’t talk much, so what? She’s a good girl. Does what she’s told without a fuss. Not like the others of her class, flirting around with the fish-boys, and in front of the mirror all day. And she takes such good care of the baby.”

“But it’s strange, I tell you. She won’t speak a word. Not even to ask for some food if she’s hungry. Even when I talk to her she keeps her head bowed and doesn’t even look at me! How many times have I told her, ‘Good God, child, don’t be so shy, we’re not going to eat you!’” She paused. “Well, all I can say is, I don’t like people who don’t meet your eye when you are talking. They are always the fishy type. And how can she live like that, not speaking a word to anybody? Sometimes it’s like having a silent ghost in the house! A spirit!” And the girl imagined her shuddering visibly, and crossing herself like the devout Catholic woman she was.

“Vi, for God’s sake, please don’t be ridiculous!” the master shot back angrily. “The girl does her work. What more can you ask from her? We don’t know what she’s gone through, coming from that godforsaken war area. All they told us at the Women’s Aid was that she’s a war victim, but I think she’s been to hell and back... Just look at her face. No young girl’s face looks like that! ... And anyways, she does talk when she wants to. I’ve heard her talking to the baby when no one is around. Murmuring to him, and the little one listening with eyes wide open. In such a tone of love, too.”

But at these words she felt the baby on her chest stir and give an angry shudder. It uncurled like a cat, and suddenly seemed to grow heavier, till her chest began to sink under the weight. Two little hands slowly reached up to her neck, and she dropped the bowl of rice into the sink with a clatter, sloshing red-rice water all over the floor. The voices broke off into stillness, and she fled.



Her day in the house was routine. After she had swept the house and garden and burnt the pile of dried leaves from the mango trees, she made the thick ginger milk-tea and poured it into steaming mugs to take up to the bedroom where her master and mistress lay. They took their tea honey-sweet and thick, spiced with slices of ginger. The sickly sweet taste revolted her. She herself would have only a cup of plain unsweetened tea, refreshingly bitter, red-gold water in her clear glass. Once the tea was drunk, however, the mistress would take over the making of breakfast, and her tasks in the kitchen would be over. For the rest of the day her duties all revolved around taking care of the baby.

The part of day she loved the most was washing the chubby pink baby with his round, blooming cheeks and spindly head of golden-brown curls. He was a healthy, fat child with a ready smile and arms with soft layers of flesh like kneaded dough. She would take him up in her arms, powdered and perfumed, smelling sweetly of baby cologne, and bury her face in his tummy. He would chuckle hysterically, throwing back his head in a ridiculously toothless laugh. The white powder on his skin would tickle her nose and she would sneeze, making him laugh even harder. Once the mistress had prepared the baby's morning meal, a strange blend of mashed potatoes, eggs and bread soaked in milk, she would take the baby out to the garden to feed him. He would gurgle in delight, the potatoes melting to a sticky thick paste in his toothless mouth. Then, with a tummy full as a fat balloon, he would suck contentedly on a finger, sleepy-eyed, while she carried him on her shoulder and lulled him to sleep.

Sometimes she thought of her baby. The one she had carried for hours in her arms, trying to bring it some relief in sleep. But, with the wheeze rattling drily in its chest, it could not sleep, and lay on her shoulder, wide-eyed, its pitifully bony ribs sticking into her. It had been a fragile thing, her baby brother, with a head too large for its puny body, and dark, shriveled skin. Struggling to breathe through its blocked nose, it would go off food for days, refusing her mother's milk. Yet its tummy remained inflated, swollen and hard like a grapefruit, a solid, distended globe. Her mother had said the baby's stomach swelled that way because it was full of gas. After her father's death, her mother seemed to care for nothing, not for the cries of her hungry brood of children, not even for the sick baby who seemed to cling to life by a thread. It was she who had taken over looking after the younger ones, after her mother had given up. She, the oldest girl.

And now, the whole day while she worked, it hung crouched on her back, constantly, peering over her shoulder and dragging her neck down with its weight. Her baby. Sometimes it curled itself on her chest and dug its fingers into her like a cat, so sharp that at times she could almost feel them digging into her heart. Its spindly arms were like the twigs of branches; but she couldn't crack them off even if she wanted. Somehow, she knew she could never break its hold around her neck. Its stick arms were so fragile, yet so strong.

Once the day's work was done and she had done the laundry in the evening, cooked and cleaned for the night, washed the baby and rocked him to sleep in his cot, she would lie down in the little store-room which was her sleeping quarters. At night, as she lay on her hard reed mat, the plaited reeds cutting patterns into her skin, *her* baby would come back to her and she would huddle it to her chest. In the cold gray dark it would snuggle up close and press its cold blue face against her neck. Her body would ache with the day's work, her muscles hard and compact with weariness, refusing to relax. But the tiny cold palms would meander across her skin, like soft bags of water, kneading her tense muscles to ease. She would strain her ears to hear the croon of the little voice, faint as a whisper, and she would feel its lips against her ear. She would wrap her arms around the dark space shaped like a baby's shadow, and close her eyes.

And then she would dream. Always the same dream.



The skies are dark, looming. Thick clouds gather like dirty cotton wool over the swollen purple bruise of sky. The night is hot, humid; heat hangs like a thick film of wax. She is lying on the small bed, the hard straw mattress hot and scratchy against her skin. Beside her lies her little six-month old brother, a dark breathing ball. In the glow of a single kuppi lamp, she can see the dark shapes huddled around the room, her mother, two sisters and her younger brother. The wick of the lamp is kept burning low to save what little oil they have. Somehow or the other, a light has to be kept burning at night. Ever since her father's death, her mother kept a light burning to keep evil spirits at bay. But the girl feels that it was lit to dispel the fear, the loneliness in their little mud-thatched home. For her mother, strong as a rock during her husband's lifetime, had now developed a fear of the dark.

She is unable to sleep in the prickly heat. So she stays awake, watching the strange shadows flicker and loom like great black tuskers on the walls. In the dull light she can hear her mother's long-drawn, tired wheeze and her sisters' soft sounds of sleep. Of all the night-time sounds, the baby's tiny rasp of breath is somehow loudest in her ear. Lying next to her, its small face tucked into her chest, it draws little, straggling breaths through its tiny blocked nose. Its nostrils were always crusted over with hardened brown snot that she would pick off in small bits to help it breathe. But it never cried, not even when it was starving; not even when it couldn't breathe.

Strange sounds rouse her from her state of half-sleep, half-wakefulness. A series of faint, distant shrieking noises like restless spirits' wails, growing slowly louder. She props herself on one elbow, the thin mattress digging into her flesh, and listens. There is a strange crackling noise, and the hot air suddenly has a dull acrid smell. A movement beside her. She sees the baby has woken up too and is watching her with dark, glistening eyes. She smiles and bends over, kissing its small, round head. It reaches out a hand and she gives it her index finger. The tiny fist closes over it, quick as a vice, and at that moment the door splits apart, making the house bloom into a burst of orange light.

She sees it all in slow motion, the dream stretching out to eternity what had happened in just a few minutes. The killers are outlined in the flaming bright light of the doorway for a moment, before they sweep in. How many of them she cannot tell, but they are all black as hell's devils, with teeth bared like dogs, yelling out in a tongue she does not understand. A flash of steel in the orange light and, before she can even rise from her mattress, her mother lies motionless, a pool of dark red blossoming around her. Three more blades slice through the smoke that is now seeping into the room, and her little siblings flop back, lifeless rag dolls, glassy-eyed. And then they come for her.

She watches as they grab the baby from her chest. She cannot remember if she screamed that day, but in the dream, where every night she revisits the old scene, she cannot utter a sound. The baby, too, does not even cry. Or maybe there is no time for it to cry, for the man flings his arm back in an easy curve, and sends it soaring through the air, dashing it against the wall. She does not feel the cold slash of steel slice her own stomach. She has turned into stone, and she watches as the baby soars in a graceful arc and its head meets the clay-thatched wall neatly with a sickening crack. Splits like the hard brown coconuts the villagers dash on the ground for luck; all the more fortune if they break into two perfect white halves, like twin moons.



And now it was that time of the year again. The erabadu flowers burst like firebirds on the edges of heavy branches, in brilliant plumes of red. Masses of little pointed flames, blazing up to a blinding clear blue sky. Hidden in the green thickets of mango, the Koha cooed out to the waking world, its voice a pure, silver note of sound, and little children whooped for joy and ran from tree to tree, imitating its call. The twin trees in the garden hung heavy with mango, plump with juice, green-gold globes of ripeness. It was her job to chase away the little neighborhood scamps, who threw stones from the road to fell the ripened fruit, and sometimes even scaled the walls like dirty brown monkeys, crazed with mango-thirst. Sometimes the over-ripe fruit would fall to the hard ground below, spilling honey-flesh and sweet juice.

Once she had picked up a lucky mango that was scarcely bruised except for a dent, and hidden it inside her blouse. Then in the cool, dark quiet of the kitchen attic, she had devoured it quietly, tearing off the skin with her teeth and chewing it up too. When she bit into the soft flesh, the feeling! Warm, heady juice from the sun-warmed mango dribbled down her chin and dripped unheeded down her arms. She had held the soft, stringy mound of fruit in both hands and sucked the life juice out of it, mango-flesh melting in her mouth. Then she had laughed with abandon, delightedly.

In the house they did not celebrate the New Year. They had their own, on the first day of January, when they would either throw a party at their house, or go out to one. There was nothing remarkably special about it, not like their new year for which everyone would prepare for months in advance. Instead, the mistress would deck up in her finery, and the master in his crisp shirts, and they would head off to some lunch or dinner with friends, leaving the baby in her charge at home.

In the house, their gala day was Christmas. In their all-Buddhist village back home they had never seen this Christian celebration in December. She was dazzled by the fairy lights on the Christmas tree, the silver sprigs entwined like snakes in the boughs. She had never seen such a short, triangular dwarf of a tree; pruned into a shapely green cone, with thousands of dark green sprigs on its boughs instead of leaves. Once she had buried her face in the dark green boughs and breathed in the musky dry scent, the rough sprigs scratching drily against her cheek. It, too, had a green smell. But not the free, vast smell of light-green paddy shoots or the pale yellow-green of tender banana leaves. Rather, a closeted green smell that suffocated her. The tree made her feel sad, as if someone had cut her down too, stunted her, hewn her into shape.

But now avurudu was approaching. She could tell by the cuckoo's pure, round note of joy, the telling ripeness of the earth. In the house next door she could see a big swing being tied up with thick, long ropes onto the sturdiest branch of a mango tree. The smell of fresh paint wafted in the air, and once, when she was on her way to the nearby boutique, there was a pool of new paint accidentally spilled over on the road, like a puddle of sky. The little shop was being repainted in blue. On the television, she caught glimpses of young girls in flowering cloths beating rabans and swinging high



on double-swings. So she knew Avurudu was on its way, though she was not sure of the exact day, and did not dare ask. She never spoke in the house. She merely did her work as told.

Then one night she was jerked out of sleep by the old sounds of gunshots. She leaped up from the mat, clutching her ears, past and present melding in her terrified confusion. In the deafening darkness, the world was erupting into blasts and booms, split apart in an explosion of noise all around her. It was the bombs! They were back, the Tigers, and they were coming to get them! With frantic eyes, she groped wildly around on the mat, searching in the throbbing black dark. The baby, her baby. The baby was not there!

It was only after some minutes that she realized it was only fireworks. Crackers split like whiplashes through the night as people rejoiced. Trembling, she hugged her knees to her chest, trying to stop the tremors that were shaking her body. Her brain was numb from the shock, her heart still quivering like a limp leaf in a storm. Slowly, her eyes, adjusting to the thick liquid dark, began to comprehend the flashes of blue and red. Through the little garret window above her head, she could see the sky burst into bloom, in a wild fiesta of red and gold sparks, and showers of blue stars. The New Year had arrived.



In the morning, she had a large load of washing to do. The master and mistress had left for somewhere, it being a long holiday with two days for Avurudu added to the weekend. They had left the baby at home, with precise instructions for what she must do that day. Once she had put the baby to sleep, she was to wash the dirty linen and cook lunch. And for some reason, the chubby baby, usually so joyous and happy, was in a strangely vile mood. She had washed and powdered him and dressed him in a pretty yellow kit, but he had refused to eat anything or even sleep. And now he just wouldn't stop crying.

She was tired. She hadn't slept all night, with the crackers exploding like gunshots, bursting the sky into sparks. It was avurudu but she felt no pleasure at the thought of the New Year. Back home they would have spent months saving up and preparing for the day, sewing new dresses from flower-patterned cloth, making diamond-shaped aluwa and dosi, frying golden-brown kavum slow and deep in sizzling oil. Her little siblings would be running around laughing, trying to snatch a kokis from the steaming pan over which she sat, watching the large yellow sweetmeats splutter and hiss in oil like melting stars. She was tired, so tired. And now the baby too had decided he was going to be in a foul mood for the day.

In the end she gave up trying to pacify the bawling child, whose face was turning red like a ripe jambu. She would keep him beside her on the grass under the Beli tree and go ahead with her washing. Hopefully he would cry himself out and eventually go to sleep. She hoisted the baby onto a hip, and carrying out the basket of dirty linen and the baby's rubber mat, headed towards the well.

Under the Beli tree the sunlight fell in flickering beams, throwing dancing shadows of leaves on the grass below. She sat the pretty baby on his mat and tickled his little fist with a fallen leaf. He stopped crying for a moment and stared in fascination at the patterns of leaf and light dancing on his rubber mat, then looked around with wide eyes, taking in the fresh sunlit world, the great bowl of blue sky. It was a beautiful day. But the girl did not see it, she was too tired. With a sigh she picked up the basket of clothes to be washed, along with the red basin, and stepped barefoot towards the well.

Elbow-deep in soapy water, she was soaking the linen in the thick white froth of Surf Excel, her skin burning from the strong washing powder, when the baby took up his bawling again. The sound tore through her thoughts, jerking her out of her reverie. She gazed down, watching the white foam bubble and rise in the red basin. Her soul, too, seemed to seethe like soap-froth in sunlight. The sun dried the soapy water on her arms leaving a sticky dampness. From the tree overhead, a Beli fruit fell and cracked against the stone ground, the hard shell splintering in two. Like a split skull. From the jagged edges of the fractured halves, the orange flesh oozed out, crushed mushy Beli pulp.

The baby was screeching himself hoarse, the sound grating against her throbbing, swollen ears. She stood up, wiping the frothy foam on her skirt. Her knees ached from squatting. Slowly she picked up the bawling baby and tried to hush him, swinging him around on her arms, tossing him gently up into the air. But the baby continued to cry. And inside her, her soul was seething, and her own baby clung to her neck from behind with frighteningly strong arms, its thin fingers pressing urgently into her skin.

She walked towards the well, rocking the child in her arms. He was heavy, sitting on her chest like a lump of kneaded white dough. She would show him the water inside the well, how the sunlight danced on the clear black water like shards of light. How the insects flitted, little mercury things, amongst the heavy green ferns. And there were a few fish too, although you had to peer closely to see them. Little smooth black fish, darting in and out of the water's surface where fallen leaves floated, good for the well because they devoured the eggs of insects.

She bent over the edge of the well, the baby heavy in her arms. "Look, baby," she murmured, showing him their reflection in the well water, mirrored in black shadow. "Look. There's my little baby. See what a pretty little chubby baby." And the baby, pausing to listen to her voice, saw the light reflected on the water and stopped screaming to watch.

A fish suddenly darted out of the gleaming silver surface and back into the water with a splash. At that, the little one gave a chortle of delight, and twisted out of her arms. Her heart gave a wrench, but she was tired, too tired to hold on any longer, and the weight of her own baby was too much, too much to carry. She let out a sort of harsh, dry sob. Her wet arms, slippery with soap, gave way and the baby soared like a bird in the air. Spun like a graceful dancer, and hung, suspended for a moment in mid-air, his laugh frozen like the sunlight in the air. Then dropped, like a rock, straight down.

When a hollow splash resounded from the yawning depths of the well, she felt the little hands around her neck finally relax their hold. And then she heard it, plainly, like a caress in her ear, a little breathless laugh.

**Pawan Madri Kalugala** is a second-year undergraduate majoring in English at the University of Colombo. She is first and foremost a poet, and this is her first attempt at short fiction. She writes essentially because she feels the need to record life. She believes in capturing on paper the minute details of life that pass us by unheeded. She is intrigued by psychology and the workings of the human mind, which she attempts to understand and portray through the characters in her work.

## UNDISCLOSED

*By Canista Arthie Denicius*

It was a beautiful evening, the sandy soil glittering with the glow of the descending sun. Theekshana, as he got down from the truck that had screeched to a stop not far from the Army camp, looked around taking in the tranquillity of the environment. As he inhaled the cool fresh air he felt a calmness and serenity within himself. The vastness of the landscape astonished him.

“Devastated, yet admirable” Theekshana thought as he walked towards the Army camp gazing around him at the huge trees that gave shelter to the land and the soft, silky sand that shone with a golden glow in the evening sun. This was his first posting. After finishing basic training, he had been sent to this remote village in Killinochchi, called Maruthodai. “Look here Theekshana,” his Commander had told him when he gave him his assignment, “we are sending you to a resettled village, where the terrorists established themselves very strongly some three or four years ago. Beware! They all have the rebellious tendency in their blood. You should always be observant. Understood?”

The words of the Commander echoed in his ears as he walked along taking in the far off murmur of waves hitting the seashore.

Though only nineteen, Theekshana had been forced to shoulder responsibility for his family. His father was a drunkard and his mother used to take care of the family, working long hours in a garment factory. About six months ago, she had damaged her hand in one of the machines, and was sent home with little compensation. Being the eldest son in the family, Theekshana had had no choice but to join the Army.

The small huts and houses he passed had white and blue plastic sheeting on them with big letters advertising the names of the NGOs who supported that family. When he reached the Army camp, there were two other young soldiers of his age, milling around the entrance talking to the sentries.

“Hello, are you Theekshana?” one of the young soldiers asked.

“Yes and you are?”

“I’m Tharindu and he is Chaminda. Yesterday we were informed that one Theekshana would be sent here and we were waiting to welcome you. You will be bunking with us.”

Tharindu and Chaminda took Theekshana’s bags and led him into the camp. He followed them observing the sand bags used to build the walls around the camp. Japan Roses were popping out here and there on the lawn and they enriched the beauty of the environment.

“By the way Theekshana,” Chaminda said, “since you are new here, let me give you some advice. You need to show a very stern face to the inhabitants. Whenever you see anyone passing the check-point, don’t forget to ask them to show their identity card to you.”

Theekshana did not know what to make of this stern warning and nodded.

“Never be friendly with them,” Tharindu added as they came into the room Theekshana would share with them.

Chaminda gestured to a corner of the room, where there was a bed and locker. “Welcome.”

A few days after he arrived, Theekshana was assigned to the sentry post at the entrance to the Army camp. The camp was near the famous Amman Kovil in Maruthodai. On Fridays, considerable amounts of people from all over Maruthodai come to worship Amman and participate in the pooja. It was generally believed that the Maruthodai Amman was very powerful, and that whatever one asked for during the pooja would be granted. Lots of mothers, whose sons had gone missing during the war, came there to worship Amman, hoping she would help bring their sons back to them. Yet, despite the numerous poojas they made in the names of their missing sons, no mother had found a son.

It was a Friday and being the first Friday after Theekshana’s arrival, he was quite amazed to see such a large number of people going into the Amman Kovil. As his eyes roamed over the crowd, they rested on a young woman. Wavy hair, dark round eyes, slim, swarthy and tall. She resembled

his beloved sister who had died two years ago of cancer. The startling similarity shocked him. From that moment onwards he could not stop staring at her.

Sudarvili felt someone's gaze on her and, looking around, her eyes locked with Theekshana's. She felt her blood freeze. "Why am I being noted like this? Am I to also share the fate of my missing brother?" she thought. Her dark face became darker as the hot blood pumped under her skin, her fear mixed with anger. "Will these animals imprison me for no reason and will I too vanish?"

Once the poojas were over, Sudarvili grabbed her mother's arm and started towards home. As she passed the Army camp, Sudarvili gripped her mother's hand tighter, her own hand icy, her heart thudding.

That night Sudarvili was unable to sleep properly, recalling the intent gaze of that soldier. Even though it was cool outside, she was wet with perspiration. She could not lie on her ragged mat anymore, so she got up, went to the kitchen and gulped down two glasses of water. Still she could not soothe her nerves. She opened the door and went outside the hut. She began to walk up and down, keeping her tread soft so that her mother and sister would not be disturbed in their little hut. Suddenly she heard noises – a truck approaching and some voices. Sudarvili hurried inside the hut, lowered the flame of the hurricane lamp quickly and went back to her mat. She pulled the sheet over her head, trying to force herself to sleep, but she was alert now to all sounds outside and, even after the truck left, she remained awake.

"No... I did not do anything wrong. Please leave me. My mother and my little sister are alone here. They need me. I am not what you think..." But her pleas were useless. The soldier who had stared at her, along with two others, dragged her out of the hut. Her mother was screaming behind them, pleading with the young man. Sudarvili's handicapped sister, Valarmathy, was hiding behind the door and peeping out at her sister, her eyes wide. Sudarvili's loud cry pierced the darkness. "No! Please leave me. I did not do anything. I won't come with you. I won't leave my mother and sister."

"Sudar, Sudar, see your mother is here. Are you okay, my dear?"

Sudarvili woke with a start to find her mother shaking her from

sleep, patting her head. She stared at her. Her sister Valarmathy was still lying beside her, asleep. The door was safely locked.

“Were you thinking of the final days in Mullivaikaal, when you went to bed last night?” her mother asked, still stroking her head.

Sudarvili nodded. She did not want to reveal her fear of being caught by that soldier and disturb her already ill-starred mother any more.

It was almost time for Sudarvili to get ready for school. She dressed quickly and, by the time she stepped out of the house, she had made up her mind that she would avoid encountering that soldier. When she drew near the Amman Kovil she walked as fast as her legs could carry her. He was there at the entrance to the Army camp, with his gun. Even though she did not turn her eyes towards him, she felt his gaze was on her. She kept her face as impassive as she could, her expression innocent and pure so he would not be suspicious of her. He did not, however, call her to stop and show her ID, and she felt a flood of relief as she left the sentry post behind.

When she returned from school, she had to pass the sentry point, and once more that soldier was there. She could feel his intent gaze on her as she walked by.

As the days went by and she saw that the soldier had no evil intent towards her, her panic gave way to red ripe wrath. At night, as she lay on her mat, she often steamed emotionally saying to him, “You don’t know anything about me, soldier. I make you believe that I am an innocent, studious school girl, concentrating on my studies, but do you know how bitter I feel whenever I happen to encounter you or your kind? You people murdered my loving father and my youngest brother! You villains imprisoned my eldest brother! My blood boils whenever I see those guns in your hands, the same demonic weapons that killed my dear ones. You dirty wolf, if I had a gun, I would shoot you until I felt my thirst for blood quenched. Until the souls of my dear ones, whom you did not even allow a decent burial, rest in peace!”

She would often think of her brother Neethan and his love for the theatre, recalling the time he did a street drama at the Killinochchi Bus Stand in support of the Cause, using his friends in the LTTE as actors. The



walls of their house were full of medals, awards and prizes that Neethan had secured in speech, drama and song competitions during his school days. How eloquent Neethan was on stage. She remembered how he would spend hours writing inspiring verses for dramas, and powerful lyrics for songs.

This was during the good times in their life but then, when the last phase of the war began, their family, like others around them, started to encounter constant ordeals. The first blow for their family was when they heard, one morning, that the school in which Theepan, her younger brother, was studying, had come under an air attack, the building full of fumes and smoke. Her father ran to the school but, on his way, he was killed by a bomb. The rest of their family were forced to flee to a detention camp, without being able to give her father or Theepan a burial.

While they were in the camp, a group of Army commanders came to examine the inhabitants. One among them, a well built, stout fellow with a thick moustache, walked up and down and stared at the people who were sitting there like cattle. He cleared his throat and started to talk in his thunderous voice. "I know very well who you all are, that many of you supported the LTTE. Before I come and drag some of you out like stray dogs, those who have had any contact with the LTTE stand up and form a line here." He looked around the crowd scowling.

"What a stupid order to be followed!" Sudarvili thought, "We were all with the LTTE, what did this idiot fellow expect us to do?" Sudarvili felt the heat rising into her throat.

A line began to form. Almost all the youngsters started to join it looking frightened and desperate. Neethan's mother signalled him not to go but, before others pointed their fingers at him, Neethan got up and joined the line. Their mother sat there like a hardened rock, unable to weep.

Four years passed after that and all their visits to NGOs, the ICRC and various meetings with government and military officials, produced nothing about Neethan. They did not know if he was alive or dead, detained or not.



As the days went by, Theekshana realized that Tamils were not horrible and cruel as he had thought and heard them to be. Many mothers, noticing the soldiers waiting a long time for food to be delivered from the camp, gave the prasatha they got from the temple as sacred food to these young men. Being mothers, they could not let these young men starve, while they were sharing the sacred food of the God. If the women forgot, Theekshana used to call to them, “Ammea, ammea, kaamathenna,” gesticulating with his hand towards his mouth so that the mothers could understand he was asking for food. They would laugh then at his appeal and offer their prasatha to him with motherly smiles.

He had become quite friendly with a Tamil man who worked odd jobs in the camp, and when he questioned him about the steady stream of women who came to the temple, he learnt that most of them came to pray for the return of their missing sons. Knowing this, made him think of the camp where he had received his training. There had been a group of young Tamil men of his age who were kept prisoner there. As a soldier in training, he had the worst jobs, and so he was often assigned to accompany the young men as they emptied out the rusted buckets they used for lavatories in their cells. He pitied them and, over time, had come to know their names and a little about their pasts. When he was sure he wasn't being observed he would offer them a cigarette.

“Except for language and culture, Tamils and Sinhalese are the same,” he pondered to himself as he watched those women come and go. “Tamils are as kind and loving as my people. Like my people, they too want to lead a happy and harmonious life. Basically, we have nothing against each other. It is the political forces that lead both groups to war, distorting and misinterpreting things so that they can attain their personal motives. We all are puppets in their hands, scapegoats for their desires.”

Sometimes his fellow soldiers were rough with the villagers, treating people harshly. Theekshana knew that this was because a Commander or Brigadier had come to check on how the soldiers were behaving towards the inhabitants. Those who were in power did not want

the soldiers becoming close with the inhabitants. If it was reported that soldiers at a particular check point were on good terms with the inhabitants, they would be immediately transferred.

As he meditated on the politics that were destroying this beautiful island, Theekshana felt the need to destroy the falsehoods and divisions created by the leaders on both sides to attain their own ends. But he knew his limitations. He had to carry out the orders that were given to him and, apart from that, he could not do much. The little help that he could offer was to improve the present predicament of the people he encountered here. So he started, in his free time, to play with the little children of Maruthodai, setting up a cricket game or refereeing one of their football matches.

Even though Theekshana became friendly with most of the inhabitants, he could not win the trust and affection of the young woman who resembled his sister. She still avoided looking at him as she passed. He understood that she must be frightened of him and the power she thought he had over her, and he was circumspect in looking at her. But she did resemble his dead sister and so his eyes, even against his will, were drawn to her. Once she actually did look at him and he quickly smiled, but she looked away, her face turning red.

His roommates, Chaminda and Tharindu, had noted his playing games with the little boys and they warned him against getting too friendly with the inhabitants saying, "If you don't watch it, you will get transferred. That is what happens to soldiers who get too friendly with the locals." They often added things like, "We have nothing against Tamils personally, but war is war. Either you win or you lose. There's their side and then there is our side." Theekshana never argued with them because he knew it was useless to do so. This was the general view in the camp, and he was alone in his beliefs.

One day, when Sudarvili was coming from school she noticed that the soldier who stared at her was playing with her little cousin Rajan. Later, she went to her aunt's hut. Rajan was playing outside and, as she walked towards him, she shouted, "What is wrong with you? Have you no pride?" Seeing she was angry with him for some reason, Rajan ran into a grove of nearby Margosa trees. She swiftly chased and caught him. He tried to jerk out of her grip, crying "What?"

“Don’t you have any others to play with?” she yelled. “Do you know who you are playing with? They are the ones who killed my beloved father. You are unable to understand things. At least listen to others and learn how to behave like a self-respecting Tamil. Wait and see, one day they will turn on you and unload their guns at you. If I ever happen to see you playing with the soldiers again, I don’t know what I will do to you.”

Rajan escaped her grip, giggled, jerked his hips at her teasingly and ran away.

Sudarvili stared up at the cloudless sky, breathing hard. The chirping sounds of little birds, the gentle breeze from the leafy trees and the milky soil that softly caressed the soles of her feet did not give her any pleasure. “All these shameless people go and talk with these soldiers,” she muttered to herself. “Is it so easy for them to forget all the torture, suffering and horrendous deaths we have endured? How easily people forget everything that happened to them. Can’t Rajan see that those who tormented us wear the same uniform as that soldier? That little brat goes and plays with him, like a dog wagging its tail whenever it sees its master.”

Her anger stayed with her throughout school the next day as she ruminated on the friendliness of her people towards the soldiers and how this friendliness was a betrayal of all they had suffered. When the bell rang to announce that school was over, she stuffed her school bag with her books and pencil box and started towards home. As she approached the Amman kovil, she heard familiar voices. It was Rajan and some other boys playing hide and seek with that soldier. Seeing Sudarvili approach, Rajan started guiltily, then ran and hid behind the sandbags at the check point. Sudarvili was red with anger and could not control the rage that had been building up in her all day. “Have you no shame?” she yelled at her cousin in Tamil and walked away as fast as her legs could carry her.

Observing all this Theekshana asked Rajan, “Who?” keeping his Sinhala brief and limited so the boy would understand.

“Akka....”

“Your own sister?”

“Illa.....”

“Aunt’s daughter?”

“Mmmm.”

“How many children?”

“Three, Sudar, Valar, Neethan...”

Neethan. In an instant, Theekshana recalled this was the name of one of the young men who had been a prisoner at the camp, where he had received his training.

“Malli what Neethan doing?”

“Kaanealla.”

“What?”

“KAANEALLA.” Illustrating his word with some gestures Rajan started running towards his home.

Theekshana understood what he meant. Neethan, was missing.

Two days later, Rajan ran to Sudarvili’s hut and shouted for her at the doorway. Sudarvili came out and demanded, “Why are you shouting like this?”

She saw that he was breathless and excited. He tried to say something, but he could not utter a word as he was breathing so quickly. At last he stuttered out, “Neethan Anna....was in the same detention camp where Theekshana *Anna* was before he came here.....Now he has been sent to the rehabilitation camp in Vavuniya.”

When Sudarvili’s mother heard Neethan’s name, she came rushing out of the shed. “Raja, what did you say? Is Neethan alive? Who told you all these things?”

“Why Chiththy, Theekshana Anna,” Rajan replied.

“But how does he know it is our Neethan?” Sudarvili demanded, disbelieving.

“There is only one way to be sure,” her mother said. She disappeared into the hut and came back with a photograph of Neethan, then she grabbed Rajan by the hand and hustled him towards the Army camp. As they left, Rajan turned back, crying, “Sudar Akka, Theekshana Anna said his youngest sister is just like you.... she died of cancer two years ago.”

Sudarvili was struck dumb. She slowly lowered herself to the floor of their hut.

Sudarvili could not sleep that night. She kept vigil for the dawn to come, thinking of what her mother had told her upon her return, how Theekshana had recognized the photograph of her brother and informed her mother of the camp where Neethan was held now, and how they could get there. He had made her mother promise not to tell the authorities where she had got the information. He was nervous, her mother had reported, and he glanced around at the other soldiers to make sure they were not listening in.

At last, when the rays of the sun touched the gloomy world, Sudarvili got dressed and left home early for school, wanting to have a moment alone with Theekshana, without her other school-mates around to see them talking. She wanted to apologize to him for her previous rudeness and anger. As she walked along, she felt a new lightness taking hold of her. She was aware of the dawn songs of birds, the soft breeze, the milky soft soil under the soles of her shoes. They gave her pleasure.

Yet, when Sudarvili reached the checkpoint, Theekshana was not there.

He had been sent to some distant village as punishment for getting too friendly with the locals, so the other soldiers told her.

***Glossary of Tamil Terms***

Akka - Elder Sister.

Amman - A female goddess.

Anna - Elder brother.

Chiththy - Aunt, especially a younger sister of a female sibling.

Prasatha - Sacred food given during ceremonial offering in Hindu Temples.

***Canista Arthie Denicius*** was born and bred in Jaffna, a society that has experienced the ferocity of war for the last three decades. She got the rough sketch for this story from one of the writing exercises she did during the Write to Reconcile Colombo workshop. In creating this story, she used both her life experiences and facts that she got from victims of the war whom she met at her place of birth.

## STRANGE WHISPERS

*By Pathum Punchihewa*

We all have our own stories to tell. Resplendent, vivid memoirs or baroque, crepuscular sagas. I can see thousands of stories scattered around, stories never told, stories never unfolded, stories never completed...

Nobody would believe that Colpetty was once a beautiful rustic village with coconut groves and cinnamon trees that grew wild, narrow cart-tracks connecting the few villas and homes of this village with the rest of the country. Even though I knew this to be a historical fact, I found it difficult to match it with the skyline of Colpetty today, its mighty buildings enhancing the radiance of the sky with their tiny flickering dots of lights.

I looked through the window of the rusty bus I was taking to Colombo's Fort, the dusk clouds hovering over Colpetty. Evenings in the city, during office closing time, were its busiest hours. The adopted children of Colombo, who came from outside towns and suburbs, thought of her as their final destination in life. Yet, after spending hours in their cubicles and office spaces, they hurry to leave her, seeking the warmth of their own suburban cocoons and the love of their families. I felt sorry for her; she loved her adopted kids so much, even more than her own children—those elite, conceited Colombo People who are set to face extinction.

The bus stopped at one of its usual halts in Colpetty town and I looked outside, trying to find the old coffee parlor located nearby. In the good old days, you could smell this stop, with its distinctive fragrance of roasted, ground, pure Sri Lankan coffee beans. I remember how, as a kid, I used to love the Island Coffee Parlor of Colpetty. I loved having one of its famous iced coffees. Later, I used to have a nice iced coffee or two whenever I had enough time to wander around between classes and on lunch hours, as well as during my ambles on dusky evenings and Sundays. They never raised the price even at the peak of popularity. A highball glass of iced coffee for just forty rupees was a real treat.



After a few minutes of gazing out of the bus, I realized to my dismay that the coffee parlour had been replaced by a tiny, ugly pastry shop. No more delicious aromas of roasted coffee beans while pausing at the bus stop. I felt nostalgic and, on a sudden urge, I pushed through the packed-to-the-brim bus and got down. Colpetty town is kaleidoscopic yet elegant, but without that coffee shop, it will never be the same.

“Machan you know what? After few years, this town will be a mess with numerous unknown buildings, new boutiques and with new faces. But if ever you can’t get an iced coffee from this joint, Colpetty town will never be the same!” I could still remember Denis’s exact words and his sardonic smile. He had said that right after we left the coffee shop having had two iced coffees each.

“Yah I know, but I don’t think this good old town will let those urban planners change her attire so easily,” I replied. “Machan I was a little boy when I had my first iced coffee from this coffee shop. And I still remember the face of the nice lady behind the counter.”

“I bet you do, pervert!” His contemptuous laugh was so natural he used to say that it was a curse from another life.

“Oh shut up Saint Denis!”

“Even as a little kid you were a pervert, admit it. Alright mate, it’s time for me to leave. From tomorrow I am going to be posted at the Trincomalee Naval Base, which means your sorry ass won’t be able to meet me for months. Finally I can get rid of my torturing pals, especially you.”

“Sure, sure, let me know when you are in Colombo again, it’s not like I’m going to miss you or anything, so leave now! And don’t tell me you lost my book somewhere. Read it!”

“I am not as careless as you. And thanks for the book!” He held up the book I gave him a moment ago, *Ender’s Game*. Again that sardonic monkey laugh.

I grinned, wondering how this giant, ape-like man could captain his battalions with a serious tone, hiding his wit and sarcasm. I knew that he was one of the greatest war strategists in Sri Lanka but I could never picture Denis in a uniform.

Denis saluted me in a purposely imperious manner and started to walk towards Marine Drive. He had only gone a few steps when he stopped and turned, his face burnished with his sardonic smile. "Forever and forever farewell my man... If we do meet again, we'll smile indeed. If not, 'tis true this parting was well made." He was smiling but his tone was solemn.

"Before the battle, Brutus and Cassius... Really you old pig? Do I have to remind you that the war is over?" I laughed at Denis quoting Shakespeare. This man was full of surprises.

"You never know man, you never know. Adios brother!" The next moment, Denis was gone.

That was the last time I saw him before he ended his life by jumping off a ten-story building.



I have stopped writing. If you have read about writers writing their books surrounded by the peace and serenity of a silent night, you have probably developed a classy idea about what being a writer is. But, reality is a bitch if that fantasy has led you into becoming a writer.

Now, as you already suspect, I am writing a book. Might be a best-seller, might be a flop. You never know how these things will work out. Nevertheless, it doesn't matter when you have the writing fixation. You just want to spit out those twirling, whirling words, sentences and feelings, the whole story striving inside your head to come out. Boy, I guess I need another shot of coffee!

The words, "Road to Jaffna," might conjure up a fancy journey or a vacation tour for a person who has never been to Jaffna, before or after the war. But for me, it was quite different. I remember all those fairy tale evenings I spend at Sarmatha's house, playing with her. Sarmatha's father and my father were best buddies. Just like Denis and I. Sarmatha's father used to visit my family with her while I chose to spend half of my holidays in Jaffna.

But this journey wasn't a vacation tour or a fancy tourist's dream, because I was traveling north this time, bearing my best friend's death in the deep alleys of my heart. It felt strange because I was on a mission to fulfill his last wishes. Denis loved to tag every vacation we had together with other friends, as "missions". There were "plans" and he wanted us to stick to them. And if we didn't share Denis's enthusiasm for sticking to a plan, our disagreements with him wrecked the trip.

My heavy heart prevented me from indulging in the childish gesture of pressing my nose against the window and letting the passing view thrill me. But I was happy to see the sight of those old roads leading to Jaffna, the endless lines of Palmyrah trees, after such a long time. I was happy because after thirty two years I would be meeting Sarmatha.

I tried to recall her childish face, as I had tried many times since deciding to make this journey. But, for some strange reason, that fragment of memory had been wiped clean from the shores of my childhood memories by the waves of time. The only memory that tied my six year old self to her, my childhood friend, was her teasing me, saying "A fine bus driver you'll make someday!" It was my childhood dream to become a bus driver who owns the open road. When I was a kid, it was like picturing a cowboy driving a huge old bus, whistling the tune, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*'

I couldn't imagine Sarmatha as a grown woman, a mother. She might have changed but I was sure that inside, she was still the same little girl who played with me, the girl with a warm bubbly personality.

We were nearing Jaffna. I looked through the curtains of the bus window and saw a milkman cycling in the distance. The rising sun shone over him in a reddish glow. An old man in a dhoti was sprinkling water on the dusty ground and girls were riding their scooters, thick jasmine garlands hugging their dark hair, their saris luminous.

The bus finally arrived in Jaffna town.

I wished I could say that nothing had changed, but that was not true. The city may still have her curves and authentic beauty from the good old days but it was just a semblance of the old her. There were new commercial constructions amidst old settlements, rising as fast as mushrooms after a dewy night. They were ugly buildings compared to what they had replaced;

often just large cement blocks painted in gaudy colours. There were sharp cuts in the bellies of the Palmyrah trees on the outskirts of the city, caused by shrapnel, but those wounds were healing so it seemed.

“Ayiah, if you want to visit Nallur Kovil, you still have time to attend the morning puja,” the tuk-tuk driver I had hired said, as we sped along.

“It’s alright, I think I’ll visit the Kovil later. Just drop me nearby, drop me near the municipal council office.” When I called Sarmatha before I left Colombo last night, she told me that they have moved to a new house near the Nallur Temple. “It’s not hard to find, after you pass the Temple. But do not wait outside Rio Ice Cream to be their first morning customer. You still love ice cream, don’t you? Come straight to our house.” She giggled. “I’ve missed you my friend,” she whispered before she hung up.

I felt excitement mixed with hope when I turned into the lane that led to her new home. Just after the war had started, her parents took her and left the country. She came back to Sri Lanka as a mature woman and I wasn’t sure what her reaction would be when she saw me.

I knocked on the door and, after a moment, it opened slowly. I could see two sets of curious eyes peeping from behind the door. Then I heard the delicate jingle of bells tied to feet. Sarmatha appeared at the far end of the hallway and the two children jumped away from their hideout behind the door and rushed to her. The jingle of her anklet stopped and the clinking of her metal bangles filled the silence as she hugged the youngest one and caressed the hair of her elder one. Even as a kid she was motherly, I remembered. She never fought with me yet used to console me with an immense patience when I burst out at her.

“It is so good to see you,” she said as she opened the door wide and hugged me warmly. “My god, how many years have passed by? You are all grown up.” Her face was beaming gleefully and now the memory of what she looked like as a child came back to me. “Meet my two rascals, Samzi and Nithu. You two, say hi to uncle Anil.” The two kids were still observing me with curious eyes. They had inherited her eyes. Even though I could see traces of the girl in short dresses who had played with me, Sarmatha had matured. Her short frizzy hair had become a neat thick braid that reached down to her waist. The skinny girl I used to play with had become a rounder

woman. Her forehead had acquired one or two worry lines during these three decades. Her warm personality was still the same, intact though she had become an elegant mother.

“Where is your husband? I’ve never met him, but I can picture him from the things you told me last night over the phone.” She had told me that, though as a teenager, she had fancied her future husband to be an adventurer like Christopher Columbus or a writer like Jack London, she had come to really love the way Rajesh, her husband, adored her in the old fashioned way as if she were the household goddess. She said that she liked that he was an ordinary, reliable man who admired traditional values.

“Oh, you will like him. Rajesh is a quiet guy. He went to kovil, to be part of the morning pooja. He will come soon.”

“Sarmatha, you can’t imagine how great it is to see you after all these years. I wish this could be just a friendly visit. But it is not, unfortunately.”

Her enthusiasm didn’t vanish but slightly faded and her face became more serious. “I’m so sorry about your friend, Anil. I know how much he meant to you, I felt it when you spoke of him.”

“Thanks. Did you receive the information I sent?”

“Yes, and you remember my cousin brother? He is a big shot here these days. He found accurate information with the partial details you gave me. How is she anyway? How is your friend’s daughter now?”

“Well, Nirupama knew that she was adopted by Denis. Denis chose to tell her that, as he wasn’t married. But she doesn’t know anything else. Even Denis didn’t know anything else about her. He found her in a refugee camp hospital. He guessed that the mother and the baby came from a nearby village, almost destroyed. She survived miraculously.”

“My cousin confirmed everything you are telling me, when investigating details about Nirupama’s mother. Denis’s adopted daughter’s mother is still alive, but I am not sure if it is a good idea for them to meet. I mean she is not stable, you know, her mental condition is worse according to my cousin.”

“But that was Denis’s last wish, Sarmatha. He wanted me to find Nirupama’s mother. She inherited everything that belonged to Denis, even the love of his family, but it seems that Denis thought it wouldn’t be enough for her in the future. So I guess it is Nirupama’s decision to meet her mother or not”

“I understand. The war scattered many families. But there is another thing you should know. According to my cousin’s information, Nirupama’s father was a former Tiger, a front-row cadre. He was killed in a massive exchange of fire between the Army and Tigers, rumors say. I don’t think raking up all that merciless history will do any good.”

I knew she was right. This was going to be more painful than I had realized. “I don’t want to think of any of that stuff for the rest of the day. Let’s catch up on our missed time, just you and me.” I could see my old playmate appear before me again as Sarmatha’s beautiful eyes started to beam mischievously. For a moment, the frizzy haired skinny girl took over the mature woman.

“Oh yes, we have lots to catch up on.”

As I looked at the bright eyes of my old friend I thought of how I had missed her. At the same time I felt a shivery feeling, as if there was a heavy weight buried in my guts. Being here in Jaffna and hearing Sarmatha’s warning about raking up the past, I now wondered if I would follow through on Denis’ wishes, especially knowing what I did know about his accidental role in Nirupama’s life.



It’s 4.00 a.m. now. Nonstop writing and lack of sleep have made me dizzy, but they haven’t eaten away at my desire to tell my story. Where was I? Ah! yes, the story of my friend, Denis. In the story, he committed suicide and left me, the main character of my story, as the custodian of his last will. Well, it wasn’t a part of the last will of Denis really, but a mere letter he left me in his military file, addressed to his best buddy, the protagonist of my story,

me. Yes, Denis knew exactly how to separate his personal life from his legal affairs.

Do not confuse “me” who writes the story with the “me” who tells the story. We might have common traits but we are two different personalities for sure. Maybe we both had a friend who committed suicide over some amorphous feelings he couldn’t identify. Maybe that friend left nothing for me, the writer, but I wanted to make up a story just to make myself feel better. You can’t predict how stories are created inside one’s head.

At least I can say one thing for sure, my dear readers. Sarmatha is my real friend. And yes, she has big, beautiful opal eyes. I should have another cup of coffee before I continue with my story. Sleep tries to catch me off guard and makes my eyelids betray me.

Anil,

I know this will be quite a surprise to you, but what can I say? I always insulted you, yet counted on you as my best friend. I know you knew that. If you are reading this letter, it means that I am gone before you. Hahaha, beat you sucker! I should stop trying to be sarcastic and should concentrate on serious matters with you, for once.

You know how much I love Nirupama, my adopted daughter. I always wanted the best for her. My mother named her Nirupama after her deceased best friend and she said that her friend Nirupama was also a delicate, feminine creature from head to toe, as her name describes. Anyway, I haven’t had much trouble with raising her as a single father; as my mother was always there for us.

You know I loved many women but never tied the knot. After sometime, I felt I was too late, but still I wanted to raise a family of my own, Anil. And I got to realize my true potential as a father when I found little Nirupama and her dying mother on a rusty iron bed, among an endless row of such beds in a refugee camp hospital. She was too weak to cry, whispering “Amma,” over and over again in a faint voice. Anil, you can’t understand that

scene, the feeling, unless you had seen it with your own eyes. I am a soldier. I have plotted strategies to execute hundreds of terrorist cells. But this...man, it was so strange. When I took that fragile soul into my hands, I knew right away, that I couldn't be separated from this child. That day I became a father.

Anil, you know I was with the military for many years. I didn't kill people directly, I didn't kill people for fun, I didn't kill people as a personal vendetta, but I did kill. I **KILLED PEOPLE**. I made strategic plans to win a war. It was sort of a game to me, but I tried to think that I did everything to keep other people safe, to make my country safe.

Anil, do you remember the book you gave me, that cyber punk fiction, Ender's Game, about the child genius? After I read it, I used to fancy myself as the protagonist of that story, Ender Wiggins. He was a child genius and a world-class military strategist. In that story, the world as they knew was on the verge of another great battle with aliens. And now, Ender, as part of his training was made the Supreme Commander of an imagined international fleet, the human army set against those aliens. Humans started the third invasion, fearing that aliens might destroy humankind if they had a chance. Ender was merciless and acute and he destroyed the aliens to the point of extinction, despite a 1,000:1 odds. Fascinating story right? Well, the point is Ender didn't know that he was fighting against another species, another life form which had the ability to think, to create. He thought that he was on a training mission; he thought that he was fighting against the commander-school super computer. That's why he was merciless at destroying the enemy.

Be patient now laddy, I'm coming to the end of my story. After he realized the truth, he hated himself. He left for the alien planet with human ships that were sent to populate those newly barren alien worlds. When he got there, he found a hidden message, left for him by those aliens who communicated through telepathic means. They said that they were sorry for invading earth not once but twice. They said they forgave him for destroying their race. They said that they understood why he did what he did, that they accepted their fate. In that message, they asked humans not to forget them. After understanding



the message of the extinct species, Ender understood the true meaning of war. He started to write. He wrote the story of those alien worlds. They also were great thinkers, great warriors and loving parents. The first invasion happened because they couldn't communicate with humans. They were children of telepathic senses, a hive mind. Hence, they couldn't understand human languages. Anyway, Ender wrote the story of those lost aliens; he used a pseudonym to write that book, 'Speaker for the Dead'. There are no such things as good wars.

Now you might ask, what is the connection between this story and me, your old friend Denis? No connection. Just wanted to share it, then you might be able to understand what is happening inside my mind.

Two months ago, I was posted on an investigation mission to Jaffna. You know one of those media stunts politicians use to impress people that they have credibility. It was after many years that I went back to that land of myriad Palmyrah trees. After my work there, I came back home a broken soul. Now, don't think it was old memories or anything. During my mission, I had to investigate some old military reports and strategic plans; a plot to destroy some important LTTE leaders. They hid in a remote village, disguising themselves as civilians. The Army decided to invade the village. They tried to evacuate innocent civilians and tried to capture the remaining LTTE cadres. There was a massive gunfight and many were killed on both sides. But I saw something wrong when I examined those old reports again and again. There were civilians remaining in the village. Believe me, when it really happened, Intel came through military channels and we were sure that the village was evacuated successfully. The army thought they'd cleared the village but it seemed the Tigers forced some of the villagers to stay behind as a shield. We didn't know that. We should have known but we didn't know. Intel was wrong Anil, I was wrong. Yes, I decided when and where to fire our rockets. I was the strategist who made those plans. I destroyed those lives. They were innocent people who just wanted to live another day. And here's the worst part of the story Anil: When I met Nirupama's mother in that refugee hospital with her newborn baby, I asked where she was from and she murmured a name through her dry lips. I wasn't paying much attention at the

time because of my adoration of that baby. But the name must have stuck with me because, when I was staring at that pile of old reports, I saw the name of her village. I don't know how she survived. Maybe she left the village in time with her child, maybe she was injured and managed to survive. I don't know. There are some times in our lives when facts don't matter anymore. I hope you can understand how I felt.

Anil, you have been a good friend to me for countless years and you were always Nirupama's dear "Anil mama." Be her good uncle. And I need another favor from you. Try to find Nirupama's relatives, if any of them are alive. I know it is not an easy task. But do it for her. I'm sure she will be loved forever by my mother and our family, but there will be a day when she will feel the desire to seek her roots. Please help her in that cause Anil.

Now, I am not going to explain anything else to you. Because if things are about to turn in a positive way and if my ship is to pass the stormy tides and arrive at a haven, then you won't read these lines. If you are reading this now, that means I am sleeping in Davy Jones's locker, forever.

I always wanted to write a story Anil. I wanted to write my story as the "Speaker for the Dead." But I guess it is up to you now.

Remember me always,

Denis



The first rays of dawn touch the soil, a mild breeze waking the brittle leaves softly. I want to think of a proper end for the story I wrote but, after writing the last word "Denis," nothing else comes to mind. Will Nirupama finally get together with her mother? Will the mother recognize the girl who came into this world through her flesh? Perhaps Nirupama's mother might call

her “my little Cicada,” as Denis did. Who knows...? Will the protagonist show the letter to Nirupama? I don’t know. As I told you, there are thousands of stories scattered around, some never told, some never completed.

When a writer falls into his own story, the boundary line between the imagination and reality slowly fades away. Maybe I am Anil, the teller of the story, actually *writing* the story, thinking that this is the best way to tell Nirupama what really happened in her adopted father’s life, that this is the best way to make her understand.

I want to end this little fable with a poem “Denis” scribbled beneath the letter he left for me. Who knows, I might send the poem and the rest of my story to Sarmatha, my childhood friend. She’ll understand. Even when we were kids, she was the wise one. She’ll be able to hear the strange whispers hidden beneath these lines...

Streets we have never walked on  
 windows we have never opened  
 hands we have never held  
 dreams we shall never have again  
 lives we have never lived  
 hopes we have never realized  
 fires we have never lit  
 love, we shall never ever make again.

***Pathum Punchihewa*** is a professional writer who sees the world in his own unique way. He was brought up in both Trincomalee and the Western province suburbs which experience has molded him into a semi-urban dweller with a sense of the civil conflict of Sri Lanka. His mixed background combined with his time at his Alma-mater, Ananda College, Colombo, nurtured his imagination and is embodied in his story.

## WITHERING BUDS

*By Vithuja Rajamohan*

The Uduvil-Manipay road was always empty, no vehicles on it, except at the hour when Uduvil Girls' College set the girls free. As the last bell rang at 2 o' clock, students rushed onto the road with their bicycles, and parents gathered in front of the school to pick up their children. The students in their blue and white pinafores ran here and there giggling, finally free from the restrictions of school. The faces of the students in the primary classes bloomed at the sight of their parents and they clung to their necks like baby Koala bears. The road was lined with well-maintained houses that stood in the midst of beautiful flower gardens. It was very rare to see a house with a thatched roof or one built of clay along that street. Almost all of them were painted colourfully with glass doors and wooden furniture. These luxurious houses, along with the renowned Uduvil Girls' College (that had the first women's hostel facilities in South Asia), added much beauty to this village. In addition to these houses and school, the shops along the Uduvil-Manipay road were attractive buildings that sold sophisticated wares such as expensive electronic and electrical goods, furniture and so on. Most of these houses were owned by the people living in the area.

Hansi's family lived in Uduvil and she was in grade five at the College. She was a jolly, fair skinned girl, with sparkling eyes and an always smiling face. She did not boast about her rich family background, and because of her kind mild manner, many of her classmates wanted to be friends with her. But she kept her distance from both the girls and the boys (who were allowed to study in the primary classes), because there was a yearning in the corner of her little heart that she did not want anyone to see. She believed that her parents did not love her very much. Her schoolmates often talked about their parents and the wonderful things they did with them, the loving words and caresses they bestowed on them. Because Hansi had no similar stories about her parents' love, she kept her distance from her friends out of embarrassment.

Her Amma and Appa devoted their entire life to work, only providing food and clothing where their daughter was concerned. But Hansi

wanted more from them. She wanted her Amma to feed her food with her hand, to sing lullabies and tell her fairy tales when she was put to bed. But, as she soon came to realize, their sole devotion was to earning money.

Once, Hansi had a severe pain in her hand, having fallen during their sports hour at school. At dinner while her Amma was serving their food, Hansi asked her Appa to feed her. He ignored her request, looking distracted and worried. Amma said, "Hansi! You are not a child. You should do things by yourself, without bothering others." As Hansi couldn't express her need for their affection and attention, she began to sob desperately. "Oh dear," her mother cried, "now, why are you crying? Appa has many problems at office. Try to understand he is stressed." Hansi got angry and left the table without dinner saying, "You both always have problems and no time to care for me."

Her only consolation was her beloved Ammachi, who understood her feelings. Hansi had a little brother named Akil, but he was only three years old and not a good companion for sharing her funny stories about what had happened at school or to commiserate with about their parents.



During the term tests that year, Hansi forgot to bring an eraser. Unfortunately it was her examination in drawing. She blinked at the paper, not knowing what to do, then looked up to get one of the supervisor's attention. They were too busy gossiping to notice her. Hansi began to sob, not sure what to do. She felt someone tap her shoulder and turned. It was her classmate Arun and he was holding out his eraser, having guessed her problem. He smiled and nodded and she smiled back in gratitude as she took his eraser.

Even though they had studied in the same class from grade one, she hadn't spoken a single word to Arun before. He was much bigger than the average students in the class, very tall and fat, with dark skin and expressive eyes that always revealed his thoughts. He always came first during sports meets, being very agile and nimble in running races and in high jump. Still, he didn't do very well in his studies, being a slow learner.

After the exam was over, Hansi thanked Arun and invited him to her home. Arun accepted her invitation.

For a while, they walked along silently not knowing what they could talk about. Eventually Hansi said, "Arun, even though we've both studied together these five years, I don't know anything about you. Why don't you tell me about your family? Do your parents love you a lot and spend much time with you?" she asked eagerly.

Arun looked reluctant to talk about his family and increased his pace. But Hansi pressed him to tell her, and finally he said, "My... my... father has been sick for two years. Mother is affected with tuberculosis. My elder brother is the pillar of our family. We couldn't manage without him. As I am the second child in the family, I too have many responsibilities. I have four younger sisters to look after when school is over." Arun looked embarrassed and stopped talking.

As Hansi was ignorant about poverty and didn't understand how hard it was for Arun's family, she said, "Your parents can get treatment from the hospital, no?"

Arun nodded and walked along silent.

"What is your favourite? Chocolates or ice-cream?" Hansi asked.

Arun blinked not knowing how to answer, never having tasted either.

"I have chocolates and ice-cream at home," Hansi continued. "I will give them both to you, as soon as we reach there."

Arun nodded, happy at the promised treat, and they began to run towards her home. This was the first time Hansi had brought a friend home and she felt very excited.

Ammachi was waiting in front of the house for her grandchild and, when she saw Hansi coming along with a boy who looked like a vagabond in a dirty shirt and shoes, she was dismayed. His hair wasn't cut neatly and it reached his shoulders, nor did he wear a school tie or socks. When Hansi and Arun reached the gate Ammachi stared at them and inquired in an angry voice, "Hansi who is this boy? How do you know him? Why are you bringing him here? What does he want?"

The expensive house and the angry questions by this old lady made Arun want to turn and run away. He would have, but Hansi had her arm linked in his. Hansi frowned at her grandmother, and because she was proud to have a friend for the first time in her life, she declared, "This is Arun," and began to tell her Ammachi about the incident that had made them good friends, her eyes twinkling.

Ammachi listened to the whole story and was impressed, happy that her grandchild had such a helpful classmate. But she didn't reveal her feelings, neither in word nor expression, because she did not intend to allow this boy into the house. "Thambi! Where are you residing?" she demanded.

"In the nearby lane, achchi. It is not far. I think I can come here to play with Hansi and her small brother in the evenings and –"

"Oh thambi! During the evenings, Hansi is very busy with her private classes," Ammachi declared, interrupting Arun. "I think you too must want to study and prepare yourself for the scholarship examination? So go and study."

Arun understood. This old lady was treating him as an untouchable and trying to get rid of him. He left with a disappointed "goodbye" to Hansi.

Hansi was angry with her grandmother and stalked off to her room without speaking a single word. Ammachi followed her and said, "My dear child, come and sit by me."

Hansi came to her with a long face.

"Why is my dear grandchild looking so sad? There are some fresh apples and chocolates in the refrigerator. Shall I bring those to you?"

Ignoring her placating words Hansi shouted, "Why did you chase Arun away like he was a rabid dog? I was planning to eat those chocolates with him. And I wanted to introduce him to my little brother. But you spoiled everything. I won't touch your chocolates and apples anymore."

"Oooo! Hansi darling. You are too small to understand such issues. Didn't you hear his words? He is living in the next lane. In fact, it is a colony. Don't you understand what a colony is? People living in colonies are uncivilized. They live like barbarians. School friends should be limited to

the school premises. Why did you bring that idiot home? Listen to what I'm saying and be a good child," Ammachi concluded harshly.

Hansi was frightened by her grandmother's tone and kept silent.

But, in the days that followed, Hansi and Arun shared their lunch and other things at school, played games, went to the library together and became firm friends. Hansi attempted to increase his interest in their lessons and he began to show more aptitude with studies. He also changed his appearance so he looked cleaner, all for Hansi's sake.

Unfortunately, time was against Hansi and Arun. The government troops and the militants started a fierce battle named "Riviresa." The word meant "a bright future is coming," but ironically it brought darkness to the people.

All the citizens of the Jaffna Peninsula were expected to offer money or gold to the LTTE. It was mandatory. Or else, a young boy from each family had to be ready to sacrifice his life to the so-called freedom fight. As Hansi's family was wealthy, they gave money and remained safe. But Hansi worried about Arun's family; she was sure they would be unable to give money or gold, as both his parents were sick.

When she met Arun two days later, he looked unhappy and his eyes had lost their sparkle. Hansi hesitated to ask if they had given money or gold to the Tigers but finally she blurted out, "Arun, why are you looking so sad?"

He was silent for a while but then finally he spoke, "Why are you trying to be friends with me? Go and spend time with your Ammachi, who drove me away like a dog."

Hansi was upset by the hatred in his tone and she turned and left him without saying a single word.

The next day the bombing and shelling started in earnest and she was not allowed to go out of the house.

After a fortnight, Hansi came to know, through her parents' conversations, that Arun and many other boys in the colony had been forced to join the so-called freedom fighters. If he hadn't gone, Arun's elder brother, who was the family's sole provider, would have been arrested and



slaughtered by the LLTE. Hansi was dismayed to hear this. Since Ammachi despised her friendship with Arun, she couldn't share her anxiety about him with her and she was tormented by many thoughts. "How can a little boy of ten hold a gun? How could his parents and elder brother have allowed him to go? Is this the reason behind his anger during our last meeting? He shared everything with me. Why didn't he tell me this too? Did he feel shame to reveal his family's poverty? If he had told me, I could have asked Appa to do him a favour. Will the Tigers feed Arun properly? Will they send him to the battle-field? When will he return home? When will I see him again?"

Tears rolled down her cheeks, as she went about her day. Her little brother, Akil, asked the reason for her crying, but she was unable to tell him and diverted her mind by playing with him. As days passed, thoughts of Arun were always in a corner of her mind. She hoped he would return, that she would look up one day soon, and there he would be.

Schools were transformed into high security camps for displaced inhabitants, and so Hansi stayed at home. Her parents' work places closed and they too stayed at home. She was pleased because her parents did not compel her to do homework or prepare for her scholarship examination, but she missed her friend a lot. The mischievousness of her little brother made her sometimes forget her worries and the growing tense situation. They invented many new games because they couldn't watch television or listen to the radio anymore, there being no electricity. They really missed "Tom and Jerry" and "Mr. Bean". Ammachi's National Panasonic transistor radio was their only source of news. For that too there was a scarcity of battery cells, as the supply of batteries was restricted by the Army who feared they might be used by the LLTE to produce shells or bombs. Very soon electrical goods, such as their electric kettle and grinder became their toys. As Hansi's brother was only three years old, she took the upper hand in organizing games. She changed the rules according to her wishes. If her brother asked about the changed rules she would divert him cleverly. Most of their games ended with Hansi succeeding and her little brother crying. Her Amma scolded her little brother, telling him not to play with Hansi and then come and complain to her. But, the next moment, he had forgotten everything and approached Hansi for another game. Sometimes, Hansi pretended that she

was too tired and made him beg. Often their Ammachi would have to play judge and solve their problems.

Hansi still thought a lot about Arun. One day she had a dream that he was playing with her and accidentally fell into a well. Hansi yelled in panic, waking herself up from the dream. She passed the night sleepless, crying a lot.

The next morning, when Ammachi turned on her Panasonic radio, they heard the government news announcing that severe fighting had started between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan forces in Jaffna. There was going to be a curfew in the Jaffna peninsula.

People were soon leaving Jaffna town taking only their valuables with them. They were displaced to Thenmarachi, Vadamarachi, and the Vanni. Most of their neighbours left and only a few, including Hansi's family, remained. Hansi's parents were reluctant to go because her Ammachi might be too old to survive displacement.

Soon they began to hear the faraway sound of bombs exploding. Every time they heard it, Hansi and her little brother screamed in fear. The family started to spend time in the nearby temple with a few people from their neighbourhood. This gathering frightened Hansi and her brother because the people around them told terrible stories, like out of the movies. They said that a bomb had fallen on a person's head and it was blasted to pieces, that people had no food or water to quench their hunger and thirst and they had to get water from ruined ponds and filter it using their saris. In the refugee camps, people were affected by many infectious diseases like malaria and dengue.

As days passed, the sounds of shells and bombs came nearer. Hansi's parents no longer took the family to the temple as the people there exaggerated their war stories and, as a result, the children panicked. They decided to build a bunker. At first, her father had difficulties getting men to dig the bunker but, finally, one morning, Appa brought five men with mamoties and other digging tools. He took them to the backyard and showed them a plot of bare ground where they were to dig.

Initially Hansi and her little brother were afraid of the men because of their long moustaches, dark skin, dirty sarongs and bare upper bodies.

After sometime, though, they came up with the idea that the men were gypsies and giggled at them secretly, making up stories about their gypsy existence. Yet, once Amma told them that the men were doing them a service by building a bunker with strong walls to protect them from gunfire and bombing, Hansi felt guilty about giggling at the men. She gave them bottles of water and stood there, along with her father, as they worked. After they finished digging, they levelled the ground and the sides of the bunker. It looked like a new house in the ground and Hansi asked her Appa, “when can we descend into the bunker?”

He smiled at her and said, “whenever you like, dear.”

Hansi and her brother jumped into the bunker joyously but it smelt like mildewed food and they got out immediately. Her little brother said to their Appa, “The bunker has a bad smell. We have to spray perfume. Only then can we be comfortable in it.”

Their Appa laughed at the innocence of her little brother. “No need for perfume, child. The smell will run away at seeing this naughty boy.”

Hansi was very pleased to hear her Appa’s laughter, it had been a long time since she had heard it.

A few days after the bunker was made, they were asleep one night, when suddenly they heard the shelling and bombing, like thunder. Her Appa and Amma led them to the bunker. They all got into it easily but Ammachi was unable to descend and Hansi’s Appa had to carry her down. Once they were all in, they stared at each other in fear.

They were in the bunker for the whole night, and though the sound of shells and bombs was terrifying, Hansi drew some comfort from the fact that she had gotten a chance to be with her parents and receive much affection and caressing from her Amma. Despite the terrible circumstances, her parents were finally spending time with her and her little brother.

After that, whenever they heard the sounds of the planes, they ran into the bunker. As time passed, Hansi and her little brother found the bunker a good place to play hide and seek. They also used the bunker to hide from their parents when they had done something mischievous. Very soon all their toys were transferred into the bunker and both of them spent more

and more time in there because it was a place where there was no adult interference.

As the days passed, Hansi's Ammachi began to find the thundering noise of the bombs and shells unbearable. She began to grumble constantly. "God gives good fortune to everyone to test them whether they will use it in a good way or not," she kept saying. "One day all those who have caused us such grief will be punished severely for their atrocities. A valiant hero such as Veeman or Archunan will be born to slaughter and put a full stop to these vampires."

Now there were no shops in their village to buy provisions from, especially milk packets and things for babies. There were some stores in other villages and towns, but the price of the provisions had increased with the escalation of the war. Also, because of the implementation of curfew, her father hesitated to go to these shops. Commodities had been coming by ship for a while now but, because of the war, the ships could not come regularly anymore. People began to be afraid they might starve if the war continued in this way. The Jaffna peninsula seemed to be a barren land, isolated from Mother Lanka.

When their regular milkman went away, Hansi's little brother, who had always drunk milk before having his meals, made a great fuss about eating food without milk. Her Amma grew annoyed by his constant crying until she came to understand that he was frightened by the thundering of shells, bombs and artillery. After this, their mother started to pressure their Appa to get a vehicle so they could go somewhere safe. Finally, he became convinced it was the best thing to do, especially after he heard that his brother's and sister's families had also left for a safer area. Ammachi too was happy to leave and convinced Hansi's parents that she could withstand the journey.

Appa booked a lorry to leave with their belongings without any pre-planning about where they were going to reside. Hansi was happy to be going on a trip with her parents. This was something new and exciting for her. They started their journey late at night. The driver drove through unknown roads. On their way, they saw people cooking meals under trees

and in public buildings. Some people lamented and swore loudly in the dark night. Others were travelling on foot to faraway places, also not knowing where they were going. People had left their pets behind and these animals strayed all over the roads. Her brother soon fell asleep in their mother's lap, but Hansi couldn't sleep. They passed a checkpoint and saw two young men being knocked down and kicked by soldiers for what seemed like no reason at all. At another checkpoint, they saw a man shot by a soldier. Her Amma hid Hansi's face, not allowing her to see these sights. But, from the conversations between her mother and grandmother, she understood what was going on.

"Is this the fate of the Tamil people? Are we cursed?" asked her Amma in a trembling voice.

"*Mmmm*, we can't blame anybody but ourselves for this," Ammachi said sarcastically. "The LTTE are giving freedom to our people by displacing them to remote areas."

"Mohan, where are we going?" Hansi's Amma asked, sobbing now. "Have you decided where we are to go, or is it the fate of my children to live under trees and be bitten by mosquitoes that carry dengue and malaria?"

Hansi's Appa patted her hand. "We are going to my brother Asham's house."

At last they reached Vadamarachi, where her father's brother now lived. They hardly ever came here to visit because it was so far away from their own home. They did not know the way there very well and, because it was a dark moonless night, they got lost. Her Appa inquired from various people and finally someone directed them to the house.

It was quite a big house with three rooms, two kitchens and a big hall. When they knocked on the door, her uncle opened it and his face fell when he saw them all gathered there. "Are you coming to reside here? How did you find my house on this dark night?"

Hansi's Appa was shocked at this inhospitality. "No Asham, we came here only to stay a night. As it's late, I couldn't find a proper place for my children," he said pleadingly.

"So you will leave tomorrow?" her uncle asked mercilessly. "This is a small house, I don't think we can all stay here comfortably."

Ammachi began to mutter angrily but Hansi's Amma silenced her with a look. Her uncle's wife came to the door now with a venomous stare. Ignoring the smile Hansi's Amma gave her, she said to her, "Ooo! Kala, you have brought your Amma also here? Couldn't you leave her with your brothers? Here we have only one kitchen. How will it be possible to cook for all of you? My brother's family is also here. There are no rooms left."

"We don't want a room. We can stay in the hall and will leave when we find another place," said Hansi's Amma, hesitatingly.

The other family who were residing with Asham's family also came and looked at them wordlessly.

"Well," her uncle said half-heartedly, "I guess you can reside here until you find another place."



Days passed and they couldn't find anywhere else to go. They were given a little room at the back that also served as a store room. Hansi's aunt, Poorani, didn't allow her children to play with Hansi and Akil. If she saw her children even talking with them, she would beat them or lock them in a room. The cousins wished to play with Hansi and Akil, but soon they didn't dare approach them.

Every morning her Appa went out to search for a house but returned unsuccessful. Hansi and her brother often complained to their mother, asking to shift to another house. Hansi thought often of Arun and yearned to know if he was okay, wishing she had her playmate with her at this difficult time in her life. When she heard reports of the war on the radio, she wondered whether he was still alive or not. She prayed to God to save Arun.

Her aunt Poorani offered delicious food to her children and her brother's family, but never gave Hansi and Akil anything. If their Amma went to the kitchen to make meals for her children, Hansi's aunt began to shout about the scarcity of provisions and the increasing prices. At times, Hansi's Appa slept on an empty stomach, because of their lack of food. No

one respected Hansi's Ammachi. When she struggled to walk because of her old age, the other two families laughed at her and spoke loudly about her struggling to walk and continuous murmuring.

One day, Hansi's parents went to a relative's house to look into the possibility of staying there. The rainy season had started, so their return was delayed. Hansi and her little brother began to cry and their panic increased when they heard shells and bombing in the distance. Ammachi tried to soothe them. Hansi's aunty, Poorani came into their room to complain that the noise was disturbing her children's sleep. "Are they children or wolves?" she shouted. "Why are they howling?"

Without showing any reaction, Ammachi fed Hansi and her brother and patted them to sleep. She was able to make Akil sleep, but Hansi had a temper tantrum and cried for her mother.

Her uncle Asham stormed into the room without knocking. "Why are you sobbing so loudly? Has somebody died?" he shouted. "This is not your place to make such a big noise. Are these the manners your parents have taught you? If I hear your voice anymore, I don't know what I will do!"

Hansi was frightened by his anger and began to wail even louder. Her uncle took her by the shoulders and shook her. When this did not silence her, he looked around, grabbed a book that was lying close by and began to hit her on the bottom. "Leave that child alone," Ammachi shouted and seized the book from him. Her uncle looked shocked for a moment, at what he had done, then he turned and hurried out of the room.

Hansi sobbed for several hours before falling sleep, Ammachi stroking her head.

Her parents arrived late, and when Ammachi narrated what had happened, Hansi's Amma began to cry thinking of the ill-fate of their children. "I have never beaten my children, but now they are beaten by that arrogant man. Poor Hansi! If she goes outside she is scared by the sounds of bombs. Inside the house she is also afraid now because of her uncle. I won't allow my child to stay here anymore."

Hansi's Appa consoled her, holding her close to him, her head on his chest. Hearing the voices of her parents, Hansi awoke and stared at them

speechlessly. Her Amma embraced her saying, “Tomorrow we will shift our dwelling to Rani Aunty’s house. Sleep peacefully. I won’t let anyone ever beat my child again.”

The next morning, Hansi’s family left. They had decided that they wouldn’t show any animosity towards the uncle or the others but expressed gratitude for their hospitality. The families said their farewell in a friendly enough manner, and Hansi’s Amma and Appa thanked her uncle and his wife for giving them a place when they were in need. Hansi felt frightened to approach her uncle or the rest of his family and kept her distance. Not knowing about the incident last night, her brother hugged their uncle and kissed him farewell. The uncle patted Akil’s head, his face twisted with guilt.

They hadn’t been able to hire a vehicle and so had to walk to her Aunty Rani’s house, which was not very far away. It was raining, however, and Ammachi found it difficult to walk in the rain and mud. Her father carted their heavy bags on a bicycle and Hansi walked slowly beside him, clutching his shirt tail, her little brother resting in their mother’s arms under an umbrella. They reached their new home within an hour. It belonged to her mother’s cousin Aunty Rani. Only the main walls of the house had been built, the inside not partitioned into rooms yet, cardboard used to create divisions. This was the reason her parents had not brought them here to stay before. When they saw the inside, Hansi and her brother cried, “Amma, how can we live here? We can’t do anything independently. Where can I change my dress?”

Amma silenced her. “Hush Hansi, did you study this rudeness in your school? Be grateful to people who help us when we are in need.” Hansi apologized for her rudeness but Aunty Rani shook her head to say it didn’t matter. Patting Hansi’s head, she said, “Why are you scolding the child Kala?”

Her mother’s cousin and husband welcomed them wholeheartedly and Aunty Rani often took Akil in her arms and whirled him around. She told them many stories and jokes. The family felt relieved to finally be in a place where they were comfortable.

But, after some time, the warm welcome began to wane. Her aunt’s husband turned out to be a drunkard. During the day, he was a quiet, normal



person. But, after visiting the toddy shop at night, his attitude would change and he would begin to condemn the government and speak in support of the freedom fighters in a loud voice. He often came home late and banged on the door. He talked vulgarly too and cursed Hansi and Akil for disturbing his household and wasting their money by eating too much. He also began to use filthy swear words at Hansi's Amma and Ammachi. Finally Ammachi lost her temper one night and cried, "Are you mad? Why are you shouting without proper reason?"

"Rani why are you keeping silent?" Hansi's Amma pleaded with Aunty Rani. "Silence your man. See, my children are scared of him."

"This is our house," Aunty Rani retorted. "He has the right to behave as he likes in his own place. If your children are scared, it's better to seek another place."

At that point, her uncle tried to slap Hansi's Amma. Her Appa, who had remained silent so far, grabbed the uncle's arm, twisted it behind his back and pushed him away.

After that incident, Hansi's parents realized the worthlessness of relatives. They laughed bitterly saying, "Blood is not thicker than water." Ammachi prayed loudly to her God, Vairavar, asking him to help her return to her home. Amma too lamented their fate saying, "How carefully we raised our children, but all that's for nothing. Our children hear words and see deeds I thought they would never hear or see. I don't know what effect this will have on them." She begged Hansi's father to find another dwelling. "If you can't get a house, we can build a small hut with things we can get from other neighbours and live peacefully."

Finally, Hansi's father did find them another place. He ran into a friend Kamalan, who used to work with him. Her father explained all the difficulties he and his family had faced and, without hesitation, Kamalan invited them to his house. His family members were very kind and welcomed them warmly. Kamalan's wife had no children and she doted on Hansi and her brother.

A fortnight after they had left their home, the government ended the curfew and Hansi's parents' workplaces started to function again in Thenmarachi. They went back to work, confident they had left their family

in a good place. Hansi dreamt about Arun often and, during the day, she often thought of the moments they had played together, shared her tiffin and laughed over jokes. She still hoped she would see Arun again when the war ended.



Six months passed. The government and the militants agreed on a ceasefire and people began to return to their own homes. Hansi's family too prepared to return to Uduvil. Kamalan's family sent them off, praising Hansi and her little brother for being good children and asking them to come and visit.

As they drove back to Uduvil, Hansi looked at her parents and felt a lot of love and gratitude towards them. How they had struggled to look after and protect their family, finally finding Hansi and Akil a safe home. They did love her. As Hansi sat between her parents, she kissed them both from time to time and they embraced her back.

When they arrived at their home, they saw that, fortunately, it had not been affected by shells and bombs. Her Ammachi touched all the walls of the house softly, like a mother caressing her baby. The chairs, tables and flower decorations were very dusty and someone had written Tamil and English words such as, "Tigers", "Thamileelathaayakam" and "Thamileelam" on the outside wall with crayons. The grass in the garden was as tall as trees. There was a bird's nest in the veranda rafters.

Hansi's parents went back to work the next day and Hansi also went to school eagerly hoping that she might meet Arun, now that there was a ceasefire. But he wasn't at school. She asked about him from other friends but nobody knew where he was. After school, Hansi went to Arun's home to see if he was there. The house had been destroyed by bombs and shells. The colony was deserted and she couldn't find anyone to ask about him.

Darkness filled Hansi's mind as she looked at the destruction all around her. "Will Arun and I ever be able to enjoy the pleasures we enjoyed?" she wondered.

The question was unanswerable.

***Vithuja Rajamohan** was born and bred in Jaffna. She was an old girl of Uduvil Girls' College and is currently an undergraduate doing English Literature at the University of Jaffna. Her creativity was moulded at school, as well as by her parents. Her story and characters come from her own milieu.*

## POEMS

*By Elizabeth*

### WRITER OF TRUTH

I wrote a story of grief and trauma,  
the Ultimate Emotional Bomb,  
armed with insightful theory,  
flawless passion, to be published  
to international acclaim.

But this is May 2009,  
all emotion is exhausted,  
thin dark empty faces wander,  
scarred by unrelenting shock.  
Silence speaks of  
unspeakable horrors.

There is no theory of justice and complex analysis,  
only people ceaselessly bleeding,  
lying broken under plastic sheets.

I built my dream of international triumph,  
on 350,000 stories of defeat.

These lines that promise fame,

slip from my tongue and empty.  
Passion is blown apart  
by pretention.

There are truths not written on paper,  
beyond language.  
They prowl in the memories of the undead.

My mind is numb,  
I fail to grasp.  
Slowly feeling returns  
and truth, like the fire of exploding shells,  
burns my writing-hand away.

I shield my eyes from the glare.

## UNTITLED

A woman is alone at the train station,  
waiting for her soldier son.  
The train never comes.

A woman is alone on the railway line,  
waiting for the train to come by  
and end her lonely life.

A woman is on Duplication Road, Colombo 3,  
waiting for a Benz to pass by,  
to fuck her and dump her by the roadside.  
A woman is walking away from the debris,  
a shell just hit her childhood home,  
now she has nowhere to go.

A woman, sixteen, smiles.  
The war is on, her wedding is on.  
She wonders if this is wrong.

Women, the country's rock  
are lonely figures on this landscape of blood.

***Elizabeth** has lived in northern and southern Sri Lanka and abroad but does not feel she belongs anywhere. In her poetry, she tries to explore contrasting and almost paradoxical realities and identities within Sri Lankan society, and find connections between them.*



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