WRITE TO RECONCILE II

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An Anthology

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

One evening in Toronto, while I was in the middle of editing this anthology, I went with a friend to listen to the monk, Venerable Ajahn Brahm, speak on the subject of Self-Compassion. He started his talk with a story that stayed with me for long after. The tale went something like this:

Seven monks lived a holy life in a cave on top of a mountain, encircled by forest; a cave that was very difficult to reach and largely unknown to the people in the surrounding villages. The seven monks consisted of a head monk, his best friend, his brother, his enemy, a very old monk, a very sick monk and a useless monk – who never did any of his chores and never remembered the chants, but who the other monks kept on to teach them patience and compassion. One day, a band of robbers discovered the cave and saw immediately that it would be a perfect place to hide out, as well as store their loot. In order to get the cave, however, they would have to murder the monks. They didn't want them going down into the valley and informing the villagers about the robbers' whereabouts. So they stormed the cave, grabbed the monks by their robes and prepared to kill them. The head monk, like most head monks, was a good talker. He spoke to the head robber at length and, after much negotiation, he persuaded the leader to spare the monks' lives. The leader, however, had a caveat. He would kill one monk as a warning to the other six not to divulge the robbers' location. The head monk had to choose which one must die.

After he had got this far in the story, Ajahn Brahm asked the audience who they thought should die. I, like a lot of the other audience members, said that the senior monk should offer his own life; a few volunteered the life of the useless monk, a few the enemy. Yet, all our answers, it turned out, were wrong. The correct answer was none. The head monk could not choose from the seven of them, valuing his life *as much* as those of his brother, his best friend, his enemy, the sick monk, the ill monk and the useless monk. The lesson of the story was that we must love another person not more or less than ourselves, but *as much* as

ourselves.

The moral of Ajahn Brahm's story lingered with me in the following days as I read and corrected work for this anthology, particularly the work of those participants who had written from the point of view of the "other side", or from points of view within their cultural community that were very different from their own. I found myself admiring how they had entered with imagination and empathy into these different, often opposite perspectives; how they had inhabited the minds of characters very different from themselves as if they were their own – Tamil participants writing from the point of view of an ex Sinhalese soldier settled in the Vanni, or of a Muslim family whose son was abducted by the LTTE; Sinhalese participants inhabiting the lives of a violated Tamil girl who finds refuge in a convent, or a young woman conscripted by the LTTE; a Muslim participant inhabiting the points of view of an LTTE soldier and a Sinhalese medical student. Their work tells us that empathy is possible, that it is possible to regard the other as one regards oneself. They invite the reader to feel a similar empathy.

Other stories and poems that reflect the experiences of their writers, through their complexity and poignancy, also invite us to enter worlds different from our own. The stories of participants from the diaspora give us a chance to see the war from the point of view of a segment of Sri Lankans who are no longer living here, but who have played an important role in the history of Sri Lanka over the past 30 plus years.

The goal of *Write to Reconcile*, which is in its second year now, is to gather together talented young writers committed to peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka who, through their work, are willing to explore the hatreds that have torn apart this country. The idea for the project was born out of my belief in the restorative power of literature in a society like Sri Lanka, disfigured by decades of civil war; my belief that literature has an important part to play in healing wounds between communities and creating empathetic dialogue in post-war Sri Lanka. Good literature, unlike politics or much of today's journalism, gets to the heart of human experience because it is not polemic; it avoids the rigid blacks and whites and goes for the multiple greys that make up society and human

existence. We all possess positive and negative impulses and these impulses jostle in us. Our actions are determined by a combination of personal, cultural and political history. Good literature, with its commitment to multiplicity and plurality, is best poised to explore the contradictions not just in a person but in a society. The nuances and muddiness of motives and interactions, as portrayed in good literature, are precisely what is needed to bridge polarities and develop empathy between divided communities in Sri Lanka today.

Late last year, *Write to Reconcile* put out an island-wide call for applications from all Sri Lankans and members of the Sri Lankan diaspora, between the ages of 18-29, along with teachers and professors of any age. 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 response was overwhelming and we received close to double the number of applications we had in the first year of the project, in 2013. We then invited the selected participants to a residential creative writing workshop that would take place in two locations. In the first year of *Write to Reconcile*, we held the workshops in Colombo and Jaffna. This year, we chose Batticaloa and Kandy. During the workshops, I taught participants the tools and techniques of creative writing, covering 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 as it related to Sri Lanka. Participants also learnt the tools and techniques of editing. I was assisted in all this by my co-facilitator Ameena Hussein. The residential workshops were followed by two online forums in which participants submitted two creative pieces, one per forum, for discussion. Supervised by Ameena and myself, the participants offered constructive feedback on each other's work and received editorial feedback from us. Following the end of the two forums, each participant selected one of their two pieces for publication, and I worked with them to prepare the chosen piece for this anthology.

One of my goals for the project was that participants learn to think of their work in the context of the cultural multiplicity of Sri Lanka. With this in mind, we organized excursions both in Kandy and in Batticaloa that exposed the participants to the vibrant, diverse cultures of these regions. Equally important, participants got to meet those who worked in the field of human rights in these areas, as well as those who were victims of the war. Encounters with the latter proved to be invaluable to the participants, stimulating their work, particularly pieces set in the Eastern Province.

To see this work set in the Eastern Province was especially rewarding to me, as the first Write to Reconcile anthology that came out in 2013 lacked anything set in the region. One of my goals for the second anthology was that this imbalance be redressed. The other area not covered in the first anthology was the experiences of members of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. It too has been addressed, I am delighted to say, in this collection.

The one perspective, however, that eludes both anthologies is that of the LTTE. Not work *about* the LTTE but rather work from *within* the LTTE. I feel that if we are to really understand what happened in the last 30 plus years and make sure it never happens again, we need to understand, even though we might not condone, the viewpoint of those who truly believed in the LTTE's cause. We need to understand why large segments of the Tamil population believed in and supported the LTTE until very close to the end of the war. Why segments of the Tamil population still believe in them. In the Sri Lanka of today, with its culture of censorship, and the use of anti-terrorism laws to silence such points of view, it may not be possible to gather these stories. I suspect one must look to the Tamil diaspora to find such stories, where people might feel freer to speak their own version of the truth.

As with the first *Write to Reconcile*, working with the participants in this anthology has broadened my understanding of the complex history of Sri Lanka. Their work has helped me to understand how the war was fought in the Eastern Province; their work has increased my empathy for members of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, with whom my own encounters, as someone with a Tamil surname, were often fraught in the war years. I hope that you

too, as you read this anthology, feel a deeper, wider and more empathetic sense of yourself as a Sri Lankan and what it means to be Sri Lankan. Or, if you are not Sri Lankan, a broader view of what happened during the civil war.

The Royal Norwegian Embassy and The American Centre backed our project for a second year and we are deeply grateful for their encouragement and commitment to the work we do. Dr. Jehan Perera and The National Peace Council gave our project a home for the second time and have been enthusiastic supporters, even getting the first anthology translated into Sinhala and Tamil so that it might reach a wider audience. They also arranged a second printing of the first anthology, to meet demand. Part of the pleasure of working on this project is the excellent team I work with who bring a joy and commitment to *Write to Reconcile*. I am deeply grateful to them.

Shyam Selvadurai

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DIVIDED BY FAITH

Nalini Sivathasan

The beleaguered bus, panting with passengers, rattled through Colombo's Fort while auto rickshaws flitted around the vehicle like bloodthirsty mosquitoes. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and then exhaled, counting to 10 in my head. I licked my top lip; I could taste the saltiness of sweat. Despite years of travelling on London's tubes in rush hour, I still found it difficult to cope in confined places, hurled into the domain of others. And that was London. This was Sri Lanka, where the heat made any journey ten times more excruciating. The bus abruptly turned a corner and the driver slammed down the brakes, causing the rear end of the bus to emit a tortured groan as it grumbled to a halt.

A subtle singe of onion and a fragrant hint of cardamom snuck under through the windows and weaved through the passengers, drifting between legs, arms, walking sticks, bags and saris, before wafting its way to my nostrils. Biriyani. I closed my eyes and inhaled, feeling as if the smell of cardamom cooled me like a gentle breeze. This particular biriyani with its hint of cardamom had the exact same smell as the biriyani Salman's mother used to make, back home in Arayampathy. I had smelt and tasted many biriyanis since, both during my adolescence and early adulthood in Sri Lanka and later in London in the eight years I had been away, but how strange to smell what seemed to be the exact odour of Mrs Hameed's biriyani now, on this visit to Sri Lanka that I had decided would be my last ever.

Suddenly I was back home in the old Arayampathy racing Salman home as I did every afternoon on our way back from school. I always won, Salman's stocky stumps no match for my lanky legs. I was like my namesake, Lord Siva, in his Nataraja form, legs everywhere, full of unbridled cosmic energy. Salman often got distracted by the shops on the way, stopping to see what shorteats he could buy with the ample pocket money he was given by his doting family.

I don't know if I would find Mrs. Hameed's biriyani as amazing today as I did at 11 years. Maybe I enjoyed it so much because I loved going to the Hameeds' house, where the delicacy was made. Silence was a rarity at the house. Salman was the youngest of six – Nazeem, Yusuf, Hassan, Salma and Fatima and finally Salman. Along with his mother he lived with both sets of grandparents, who occupied opposite ends of the house. Meals were a rambunctious affair, doors slamming, children pushing and shoving for first dibs of food, rice and curry spilling on the stone floor, the slightly demented grandparents complaining about their progeny. Because I was the guest, Salman's mother always offered me food first. I had a tactic for getting a second serving: "Aunty, your food is so much nicer than Amma's. Everything she makes is tasteless."

"Ah Siva." Salman's mother would blush. "This is nothing, I'm sure your Amma can make this better than me, it's a bit salty and I cooked it in a rush," she'd add, clearly vying for a compliment.

"Oh no, no, I like it," I'd insist, taking her bait, pointing at my plate as justification. Not a speck of the turmeric infused rice remained on it. I had licked it clean, and it sparkled in its white glory, as if it had just been washed. Satisfied with my response, Salman's mother would dish me out some more biriyani.

"Poor thing," she'd say, inspecting my gangly limbs. "You need to fatten up."

"And you kutti," she'd wave her ladle at Salman, "need to lose weight, and stop buying shorteats on the way back from school." She'd scowl at Salman's half-eaten plate of biriyani and he would smile guiltily. He looked like a pocket-sized sultan; full, fleshy cheeks consumed his neck, and his limbs seemed to strain under the weight of his paunch. I often wonder what he looks like now, whether he has lost all that puppy fat or if he still has an appetite for all things sugary.

After eating, Salman and I would play with Hassan, Salma and Fatima, although on most days this would consist of us boys bullying Salma and Fatima, who were aged eight and nine respectively. "Ai Salma, karippi, your parents are never going to be able to find you a husband with that colour skin, and you'll be like

that old black woman in the market, begging for money."

"Siva, shut your mouth," was the best response Salma could come up with. Sometimes Nazeem, Salman's oldest brother, finished work early and took us to Pasikuda beach on his scooter. He was about 18 and was training to be a mason. Unlike his garrulous family, he was quiet, always with a furrowed brow as if he was carrying the debts of his family on his lean shoulders. And he probably was. Salman's father had died when Salman was five years old. I vaguely remember Salman's father – he was certainly a cheerful presence. Mr. Hameed was always laughing, revealing his terracotta-tinged teeth from his addiction to betel leaves. He would always snort when he laughed, making it difficult for his audience not to laugh too, regardless of his joke. He owned a few roadside restaurants, which was perfect for him, as his passion in life was eating. He would always arrive home with ice cream, watalappam and faluda. It was probably his love of sweet things that led to his death – he had a heart attack one evening while prostrating during prayers at the mosque in Kattankudy. It was towards the end of Ramadan and only a few hours before fasting was to be broken. I remember that time well, and the mourning period that followed, because it was the one time when there was barely any food in Salman's house – even on Eid.

I guess Nazeem, being the eldest son, had to grow up pretty quickly after his father's death. He got a job when he was 15 and set about trying to be the family breadwinner, paying off his father's business debts, shepherding his younger siblings to after-school classes and taking his ailing grandparents to the hospital for check-ups. Although he seldom joked, Nazeem was affectionate in his own way. He always bought me sweets, along with those he dispensed to his siblings, or ruffled my hair as he left the house to do errands. And when we went to Pasikuda beach, he'd buy us Elephant House ice creams. We'd then spend the afternoon watching the wealthy Sri Lankan tourists from the south. They would arrive in their vans and fashionable clothes, wade in the water for a few minutes and then jump back into their Pajeros.

I often wonder what Salman looks like now. It has been 16 years

since we saw each other. That last afternoon we had together was spent splashing in the sea. I know it is ridiculous to think this, but I wish I had known it was our last afternoon. Because if I had, I would have gone to his house and seen his family for one last time. I'd go into their kitchen, pull out the step stool his mother used to reach her spice shelf, sit and stare at Mrs. Hameed long and hard so that her visage was seared into my memory. And then I'd go into each of the rooms in the house and do the same for the rest of his family. Because now when I try hard to picture all of them, their faces escape through the crevices in my mind, like water trickling out of cupped palms. Although my memory of Salman and his family has been worn down by time, I do remember our last day vividly. Even when I'm shivering on a night bus in London, with the rain pelting the windows and condensation fogging my view of outside, I'll sometimes close my eyes and feel the sea breeze from the beach, laden with salty sand and dust.

It was a Friday afternoon, and Salman and I were at the beach on the border between Arayampathy and Kattankudy – one of our regular hangouts aside from Salman's house, the sweet shop and the school playground. I was splashing about in the sea. The waves playfully submerged me underwater, then lifted me up through the water, back to safety. I could see Salman, a fat blob, sitting on the sand by the shore, eating. In the distance, my namesake was gleaming. Lord Siva was at his most dazzling at this time of the day, sunlight bouncing off his 10-foot tall frame, which was set on a two-metre plinth. Trident in one hand and a cobra zigzagging around his muscular body. His smile exuded calmness as he stood to face the sea, like a Sri Lankan Poseidon. Not the type of pose you'd expect from the destroyer. His presence was such that he eclipsed the Sivan kovil which was behind him — a modest compound, lacking the pyramid-tiered structure so common to temples in Sri Lanka and India. The only thing competing with Siva for the skyline was the glint of a golden sliver of moon on a dome further along the shore. It was from the mosque in Kattankudy. These emblems of faith were abstract and unimportant to my 11-year-old self back then. Little did I know that Siva's trident and Allah's crescent would tumble from the sky, tearing my friendship

and my community apart.

That day in the waves, I took a huge gulp of sea water, then raced across the sand to a rock where I had strewn my school shorts and watch before entering the sea. Salman sat by the rock, his once white shorts stained with food, drink and ink. He was already onto his second ice cream tub, his tiny spoon struggling to sustain the amount of ice cream he was loading onto it. Small dots of pink ice cream were journeying to the bottom of his chin and onto his shorts. I spat the water in my mouth onto Salman's head, drops landing in his tub of ice cream.

"Aiyo, saniyan!" screeched Salman as I laughed. He looked down at his tub ruefully. "Why did you have to do that while I was eating?" Salman sprung up and scooped out a handful of his now soiled ice cream. Before I had time to react, he smeared the ice cream onto my face. I pulled Salman down to the ground and sat on him, my legs straddled across his belly. We had a mock fight – me getting a fistful of sand and showering Salman with it, while he attempted to kick me with his tree-trunk legs. We wrestled in the sand, our shrieks and giggles drowning the sound of the advancing tide.

Suddenly, my mother's voice cut through our racket. "Siva! Siva! Dai, Siva, get back here!" I felt like a bucket of ice had been thrown over my head. It must be four o'clock, I said to myself. I looked up towards the mainland – Amma was as far back as the kovil but about 50 metres to its east, dressed in her blue sari with its faded white flowers. I couldn't make out her face, but her hair was all loose and frizzy, like a lion's mane. Clearly this was an emergency – she would never leave the house with hair as messy as that. I snatched my bag from the rock and scrambled across the sand. As I dashed towards her, I yelled back at Salman. "See you on Monday monkey face."

Salman puffed out his cheeks and started making monkey noises. He looked like a chubby Hanuman. "See you later karappan. Make sure you do the homework!" he yelled.

"I'll let you copy my homework if you bring in some of your Amma's cutlets," I cried.

"Okay." Salman gave me a wave, got up and started to gather his things.

As I got nearer, I could see Amma's expression getting more and more annoyed, as if I was deliberately being slow. When I reached Amma, she yanked me towards her, and her eyes narrowed as she inspected me.

"What is that on your face?" she said, poking my cheeks.

"Ice cream," I replied guiltily.

"Siva, you're too old for this, you're 11 years old."

Amma gathered the end of her sari palu from behind her and started smothering my face with it, wiping the ice cream off my cheeks. Then she yanked my ear and dragged me behind her, as she began to march rapidly in the direction of our house.

"Amma. Sorry, Amma," I screamed, the pain shooting through me. I knew why she was annoyed with me – and it wasn't because of the ice cream.

Amma let go of my ear after a moment and looked around apprehensively, scared someone had heard my yelps. "If your father finds out, it's not you who will be blamed, it's me," she said, through clenched teeth. "I get enough grief from him when he thinks I haven't been cleaning the house properly, or for talking back at him."

"I'm sorry Amma, I forgot about the time," I pleaded.

"What's this for then?" she squeezed my wrist, and flicked her chin up, gesturing at my wristwatch, which she had bought me a few years ago. It was a gift for winning the school's public speaking competition.

"I didn't look at it. Sorry," I replied.

"*Hmm*." Amma let go of my wrist, a sign that she had accepted my apology.

I turned around, and looked back towards the sea. Salman was still there by the sea, bumbling along at his own pace, like he did with everything. That was the last I saw of him.

Four pm was normally the time my father woke up from his

nap, and it was the time by which I had to be back in the house. A year before my friendship with Salman ended, my father had forbidden me from playing or associating with Muslims. And this meant Salman. For six years, my father had tolerated my friendship with Salman, thinking that the friendship was just a fad which would dissipate when we realised how different we really were. However, as we grew older, Salman's and my roots became more intertwined. Despite my father's attempts to force me to play with the children of temple committee members or the sons of other fishermen he worked with, they were poor substitutes for Salman.

I knew from a young age the contempt my father had for Muslims. But, despite his authoritarian reign within the house, he seemed to live by the mantra that whatever happened outside the home wasn't his concern. Out of sight, out of mind, would be the English way of saying it. So I made sure that I was out of the house as much as possible, because Salman was forbidden from coming in. Despite my fear of my father, I didn't take his warnings too seriously as I knew Amma didn't agree with him. She remained silent during most of his tirades against Muslims, knowing that if she retaliated, the rest of the day would be ruined, but I knew she didn't feel the same way he did.

She actually had some Muslim women friends, whom she described to my father and me as her "customers" or "fellow business owners". She'd gossip with them when she went to the market to sell mats and sacks which she made from coir rope. My father didn't like her working and being out of the house, but he had no choice. It was difficult for us to survive on his paltry income as a fisherman. He complained that it was getting harder for him to fish, as some of the Muslim fishermen from Kattankudy were encroaching on his territory.

Amma relished the independence that came with selling her coir products. Sometimes on a Saturday, she would take me with her to the market to sell her wares. She would assign me the very important task of carrying her handbag while she dragged a small trolley with wheels, which contained her products. As soon as we reached the market, she became a different person. It was like

pouring petrol onto embers. She erupted into life. Not anxious housewife Sumathy, but Sumathy the businesswoman. Her job, which took up two or three hours every few days, meant she could be independent. She didn't have to think about my father, she could browse in the beauty shop that was opposite the market and exchange titbits of gossip with some of the women who worked in the market. Most of her customers were Muslim, and she got to know them well.

I thought it was strange that Amma was friends with so many Muslims. But maybe it was a reaction against my father, her way of showing defiance against his authoritarianism. Their relationship wasn't a happy one and the tension in their marriage was palpable in the house. Unlike Salman's house, which was noisy and full of yelps, claps and laughs, our house was sterile. The clink of pots, the sweep of a brush and the yelling of my parents formed the soundtrack to our home. I knew Amma didn't love my father; they'd had an arranged marriage, like most people in the village. She was from a village not far from Trincomalee, and she missed her family. Many people in the village, especially the women, mistrusted her as an outsider. And maybe because of this, she felt sorry for Muslims and tolerated my friendship with Salman. She knew he was my only friend.

That attitude of out of sight, out of mind that my father followed was brought to an abrupt end one afternoon. My father followed a strict routine – after his early morning fishing round, he slept through most of the afternoon. But one particular afternoon he went to the kovil, which backed onto the beach. He was part of the temple committee, a voluntary post which he took very seriously. The kovil's chariot festival was fast approaching so the temple committee had met up to discuss the procession route, food and puja times. Had I known my father was going to be by the beach, I would have gone to Salman's house or the school playground, but instead Salman and I were playing in the sand. We were extremely bored, having exhausted our usual forms of entertainment, so I grabbed Salman's topi and put it on my head.

"Now I'm a Muslim!" I yelled. I jumped onto a nearby rock.

"As-salamu alaykum!!" I shouted and Salman squealed in glee. "My name is Salman, I am a Muslim, I'm going to the mosque now, wearing my stupid hat!" I then did a little jig on the rock, while Salman burst into applause.

I didn't realise that my audience wasn't just Salman. My father also happened to be walking from the kovil to our house with two of his fellow temple committee members. When they saw my display, the men fell into an embarrassed, stern silence.

When I returned home a few hours later, I knew immediately something was wrong. I could hear my mother's broom determinedly hitting the ground, SWISH SWISH SWISH. I opened the gate and saw her sweeping, her back turned towards me.

"Amma," I said, trying to catch her attention.

She stopped sweeping, but didn't turn round. She remained still for a few seconds, then resumed sweeping, this time with alarming ferocity. I started to tremble – I knew something was definitely wrong. "Amma?" Still no response.

I tiptoed past the verandah into the living room. My father was seated in his easy chair and was staring into space. On top of the coffee table was his belt that he reserved for his trips to Batticaloa town, or for special occasions.

A lump formed in my throat. "App-aaa?" I stammered out.

"What did I do wrong in my past life to get a son like you?" he said, in a calm, quiet voice. "We tried to have children for so long, but I think it would have been better if we had none at all." My father's voice cracked as he said this and I knew that he would start shouting soon.

I kept silent. I'd witnessed enough of my father's rants to know that the best thing to do was keep silent and ride out the wave of abuse. The shouting began.

"Embarrassing me in front of the temple, the community, the other committee members, prancing around like a Muslim," he bellowed.

I stared at him, appalled, realizing that he had seen me. "Appa, I was joking around with Salman," I pleaded.

My father stood up and grabbed the belt from the table. "Joking? Is that joking to humiliate me in front of the whole village?"

"I'm sorry Appa, I'm sorry," I pleaded. But my father was intent on dispensing the punishment. He swung the belt at the back of my leg. I managed to quickly sidestep it, beginning to sob with fear.

"You rascal," my father said through gritted teeth. He grabbed my T-shirt and pulled me towards him. I tried to wiggle out of his grasp and my T-shirt ripped. Whack! The belt landed at its intended destination this time. The pain on my leg felt like a simmering orange burn. "Ammaaaaa!!" I screamed.

"You know what Thurai said when he saw you with that Muslim hat on?" my father yelled over my cries. "He said, how can you hope to become head of the temple committee when your own son is going off with these Muslims?"

The belt came down again, this time on my other leg. The pain was less sharp, but I screamed again for Amma, letting out a pathetic whimper. My mother came in through the kitchen door immediately. It was clear she had been standing behind it, hoping my father's anger would soon fizzle out. I ran over to her and hid myself in the folds of her red batik nightdress. She rested her hand on my neck.

"I told Thurai that something like this would never happen again and that I would discipline you appropriately." My father raised his voice. "A Muslim's topi!" he thundered. "You don't know where they've been. Dirty rascals – they'll eat anything, steal anything, they'll bleed you dry. And that's before they've tried to convert you. You want to become a Muslim then, go! Go!" He pointed to the front door. "But so long as you're in this house, you're not to see that boy!"

My father was readying himself to deliver another blow. Amma, sensing this, interjected. "Appo, he's learnt his lesson now. That's enough," she pleaded.

My father now shifted his focus to her. "You're the reason why he's running off wild. While I'm working, you're busy on the

streets. This boy needs discipline."

Indignation flashed across Amma's face. "I'm on the street trying to get us money so we can eat!"

"Probably whoring yourself for all I know," my father retorted.

"Aiyo, how can you say such horrible things like this? You've just been at the kovil, in a holy place and you're spewing out all these disgusting words. I'm making those mats and selling them because you don't make any money for us. Maybe if you spent less time at the kovil and more time at sea, we'd be in a better state than we are. I've already sold off my gold for you, next you'll be asking me to sell this." She pointed to the thali on her neck.

"Dai," my father warned her.

"Siva, go to your room," Amma ordered. I rushed to my room thankful my ordeal was now over.

Their argument continued into the evening and the next day they were cold with each other. In a few days, however, things settled down again. After a few days of enforced separation from Salman, Amma allowed, or rather turned a blind eye to my playing with him after school, as long as I returned home before my father woke up from his afternoon slumber at around four pm.

"Siva, you need to be careful," she said as we walked to the market a few days later to sell her coir products. "You really upset your father, what you did. And I don't blame him for hitting you. Imagine what those temple committee people thought when they saw you wearing that topi?!"

"But I was just joking Amma, I'm not going to become a Muslim. And just because some Muslims take his fishing space, doesn't mean it's Salman's fault."

"I know, I know, it doesn't make sense now, but your father has his reasons..." Amma stopped and turned round to look at me, as if she was on the verge of saying something important. But then she appeared to change her mind, and turned round again, continuing at her rapid pace.

"Anyway, who gets most of the blame Siva? It's me." She sighed. "Whenever you misbehave, I get blamed for not disciplining you,

for not paying enough attention to you, for not listening to your father, for encouraging you to be friends with Muslims. What your father doesn't know is that most of the people who buy my goods are Muslims. They're paying for our food. If he knew, he'd probably blame that on me too."

CLAP. CLAP. Two hands slapped together in front of my face. I looked up to see a tall, skinny man with a golden tooth speaking in Sinhala. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but then I realised that everyone on the bus had got off. I looked out of the window to see if I was at my destination, Cinnamon Gardens. Instead of clean streets and preened trees, I saw a decrepit, dank bus station. I bolted up and looked at my watch; I had been lost in my memories for 20 minutes. I stepped off the bus, hoping to find another bus that would take me in the other direction. Aside from the graveyard of empty buses and a few bus conductors dozing in the bus station, there was no one else around.

I came out of the station onto the main road. I was sure I was imagining it, but there still seemed to be a trace of that biriyani in the air, mingled with the smell of my sweat, exhaust fumes and petrol. I walked in what I thought was the direction of the tantalising smell and soon passed a sign in English, pointing to Pettah. Following that supposed smell, I turned down a dishevelled, dirty street. Despite the 'No bills and posters' signs, election posters had been plastered on every wall. Many of the posters had been ripped, so that only an ear of one election candidate was visible on one poster, a headless body on another. Graffiti in Sinhala was scrawled across the posters. I didn't know what it said but I could guess the sentiment. The swirls and curls of the letters were like a scorpion's tail, flashing angrily at me. I felt unnerved.

As I walked along the street, that supposed smell of biriyani began to give way to another odour. A smoky odour. Something had been on fire recently. I felt goose pimples prickle all over my body. I thought to turn back, but curiosity got the better of me. I

walked past some trees and then there in a clearing I saw the burnt out innards of a building. The fire must have taken place last night, because wisps of smoke were still rising from the ashes. Some of the foundation of the building was intact, a single standing wall had hints of green but was mostly dull grey or black. The area was completely deserted, save for some bored looking policemen, who were flopped on plastic chairs, and stray dogs sniffing at the carcass of the building, in the hope of food. A damaged golden crescent lay in the debris. This had been a mosque, and judging by the presence of the police, some thugs had set it on fire.

I knew there had been recent trouble between Sinhalese and Muslims but hadn't realised it had escalated this much. I couldn't tell if anyone had died in this arson but, even if they hadn't, I knew that the destruction of a mosque was tantamount to murder in the Muslim community. Even if this attack was retaliation for some other crime, it could only mean more violence was in store. I shuddered. Sri Lanka hadn't changed in my absence, not one bit. Thankfully, I had made it out of there. I thought of my tiny room back in London, with its faulty heating, miniscule window and damp walls. Compared with Sri Lanka, those flaws were minor.

The last time I saw Salman was on a Friday and the next day we were woken prematurely by banging at our front door. I heard Amma and my father murmuring and after a few seconds' silence, I could hear the rustling of drawers. I crept out of my bed and pushed my room door ajar. My father strode past, readjusting his sarong as he went towards the front door.

He opened it and three of his friends tumbled in, bringing with them the morning sunlight.

"Anna, you need to come quickly to the kovil. See what they have done," cried one of the men, Gana, my father's fishing partner. He had got ready in such haste that he had done his shirt buttons wrong and one side of his shirt hung lopsidedly. He looked around

furtively and lowered his voice. "We need to sort this out once and for all." Bala, my father's childhood friend was also present and he nodded vigorously. I had an aversion to him, maybe because he hero-worshipped my father. He would listen and agree fawningly with my father's various diatribes on the loose morals of Sinhalese people, how Muslims were propagating at a dangerous rate, and how women these days were getting a bit too free-willed and needed to be put in their place.

I didn't recognise the third man. He was stocky and fierce-looking, with a handlebar moustache like some villain out of a Tamil film. He was carrying a bat. The three men talked to my father in hushed tones. He listened silently, eyebrows furrowed, his forehead shining with sweat, hands trembling slightly. Finally, he lifted his hand to silence them. They fell quiet and he turned round and went to the yard, via the kitchen. A few minutes later, he re-emerged. His hands were behind his back. When he turned slightly, I saw that they were wound round a knife normally reserved for hacking fish. He cast a few furtive glances towards the bedroom, trying to ignore my mother's worried face, as she peeped out at the scene from behind the door, unable to come out because she was in her nightdress. My father tucked the knife into his sarong. He followed the three men out of the house, without a further glance at Amma.

I started to shake with fear. I crept into my parents' room. Amma was seated upright on the bed. Her hair, which was normally tamed into a fishtail plait, with hair oil, pins and hair ties, was loose, and tangled. Her eyes were bigger than usual, and she looked like a terrified doe. She had seen the knife too.

"What happened?" I asked.

Amma shook herself. She tied her hair up and stroked my head. "Nothing, chellam, go back to bed." She then got up and proceeded to sweep the bedroom manically.

I went to my room and sat on my bed. The sound of bristles being battered stopped after a few minutes. I knew Amma would go to our neighbour's house to find out what had happened. As soon as I heard the jingle-jangle of her anklet fade, I headed for the

beach. The air tasted more salty than usual and the wind was more persistent. Dust and sand kept flying into my eyes, making them water. I looked towards the beach, where the kovil was.

I could see a swarm of men in front of the temple, obscuring its entrance. I scuttled along the beach. As I approached the kovil, the murmuring of angry men grew louder like a drone of angry bees guarding a nest. There were no women or children around, and the air felt heavy, tension weighing it down. Many of the men were carrying bats. Some were carrying knives. A small pistol peeped out from the top of a man's sarong, which he was using as a holster for the weapon. I recognised many of them – Rajan mama who lived a few houses away from us, Senthil mama who sold spinach in the village. But it seemed like they had morphed into animals – swearing and spitting as they redid the knots on their sarongs, as if limbering up for action. I looked around for my father but I couldn't see him. Despite my urge to run back home, I continued towards the temple. I wanted to know what was happening.

"Animals, these people are nothing but animals," shouted one man.

"We need to find that scoundrel imam and shoot him," said another man. As soon as he said 'imam', my heart sank.

As I neared the kovil, a putrid smell started to overpower me. I reached the entrance. Instead of the customary smell of jasmine flowers and sandalwood incense that normally greeted devotees as they came into the temple, what I smelt now was like rotten eggs and sewers. I took off my slippers and darted between the arms and elbows of men in the doorway, into the courtyard where the main shrine was. Usually, there was an ayer quoting scriptures, performing pujas or cleaning the shrine and gods with honey and milk. But this time, there were no priests present. Instead of the customary offerings of flowers, the bloody, severed head of a cow lay before the statues of Siva and Parvati, who continued smiling despite this perverse offering; continued to stare calmly at the chaos before them.

The cow had been freshly killed, and blood was still flowing from inside its head, dripping onto the stone floor like honey. On

the once gleaming marble floor, there were now the blood imprints of sandals and shoes, at least three pairs.

"Wearing shoes in the kovil!" exclaimed one man, crouching down beside the bloody imprints.

One of the cow's eyes was rolled back, as if it had been driven into shock at the depravity of humanity. The other eye had been gouged out by a knife and what remained was red streaky entrails. On its white cheeks were bloody fingerprints, where its murderers had jostled with it in its final living moments as it probably struggled to break free. Flies were beginning to congregate around its head, while outside two eagles silently glided above the temple.

I felt like I was going to be sick. I knew the cow. Jessy! With her unmistakeable black and white markings on her forehead. Salman and I had given her the name Jessy, after a character in a book we were reading in our English class. She lived on the temple grounds and had become an integral part of temple life. She would circumnavigate the kovil like a devoted pilgrim, stopping at different points to receive blessings. She would butt the hands of devotees, tongue poking out, ready to receive their sweet, sticky rice prasadams. Despite their reluctance to part with their prasadam, most devotees admired her tenacity and would feed her. With a full calendar of special religious days throughout the year, she had grown plump from all the donations. Sometimes she would wander onto the beach and stop as if she was looking for us. Salman and I would give her any remaining sweets or ice cream we had.

I started to cry. Big blobs tumbled onto my T-shirt but no one noticed that there was a small crying boy in their midst.

I wanted the men to cover her dismembered head and give her some dignity. Surely Siva and Parvathi would be angry that these men hadn't cleaned up the shrine, that they were watching as a dead carcass rotted on such sacred property. As I stared at the blood-stained face, I knew where the blame would fall. A shudder went through me as I thought of Salman.

Someone tapped my shoulder sending an electric shock through

me. I swung around to find my father with a satisfied grimace on his face. I inched back, unnerved by his expression.

"See Siva, this is why we can never be friends with the Muslims," he said. "They have come into our kovil and killed our most sacred animal. It is good you have seen this. Now you know what they are capable of." His voice grew softer. "But they won't get away with this. They've got away with things for too long. The gods will take out their revenge on them. Yes, they will take out their revenge." I was used to my father's thunderous fits of rage. But this calm, measured tone frightened me more.

After the attack on the temple, the community went into lockdown. The temple management ordered the village to observe a curfew, with children being told not to go to school for a week and to stay indoors. Women were also advised to stay inside. According to the temple committee, this was to prevent them from being targeted by any Muslims. My father told Amma to stop selling her coir products in the market. Although she tried to protest, she knew there was no point arguing with him. She threw herself into household chores, the bristles on her poor broom battered by her rigorous cleaning regime. For my father, all his doubts and misgivings about Muslims were confirmed by the Jessy incident. Previously there were Hindus who talked to Muslims or had business deals with them, but now most people were unanimous in their aversion towards them.

Having not seen Salman for a week, I was impatient to see him. But I knew that if I got caught, I would be severely punished by my father. I stayed optimistic by imagining that I would see Salman in school the following week, and we'd go back to playing with each other clandestinely during my father's naps.

One afternoon during the week-long lockdown, Amma and I were in the kitchen when the monsoon rain began to beat down on us, trying to force its way through the roof and windows. A few pots were strategically dotted around the kitchen to collect the water that had managed to make its way through the roof tiles. We were both bored as we began to prepare the evening meal. I was

desperate to go to the beach or Salman's house; Amma wanted to be at the market. In the past week, although my father still went fishing in the morning, in the afternoon he was out, forgoing his nap. He didn't tell Amma where he went or when he would be back, but she didn't mind too much because he was in a better mood these days. Having been elected president of the temple committee, he now walked around wearing his fancy belt and striding with a sense of purpose, as if he had found his true vocation.

"Amma, why does Appa seem happier now than he usually does?" I asked, peeling some potatoes.

"Maybe because he's been proved right by what happened in the temple," Amma said, cutting a juicy onion. The bulb's intensity caused tears to trickle down her cheeks. "What the Muslims did, that was disgusting."

"But you still like Muslims, don't you?" I asked. Amma looked round the room guiltily, as if checking my father wasn't there. "I mean you're friends with them and-"

"*Ssssh* Siva," Amma interrupted, her eyebrows crawling together. She gestured the knife in my direction. "You can't go round saying things like that. I hope you don't tell your school friends that. We could get into a lot of trouble."

I was indignant. "Well I don't have anyone to tell, Salman is my only friend, and now I can't see him."

The furrows on Amma's forehead cleared, softening her features. She put down her knife, came to me and stroked my hair. "I know chellam, I know. But you'll be able to see him at school once it restarts. Although I think you need to be careful. I know Salman and his family are nice, but you don't know what other people are like in his community." Her features hardened again, but she continued to stroke my hair. "Also, no more meeting Salman after school. You'll see him at school, that's enough. You'll have to come straight from school."

I was annoyed with her hypocrisy. She was friends with other members of the Muslim community so why was she now siding with my father? I wiggled out of the reach of her hands. She knew

why I was annoyed, and threw her hands into the air in frustration.

"Aiyo, I don't know what to do Siva. I'm sure a lot of the Muslims are angry that some people amongst them did that to the cow. But I don't think I can push back against your father on this one. I've been defying him since the moment we got married, and look how unhappy we are. Things have changed now. I think we need to listen to him."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Amma was my guru when it came to evading the wishes of my father. Her U-turn meant that she would no longer consent to me seeing Salman. Tears burst out, trickling down my face.

"Oh Siva." Amma pulled me towards her and hugged me. I gave up resisting after a short struggle and my body flopped against hers. "You know why your father is like this? It was a long time ago, but he actually used to be best friends with a Muslim."

I was shocked and as quickly as I had started crying, I stopped. My father, friends with a Muslim?! Amma saw the confusion on my face.

"It was a long time ago now, chellam, when we mixed more with Muslims. His name was Kadheem, he actually came to our wedding. He and your father were inseparable when they were young, just like you and Salman. They were even going to set up a business together."

"What happened?" I asked.

Amma lowered her voice. "Well, it was when the problems were really starting."

"Problems" was a vast understatement to describe the conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government. "Anyway, Uncle Mano went off to join the boys."

I had never met Uncle Mano, my father's younger brother. He had died long before I was born. I didn't know the circumstances behind his death and my father never talked about it, but we had a framed photograph of him in our living room, near the shrine for the gods. He was handsome, with defined cheekbones and a slightly mischievous smile.

"Anyway, one day the army came round to your appappa's house, looking for Uncle Mano. They had been tipped off that Mano had joined the Tigers, and they wanted to take him away for questioning. He wasn't in the house at the time and your grandparents denied that Mano was involved in anything. When your appappa demanded to know why they suspected Uncle Mano, they mentioned Kadheem."

I gasped. Amma continued the story. "Your appappa and appamma tried to get hold of Mano to tell him to run away and hide. But by that evening he had been taken away by the army for questioning. We haven't seen him since."

"What happened to Kadheem?" I asked.

"Obviously your father was in a rage, because he had trusted Kadheem so much, and Kadheem knew Mano and your grandparents well. He tried to track Kadheem down, but when he arrived at their house, it was empty." Amma got up and went back to the chopping board. "Your father feels guilty about what happened to Mano, so that's why he's like that now."

"But that doesn't mean that all Muslims are like that," I protested. "Salman would never do that."

"I know he wouldn't Siva. But that's just how your father thinks. I think Kadheem was forced into confessing about Mano, maybe beaten or threatened. I can't think why he would ruin his friendship with your father otherwise. Kadheem was a really nice man, such fair skin..." Amma trailed off, immersed in her memory. She glanced at the clock. It was six pm. Her eyes widened. "The time, Siva! I better get this food cooking before your father comes home." That was her way of saying that the conversation was over. She went into the yard to collect some eggs from the hens. By now the rain had stopped and the sun was beginning to set.

Although my 11-year-old self sympathised with my father for what had happened to his brother, I still wanted to see Salman. I didn't understand why Salman and I had to be punished for what Kadheem had done.

I formulated a plan. I would listen to my parents and stop seeing

Salman after school for a while. Once things died down, I would tell Amma I was playing cricket with some other boys, but then go round to his house instead of meeting somewhere open like the beach.

The following day I was sitting in the living room, doing maths exercises. School was starting again on Monday and I was excited. My father was in the living room, dozing on his easy chair. Amma had gone round to the neighbour's house to borrow some onions. My father hadn't done shopping for us in a week, and we were running out of food.

I heard the front gate bang against the metal railings and looked up, scared it was some gang. Amma darted into the house. Her hair was hanging loose, having fallen out of its bun, her eyes were raw with rage. She rushed straight to where my father was seated. "Did you do it?" she barked. I had never heard her use that tone with my father.

"What is this?" retorted my father. "Show some respect."

"How can I?" Amma cried. "How can I show respect to someone who murders people?"

I let out a sharp sigh. Amma didn't notice it but my father did.

"Aye," he frowned and lifted himself out of his chair. "Don't you dare say that, especially in front of Siva. I'm protecting our religion, our community, our people." He spoke calmly and Amma seemed mad in contrast to his measured coolness.

"What, so you're a hero by killing innocent people who weren't involved in what happened at the kovil? You disgust me." Amma spat out.

"Aye. Don't push it." He inched forward and raised his arm. "They are all to blame for this, all of them."

But Amma, rather than being intimidated, began to hammer at my father's chest. He let her do so for a moment then held her by her shoulders so she was an arm's length away. She stood there, head bent, the life seeming sapped out of her. "How could you? He was practically a boy." She began to weep, then made an

attempt to head butt my father. "You're nothing but an animal," she screeched.

My father had reached the end of his tether. He drew his hand back and slapped Amma. She drooped to the floor, like a stem snapped by a heavy wind.

"Go to your room Siva," my father bellowed. I ran to my room and crept into bed, pulling the bed sheet over my head to try and drown out the sounds of my mother and father arguing, even as she wept.

From the few words that drifted to me, I learned what had happened. My father had killed someone. My father was a killer. Images of my father tucking the knife into his sarong replayed in my mind. Where had he done it? When? Did he do it by himself or with the men who had appeared at the door the other day? Amma said that the person was practically a boy, so I presumed it was someone older than me, but not an adult. Who could it be? It had to be a Muslim.

Salman would know, I thought to myself, I'd find out from him when we went back to school on Monday. But would Salman even want to be friends with me if he knew that my father had killed a Muslim?

I spent the rest of the day in bed, cursing the gods for making me the son of my father.

In the next couple of days, the house became even quieter than usual. My father was constantly out of the house, and Amma kept to herself in the bedroom for most of the day, only coming out to cook. She even avoided me, only calling to me to say food was ready or to give me orders. I wanted to ask her more about the murders, but I was scared she would become possessed like she had been a few days ago. Anyhow, I was sure I'd find out what happened when school started the following day.

The next morning I sprinted to school. I had been caged in the house for nearly a week, and I was glad to be free now. But I was nervous. My heart felt like it had doubled in size and was pounding my frame. I reached the front gate of the school, and

waited for Salman at our usual spot, next to a wizened tree. Five minutes went by, no sign of Salman. Another ten minutes – still no sign of him. Other children walked past me. I noticed that there were fewer children going into the school and I didn't see any Muslim children walk past.

The first bell rang. I had to go into class or I'd be late. Salman sometimes comes late to school, I reassured myself. Perhaps this was one of those occasions.

I went into the classroom. The rest of the class were settling down in their seats, putting their bags away and getting their stationery out. We were all subdued. About a quarter of the class were missing, and most of the missing children were Muslim. By now, my heart was thumping as if it was trying to escape from my chest. I left my seat and approached my teacher, Miss Shanmugalingam, at the front of the classroom.

"Miss, where's Salman?" I asked. "Why isn't he at school today?"

My teacher peered at me through her spectacles. "Ah Siva, I wasn't sure if your parents had told you." She took off her spectacles and looked at me intently. I looked back, imploring her to carry on. "Salman and his family have left after what happened to his brother Nazeem. They were worried about further violence."

Nazeem? Salman's oldest brother who used to take us to the beach on his scooter and buy us ice cream?

"What happened?" I'm not sure why I asked, because I knew what she was going to say.

"He was murdered, along with three other boys a few days ago." She stared at me, trying to gauge me. Perhaps she knew my father was involved in the murders and was analysing my reaction.

"But but where has Salman gone? This is their home," I stammered.

"I'm afraid I don't know," she replied. "His mother mentioned them going to stay with family in Puttalam."

I couldn't stand it any longer, I started retching. I ran to the toilets and threw up three times. Nazeem! Quiet and caring Nazeem who provided most of the food for the family. Nazeem, who would

take his grandparents to the hospital, who escorted his siblings to after-school classes. He had been murdered in retaliation for what happened to Jessy. It just didn't make sense. Nazeem knew we loved Jessy, he'd seen us play with her. He wouldn't have done that.

By the time I returned to class, I felt exhausted and was running a fever. My teacher phoned Amma at home and told her to collect me. Amma arrived half an hour later and scooped me in her arms, kissing my forehead, cheeks and neck. She didn't ask me anything – she knew that I now knew. We got an auto rickshaw back home. Exhausted, I lay with my head sideways on my mother's lap, the frayed ends of her sari stroking my head as we sped along the bumpy track to my house. This was a nightmare. And I wanted it to be over.

That was the last time Salman was mentioned – at school and at home. But I still thought about him and his family and wondered how they would cope with the loss of their sole income provider.

I was off school for about three weeks with a fever. Amma was beside herself, scared that my condition might worsen. Even my father was worried. One day during my sickness, he came home with a blue bag. He entered my room and I recoiled in my bed as he sat down at the end of it. He placed the blue bag between us.

"Some chocolate cookies for you... I know they are your favourites." He pushed the bag towards me. Feeling his intent gaze on me, I felt I had no choice but to open it. There were three packs of imported chocolate cookies. They were really expensive and difficult to find in our village, and we usually had to go to Batticaloa town if we wanted them. Amma only bought them for me on my birthday.

"Get better," he said and ruffled my hair. "Your teacher wants you back at school soon, she says you're not going to be top of the class if you're off for much longer." He gave me a small smile, and walked out of the room.

As months turned to years, Salman's imprint on me faded. But I never forgot what my father had done, and was determined to get away from him at the earliest possible opportunity. Instead

of rebelling against him by going out or causing trouble, I threw myself into my studies, determined to go to university and leave the village. I excelled at school and got a scholarship to study engineering in Peradeniya University in Kandy. After this, a foreign engineering firm poached me and invited me to do a master's degree at Kings College, London, after which I would join their firm. My parents were overjoyed, but little did they know the motive behind my academic achievement. And I never told them. What was the point of digging up past memories, when that was all past history now? Most of the Muslims had left, but a new set of problems were brewing. Sinhalese villagers, including their fishermen, were moving up and settling nearby, encroaching on our land and sea.

After I left Sri Lanka, I didn't return until my father died of a stroke. His health had been deteriorating in the past few years so the death wasn't a surprise. I didn't want to go to the funeral and I feared going back to Arayampathy. Memories of violence and guilt popped up whenever I thought of that place, but I was desperate to see Amma. When I returned, much had changed in the seven years I had been away. The town was buzzing with energy. The market was livelier than it had ever been because of the new communities from the south of the country who were settling there. There were shops with Sinhala writing on their signboards, as well as Tamil. The statue of Siva was still on the seafront, resplendent and victorious. But instead of the crescent of the mosque, a giant Buddha statue competed with him for the skyline. Although there was a simmering of resentment towards the statue among the Tamil villagers, I knew that it would be a few years before these tensions translated into action. I was determined not to be there to witness it, and neither did I want my mother to be its witness.

The funeral was a simple affair and there was a good turnout, especially from the temple committee and the temple devotees. My mother had aged considerably during my time away. She was small and frail, and no longer bothered to plait or tie her hair up properly, making her resemble a crazy, old woman. Free now from my father, she seemed lost. I guess as they grew older, they both realised they needed each other. My mother said my father had

become less aggressive as he had grown older and, in his slightly demented state, he frequently talked about Uncle Mano, sometimes asking her where he was. I knew she would be lonely without him, so I told her I was going to apply for her to come and live with me in London. Now that my father was dead, there was no one else left here for her anyway. Her application was successful and so, within a year of my father's death, I was back to take her to London, on this my final trip to Sri Lanka.

Still standing in front of the burnt out mosque in Colombo, I think of how I have tried to atone for the sins of my father by making Muslim friends in London. But I am never free of the guilt of Nazeem's death. So long as I keep coming back to Sri Lanka, I will never be free of that history. Sri Lanka, it seems to me, will never be free from prejudice and violence, and so it is impossible for me not to feel caught up in the hate. So, once I leave with my mother in a few days, I will never return to my homeland. I will give up Sri Lanka as a sort of sacrifice to Salman. As I turn and walk away from the mosque I think again of my old friend, immortalised in my mind at age 11 on that beach in Arayampathy, behind him Siva and behind Siva the golden crescent, the setting sun in Salman's hair as he sits on the beach, eating his second ice cream. I hope he has forgiven me for my father's actions and I pray that he is well, wherever he is.

Nalini Sivathasan *was born and bred in the UK, but has been visiting Sri Lanka frequently since the end of the civil war. She works as a video producer for a newspaper in London. She feels that some of the issues in her story relating to religious discord and Islamophobia are as relevant to Western countries such as the UK and USA as they are to Sri Lanka.*

SACRIFICES

Binguni Liyanage

27th February 2009

Pudukuduirippu, Mullaitivu

6.00 am

Chanaka opened his eyes to streaks of sunlight peeping through the window of the cabin. He blinked away the sleep that hung around his eyes, whose heaviness confirmed his lack of sleep. Sitting on the camp bed, he rubbed his face thoroughly with both hands and looked around him. A few papers were still scattered on the table which was pulled into a corner of the small room. The room looked tidy despite the papers. Yes. Being an army soldier had made him an exceptionally tidy person. Getting up from the bed, he dragged his feet to the table, pulled the armchair towards him and lowered himself into it. He took up one of the pieces of paper and read a few lines of the poem he had written after the battle at Thoppigala.

The heavy rain flowed,

but did it wash away the blood rivers

from Thoppigala?

Looking up from the paper he sighed heavily. Nobody knows what this life is like he thought, tracing with his finger, the small clear lettering on the paper. Collecting the scattered papers he clipped them together and slipped them into his diary.

After a quick wash he put on his camouflage uniform, looking with pride at his image in the small mirror before him - his curly hair cropped close to his scalp, his eyes dark and deep with all the experiences he had gained. He buttoned up the jacket and adjusted the badge which held his number, 66181. His lips curled into a momentary smile as he recalled the memory of himself as a 10 year old child so eager to wear this uniform. At that time, all he knew about the uniform was that it was the shining armor of a brave knight. Since then, a lot had changed.

In his teenage years, he became the cadet leader at school and then achieved enough marks to enter university. But his dream was to follow the rush of patriotism in his blood. Every time he celebrated his birthday on February 4th, he became more and more determined to realize his dream.

At 21 he became a Cadet Officer in the Sri Lanka army, went to Pakistan to follow a degree in Military Science, entered the army as a second lieutenant and put hundred percent of himself into his work. He wanted to make a heaven beneath the sky, along with his other colleagues of the Sinha Regiment; wanted to rid his country of the blight of terrorism.

His parents objected bitterly to his joining the army because of what they had heard through the media: the devastating stories of bomb blasts and deaths, the stories about soldiers who were missing in action, the media's criticism of the army's decisions and brutal killings in the North. He knew they were fair in their objection, yet, despite the shortcomings in the army, the danger for soldiers, he still wanted to join, to serve his country and free it from the Tigers.

Over the years, he had watched the gleaming pride grow in his parents' faces, their eyes fill with tears at his success. And of course his beautiful wife, Dayani, was his pillar of strength and the friend he needed. He met her at school and over time they became very close, slowly moving from friends to falling in love. He valued her fierce love, the loyalty they shared and the courage she gave him. She listened to his fears and his dreams, his happiness and sadness. She never asked about the war unless he mentioned it. That was all he needed. Now, she was five months pregnant, and with a boy. When they found this out at their last medical appointment, there were tears of happiness in the corners of their eyes. Though they wouldn't have cared about gender – healthy was all they wanted. He looked forward to another appointment at the doctor's to hear his son's heartbeat.

He was there in the battlefields at Ariyale, Muhamale, Jaffna, Vavuniya, Thoppigala, Kalyanapura, Welioya, Gajabapura, Nedunkarni, Ottyamalei, Periyakulam and Oddusudan. And

today, he was ready to take on a new mission with his fellow soldiers at Pudukuduirippu.

And yet, his dream of glory, of making a heaven beneath the sky, had become tarnished with time. In his service on the war front, he saw people who lost their property, who lost their lives, who were missing in action, civilians and soldiers alike.

He saw one of his colleagues, who had joined for financial reasons, struggling hard to meet his family's needs with the flaring inflation rate. Since they received almost everything from the army, from medicines to the uniforms they wore, their families managed to live in better conditions than they had before. Yet, inflation took larger and larger bites out of their household income. There were hundreds of soldiers who were disabled, some at the rehabilitation centers seeking help to escape the relentless memories of war. Their families avoided talking about their nightmares. He noticed the questionable actions of the government and some of the high rankers in the army. The plight of the needy never got better. There were thousands of people in the northern areas who knew next to nothing about life in the rest of the country, but knew only how to get away from an attack either from the army or the LTTE.

People in the northern areas knew fear by heart. Their lives were always in God's hands. People from the south put their dear ones' lives in God's hands when they allowed them to join the army, the sons and husbands often joining as a way out of poverty, a handful for patriotic reasons. Both communities prayed for protection. Anyway in the battlefield all intentions were the same; to take cautious, protected steps to disarm the enemy. He had some disagreements with the Armed Forces' decisions that were inhuman and brutal. Simultaneously he was astounded by the Forces' successes.

Following his troop, Chanaka reached the line of jeeps. He wondered what the battle would be like this time. He saw Major Thibbotuwage and a few other officials make their way across the camp to the entrance. He saluted, head held high, with a deep breath and a promise that he would perform his part for his

motherland as a Sri Lankan, not just as a soldier.

After a short discussion with the other higher rankers, his troop leader Captain Samaranayake called him out.

"Lieutenant Liyanage, I want you to be in charge of this mission. Whatever happens, make sure you go for your target." Then with a soft voice he continued, "Make sure everyone comes back. And you too." He put his hand out and shook Chanaka's, who felt his stomach clench in fear for his troop's welfare. Nodding at the Captain he stepped back, saluted him and with a tight smile looked around to see his colleagues getting into the jeeps. He made his way towards the first jeep in the line, got into the passenger seat and sat back, cradling the firearm in his lap. He smiled at the young man, Piyal, behind the wheel as he started the jeep.

As they drove along, he listened to the other soldiers chatting behind him, their confidence and elation because they were now, without a doubt, winning the war. Senel Weerasinghe, his second-in-command, raised his voice and said to Chanaka, "Sir? Piyal seems to be scared today." As always he tried to mock the driver and lighten the moment. Chanaka chuckled at the scowling face of the driver. He and his crew had a strong relationship. They joked around a lot, yet always respected their superiors; respected the uniforms they wore, proud of their work for the country and happy at the esteem they got from the general population, who saw them as heroes. Today their mission was to attack and destroy an LTTE bunker.

The road started to get bumpier as they went deeper into the forest, and he grabbed the console in front of him. The trees on either side blurred as they made their way towards the labyrinth of foliage that began where the road ended. The conversation he'd had last night with his mother, his pregnant wife, his sister and father came to him – his father's consoling words to him as he told them about the new mission, his wife's sensuous voice.

"Come home soon, Daddy," Dayani had said, teasing him about his impending fatherhood. "Your son is waiting to hear your voice. We both are." Then there was the pride in his mother Hema's voice as she said, "Take care son. You always have our blessing. Do what

you have to do. Always listen to your heart."

He longed to go back home to his loved ones, to assure them how well he was keeping. He knew how much they worried about him but here he was, doing something for his motherland rather than just becoming a typical guy who bragged and boasted with empty machismo.

The jeep started to slow down and the voice of the young driver, Piyal, broke into his thoughts. "Sir, the track ends here." Piyal smiled, his lips tightening, then said encouragingly, "All will be fine, Sir. The blessings of the holy triple gem of Lord Buddha go with you."

Chanaka gave a thumbs-up to the driver, grinned and mock-saluted to make light of the tension that had started up in him. Jumping down, he looked around to see his second-in-command Senel giving orders to the soldiers who were now forming lines. They were to go in three different groups to attack the identified LTTE bunker. The soldiers had tension written over their faces, but determination flared through their eyes. They were winning. When they were all in line, he raised his voice. "It's time! Go!!! Finish it off! For our country!!!"

Adrenaline rushed through his veins as he felt a burning anger towards the Tigers who had started this worthless war. He made his firearm ready. His mind startled at a sudden thought as he began to follow the others. He looked down at his hands. Would he be lucky enough to hold their baby one day? Were his hands worthy of holding an innocent soul? He shook his head to chase away the thought. What he did was for the country. To save it. All the lives he had taken with this firearm were to protect his country. To give a chance for his fellow countrymen to be free one day. He wanted a united country. All under one flag. He wanted to stop the bloodshed.

He looked around, trying to see through the lush greenery, to get a hint at what was coming. His mind raced through the tactics while the sunlight soaked his skin and wrapped him in a thick blanket of perspiration. He saw his valiant camouflaged men, hyperaware of the danger before them, measuring their steps and

clearing the path before them, checking for landmines and any possible threat that was headed towards them.

Beads of sweat started to drift down his back, as he took his place among his men. The chirping of the birds faded and the forest gave off an eerie quietness. Chanaka heard the dried leaves rustle beneath their feet, the branches and twigs break when their bodies passed. After a restless night of tension, he knew all the soldiers were fired up. The attacks of mosquitoes, the little sleep they'd had in the night were nothing when compared with what was to come. The hardened lines around the eyes of the soldiers showed determination and fearlessness. His courage hardened; his determination surged.

Some of the soldiers got down, one by one, and started to crawl forward. He looked back and signaled to the other soldiers who were behind him. He heard nothing except his own heavy breathing and the sound of leaves and bushes squish beneath him and his comrades. The cool soil was warming; more sweat slickened the insides of his thick uniform. In the distance he finally saw the bunker made of logs of wood with a thatched roof. It looked disheveled, covered also with tin sheets and polythene. His hands tightened their grip on the firearm and his beating heart felt ready to break through his ribs. The line of soldiers broke up and went crawling. Soon they surrounded the clearing in which the bunker was located. This close, he could now see that there was only one guard out in front; he could hear voices coming from inside. This attack, as they had planned, was really going to surprise the enemy. He looked around him and noted that all his fellow soldiers were in place. Their eyes were focused upon the clearing. Their heavy breathing visible with the rise and fall of their chests. He looked around at the tense soldiers along the forest line. His watch ticked on and on. They counted down the time. The signal was given. The roaring of guns echoed.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Hema arranged the flowers into a few reed baskets, while her daughter and daughter-in-law, Dayani, arranged the oil lamps under the Bo tree. The wind came consoling them and wrapped their souls in meditation, giving them the relaxation they needed. A shadow fell on the steps near the entrance to the Bo maluwa. Hema looked up. A tall, slim man. He stood facing her wearing his army uniform, his cap in one hand and a small smile on his face. "Puthe!!!" she cried in shock, holding her hands out to the vision.

"Sir, all is cleared," Senel said as he came to him.

Chanaka nodded. "Don't let others roam around. Make sure every inch is cleared."

"Yes, Sir."

He watched Senel make his way to a small group of soldiers and start into the clearing. Unable to watch them do their work alone, he joined them. Senel and the four others were very careful about what they were doing. Cautious and brave, he thought to himself. Getting away from them, he ran his experienced eyes over the land in the clearing and paced forward.

Foot by foot he got away from his colleagues. It was like somebody called out to him.

"Sir!!!" one of the soldiers called out in panic.

He looked over his shoulder and, as he did so, he felt himself thrown backwards, a loud boom roaring through his ears. His eyes widened, bile rose into his throat, his knee felt ripped into two. His parents and his wife came to his mind along with the memory of his unborn baby. He smelt the burnt gunpowder, his colleagues' voices became a cacophony. Pain rushed through his senses; the loud voices surrounding him faded away. He heard his mother's shocked voice. "Puthe!!!"

The air was finally still, reeking of gunpowder from the 21-gun salute. A poignant sorrow was visible on the faces of everyone gathered in this corner of the cemetery. The world suddenly looked so lazy in the rays of the setting sun, Hema thought as she clenched

her fist to try and keep back the tears. She felt a lump at her throat and her knees felt wobbly. She closed her eyes tightly. In her hand was the poem she had found in her son's diary. She had brought it with her, thinking she might place it on the coffin before it went into the crematorium, but she knew immediately she arrived, that she would not do so. She knew the poem by heart now; its words echoed in her head.

The heavy rain flowed,
but did it wash away the blood rivers
from Thoppigala?
I looked down at my wet body.
It's not easy to live this life.
We don't use umbrellas when it's raining,
cold gives us goose bumps as well.
Sinha hearts will never shake.
While you sleep at night,
little heroes, we,
feel like we do something
to protect the motherland.
If you are thinking about yourselves only,
close your eyes and think twice.
This is our small country.

Binguni Liyanage *is a past pupil of Sacred Heart Convent, Galle and is waiting for university entrance. She finds her channel of release by writing. The story is inspired by the poem at the end. It was originally written by a soldier who was killed during the final battle at Pudukuduirippu. She relates his story through the poem which unveils a part of the soldiers' life, we can't see.*

IN SEPARATION

Shanthiya Baheerathan

As a child, I had an unrelenting fear of my mother never returning home. If she was just minutes late from her night shift as a cleaner at the fish factory, panic gripped my chest and I would flip through the news to find word of a tragedy. Vivid images filled my mind: her limbs twisted in heavy machinery, hooded men attacking her, or a bus colliding into her small frame.

I couldn't stop thinking these things. I'd sit in our dark living room until four or five in the morning listening to the sound of passing traffic, staring at the door at the top of the stairs that led down to our basement apartment, sometimes drifting into a restless sleep, but always with an ear aimed at the door. When I finally heard footsteps or a turning key, I would scurry into our shared room and curl up under the covers of my twin bed. I didn't want to worry her.

She would peek silently through the door to check my sleeping form before heading to the shower to wash the smell of dead fish off her body. The smell would linger in the carpeted floors.

Our tiny basement apartment in the shabby suburb of Rexdale, was four doors down from a convenience store where neighborhood men loitered and smoked in the evenings. Above us lived a family who stomped around at the oddest hours and never stopped fighting. The thin ceiling only amplified their obscenities. Their washroom, located above my bed, would gurgle and flush in the mornings. When my mother wasn't home, these echoes comforted me.

I wasn't always this way. These anxious rituals started when I was eight, two years after we moved into that apartment. I awoke one morning to find that my mother had not come home. I thought maybe she had left early to college, as she sometimes did. So, I got dressed, found the apartment key in the bedside drawer, and walked to school. But when I returned home, she still had not come back. I waited until four in the morning to call my father. On my

first try, I got the number wrong. The second time I called, it rang seven times before the line cut off.

I didn't know any other phone numbers.

The next day, I tried telling my teacher, hiding the fact that my mother regularly left me at home by myself. This type of thing was common in our neighborhood. She told me to call 911 if she hadn't returned by that night. I went home and watched TV, starving, waiting for her. I stayed on the couch staring at the door until I drifted to sleep. She returned that night around 2 am; the smell of dead fish enfolded me as she carried me to my room.

She never did tell me why she hadn't come home, and after a while the incident only existed in my mind. Never vocalized, it failed to solidify into something real. I felt like I had made it up. Yet, for days afterwards, I would go to sleep to the sound of her sniffling in the bed on the other side of our room.

I didn't have anyone else. For 11 years, we lived alone in that apartment. When we first moved in, my mother's brother Suresh would visit. At first he came weekly, then monthly, and after that, we only saw him at temple gatherings and birthday parties. I wasn't allowed to ask him why he never visited us.

When we first landed here, Suresh picked us up at the Canadian-American border. We thought we were going to live with his family. Throughout our flight to America from India, my mother bit her lips to shreds and imagined conversations with her brother. On the bus to the border, she told me stories of their childhood in Sri Lanka. She told me about the strange old woman who sold sweets by their school gates, who told them tales of her husband's fishing expeditions; about schoolboys stealing bicycles and returning them the next day, and about adventures climbing mango trees in neighbors' backyards. All through our tumultuous voyage, across the Gulf of Mannar, over the Atlantic, up through New York, and finally, as we walked across the US border to declare ourselves as refugees, she was excited to see her little brother.

Suresh showed up late, and looked anxious when he greeted us.

My mother immediately tried to act familiar with Suresh; she

joked around in Tamil, commented on his graying hair and asked him about Ravathy, his wife.

His response was short, abrupt, and in English, a language hardly used by my mother. “She’s fine.”

My mother tried twice after that to convey her excitement, and received disinterested one-word responses. So, she let silence fill the space between them.

After we had been driving for some time, however, he said to my mother, “Well, we must get you a job soon.”

Recovering quickly, she answered politely, coldly, “I’m sure I’ll find one.”

“I can help you. Ravathy has a couple of connections. It’ll be better for our relationship if we’re all independent, you know?”

My mother, not knowing what to say, nodded and watched the passing scenery.

I vividly recall that drive and the image of the white landscape on either side of me as we drove under overlapping roads. Snow-capped trees pointed to the sky like arrows, thin iron rods held up massive bridges, and building block towers glared light at the speeding cars. Inside and outside the car, there was only silence.

We had been traveling for weeks, on boats, planes and buses, with tall women in pointed shoes and painted faces. What changed most was the smell – from the salty, humid breeze of the Gulf of Mannar, to sickly-sweet airport stores, to the artificial plastic of the Greyhound bus. The worst was the waiting and the unknown words that would blare at me from unsmiling foreign faces and crackling loudspeakers. While we were traveling, I grumpily acquiesced every time mother would tell me to sit still or move, because I knew, even then, that not doing so would break her, and I couldn’t bear seeing that.

After we had traveled for some time, Suresh asked about my father. “When is Nishanth coming?”

My mother responded optimistically, suppressing the tears and emotion she had expressed earlier that week. She could tell that weakness and sensitivity wouldn’t be tolerated here. “Soon. A

couple of months at most."

We left my father behind because the smuggler told us he could only take two people. My father took the train with us, from Trincomalee to Colombo. The entire time, he made jokes and reassured us that he would soon be with us in Canada. He warned me not to get too modern in his absence. He mimicked English accents, and told me that before long, he wouldn't be able to understand me. He made me promise never to forget Tamil. My mother hardly spoke to my father; instead they focused on me. It was clear she didn't want to go. I had seen her sniffling and talking to herself in our kitchen the day before.

She only broke down after speaking to another woman on our tiny boat. All 100 of us were crammed onto the deck, dressed in yellow plastic ponchos, lying shoulder-to-shoulder under a leaky tarp. The woman beside my mother was traveling by herself to reunite with her husband, who had left to India over seven years ago. She told us her story, crying over the roaring of the engine as the inky black sky loomed over us.

I drifted in and out of sleep. Whenever the boat jumped over a wave, I awoke startled, searching for my mother's form beside me. In the middle of the night, I felt her body shaking with sobs as she told the other woman that she didn't know when we would see my father again. I'd never seen her cry before.

We finally arrived at Suresh's home: grey-bricked, two-storey, and surrounded by others so similar it was hard to tell them apart. Ravathy opened the door to us. She stood there with a tight smile, barefoot on the carpeted floors, dressed in a batik nightdress and heavily pregnant. We had met once before when she had come to visit us, but I didn't really remember that visit. My father said that she had insisted on a private room and warm water in the outhouse bathroom, and cutlery. He said that we had been forced to sleep on couches in the living room, boil water by the bucket, and learn how to use knives and forks because we didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable.

Ravathy was born in Canada, and her English sounded like the women I had seen on airport televisions: sharp, severe, and

unquestionable. She looked people in the eye when she spoke. The exaggerated movements of her eyebrows reminded me of the Bharatanatyam dancers in the shows my mother used to take me to when I was younger.

Ravathy made the same suggestion as Suresh, only it wasn't a suggestion; it was an assumption, gracefully uttered over lunch after we had unpacked our tiny suitcase in the tiny basement room they had allotted us. "My friend knows a woman who works at the fish canning factory – they pay cash." Suresh drove my mother to the woman's house that same evening and she started working the very next day.

While my mother was at work, the next day, I heard Ravathy and Suresh fighting.

"What is she going to do for us, Suresh? You already spent so much time trying to get her here. You have a daughter coming soon. You need to start thinking about that."

"It's just for a couple of days. She has already started work, we'll find her a place."

We moved to our tiny apartment four days later. It was small, with bare, beige walls and stained ceilings. We always believed that we would move. It seemed so inevitable that we were in constant expectation of it. Our furniture was bought from garage sales, and our belongings were sparse. But we never did leave, even after we got permanent residency status, even after my mother started working at an accounting firm, and I got a job working at the Burger King. We lived in a state of perpetual limbo, waiting.

We were waiting for my father to get his immigration papers. But by the end of our first year in Canada, I had forgotten what he looked like. His voice, jovial and booming over the phone, was disembodied. We had left most of our photos back in Sri Lanka. By the time I realized that his image had faded from memory, I was afraid to ask him about himself: Did he have a scratchy beard? Did he still wear spectacles that covered half of his face? My mother always got upset at any reminder, however subtle, of my father's absence.

At parent-teacher interviews, and when my friends' parents asked about him, she always said that he was in Sri Lanka on a business trip. "He will be home in some months," she would say in her slow, careful English. I don't think the other parents or teachers really cared, but they would nod sympathetically. I could tell that it meant a lot to her, making sure that the falsehood was believed.

She worked hard to ensure no one worried about us or asked if we needed help. A year after we had moved into the apartment, she enrolled in college to become an accountant. She worked during the night and studied during the day. I really don't know how she managed it.

But news traveled fast in our Tamil community, and I think everyone knew what was going on. Just, no one talked about it to us. I realized this when, one day, at my cousin's third birthday party, I overheard two men talking about my mother.

"His papers are being held up because the LTTE are now thought of as terrorists."

"He's not a part of it, is he?"

"No, but single males are suspicious."

"Shit, she needs a man. Did you hear about what happened to her a couple of weeks ago?"

"No, what?"

"She threw her bucket at her supervisor, and started crying at him in Tamil. Kept accusing him of touching her. Crazy bitch, she probably just wanted money. And that was before she got working status. They could have deported her. Suresh had to pay 'em off so they didn't press charges or fire her."

She worked there for two years after that night, with the same supervisor. I can only imagine what she went through every night. She never told anyone about it, not even my father, who we called weekly.

11 years after we left Sri Lanka, our sponsorship application for my father finally passed.

As I drove us to the airport to pick him up, thoughts of forced greetings and strained attempts to recall our combined past in Sri

Lanka filled my mind. I kept switching radio stations, hoping to blanket the car in noise. My mother didn't try to ease our discomfort with stories from the past, to give meaning to a relationship that consisted of hour-long phone conversations every week. Instead she worried her bottom lip and traced patterns with her elegant fingers on her purse.

At the age of 40, except for a few graying strands of hair and some creases around her eyes, she looked the same as she did 11 years ago. But she was different. Her mannerisms had changed; her youthful laughter and her teasing questions had morphed into strict rules and concise speech. She walked with a straighter spine; spoke English fluently, and confidently.

At the airport, the three of us curled our arms around one another and exhaled. He had more wrinkles on his face, and more grey in his hair. Something desiccated about him within. The car ride alternated between comfortable silences and my father's rapid questions that my mother and I mustered the enthusiasm to answer. His cheery chatter pressed at the dynamic between my mother and me.

Since I was soon to be leaving to a different city for university it was decided that I would sleep on the couch. We unpacked, my father holding out to us the twenty packets of Ceylon Tea, and we went out to eat. Later, when I was preparing to go to the library to do some research for my homework, my father asked me if it was too late to be going out on my own. I explained to him that the libraries didn't close until 11. That night, I fell asleep to the sounds of their whispers from the other room.

Those two months before I left for university passed slowly. Our tiny apartment felt smaller than before, my father took up so much of our space with his loud voice and large movements. He commented freely on our established routines, asked me why I had a car, where I was going, when I was coming back. I wondered how he could think he had any authority in my life.

A month and a half after his arrival, I heard my mother screaming in Tamil in the middle of the night. I knocked loudly on the door, and she grew silent. When I entered, she was sitting on the corner

of the bed, in tears; my father, wearing only his sarong, sat facing away from her, on the other corner. I told them to be quiet, and that I needed to sleep. My father told me he was sleeping on the couch and I must take his bed.

I left two weeks later.

Six months after my father arrived, with his heart hungry from 11 years of loneliness, my mother stopped speaking. Her descent into silence happened very slowly. I was so rarely home that I didn't notice at first, until my father pointed it out. By then, I didn't know how to stop it. My father and I watched, helpless, as everything about her slowly became muted.

While before she had been someone with the sort of resolve and determination that left most people breathless, now every movement looked like it needed intense concentration. She moved slowly, and became careless: stopped going outside, started eating less, no longer took the time to choose bright clothing and tie her hair into a tight chignon. She acquiesced to letting my father shoulder the burden. He had got a full-time job as a chef in a restaurant. She quit her job, and floated around the house as if she was a ghost.

My father and I tried everything we could to prevent her slow self-erasure. But nothing worked. It felt like she was never going to come back.

Shanthiya Baheerathan *migrated to Canada from Sri Lanka when she was seven. Shaped by her experiences as an immigrant, she has a diverse set of interests ranging from mathematics and statistics, to reconciliation and storytelling. She is especially interested in exploring Tamil diaspora narratives to understand the impact of displacement on intergenerational trauma, identity and family.*

POEMS

Kandiah Shrikarunaakaran

ELLAIKKAL

Well-laid roofs with tiles,
mossy green and red,
rustle of mangoes against leaves.
Portico with round pillars,
slick trees I would try to climb.
Parapet walls beckoning my imagination
to draw dog-rabbit chases.
Raised water tanks.
Small gardens dotted with blooming bushes,
among which we played hide and seek.
Deeply dug wells
holding the soul of the land.
Water:
sweet mouthfuls,
after an evening of sweaty games,
a walk in the April sun.

Protective, nurturing
objects they were,
when we fled our homes
in the wake of the dance of a destined war.

Now,
Pillars, porticos, walls,
water tanks, trees, roofs
leveled.

Not even the ellaikkal left,
we languish,
robbed of any trace that tells us
our place.

Ellaikkal – a stone used to identify the boundary of a piece of land.

KUPPI LAMPS

Miraculous times they were:
to still be alive, to be living each day.
They were times that called for starving.
Why not confess, stealing
firewood, immature bitter gourd,
unripe drumsticks that hung over walls.

Rice pricey, wheat flour rare
matchboxes scarce, milk powder hoarded,
we ended up content
with one meal a day,
scantily lighting the kitchen fire.
War rules sapped the city,
feet worn, walking the length of the bazaar
searching.
White ash and palm fruit juice
could not wash away dirt.
When paper ran out
we read our news printed on Bristol boards,
old stock that had lingered in warehouses.
Petrol pumps useless,
we oiled our unused thulas to draw water.
Cyclists carried firewood,
emaciated wiry bodies

shining with sweat,
straining hard to pedal
in the burning sun.

Electricity cut off,
life now aligned with the sun's cycle,
we turned pre-historic.
Kuppi lamp with scant kerosene
resisted the night feebly,
every spit of light weak
against the howling wind.

These lamps flickered and dangled
marking our scramble backwards in history.

Kuppi lamp – an economical lamp that uses only a little amount of kerosene. It is made from a small jam bottle with a piece of twine hung inside the bottle to suck up the oil. It gives out only a little light. The lamps were widely in use in war affected areas when fuel was restricted.

Thula - Traditional technology used to draw underground water from wells in Jaffna. It consists of a lever, fulcrum and load. They were replaced by motorized pumps but, with petrol unavailable, people reverted to this old technology during the war.

EXODUS

Couldn't stay.
The night sky crisscrossed by sparks and lines
as though it were a festival.
Sulphurous stench pervasive,
our noses itched.
Hum of bomber planes in the background,
earth shuddered and a surge of air hit from nowhere,
repeatedly.

Occasional ambulance sirens whizzed by,
the seemingly distant rattle
clearer and nearer.

'Have to leave' but where to?
I knew not how I would live,
wherever we would end up.
Brain turned inert, time ticked by.
Shuddering of the earth continued,
stronger, closer.
Panic spread: 'Leave for safety, war rolls in.'
Rushing, I came out, necessities in hand,
bundle of clothes, documents,
didn't realize then, this marked
the crumbling of our world forever.

A walk into the night,
the whole city unusually buzzing,
shadows of men and women,
old and young;
complaints heard about the times
and the gods' indifference.
Possessions in single bundles
on handlebars and carriers of bicycles,
hours of walking
amidst the orchestra of explosions
along a crowd-thronged road
houses on either side
already empty.
The next day, the road opened onto Chemmani's fields.
The endless human lines
jostled to a stop.

Lorries, buses, carts, disoriented crowds,
jammed, unmoving, rooted,
no one sure where to go,
which way to travel to safety.
Salty water brimming the road on either side,
failed to quench our thirst.
Impatient, sleepless, sunburnt,
our tears of anguish turned
the salty water saltier.

The procession moved on,
self-styled custodians shepherding us.
Scorching sun ruthless,
throats turning dry, water urgent.
Of a sudden rains poured.
Umbrellas turned upside down
to gather this bounty for our throats,
wet clothes sucked dry.
Replenished, the tortoise moved on.
Sundown,
yet the walk continued
through darkness,
into the unknown.

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THE REDEMPTION

Sandunika Hasangani

Kamal leaned his head against the bus window covered with a thick brown curtain. It was almost midnight now and seemingly most of the passengers were sleeping except for the driver and the bus conductor. Someone was sneezing and he heard snoring, the sole sounds that broke the stillness and silence. Indumathi's head was on his left shoulder, so he was careful not to move his left hand. He raised his right hand, gathered the curtain and peered out at the world. The dimmed lights of small houses faded by fast. A dazzling string of neon lights above a row of shops stretched for several minutes indicating they were on the outskirts of Colombo. Deserted streets, shops shuttered. He lifted his face; the moon was rising alone in the sky. The numbing odor of strawberry air freshener mingling with the AC, that was turned up too high, chilled his nostrils. The natural breeze outside would have been better, but the shutters were not supposed to open.

As he glanced at Indu, he felt again that terrible sense of uncertainty about their future; her pleas yesterday flooded his mind.

"Where are you planning we will go now? Are you taking me to your home?"

"No… Indu please… please understand me… how can I take you to my home… you are not a little baby, no?" He was hardly able to control his anger and restlessness.

"Then what are we going to do next?"

"That is what I am thinking about, can't you understand?"

Kamal remembered how Indumathi's eyes had filled quickly with tears at his ruthless, resentful answers, his refusal to name his plan, which he was afraid she would reject outright. He had only told her that his friend Gamunu would help them. He sighed now. He could have treated her better, he could have understood her situation better. She was a girl alone now. Legally they were not married but, after what had happened, they should marry soon.

This shuttered, curtained bus felt like a cage made to trap himself and Indumathi.

"I am like a caged parrot, I can't do as I wish," he murmured and touched the envelope in the upper pocket of his shirt - a letter detailing his new appointment to the Vanni. The war was merciless there, the general public did not know how bad it had become.

He remembered how much his mother had struggled to prevent him joining the army. "Like your father you also take the most stupid, impractical decisions. Why can't you understand that this is a never-ending war? You think you can finish it like eating an ice cream?" He was able to recall her words as if it was yesterday he had heard them.

It was not because of pure patriotism that he joined the army but because he had nothing else to do. His mother tried to force him to sit for the A levels a second time, but he refused. Then she tried to find him a job through her friends and relatives. The pressure on him soon became unbearable.

"It was truly a stupid decision… I could have done a small job in the village." Kamal felt depressed. His only hope was Indumathi and the life inside her womb, but she herself was another restriction. He knew very well that Indumathi was not going to be accepted by his family because of her race. He recalled the marriage proposal Amma had mentioned in one of her recent letters. "I have found a good, well-disciplined girl for you… next time when you come back home we can go and see her. You know, she is from a very respectable Sinhala Buddhist family here." She thought about everything and the word 'respectable' contained them all: caste, race, class, horoscope, properties etc. His mother's approach to marriage was a nightmare to him. "Keep in mind, you are the only son we have, and in things like marriage you can't take irresponsible decisions, like your deciding to join the army."

Indumathi was still sleeping on his left shoulder, calmly. His heart melted, but his head was rumbling. All the options before him presented problems, which was why he had not been able to give her a straight answer about their future. Indumathi desired to marry him soon and stay in Jaffna, but marrying Indumathi and

living a peaceful life in Jaffna was unrealizable. Then there was this new appointment to the Vanni, a deadly appointment that made his life precarious. Then there was his mother. She would not allow him to live peacefully with a Tamil girl in this country. The only remaining option was this running away. He was enveloped by a dismal feeling, as if his hands and legs were tied up by thick thorny rope.

He gathered the curtain again and peered out of the window. The moon was peeping out through the dark patches of trees which faded by quickly. The driver had increased the speed of the bus. He remembered the day he saw Indumathi for the first time in Jaffna. They were in the same boat which was heading towards Nainativu from the Jaffna peninsula. He had watched how she assisted her grandmother to get into the boat. They sat on the front seat, and he was standing across the aisle, able to observe her closely. Her plaited hair was decorated with a string of jasmine flowers. Occasionally she touched her hair and the flowers. He observed how her fingers moved so delicately, he inhaled the smell that emanated from her hair. That smell soothed him. For a soldier like him, who was always under terror and pressure, the healing smell of jasmine was a source of happiness.

They saw each other many times at Nainativu while he was visiting his friends. Finally, after several attempts he was able to find her house. It was a small, old-fashioned house, unrepaired for many years. The yellow walls with patches of peeled off paint and the brown tiled roof had been damaged a lot. The garden had a well-nourished blooming jasmine bush, along with bushes of shoe flowers. Right next to the house there was an army bunker where some of his fellow soldiers worked. He guessed the absence of males in the house and a friend of his, who was stationed at that bunker, confirmed it. His friend warned him that pursuing a Tamil girl who was alone with a feeble grandmother would one day put him and his job in trouble. There was an uncovered well in the compound, from which the soldiers drew water. Though he was not assigned duties at that particular bunker, he visited frequently whenever he was free. He became the unofficial water supplier for the bunker. “Kamal be careful, that old lady will chase you with

the broom!" his friends used to tease.

Kamal sighed leaning his head against the shuttered window of the bus. It was more than a year ago. What a difference! Life had become complex now. He would not have taken such a hasty decision now.

Whenever he had gone to that well, Indumathi, if she was on the verandah or in the garden, would smile lightly at him. He always smiled back, thrilled. Her eyes fascinated him because of their innocence and modesty. For more than three months nothing happened except for the light smiles.

Then, one day he heard a loud cry inside the house, while he was at the well. It was the girl not the old lady. A moment later she appeared at the front door.

"Could you please help me, my grandma is extremely ill, I want someone to take her to the hospital," she cried in Tamil, her cheeks red and wet with tears. She ran back inside the house.

Though he was unable to understand what she had said completely, he could tell that something had happened to her grandmother. He ran to the bunker and returned with another soldier and together they entered into the house. Though it was fairly dark inside, he could see several cracks on the red cement floor. Passing the living room which contained three old patterned armchairs and a small table, they entered a room from which sighs could be heard. The old lady was on the bed, shivering. She was suffering from a severe fever, and seemed unconscious.

He told the girl to get ready to accompany her grandmother to hospital. The other soldier disappeared and returned with a villager who had a tractor. There weren't any army vehicles nearby, therefore it was the most practical option. He accompanied her to the hospital. During the journey she did not talk much except to reveal her name and some general information about herself, but he saw the gratitude in her eyes.

It was after her grandmother's illness that they started to talk. He knew a little bit of Tamil and she could speak Sinhala to a certain extent. In the next two weeks, he often dropped by, ostensibly to

see how the old lady was doing, but Indumathi was not fooled and greeted him with an open happiness that showed she understood he had come to see her. Their meetings became frequent and continued even when her grandmother got better, both of them slowly falling in love with each other. They were careful not to let their emotions show in front of the old woman. The army bunker next door provided the explanation for his frequent presence in their compound.

She soon told him about her past. "Amma died at childbirth, I was just five at that time. I have a slight memory of her face and shape. It was my grandmother who then took care of my brother and me. Anna and Appa disappeared a few months ago. First Anna, and then Appa. Appa's body was found at Punkudutivu, but we still don't know anything about Anna. I don't know who is responsible for Appa's death… I don't know what has happened to my Anna. Maybe he will not come back."

"You smile like my Anna," she said to him after the first time they had made love, leaning her head on his shoulder. Her grandmother had gone to a distant village that day to see a relative and they had taken the opportunity to be together. He was happy when she said this, as it showed just how much she loved and trusted him.

They had reached Colombo finally. He stepped off the bus and assisted Indumathi to get down. After the air-conditioned bus, the sunlight felt harsh even though it was only morning. Pettah was busy with thousands of hurrying men and women.

"Let's find a small restaurant first, to have something for breakfast," Kamal said while taking the traveling bag from Indumathi.

"Okay…" Her voice had reduced to a whisper.

"Are you sick, Indu?"

"No…"

"Then why are you like this? Even your face has gone pale."

Her eyes were swollen as she had cried a lot during the last few days. Some dark wrinkles had appeared under her long beautiful eyes. The red pottu which added an extra light to her eyes had

almost faded. She looked feeble, and walked slowly, nodding at the ground as if she wanted to hide from the whole world. Her long salwar shawl swayed lightly and brushed Kamal's denim trouser. He inhaled the jasmine smell of her hair, which he considered an innate feature of Indumathi.

"I was rude to you yesterday Indu… please forget it. Please, please forgive me."

"It's all right Kamal."

"Please don't misunderstand me… you know the situation well."

"Yes. I am tired now." She grasped Kamal's elbow tightly. He felt the coldness of her palm.

"Let's go and eat something. Everything will be okay soon." He smiled and patted her head gently.

She lifted her face and smiled, and he noticed her wet eyes.

Indumathi looked around at the crowded noisy city, a complete contrast to the eerie silence in Jaffna, except for occasional shelling and bombing. She felt almost as if she didn't exist, the way people's eyes would rest on her indifferently. Holding Kamal's hand tightly she walked along on the narrow pavement, most of it colonized by street vendors. She smelt the putrid odour of garbage and blocked drains and pressed a handkerchief to her nose. Smaller shops were already open and the street vendors shouted loudly, selling film videos, cell phones and travelling bags. Vehicles blared their horns. She heard the famous Hindi song '*Kuch kuch hothahe*' playing in a nearby shop. Men and women were running to catch trains and buses, indifferent to everything around them. Passing vehicles sent up a cloud of dust. A Bo tree was filled with crows, and their unpleasant cries pierced her ears, the pavement under the tree covered with white splotches. She noticed that a policeman was scanning her from top to bottom with sharp, suspicious eyes. "Might be because of the pottu." She touched her forehead and then looked at her hand. It had already faded.

"Pettah has not changed," Kamal thought. The stench of garbage overpowered Indumathi's gentle smell of jasmine. He passed the

heavy travelling bag from one hand to the other as they walked along. Finally, he saw the sign 'Mathara Kade' on the other side of the road. They had reached their destination, the place where his friend Gamunu worked.

They entered the café, which he had visited a few times on his way home for vacation. It too had not changed a lot. The glass windows were decorated with so many colourful advertisements, stickers and posters that customers in the café were barely able to see the road outside. The old cement floor had been overlaid with off-white tiles, but the plastic tables and chairs were the same. He glanced around. Two men with shirts and polished shoes were having a hasty breakfast and a waiter brought two glasses of water and placed them on the table. "What else Sir?" the waiter asked. One shook his head and the other one said "A vadai for me." While sitting down, Kamal glanced around again. He still couldn't see Gamunu. Indumathi was floating in another world, looking outside through the windows with an empty gaze. The ceiling fan above them circled lazily.

Another waiter appeared and Kamal ordered breakfast. He noticed the waiter's suspicious glance, first at Indumathi and then at his travelling bag. Kamal looked at him with knitted brows. He understood the reason for the waiter's unease. Bags were highly worrying objects. His mother in a recent letter had said, 'Putha, this war has removed humanity from us, now we are used to distrusting each other. You know, no one is ready to take my heavy bags when I am standing in the bus, on the way home from school. Even I don't take others' bags. Everyone has been warned to be suspicious that a bag is a bomb. Bus conductors don't allow us to keep our bags on the rack. This evil war has taken over everything.'

How true this was.

"Is Gamunu here today?" Kamal asked the waiter.

"Yes, yes, he is here… do you know him?" His tone became friendly.

"Gamunu? That's the friend you mentioned yesterday?" Indumathi asked slowly. The waiter easily identified her Tamil accent, her broken Sinhala. He looked sharply at Indumathi and

went away.

"Yes, one of my best friends."

"Though you ordered, I can't eat Kamal. I have no hunger at all…"

"But you should, to keep strong."

"Yes, I know… I know that… but… I don't know..." she sighed.

"There is nothing to worry about. Don't be anxious."

"Can Gamunu help us?"

"Let's see."

"It means you are not sure."

"Yes, I am not sure… that is the nature of our lives and-"

"Hmmm, that is the nature… I wish I knew the end."

"Don't be anxious Indu. Please believe me."

"Do you have a plan?"

"I have a plan, and you have to-"

"Believe? Yes, I believe you, that is why I came with you." She nodded again and a few teardrops touched the table.

Indumathi looked at the glass wall again. Lots of advertisements were pasted on it for soft drinks, cakes, noodles, and many other things. She stared at a baby soap advertisement on a far wall. The picture of a pretty baby smiling with his mother relieved her mind for a moment and she touched her belly. Kamal, even though he could be rude and harsh sometimes, loved her. She knew that he did not want to leave her helpless in Jaffna, to desert her. And she loved him a lot too. She gazed at the picture of the baby on the wall again.

Someone increased the sound of the radio which was placed close to the cash counter. Kamal listened to the news broadcast. The newsreader was praising President Chandrika Kumaratunga for her keenness to progress with peace talks. "Peace talks, what a stupid term," he murmured. Two soldiers entered the café at that moment and Kamal became restless and frantic. He was wearing army boots though the upper parts were covered by his denim jeans. He crossed his legs and tried to hide his boots behind

Indumathi's long salwar shawl.

"Are you playing with my shawl?" Indumathi asked with a soothing smile. Kamal closed his eyes. 'There is no sign on my face or body that shows I am a fleeing soldier,' he said to himself. The thought brought him relief. 'Indumathi is smiling after two or three days,' he thought. 'A good sign.' Sometimes, life is easy.

"Kamal, are you dreaming?"

"Yah, *mmm*, actually I am inhaling your jasmine." He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Jasmine, is it? Am I smelling of jasmine? Don't lie just to make me happy." She laughed. "I don't have a string of jasmine in my hair."

"But still I can smell the scent of jasmine… for sure, I am not lying."

"You are dreaming… when will it be possible to wear a string of jasmine again?" She sighed.

The two soldiers had left after a little chat with the mudalali. Soldiers were patrolling everywhere these days, to make sure there were no hidden bombs in crowded places. There had been two bomb blasts recently, one in a bus and the other in a shopping center.

Someone tapped Kamal's left shoulder. He turned to find Gamunu with a big plastic tray full of several dishes of food. He placed it on the table smiling sincerely at Indumathi. Then, he grabbed a chair, sat down and gently invited Indumathi to take breakfast.

He looked at Kamal. "How's life Kamal? What's going on?"

Kamal knew Gamunu's ways. He never came straight to the point. Whenever they met, he reported all the gossip first to Kamal. He had many stories, most of them about their village, Akuressa, because he went to see his parents at least once a month. "You know Kamal, that retired old policeman Karunaratne? The man who complained that we used to empty his mango tree in his back yard? He died last week. I went to his funeral. And can you remember Priyani, who had an affair with Ruwan? Last month she

married a businessman. They spent a lot for the wedding. I think her parents had arranged it. You know, Ruwan was very upset, but who would be ready to marry an unemployed guy like Ruwan, even though he is a really nice guy?"

Gamunu asked about conditions in the North and Kamal explained briefly his new transfer to the Vanni and the current situation there. Both consciously delayed the main topic, the elopement. From time to time, short pauses occurred in their conversation and Kamal tapped the table with his index finger. Finally, Gamunu stood up. "It is too hot today, and this fan is too slow. I'll go and increase it and bring something to drink." He subtly signaled Kamal to follow him.

Kamal returned with a small piece of paper.

"What is this?" Indumathi asked.

"An address."

"Where?"

"Negombo, you don't know that area."

"A place for us to reside?"

"N…no."

"Then, what's the purpose?"

"There, we can find… a boat."

"A boat!" She raised her eyebrows.

"A boat to flee to Italy," he explained lowering his voice.

"Flee to Italy? By boat? Are you mad Kamal? It is dangerous."

"But, most people here are doing that."

She looked at him sharply and Kamal looked outside through the glass wall. His vision was blocked by the stickers on it. The sunlight was harsh outside. She did not say anything. So this had been his plan all along.

"There is no danger." He turned to Indumathi. "Some of Gamunu's friends have done the same. Now they are safe in Italy. They are doing good jobs. We will be fine soon."

"Why can't we stay here Kamal?" she pleaded.

"Think practically Indu. Living here is more dangerous. Do you want them to catch me? Do you want me to go back to that bloody war again and return in a coffin?"

She looked at the ground.

"I know it's not simple. It is not easy. But there is no other practical option. Do you think there will be an end to this war soon? Can we wait until then? Can you wait?"

"Do you think that I am in a good position to handle this journey?" she asked.

"It is because of the baby that I decided to take this path. I want to marry you and I want to have a family."

She nodded again.

"We can marry here soon and after that we can go," he added. "Gamunu will arrange it all."

"Isn't it safe to go to your village?" she asked even though she already knew the answer.

"What makes you think so?" He became furious. "Are you mad Indu? I have already explained. How can I go back to my village and marry you there? They will definitely catch me." His tone became feverish. "Going back to your home or my home is not possible. Why don't you understand this?"

"I don't want you to die, you know it well." She was about to cry.

"This is the best thing we can do… I can't hide myself from the army and live my whole life like a coward. And I can't go back to the war. I don't want to die. I want to live with you. That is why I am doing all these things. Why don't you understand?"

"Maybe, both of us will die on our way to Italy."

A long silence came between them. She began to twist the bangle on her hand. Kamal looked out the windows again. The sun was becoming more severe, ruthless. Most of the pedestrians had hidden themselves under different coloured umbrellas. Pettah had become busier, more people on the roads. Vehicles were stuck in a traffic jam, a never ending chorus of horns.

"Well… if you don't want… I am not forcing you," he finally uttered slowly and thoughtfully.

She was still twisting her bangle. He waited patiently looking at her. Two, three minutes passed.

Suddenly she stood up. "Let's go."

He picked up the travelling bag and followed. They came out of the café. Indumathi looked at Kamal and grasped his elbow tightly. She felt the strength and warmth of his arm.

He turned towards the main bus stand.

Sandunika Hasangani *was born and bred in Colombo and is currently reading for her master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies in Japan. She is more interested in the unspoken psychological byproducts of war than its visible violence. During and after the conflict, soldiers were simply described as 'War Heroes' but their true stories were mostly not spoken about. This story is based on what she has seen and heard about soldiers, specifically their psychological urge to redeem themselves.*

HIS SMILE – A MEMOIR

Ranmini Gunawardena

His handsome young face smiles down at me from the topmost shelf on the wall. The photograph was taken on the day of his engagement to his sweetheart Mali. His perfect white teeth form a beautiful smile, eyes sparkle with joy. With his dark blue striped tie, new blue coat with a pink carnation in the buttonhole – his favourite flower – Priya looks ecstatic.

For the past twenty-four years, he has stood there, smiling, trying to tell me something. And tonight, as I take a break from the papers I am marking, to look at him, to ask, as I so often do, what it is he wants to tell me, I feel overcome as always by nostalgia coupled with despair. Silent tears roll down my cheeks, blotting the question papers before me.

My two brothers are very precious to me now, although I didn't realize it at that time. Priyadarshana, the eldest, was aptly named, as pleasant and attractive as his name denoted. He towered over my mere 5' 2", with his fair skin and sharp features, and well-built torso. He had girls swooning over him. Winning medals and accolades at school, he was a star. Subha, my second brother, two years younger to Priya, was by no means second to him. He excelled in academics and chose the most appropriate profession for himself, a doctor. If my brothers were the North Pole, I was the South Pole, They were the smart handsome ones, I was the ugly duckling. My parents were so proud of the two Adam's apples, as I used to think of them. My brothers often got together and went out to have fun, leaving me to my books – my refuge, my silent friends.

My two brothers frequently got on my nerves. The most annoying times were when I had to wait for my turn to use the washroom. Priya would take an hour. After waiting outside impatiently I would scream, "Come out you hairy baboon…" He would shout, "You sissy, wait!" The name calling would continue, both of us yelling insults until my mother had to intervene to bring peace. I never understood at that age, that my brothers were really

both amiable guys.

We had all been brought up well, thanks to the tireless efforts of our parents, both government servants: my mother a teacher totally committed to her family and profession, my father an admin officer in the Sri Lankan Air Force. It was not easy for them to make ends meet. My father finally went abroad in search of the elusive pot of gold. My mother used to rise early to prepare tasty meals for us, her arthritic hands slowly but steadily cutting the vegetables neatly. I helped her with scraping the coconut, the chore I hated most.

Priya decided to join the Air Force despite my mother's objections. It was the 1980's, the beginning of the bloody separatist war in our country. I doubt if any parent wanted their son or daughter to join the security forces, at that time. It was like signing a death warrant. Priya was adamant. He wanted to achieve his childhood ambition of becoming a pilot. He passed out as a Flying Officer. "A crack pilot," his instructor Captain Winterborne said, "to teach him was like teaching a grandma how to suck eggs."

Soon after graduation Priya became a Flying Instructor and was actively involved on the war front. He meticulously carried out his duties. He was popular, loved and respected by all. He had no airs about him, he mingled with the cooks in the officers' mess, tasting the food and complimenting them. He told his secretary that he would type his own letters because it was easier for him than dictating. Of course she was thrilled! His work was always done on time, efficiently and flawlessly.

Priya used to come home occasionally for a short break. One day when he came home I was having my afternoon siesta. He came and poked me in the ribs. "Hey Girly! How are you doing? How is school?" he asked, being concerned about my welfare as usual. "Aiyo I just went to bed," I said with a groan, waking up from my peaceful slumber. "Hey I brought you chocolates," he said with his cheery smile. "Yum that's nice," I said, no longer drowsy as I reached for the chocolates with cashew nuts – my favourite. "Do you need anything?" he asked kindly. "Mmm…" I thought for a moment. "Well…" I said after a while, "nothing pressing." Priya

laughed at that. I was too sleepy to catch the humour in it.

He took me to the fair on that visit and bought me flowers – pink roses. "Give some to Amma," he said.

When he brought me back home I thanked him, then said, "You went on an unprofitable excursion."

"Why do you say so?" he asked curiously.

"Well, taking your sister out is not a profitable venture," I joked.

He laughed merrily catching the humour in it. "No worries," he smiled.

Priya got engaged to Mali, his sweetheart, in July of 1990. Jim Reeves crooned "Welcome to my world" in the background as Priya slipped the engagement ring on Mali's finger tenderly, his face radiant with love. He had personally selected the music for his engagement party, which was limited to family and close friends. A grand wedding was to take place after Mali finished her studies. Being systematic and organized, he had already drawn the plans for their house; he had so many dreams for the life he envisioned as his future.

Mali knew how fortunate she was. Priya was a good find. Numerous girls pursued him, but he chose her. Their love had blossomed during their school days. They got along very well, like curd and honey, he fair like curd and she dark like honey. Mali was pretty and had a distinguished look about her; she carried herself well, very much a lady. And she was about to graduate from Medical College. She was always kind to me and we got on well like sisters. I used to cycle to her house in Wellawatte and sit in a rocking chair, gossiping and munching the goodies her mother offered me. Mali used to buy my birthday presents because Priya couldn't come for my birthday parties as he was on duty. The last gift I got from both of them was a white silk skirt with small black flower buds printed on it.

Life went by with the violence escalating, more deaths not only on the war front but also in the cities and villages. It was bad news always with the war ravaging relentlessly in the country. Life was arduous for people living in Sri Lanka.

Subha entered Medical College with straight A's. I followed my mother's footsteps, and joined the noble profession of teaching. I didn't receive my letter of appointment as a teacher on time. One morning in January 1990, Amma heard over the news that the letters of appointment for newly recruited teachers would be given at Visakha Vidyalaya, my alma mater. Amma was anxious that I had not got a letter of appointment and she asked Priya, who was on leave at this time, if he could go to the ceremony and see if I had been selected. Being the helpful brother he was, he agreed. When my name was called, acting on impulse, Priya marched onto the stage and took the letter of appointment on my behalf much to the amazement of the audience, as I got to know later from my friends. They had wondered what on earth a good-looking hunk like him was doing taking on a job as a teacher!

Afterwards Priya went shopping with me. "I don't want to wear high heels," I said. "If you insist then let's get that flat ash coloured pair," Priya said agreeing. He bought an ash coloured umbrella to match my shoes. I was all geared up to take up my new appointment as a school teacher. I had found a purpose in my life.

But amidst these positive developments, fate was making plans for my family.

The day, September 13th 1990, was hot and humid - how that date is scorched in my mind. The sun glared down on Amma and me as we returned from school. After I had changed out of my sari, I sat down on the stool in the kitchen and rattled off the events of my day while Amma served out our lunch.

"The Principal caught Nirosha bunking the class during the last period and chilling in the staff room." I chuckled. "You should have seen Madam's face, like a grenade about to explode," I continued describing my best friend's antics. She and I had both joined the school as new recruits in January 1990.

Amma who was ladling out my favourite spicy chicken curry looked at me with great disapproval. "Were you also there gossiping with her? I don't know from where you have picked up such irresponsible behaviour."

"Well er… not from you, definitely," I said, quickly reassuring

her.

My mother was a conscientious and fastidious teacher and she was horrified to hear of teachers cutting classes, particularly her own daughter. Exasperated, she tossed her shoulder-length ponytail. Suddenly she seemed older to me, the silver strands of hair on the sides seemed to be more prominent. I was sad and afraid that I had caused most of them. I had not achieved what her sons had and now I was acting in an improper manner. *Poor Amma, I should be a good teacher like her*, I thought to myself, *I must make her proud of me too.* I also made a firm resolution to help her more in the household chores.

My father Abey was still working overseas and that too was taking a toll on her. He was compelled to do so to make ends meet. He missed his family dearly, yet he was a strong man who had been through a lot of hardships to bring up his three children and look after his wife. He felt his sacrifices were worth it. How happy and proud he was of his three children. He even celebrated his kids' birthdays with his friends, far away from home. He felt that he was blessed to have such a kind and adoring wife and smart children.

We had just finished having our lunch, when suddenly we heard a thundering crash outside. Leaving the dining table hastily, we ran to the French window.

"Oh, they are cutting down the coconut trees!" my mother exclaimed gleefully.

We had won the court case against our neighbours. Eight long years the court case had taken, the mercenary neighbours bribing our lawyers to delay the case, and my two brothers cursing the days they had to waste going to the lawyer. "They are only eating up our money," my second brother Subha would grumble to Amma. "I don't know why you want to pursue this madness."

In the heat of the mid-afternoon a soft cool breeze blew through the window and my mother smiled happily. They were breaking down the wall and cutting down the coconut trees to rebuild the boundary wall as per the court order.

CRASH!

The second coconut tree was felled, both trees in their prime. I went out to have a closer look. I was known for my wild imagination, and looking at the coconut trees, I pictured them as two tall men cut down from their torso. As I stood there, watching the work in progress, I noticed a jeep pull up outside, then begin to wind its way down our driveway. An Air Force jeep. I watched its arrival, feeling something beginning to tighten inside me. It came to a halt with a jerk, and two officers dressed in smart blue Air Force uniforms and black boots got out of the vehicle. I stood transfixed as the officers' boots crunched on the gravel.

Coming back to myself, I called out frantically, "Amma, some Air Force officers have come."

Amma came out adjusting her white housecoat, her fair forehead wrinkled with worry.

"Are you Flying Officer Priyadarshana Gunawardena's mother?" the young officer asked politely going red in the face.

"Yes," my mother replied. "Is everything all right?" she asked anxiously. She knew that an Air Force jeep wasn't the harbinger of good news.

"Well, er… m…Mrs. Gunawardena," the officer stammered, his voice breaking. "I am afraid we have some bad news. There's been an accident… Your son's plane crashed into the Jaffna lagoon, in the morning today…" His voice trailed off as we stared at him speechless, stunned.

Finally, my mother gasped as if she had been choked. I could sense she wanted to scream out loud and cry, but all the grooming and education she had received stopped her from doing so. Her face turned dark and her nose went red, which always happens just before she cries. She asked in a voice controlled with great effort, "So what happened to my son? Is he alright?"

My heart was racing like a deer hunted by a tiger.

"We only know that his plane crashed, he was firing rockets at the enemy, and he flew too low… and his plane crashed," the officer said, trying to be as gentle as he could. "That's all that was

communicated to Headquarters. Don't worry Mrs. Gunawardena, we will get more details of the crash in the evening." He tried to sound reassuring. "We wanted to inform you as soon as we got the news."

Both of us were in a daze. I stood leaning against the wall as if I had been crucified to it.

"We will keep in touch to update you," the officer said apologetically. He could see how upset we were. He nodded at us sympathetically, then turned and got into the jeep, which made its way slowly down our driveway.

Two weeks ago my brother had come home. As usual we'd had an enjoyable time with him around. There was always laughter and happiness wherever Priya was, with his humorous anecdotes. The only time he was serious was on the matter of war. His face becoming grave, he said to us, at one moment during his visit, "We are all suffering, on both sides, this senseless killing must be stopped. Last week, I was given a mission to bomb a location. When I flew over, I noticed white specks. I flew down lower although it was risky, and guess what, they had erred with the location. It was a school, the white specks were school children." Amma and I listened in shock and breathed a sigh of relief when Priya related how he had decided to pull back ignoring orders. What a disaster it would have been if he had not flown low.

Priya before he left, went to Amma's school to say goodbye to her. She had left home early, but not before making breakfast for her beloved son and leaving it on the dining table, along with his clothes washed and folded, and a snack for his journey - not knowing it was the last time she would do any of this for him.

"I will see you in a month's time Amma," Priya had said, his smile showing his perfect pearly teeth. He went down on his knees to get his mother's blessings, a habit he'd had since his young days. "*Theruwan Saranai Putha*," Amma said invoking the blessings of the Noble Triple Gem. This boy was her treasure. "Go safely, and give me a call when you get to Anuradhapura," she added, tenderly stroking his head.

"I have to finish this war Amma. After the war, we have so many

things to do, and must get on with our lives." His voice was full of aspiration. He was fighting this war to bring peace to everyone, to set the country free of this menace which was a curse to all its citizens. Priya had nothing against the Tamils, our family had nothing against them, and we wanted what everyone wanted – to live peacefully.

"I left the cheque book signed," Priya said as an afterthought, just before he walked away. He had the habit of signing his cheque book so that Amma could use his bank account, just in case she was short of cash during the month.

Now as I watched, Amma flopped on the chaise longue sobbing miserably. I thought of the last time I saw my darling brother, how he had dropped me at school on his trail motorbike before he went to Anuradhapura. He literally flew on the road. He was so used to the speed of the airplanes, I thought amused at that time. I would have given him a hug but we were outside the school I worked at, so I didn't. I wished now that I had thrown propriety to the winds and hugged him.

Soon the land phone started ringing. Amma, still on the chaise longue, made no move to get up. I stared at the phone. The wire dangling from the phone was like a coiled snake ready to strike. Finally I mustered up sufficient courage to go to the phone. "Hello!" I said in a weak voice.

"Can I speak to Mrs. Gunawardena?" the voice at the other end asked courteously.

"No, I am s…sorry." I didn't want to say that my mother was crying uncontrollably now. "She…she can't come to the phone right now. Can I take a message? I am her daughter."

"We are calling from the Ratmalana Air Force Base, miss."

"Yes," I said desperately.

"We have sad news for you." The voice was very clinical. "I think you have already been informed your brother's plane crashed into the Jaffna lagoon. I am very sorry, miss, he died. Can you send someone to identify and claim his body?"

I put down the phone, like a thunder clap.

"Aiya is gone," I cried, tears streaming down my face. Amma looked at me dumbfounded.

"Aney, what happened to my loku putha! *Aiyo, mage putha*…" she began to wail.

In my dazed state, I suddenly became aware that I had to inform my brother Subha and my father. I called Sharm, Subha's girlfriend. "Please tell Subha to come home as soon as possible, something terrible has happened," was all I could say.

I was numb and frozen with pain as I called my father, but I couldn't get through to him.

He had heard over the news that there had been a plane crash in northern Sri Lanka. He had felt perturbed, but then dismissed the thought saying, "No, that can't be my son, he is a lucky guy and he is so smart, his plane would never crash… unless it's shot down by those good-for-nothing Tigers."

I finally got through to my father. He was asleep in bed but his flatmate went to wake him. When he came to the phone and said, "Hello," my brain felt frozen, too numb to figure out how to break the news properly. After a silence, I simply said, "Bad news Dada, Priya's plane was shot down, he is no more." I couldn't say anything beyond that.

Only Subha saw our brother's last remains, as he had to identify the body. Priya's face was bloated, his body disfigured. The impact of the crash had shattered his bones into smithereens. The smell of rotting flesh made Subha wince in horror. He decided the rest of us should not see the body in this state. It was better to remember Priya as he used to be, when he was alive.

Flt Lt Priyadarshana Gunawardena's body was brought home in a sealed coffin. He was accorded full military honours. The oil lamp flickered emanating a pale yellow hue, as airmen stood at the four corners of the coffin in honour of their fallen officer who was now just a bloated piece of flesh in the sealed coffin, with his photograph placed on top of it. Seated beside the coffin our hearts burned with grief and despair. Amidst our tears, we accepted condolences lifelessly. Our residence was thronged with myriad

relatives, friends, neighbours, sympathizers, press, politicians – all come to pay their last respects to a hero, who had saved his fellow compatriots and made the supreme sacrifice. Operation Thrivida Balaya had been a success. The Jaffna Fort had been liberated, but at what a cost. Mother Lanka had lost many of her precious sons on both sides.

The sealed coffin of my 24-year-old brother was cremated at the cemetery by the sea, in Mount Lavinia. It was carried in a gun carriage. My father, mother, brother and I walked behind his casket, along with Mali and other relatives. My mother didn't stop sobbing and kept saying through her sobs, "He was supposed to go after me." Mali had an empty look on her face. Time had stopped for her, she had no more tears to cry. One chapter of her life had come to an end

The city stood still, traffic halted for the large funeral procession. When we got to the cemetery, Air Force personnel carried his coffin to the pyre. The last post was played. Twenty-one gun salutes. *BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!*

The golden sun was sinking on the horizon, the waves swish-swashed onto the sandy beach, the salty breeze whistled past as the sea gulls took to flight with a plaintive cry.

"Aiya please don't go," I screamed.

The guns replied *BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!*

The morning after his cremation, my brother Subha and I went to collect Priya's ashes. We were helping the caretaker of the cemetery do so when I noticed something small glinting on the ground. I moved close and picked it up. It was one of Priya's front teeth, white and perfect. "Put it into the pot," Subha said. I held the tooth tightly in my palm, thinking of Priya's wonderful smile. "Girly," Subha ordered gently. With great reluctance, I put the tooth in the pot he was holding out to me. It was the sensible thing to do.

On May 18th 2009, the day the war ended, Mali called me from London, where she now lives and works as a family doctor. "Finally

Priya will be at peace," she said. "His death has been avenged."

I didn't say anything because I was thinking of all the soldiers and security personnel who had sacrificed their lives. The thousands of sisters and brothers on both sides who had lost their loving brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers on both sides who had lost their precious sons, wives who had lost their beloved husbands, husbands who had lost their wives. I thought of the 70,000 who had died as a result of the war. The 300,000 displaced people. I thought of the days and nights of torture and suffering, of fear and terror people had gone through. The fear of being bombed by the terrorists, the fear of being bombed by the Security Forces' planes. *It could have been my brother's plane dropping bombs*, I thought sadly, *he was doing his job but what a curse it was.*

There are no victors in war, only victims.

Now, as I look at his beaming face smiling on the top shelf, the medals and accolades he received for bravery surrounding the photograph, I speak to him: "Amma wouldn't have died the way she did if you were there Aiya, at least not within seven days of stepping on that accursed garden rake and getting tetanus. Perhaps, I would have got married. Perhaps, you would have found me a handsome guy."

I have a vision of him standing beside me, and I feel as if he answers me back. "Move on Girly, life is meant to be enjoyed, too short for regrets, make the most of it, hold the fort." I smile up at him, wiping my tears. Perhaps this is what he has been trying to tell me all these years.

I can hear thunder and lightning strike outside and the rain beat down on the windowpane unmercifully. It's close to midnight, and my papers remain unmarked.

"Will I meet you again?" I ask him sadly.

He doesn't answer me, yet his smile remains.

(Based on true incidents, with a few alterations in names and dates to protect some people's identities)

Ranmini Gunawardena *was born and continues to live in a suburb of Colombo with her family. Her memoir relates the death of her brother Flt Lt Priyadarshana Gunawardena. She currently serves as the Vice Principal of Horizon College International, and firmly affirms that everyone must live harmoniously in the pluralistic society of Sri Lanka, and appreciates the diversity which she feels makes Sri Lanka more beautiful. She decided to share her personal story in an attempt to promote reconciliation and to depict how everyone has to pick up the pieces and move on in amity and peace.*

A PAINTING FOR APPAMMA

Nimalan Thavandiran

When I was a young boy, I had an insatiable hunger for stories, and would often ask Amma and Appa to narrate some to me. I would secretly hope for stories of unexpected dangers and unlikely love, insidious villains and idyllic heroes, epic wars and powerful magic, but of course, was grateful for any story I received.

The stories that Amma and Appa would recount were often connected to their own early days back home in Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as they habitually called it. Amma had a robotic memory coupled with a spirited imagination. She would take factual accounts and weave them into incredibly bizarre tales full of poetic surrealism and curious intrigue. A brief stint as an English teacher during her younger years in Ceylon must have had a lasting effect on her storytelling prowess. Her stories would contain strangely vivid imagery and descriptions that would infiltrate my imagination and warp my reality. In one story, for example, raw ginger roots came to life, grew in size, and engulfed anything or anyone nearby. In another, a dog she had grown up with as a child had the ability to transform into a flying beast at midnight. I would often find myself navigating these make-believe realms, which I would craft in my head and overlay onto the real world.

Appa, on the other hand, liked to tell, and often boasted of the appallingly merciless methods employed by the older generation to teach life skills to the youngsters. His favourite was of his swimming lessons that consisted of being tossed into the local well. The fight to keep afloat, so he said, made him an expert swimmer in no time. Appa's stories of his days as a cargo ship sailor were also quite exciting. He had a large scar on his calf from a rogue sail rope that had unexpectedly swung violently in a storm and caught his leg.

One of the stories Appa told, however, lingered longer than the rest, well into my early adulthood and beyond, because it was the only one that contained elements of magic, unusual for his stories. Much like Amma's stories, it began as a real event, in this case his trip back home to see his mother, my Appamma, when I was about

six, not long after he had immigrated to Canada, a trip that I had only the vaguest memory of him taking.

On the day of his arrival, my father said, he decided he would get a haircut before going to see his mother. He had arrived in Colombo in the afternoon after a long plane ride from Toronto and wanted to look presentable before making the trip to Jaffna to see my Appamma. He hadn't seen her in over ten years. He sometimes called her to talk, and this I do remember because I would be invited to say a few halting words to Appamma in my poor Tamil and listen to her gentle affectionate questions about my progress in school.

The other thing I remember was her letters. She had handwritten over a hundred letters to her son and me over the years – all of them in poetic Tamil – updating us about her life in Jaffna and inquiring about ours in Toronto. Appamma would even take the time to write an individual letter to me. She would start her letter to me the same way each time – 'Anbula Arul,' which Amma would translate as 'My dear Arul' as she read them to me. Although the letter would begin identically each time, hearing Amma say those words never failed to prod at my heart.

Some of my favourite memories were of just listening to Amma read the letters, even ones I had heard before. Understanding Tamil was a mix of recognizing the simple words I had already learned and real-time translation from Amma. While she was reciting the letters, I would imagine Appamma writing as she sat in a wood and rattan chair by the light of an oil lamp. I loved grazing the pads of my fingertips over the fibrous paper of the off-white envelope bordered by slanted red and blue checks. Then there was the pale, blue lined paper within it covered in dark blue ink, that I would bring up to my nose for a deep sniff. The envelope and paper had an unidentifiable but familiar smell, almost like naphthalene used to make mothballs. But it was the overpowering smell of the pungent blue ink Appamma used in her letters that I remember most vividly. It was strong and skunky and sometimes dizzying – likely because of cheap manufacturing. I enjoyed it nevertheless.

On that first day in Colombo, my father, because he was from Jaffna originally and did not know the city well, asked an auto-

rickshaw driver where he might go for a haircut. The driver drove him to the outskirts of Colombo, away from the buildings and city noise, to Diyon, a barber whom the driver claimed was highly skilled.

Appa tipped the driver well, entered the dimly lit shop and stood for a moment trying to get his bearings. "Have a seat. I'll be with you shortly," a gravelly voice said in English with a heavy Sinhala accent.

He peered into the gloomy room and saw a thin, dark-skinned barber, who had emerged from a partially hidden back room. The top two buttons of his soiled shirt were undone, possibly because the buttons themselves had fallen out. He seemed to have just finished his dinner break, as he was chewing while he washed his hands in the sink. A residual smell of incense hovered about the inside of the barbershop, barely masking the aromas of dhal and eggplant curry wafting from the back room. A statuette of a grazing elephant sat on his desk of barber's tools surrounded by offerings of flowers and shiny coins.

This must be Diyon, my father thought as he sat down slowly in one of the chairs in the waiting area.

"Please."

Diyon motioned with his chin to the empty chair while drying off his spindly fingers with a yellowing towel. His face was brightly illuminated as he stood directly under a light bulb. His large gleaming eyes too were yellowing with age. In contrast, his hair was thick and full, and vibrantly black with only rare speckles of grey. His face was small and leathery with creases everywhere and reminded my father of a wooden carving he had seen in a First Nations museum in Toronto. He had a small brass loop earring on one ear. Not a smile as of yet.

"Short or long?"

My father briefly considered the two options as he made his way to the brown beat-up leather chair. The cotton stuffing was fighting its way out the underside of the seat cushion. A few white pieces of it had fallen to the ground and stuck to the clumps of black hair

already lying on the floor, creating balls of grey fuzzy tufts. The seat gave way deeply as Appa sank in.

"Short, please."

There was a painting on the wall to his right that caught my father's eye. It was done in the surrealist style. At first, it was difficult to make out the scene portrayed but, after some time, he deciphered that it seemed to be of a young man walking alone through a forest. Diyon noticed my father intensely studying the painting, but remained silent. As he stepped in front of the chair to prepare his tools, my father scanned him over curiously. Diyon returned the stare emotionlessly and continued to gather his tools. He then stepped around to position himself behind the chair and began to cut my father's hair.

"You are visiting?"

"Yes. From Canada. I'm here to see my mother."

Diyon nodded slightly. Then after a few seconds, "She is ill?"

That caught my father off guard. "Yes… You assumed that. Based on what?"

"Based on the fact that you are here to see her."

Without waiting for an answer, Diyon snipped away at my father's black curls. As his expert scissor-wielding hands buzzed about his head, a faint smell of residual spice wafted from his hands. As his locks of hair fell, my father thought of his Amma teasing him about his unruly long hair as a child. *It will be a nice surprise when I see her tomorrow,* he thought to himself.

"She is ill and her memory is fading. If I don't see her now – I may never get another chance," my father said after a moment. "Many things have prevented me from coming to see her sooner. To raise a family and hold down a job in a new country is not an easy task. In fact, I have had to work two jobs while studying for certification as an accountant, just to make ends meet." After a long silence, Appa spoke up again. "I want to give her a gift of some sort – something that may help her hold onto her memories a while longer."

Diyon continued to trim away without a word.

"I was thinking of buying her a statuette from Jaffna, when I make

the trip up there in two days."

"That won't do," Diyon replied brusquely.

"No?"

"No."

"Any suggestions then?" my father asked, curious at Diyon's certainty.

"Make her a magical painting."

A magical painting? my father thought in surprise. *What on earth is that?* He glanced at Diyon's reflection in the rusting mirror and saw the barber give just the smallest hint of a smile.

"I am not a skilled painter," my father said.

"No matter. The magic will take care of your lack of artistry."

Before my father could reply, Diyon began adjusting the chair, leaning it back in preparation for a shave. He brushed in the shaving cream, the bristles of the brush screeching as they dragged over the stubble of my father's beard.

"Your mother – does she have any stories?"

"Stories?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"About you."

My father thought about this for a moment. "Yes. Many actually."

Diyon gestured for my father to go on.

"One in particular, stands out," my father continued. "It's a story she tells me quite often and in great detail."

Diyon nodded in encouragement and so my father went on. "When I was young, I would line up large stones in the front yard of our house. This was in the early days of the civil war. I was preparing them to throw at Sri Lankan army officers when they came by for their patrols. My mother would watch me and laugh. I could barely lift each stone, let alone throw it over the gate. Her memory is fading now, and so are the details of her stories. Years ago, she would tell me that story in so much detail that it would take her almost 15

minutes to complete it over the telephone. These days, it only takes her one minute at most."

My father was so caught up in that memory that he didn't realize Diyon had finished the shave. The barber gave his face a final wipe with a towel and applied some balm.

My father stood up and reached for his wallet but, by the time he had done so, Diyon had made his way to the back room and was motioning for him to enter. Placing the money on the nearest table, he walked toward the back room which was now lit up with a single bulb hanging from the very cord that powered it. As he stepped through the curtain-draped doorway, a toxic scent rushed to his nose. The room was peppered with newspapers and canvas, but what made his eyes widen were the blobs and swirls of paint splattered about the floor, tables and shelves like scattered rainbows and waterfalls of brilliant colour. There were half-finished paintings lining the walls and spread out on the floors. Many of them were of strange creatures and warped imagery painted in bright colours.

"These are yours?"

Diyon just stared back. "Would you like to make a magical painting?"

Appa wondered again what he meant by magical painting but then, as he looked around, the idea of making a painting for his mother suddenly felt like a good idea. It would be pleasing to take a hand-made gift to his mother tomorrow. Her memory had recently begun to fade and it was getting increasingly difficult to communicate with her. After a moment, my father nodded. Diyon reached for a fresh canvas. Placing it down in a cleared area on the floor, he motioned for my father to sit down.

"Some brushes and paint." Diyon slid over a water jar containing brushes, along with a full set of paint. There were about 10 colours in all. "I would suggest not using the brushes."

"What should I use?"

"Your hands."

My father looked down at his hands closely, imagining them doused in colourful paints. "What am I painting?"

"Your Amma's story. The one you spoke of. The one in which you line up stones."

"Okay…" my father said, still sceptical that he would be able to visually capture the memory, even with the help of all the magic in the world.

Diyon walked over to a shelf on the back wall that had glass bottles in many sizes and colours clustered haphazardly on it. The bottles were stained and dusty so it was difficult to determine what they contained. He thoughtfully scanned over them, and then reached for a pale blue bottle with a clear liquid. After giving it a vigorous shake, he offered it to my father.

"What is this?" Appa asked.

"This is the magic."

Appa took the bottle in his hand, confused. He sat down and began to gingerly open it with his fingertips. The liquid inside was cloudy like very salty water, and when he removed the lid, the sharp stink of the liquid's aroma hit his nose, much like the smell of rotting flesh. He hurriedly closed the lid and placed the bottle on the floor beside him.

"You will be able to paint the entire memory with that one bottle," Diyon said. "But it must be used at the very end, after you have finished your work."

Appa frowned. This was all too strange for him, and he wondered if he should just get up and leave. It suddenly struck him as so strange that he had even agreed to get this far in this peculiar process, to even come into this back room. Nevertheless, he decided to continue because he knew his Amma would find a painting made by her son uplifting. Rolling up his sleeves, he reached for some green paint, dabbed it onto his fingers and hesitantly spread it over the canvas, not quite sure what he was doing.

Diyon left him to his work and returned to the front room.

The memories of his mother's story of him stacking stones began to slowly trickle in as he started to paint. The image he was creating grew more and more muddled, much like his own memories. He closed his eyes trying hard to remember that moment in his life.

There was a dirt road with rocks and pebbles, thick green plants, lush trees surrounding the house, a gnarly wooden fence that was fading from years of sun, a large well in the backyard, the pile of stones, his Amma standing by some of the farm animals tied up by the side of the house near the shed, keeping an eye on him. Yet these images seemed splintered, like a collage of magazine cut-outs. The drenched canvas was now swimming with colour. Diyon's paints were thick and initially maintained their boundaries; they were not easy to shape, mold, and blend. Then, as my father tried to maneuver the colours into the right places, they developed urges of their own as they slipped and slid over each other on the canvas. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't control them.

He did the best he could and finally was done. He sat back to inspect the work and Diyon slipped back into the room, as if he had sensed the painting was complete. He nodded his head and sat down beside my father, at the same time reaching for the magic bottle my father had earlier placed on the floor.

Diyon slowly poured the mysterious liquid all over the painting. My father leaned forward, curious to see this magic liquid do its work. The liquid seeped into the thick paint, like rainwater into parched soil. They sat there for what felt like 15 minutes. Diyon had his hands spread out and hovering over the painting – it seemed like he was willing it to act in some way. Appa had nearly lost patience when he noticed a small bubble form near the top right corner. It was fighting its way up through the paint and in the process was moving the surrounding paint around, causing the colours to blend. Suddenly, bubbles started to emerge all over the canvas. The paint began to run and cross the boundaries between the colours. My father's eyes widened and he drew in his breath sharply. A new painting was forming and, as my father looked on, he realized that it was an exact replica of him lining up stones with his Amma standing by laughing – a clear image rather than the splintered one in his mind.

The movement of the paint gradually stopped. Despite being a painting reliving a memory of the war, it was calmingly beautiful – it brought out a rush of nostalgia in my father. Even in a time of war

and unrest, he had made his mother laugh with his stone stacking.

"It turned out well. Your mother will like this one," Diyon said in his usual calm, neutral way.

My father nodded, too overwhelmed to speak.

Diyon picked up the painting, wrapped it in old newspaper and nodded goodbye as he handed it over to my father. A new customer had come in through the door and was calling out for him in Sinhala. Diyon turned and left. But before he did, he smiled. "Hopefully, your next painting will be of a happier circumstance, in a happier time."

My father's story always ended there. And always I would demand, "What happened next?" I wanted to know the cause of the magic, wanted my father to tell me something fantastic, like he learnt that Diyon was a gnome or a spirit or some such magical creature.

An odd look would come over Appa's face and he would say impatiently, as if the answer was obvious, "I delivered the painting to your Appamma," before he got up and walked away.

Many years later, not long after my father's death, when my mother and I were preparing to go back to Jaffna for a visit, I reminded her of the story. She gave me a curious look and then let out a small sad laugh. "Yes, I remember that story well. I would often listen to it while pretending to be busy in the kitchen." She touched my arm. "Son, the thing is, your father never did go back to see his mother while she was alive. That trip he made when you were six was after her death."

I stared at her in shock. Of course I had ceased for quite a long while to believe in the magical painting, in the same way that I had long stopped believing in my mother's mutant ginger roots and flying dog. I had believed, however, that my father had gone to see his mother.

After I recovered myself, I said to my mother, "Why did he not go back to see her sooner?"

Amma pressed her lips together as if the answer was both obvious and too complicated to describe. My father had already given Diyon

some of his reasons – the two jobs, the lack of holidays, the expense of travel, the raising of a family in a new land. But there were other reasons that I didn't understand until a few weeks later when I was back in Jaffna with my mother, surveying the destroyed landscape in which his house and village had once been. As I stood with my mother on that barren land, in which not a trace of the old world remained, I found myself thinking of that stone stacking incident and how my father, as he told me the story, had said that despite the painting reliving a memory of war, it had been a moment of happiness, him assiduously stacking those stones, while his mother, my Appamma, stood by laughing.

Nimalan Thavandiran *was born in Jaffna in the late 1980s, but soon after emigrated to Canada with his family to escape the escalating war. He was raised in the city of Toronto where he cultivated a love for stories through consuming the endless stream of books gifted from his parents. His connection to Jaffna was kept alive by the stories he would eagerly listen to told by his immediate and extended family, some of which inspired elements of this fictional story. He is currently completing his Ph.D. in Bioengineering at the University of Toronto.*

POEMS

Piumi Wijesundara

SIVA'S TRIDENT

Salty slivers of guilt ridden sea breeze
on the shore where no man walks,
kiss His gold cheeks as He looks ahead
at the panorama of stretched sea. Nobody's sea.
"Allahu Akbar," Kattankudy bellows
"Haro Hara," Arayampathy backlashes.
Here at No Man's land where
Lord Siva stands
in all His glory
trident clenched.

How does one further fence the fence
that fences Muslims from Tamil,
Tamil from Muslims?
How thick a wall should they build
to stop the sound waves
shooting Allah's blessings to Arayampathy
Krishna Gaanam to Kattankudy?
"Ithu endu idam." This is my area,

He hears them say.
"Ithu endu naadu." This is my country,
He hears nobody say.
Lord Siva stands
in all His glory
trident clenched.

A bare chested little boy rushes
to No Man's land by the shore.
Sand in his feet, chest and
hair. Is he Muslim?
Is he Tamil? Is he Sinhala?
Pulls down his shorts, urinates,
by the statue, by the god.
Sacrilege, you say? But wait:
"I pardon you."
Lord Siva smiles
in all His glory
trident clenched.

DOLL HOUSE

You heard, but were you listening,
when a child bride said "My child cries"?
You saw. But were you watching?

When they stealthily passed, snatching
sleeping children to wage their wars
you heard, but were you listening?

When mothers accepted old men wedding
their young daughters, as better of two evils,
you saw, but were you watching?

'Better my daughter a mother than a cadre.
Giving life is better than taking.'
You heard, but were you listening?

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen,
Bloated stomachs on tottering limbs.
You saw, but were you watching?

Now their muffled cries are muffled by cries of their crying
children, doll house dreams shattered.
In your post war glee, are you listening?
In your post war dance, are you watching?

SANCTUARY

Stay inside little one where it won't matter
At all whose tongue dominates,
Nor your esteem shattered by
Cruel whispers about origins.
Tucked inside and cocooned now
Untouched by the war within, the war without
Are you; a war where men barely know
Right from wrong, patriotism from hatred,
You, spawn of this war, untouchable, still untouched.

BUDDHA WATCHES (Haiku)

Buddha shows Meththa
from cobweb strewn STF
camp walls, bullet holed.

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BUTTERFLY KISSES

Ruchini Abayakoon

She holds the shard of broken glass in her left hand. Shaking uncontrollably. Knuckles lifelessly white. Eyes glossy, tears streaming down her cheeks, her own voice dumb.

Rain outside.

It was her habit to remember people according to physical oddities in the shape of their noses, lips, or just their size. His trade mark was that smile. It crinkled his eyes and gave his entire persona a radiant happiness. It made anyone watching him smile too.

It has been so long since she saw that smile.

Inhaling with all her strength, she lowers the shard of glass onto her right wrist. Her mind, that had been her single constant companion through these last lonely years, seems paralyzed now. He once said, "You might cry, but I'll never let those tears hit the ground," but now tears splash the un-tiled floor. A slow smile stretches her thin cheeks. Her haunted eyes are filled after a long time with pleasure, as she watches her life slowly drain away. This is what she deserves.

She recalled the day he was brought home. 10th of July. Wrapped in a light blue flannel cloth, his bright eyes wandered all around the rooms and absorbed the wondrous colours the world had to offer. She peered at him almost afraid to touch the tiny human so much like her dolls but just so much more real. She wondered what he was hiding in his clenched fists and caught herself trying to catch a lock of his soft curls in her own small hand.

Almost immediately she changed her role at home; she went from being "little angel" to "guardian angel". When he turned in his sleep she ran to his side. When he woke up crying she took him expertly from his cot and lulled him back to sleep. Amma used to watch them with a proud smile and easy confidence. They were inseparable. Some days she'd wake up to a sudden wetness on her cheek, followed by a tickling sensation. She'd open one eye to find

him sitting on her chest with his big wide smile. The wetness on her cheek was one of his "kela-ummas" and the tickling a "butterfly kiss" which he gave by gently fluttering his eyelashes against her face. Her annoyance at having been woken up would disappear in an instant when she saw that smile. Her parents often mused about how, in any other circumstance, she would have got furious if woken for no specific reason.

Having a Sinhalese mother and a Tamil father, their language included phrases from both languages. The Tamil generally spoken at school would automatically turn to equally fluent Sinhala when they reached their doorstep.

When he was a little older, their special words became "forever and always". Whenever they argued, whenever their parents yelled at them for one mistake or the other, whenever they heard of yet another death due to the war, whenever they laughed so much that their ribs hurt, they'd whisper these three words like a prayer or spell or affirmation, and everything would be at least a little better. He had picked up the words from a song and she remembers now watching him write them on the top right corner of every birthday card he had ever made her.

On his first day of school, she had woken up even before Amma and hurried to check if his clothes, books, lunch box and everything was ready even though she had gone through them twice the night before. When she had dressed him up and led him to the living room Amma's eyes filled with tears as she hugged him and looked at her saying "My, Swasha, you really are a little guardian angel…" She kissed them both when they worshipped her before leaving, and watched her two treasures walk to school hand in hand. She had no doubt that no matter what happened to her or her husband, her children would look after each other. That was all a distant memory now.

Swasha helped her brother grow up with all the love and patience generally seen in people far older than her. At the beginning, Malli was an easy target for bullies at school. Having grown up with a sister who was his best friend in the "whole wide world", rowdiness was something very foreign to him. The first time he came running

to his sister's class with tears streaming down his face, Swasha was furious. She lifted him up onto her waist and stormed into his classroom demanding to know which little brat had upset her baby brother. After that, no one dared to touch him. But that protection only lasted till the boys grew a little more and started taunting him for not being able to defend himself, but expecting his sister to "take care" of things instead.

When Malli grew tall enough to tower over her, the roles in their relationship turned.

During her final year at school, the war took a turn for the worse in the Eastern Province, where they lived, and the bodies of people who had been shot began to appear all over their little town. The first person they personally knew who was left helpless as a result of the war was their neighbour Premila Nanda. She was about five months pregnant when her husband suddenly disappeared, allegedly killed and dumped in the sea miles away by terrorists. His disappearance left her completely alone and Amma took her under her wing. Amma cooked for her and escorted her to check-ups. When she was taken in for labour, the "family" who stayed outside waiting for good news was an excited Swasha, a curious Malli, Amma and Appa. Anjana, the baby, was like their after school treat. They'd come home, change and go over to Premila Nanda's to play with the baby. They tried to teach him to speak, competing with each other to get him to say "Ayya" or "Akka" as his first word.

During Swasha's final years at school, Amma tried to insist on them staying home until things settled down, but Swasha was intent on her studies and, although Malli would have preferred to stay home rather than learn in school, he went without complaint just to walk her back and forth. Swasha's friends would often say, "There, your bodyguard has come," and tease her when he stood in front of her class waiting for her to pack her stuff so they could leave.

The girls in her class would watch him and exclaim aloud what a pity it was that he was younger than them for he was most definitely "eye candy". By now Malli had become lean and a little angular. His easy but rather rare smiles were full of charisma. While these

remarks made her feel protective of him, a small proud smile almost always slipped onto her face.

Coming home from school one Friday, they heard a gunshot nearby and turned around to see an army officer walking towards them with the barrel pointed at Swasha. With his eyes on Malli the officer said to Swasha, "You are needed for questioning. Get into the vehicle. Who is this?"

Malli didn't even blink as he calmly placed himself between her and the gun. "Let Akka go home, I'll come with you." There was no pleading in his voice. They had heard that adolescents were being taken by the army for questioning in the hope of squeezing out news about the LTTE. They were rarely seen afterwards. She was surprised at how steady and determined Malli was. He had suddenly become a man – the world had stripped him of his childhood.

That day, thanks to their father's influence, he was brought home late at night with no bodily harm. But his eyes looked vacant and it took a few days for him to completely shake off whatever had happened in that army camp.

Since their younger days, their favourite relative was "Uma Punchi", Amma's sister, who was very much younger to her. She'd visit them every year from Mullaitivu, no matter how difficult the war made it to do so. When she visited that year, they were at the dinner table and she had a mischievous grin on her face as she said, "So what is this I hear about Swasha being walked back and forth by a handsome young man? Do tell me Akka, I heard from Mrs. Selvam down the road!"

Appa almost choked on his dinner and both Swasha and Amma burst out laughing. They turned to look at Malli, who was intently watching the news, having not heard a single word. Uma Punchi blushed and grinned as soon as she realized Mrs. Selvam's misunderstanding. "Ohhhhhh I see, he really has changed hasn't he…" she said with a sad smile as she studied his tensed shoulders and rigid pose.

When Uma Punchi left, the two of them stood by the door in

silence, watching the vehicle disappear. They were as close as they could be but something haunted them now. They had learnt recently that his childhood friend had been abducted by the LTTE and found dead four days later in the middle of the market place. People said he had refused to join them. That was why the corpse had its fingernails missing, deep slashes parting the skin at his wrists and multiple times around his neck.

The day after their aunt had left, Malli said to her, "They will come for me too Akka… and… and I'll have to go with them if I ever want to see you again…"

She had guessed his worry from the brooding expression on his face the last few days, but actually hearing him whisper this in a hoarse voice made her let out a sob. He came and put his arms around her, squeezing her shoulders, pulling her into an embrace. She held onto him not wanting to ever let go as the front of his shirt soaked up her tears. She thought she could feel something inside being torn apart and wondered then too, if these scars would ever heal.

When more and more young men started to go missing, Amma pleaded with Appa to leave the country, or at least to leave their town and to go somewhere safer for her children. Appa only said, "It's the same all over the country Neetha, and I am definitely not leaving this country. This is *our* country. We pride ourselves on our multi-cultural harmony. Everything is unstable now, yes, but it *will* be over. And if it's sacrifices that we need to make, we will make them. For the betterment of the country."

Amma begged and begged but her pleas fell on deaf ears. While her patriotism was overshadowed by her protectiveness towards her children, Appa's heart had grown as cold as the faceless bodies lying all over the place like abandoned jigsaw pieces. The endless killings and suffering had made him numb.

One Sunday morning, after a relatively quiet week, the television brought news of how the army had won a few battles with the LTTE and things were going to become a little peaceful again. It finally felt like the old days once more, as all four of them sat down for their customary Sunday breakfast of kiribath, Malli's favourite.

Malli's smile, so very rare lately, was back in place as he sweet-talked Amma into buying him the bike he had been eyeing for years. Amma's adoring eyes didn't leave his face as his tall frame settled around her and whispered secrets like he used to when he was just a child. He said something and Amma threw back her head laughing and caressing his face with her fingers. Swasha watched them and thought that if someone took a photo right at that moment, their family would be the very image of happiness and perfection.

Yet, a few minutes later, a terrifying scream cut through the neighbourhood, a woman sounding like she was being torn limb from limb. She screamed and screamed and a few seconds later there was complete silence. All four of them stood still, unable to move, unable to breathe, helpless at their inability to go and protect a fellow human being.

When they finally felt it was safe to go and see what had happened, they found out that the six-month-old infant a few doors away who smiled and made cute faces when he saw them had been cut to pieces. The mother lay dead at the bottom of his cot, having screamed until they silenced her with a bullet to the forehead. Nobody knew why this had been done, but rumour had it that the woman's husband had betrayed the LTTE in some way.

She remembers now the day Malli was taken. He had barely completed his eighth grade at school.

Their faithful helper had come running to warn them that they were recruiting members. They sent Malli up to the attic and hid him there where all the old gardening equipment and dry rations were stored. When they came banging open the door, they demanded to see Arjun. Appa said, "He isn't here, can't you see?" and took Amma's trembling hand in his.

One man suddenly took hold of Swasha's hair, dragging her towards him.

"Do you know what we will do with her if you don't hand him over?" he said jerking her head back. "We'll make her suffer…and we'll make you watch."

Amma was weeping like a mad woman and Appa's eyes were cold with shock. "Kill me first then… If you're going to take my children, kill me first," he said walking towards them, all signs of life abandoning his eyes. Swasha screamed and begged him to go back and let them take her, but he walked straight up to the leader until their faces were nearly touching. "Take me, leave my children. Take me and do whatever you wish to do with me."

They laughed and the leader pushed him onto the floor saying, "We don't need old men who are already withering away. We need young blood and, unless we get it, we will rape your daughter and kill her slowly."

"Stop. Just stop. You want me, fine, take me. Let her go." Malli strode into the room, his head held high. His eyes were shining and his fingers were clenched into fists, but it was only Swasha who noticed his thumb unconsciously grazing the twig ring that she had made him for his twelfth birthday. He didn't look at her, but knelt down and raised their father.

"Malli please…"she whispered.

His last look at her before he left was broken, as if he knew he was already shattered and would have no way of bringing himself together ever again. Those lively happy eyes were empty. In the back of her mind a voice whispered *dead.*

The glass pressed against her skin as the trembling of her left hand increased like the beating drum of a wound up toy monkey.

The first time they heard from him was when they got a letter eight months later, addressed to "Amma".

> *Dear Amma,*
>
> *I am fine. Please don't worry about me. I cannot disclose any details but I need you to know that I am not staying here unwillingly. Although I left thinking it was the end, now I understand what these people fight for. They fight for US. They fight for our rights. I WANT to help them and I want you to be proud of me. I cannot write any more. I will always love you.*
>
> *Your son*

She remembers the pain in Amma's eyes, the fury in Appa's words as he spat out that he was disowning his son. "I didn't bring up a child to watch him bow down to terrorists who once threatened to rape and murder his own sister! I didn't bring him up to become a traitor to our nation! He is not my son anymore!"

She remembers watching the effect of those words on Amma, how her sobs ran dry and all life in her eyes evaporated, replaced with a coldness and numbness similar to the one that enveloped her, too.

She didn't understand how family could be disowned. How can you disown your own blood? Despite the weight of Malli's writing and the feeling of betrayal, all she could remember was how he'd cling to her when it was thundering outside, how those large eyes would search her face for answers for every little thing that fascinated his tiny mind, how his soft fingers curled around her own as he fell asleep in her embrace. She remembered how later he would go all protective when any boy tried to approach her, how he had grown up to become *her* guardian angel.

About a year after the letter, he came to visit. By then Appa had already passed away from a heart attack. Amma was like a walking corpse. He stood there in the doorway with his hand proudly strung around a rifle and his head held high. He didn't even blink when they mentioned Appa's death. He accepted the tea with a practiced, efficient smile. She waited and waited for his eyes to crinkle around the corners with his old mirth, but they didn't.

His movements were so strong and precise, but somehow they didn't seem genuine. His declarations were uttered in an adopted grave tone, his voice deeper now. He used big words - "insurgency", "policy of standardization", "racial segregation" - but she doubted he actually knew their meaning. She held her breath, waiting for him to give one last "kela umma" or squeeze her shoulders. She kept trying to catch his eye, hoping to see at least a piece of the Malli she had watched growing up, but his eyes never met hers. Her pain finally broke through when he was about to leave. She collapsed onto the tiled floor in a heap of tears and sobs. He looked down at her

from behind unfathomable eyes. "Don't cry, Akka," he whispered, not unkindly. Then he turned around and left.

The next visit was nearly two years later. His face had become more angular, he looked taller, stronger, colder. With a tinge of pride he said, "I've been promoted. Now I can come visit more often."

He said the words into the air in front of him, looking neither at Swasha in her torn apron, nor at their mother sitting quietly in a chair, a bag of bones wrapped in thin skin.

"Why do you even bother visiting us, Malli? What do you gain through these meaningless visits?" she finally blurted out with anger and disgust. "Is it just to hurt Amma more? Can't you see that your visits are only going to make her weaker?"

"My name is Arjun." He held her gaze. They watched each other, him unreadable but her eyes softening more and more with each passing moment. Then he got up abruptly and left without another word. She watched him walk away. *My name is Arjun*. He had disowned her just like their father had disowned him. She no longer possessed the right to call him "Malli".

Her hand finally steady, she presses the glass against her wrist and watches the skin tear open, hot red blood hissing and snaking its way down to her elbow. She drives the glass in harder and the rivulets snake down faster, reaching the un-tiled floor in tiny splashes. Relief.

When the army came and questioned them about him, she and Amma both gave in and told them all they knew. They were betraying their own blood, but Appa's dying command was to make them promise they would never choose blood above nation. They knew he was right, but the pain and feeling of betrayal was overwhelming. In a matter of months, Amma also passed away, having anyway been dead inside for years.

Amma's death left Swasha completely on her own. Her father's pension money still came in but living alone in a town torn apart by bombs and gunshots with no one to turn to, nowhere to go to, was a penalty too extreme for her to bear. Her neighbours no longer helped her with anything. She was the sister of a murderer.

Whenever she went out of the house, their words cut into her and she started to leave the house only when it was necessary to go out and bring supplies. Luckily their helper remained with her but he too was subjected to accusations for not abandoning her and letting her die the way the sister of a murderer "deserved" to die.

The army fought for piece after piece of the Eastern Province, once ruled almost completely by the LTTE. The streets of her town were painted with blood, both sides on a killing spree. The number of corpses increased. There was seldom a night when the town's people slept peacefully all the way through, the distant bombs and mortar fire constantly waking them and fraying their nerves. Struggling for new members the LTTE grew fiercer than ever before.

One day, Swasha was at the market when she heard his voice and spun around to see him and a bunch of his comrades trying to drag a fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy into their jeep. The boy's little sister was crying, grabbing his foot. Arjun slapped her off his foot and, in a deadly voice, asked the boy to get into the van without making a fuss. But the boy was stubborn and he was upset that they had slapped his sister. He bent down to pick her up.

"I said, leave her behind and get into the goddamn jeep!" Arjun's voice silenced the entire market.

The boy pretended not to have heard him and touched his sister's crying face. Arjun stepped back and fired. A bullet pierced the boy's right knee and he screamed in pain. The little girl wailed. Swasha stared at Arjun in shock, his gun aimed at a boy around the same age he was when they took him away. "Malli, no!" She rushed to stand in front of the boy.

"Move," Arjun cried.

"What are you going to do? Kill me like you killed Amma and Appa? Kill me the way you slaughter hundreds of innocent people every day?" Tears were streaming down her face. She bent and picked up the little girl. "Leave. Now."

Arjun watched her for a moment longer, then abruptly turned away. Swasha was bending towards the boy's leg to inspect it when a bullet shot past her, nearly grazing her face. With deadly precision

it sank into the wounded boy's chest.

"I don't leave my work half done," he said, then turned and left. He had actually *smiled* when he said that.

As she watched him walk away, she remembered that she had once wondered how her father could so easily hate his son. Now she understood. This was not her Malli. It was a cold-blooded murderer in his guise. This was not the little boy she had led to school or whispered songs to. It wasn't the boy who had painted her cards and made her little gifts. A stranger had killed her brother but hung onto his dead body to use it as a shield, like those perethayas that inhabited corpses.

Their last meeting was a few days after he would have turned 19.

At the sound of a commotion outside the house she came running and there he was.

Their neighbour's son, Anjana, barely twelve years, was on his knees begging for mercy, begging to be forgiven for a crime he had no part in committing. "Please *aiye*, please, if I leave my mother will be alone. Your people already took my father, please don't let me abandon her too."

She saw a small flash of recognition cut across Arjun's features as he recognized Premila Nanda's son, the little boy they had loved as a baby, the boy that Arjun had taught to play cricket in their backyard.

Aunty Premila, hearing the commotion had come running out too and she began to wail now, pleading with Arjun and the men who had come with him. "Please son, you were the one who helped me give this boy life! You remember him don't you? You and your Akki both came to the hospital to bring him home…" She was hiccupping and her hands were clasped together like she was worshipping him.

"I don't have time for nonsense," he replied coldly, his features settling into a hardness. "We need people right now." He addressed the boy. "If you aren't willing to join us, then you won't live to see what happens to those who don't give in." The boy continued to stay on his knees looking at him pleadingly. Arjun sighed as if a part of him hated what he must do next. He stepped back, swung his arm swiftly and hit the boy's head with the back of his gun.

Aunty Premila screamed and rushed forward as Anjana's neck tilted sideways with a sickening crunch. Falling to her knees, she held onto him. "Son, son." She kept shaking him, willing him to open his eyes. Her sobs and pleas filled the neighbourhood as she stroked his thin limbs draped on the ground like chopped vines.

Arjun's eyes lit up in a smile as he watched that mother weep the kind of grief that mothers should never be forced to feel. Somewhere in a corner of that smile, Swasha could see her little brother.

All the anger, pain, hatred and loneliness bundled up inside of her, filled her now with a sudden rash madness, a desire to free that brother trapped inside this man. She rushed back into the house and came out holding Appa's gun. She pointed it at him. He staggered in surprise. Then, not taking his eyes off her, he slowly but expertly lifted his own gun and pointed it at her chest. His gaze was hauntingly unfathomable.

She focused all her confusion and unbearable hurt into that trigger and shut her eyes. For an instant, all that love rushed back in. She saw him as a child, saw him say his first word "Akka", and stretch his hands from the cot. She saw him taking his first steps towards her, she saw him struggling with his "butterfly kisses", she saw him racing her home from school.

She pulled the trigger, her hands jerking back for the power of the gun as it fired.

She waited for pain to shoot through her, for she knew he never missed. But then after a moment, the truth dawned on her and her eyes flew open in shock. By luck or a curse, the first bullet she had ever shot had reached its target.

She didn't recall getting to his side but she was there and, as his life drained away, she saw the corners of his eyes wrinkle into that smile; she saw in his eyes the three words that no one else had ever said to her. *Forever and Always.* Her sobs could have shaken the world apart.

Both wrists now split open and spurting blood, the jagged glass hits the ground with a clutter. She sinks to the ground, waiting for the engulfing darkness.

Ruchini Abayakoon *was born in Sri Lanka and, having spent her early childhood in Canada, settled down in the Hill Country area of her motherland. She is currently getting ready to enter the University where she hopes to major in English Literature. She believes that war is never the answer, and that the connection between siblings will never truly evaporate. Though she didn't experience the war directly, she has seen the suffering the country underwent. The inspiration for her story came from what she saw and heard when visiting the Eastern Province of the island during* Write to Reconcile.

THE SAVIOUR

Wazna Wazeer

Ramalingam walked quickly out of the airport and onto the street. He needed to leave the area as fast as possible.

He thanked God for allowing him to complete his mission. He mopped his forehead with a yellowed handkerchief. He was perspiring freely and hoped no one would notice. He was almost at the bus stand when he heard a cry. It sounded like a baby. Close. He turned to look in the direction the sound came from but couldn't see anything. Only stray dogs and cats huddling around a garbage bin. The cry grew even more violent. With a quick glance at the airport in the distance, he walked rapidly to the bin and peered inside. A baby wrapped in a blanket lay among the refuse, its face reddened like a beetroot from wailing. He reached in and took the child in his arms. Then he stood staring at it, not knowing what he should do, wishing he hadn't picked it up, but just walked on. He couldn't remain here a second longer, nor could he leave the baby alone. He was helpless. Fearing that people might notice him standing there indecisively, he began to walk away with the baby. What was he to do now? As he walked briskly along, he recalled seeing an orphanage on his way to the airport.

He could see an empty three-wheeler approaching. When it came closer, he shoved out his hand and gestured for it to stop. He told the driver where to take him. With a shrug, the driver set off. Ramalingam sat back in his seat and looked down at the baby. It was sound asleep in his arms. He felt a tenderness welling up in him, but quickly suppressed it. This was certainly not the time to be sentimental. Yet fear and confusion kept coming over him in grim cold waves. When the three-wheeler reached the orphanage, Ramalingam got down and paid the driver, avoiding his curious look. He hurried up the front path and rang the bell.

A man opened the door, a woman hovering behind him. With a quick unsurprised glance at Ramalingam and the baby, they invited him in. They wanted him to sit and have a cup of tea, but Ramalingam shook his head without saying a word, gesturing to the baby. Once the man had taken the child, Ramalingam started

towards the door. But before he could protest, the woman had thrust the baby into his arms and taken a photograph.

Later, when Ramalingam was on the bus, riding away, he felt his heart grow heavy at the thought of the baby he had left behind. A tired resignation took hold of him as he considered his own fate.

The fragrance of mango blossom on the tall trees at the University of Peradeniya mixed with the smell of damp grass. The fine raindrops touched the araliya leaves with a cracking sound. The beautiful hill country was bathed in muted sunshine and a cool breeze blew. Students hurried up and down the stairs with stacks of books, chatting, laughing and giggling with each other. The girls' skirts rustled like dry leaves, as did the dog-eared assignments in their hands.

Once Wanitha and Nalaka had left their fellow students behind, they strolled down the path that led to a bench they considered theirs, a private spot where they always went to sit and talk to each other.

Wanitha was a third year student in the Faculty of Arts. Nalaka was a medical student also in his third year. Their friends told them they were made for each other. Wanitha was pencil-slim, fair in complexion, very tall with a pair of lollipop eyes. Every time she lowered her eyes Nalaka would be lost in her long lashes. Her cheekbones were pronounced, her lips full and she had hair that he referred to as a 'cascade of black water'. She was also an avid reader and very artistic and seemed clothed in literature to him. Sometimes they fought and argued, but one thing they had in common was that they were crazy about each other.

Nalaka was very tall and dark-skinned with a handsome, open face on which he maintained a carefully trimmed week of stubble, as was fashionable. He had the most important virtue that a doctor needed to possess: a kind heart.

Wanitha was well aware of Nalaka's origins as he had related everything to her once their relationship began.

"I don't know who my parents are," he had confessed, "as I was raised in an orphanage." He had told her that he wished he could meet them and he often wondered what made them leave him. "Parents are the pillars of a child's life," he told Wanitha. "One of the worst things to experience is having no parents. Wani, don't you think it's better to have dead parents than no parents at all? You are lucky Wani. Despite losing your father when you were 15, you have your mother's care and love."

Wanitha had no words to comfort him that would make up for his loss. All she could do was hold Nalaka's hand tight, clasping his fingers in hers.

Nalaka also told Wanitha that he had been handed over to the orphanage by a man who gave his name as Ramalingam. He had come to doubt that Ramalingam was his father. If he was, then why did he leave him? Had he really been such a burden to him? And who was his mother? The man and woman who ran the orphanage had given Nalaka a photo of himself with this man. He carried the photograph everywhere with him and had shown it several times to Wani. "He must be somewhere, alive. My mind says so," he would say wistfully, over and over again.

"Don't worry Nala. God is with you. And I am with you. Life has its ups and downs. Its own complications. We are destined to move along, our heads held high," Wanitha would often say to Nalaka when he became sad about this lack in his life. She would remind him of how good the orphanage had been to him, how the teachers there had molded him into a good student. Nalaka, because of his intelligence, had been the favourite of his teachers. They were jubilant when he passed his exams with distinctions and got a place in medical college.

Wanitha stood behind Nalaka like a rock. To soothe him when he was sad, she taught him Shakespeare, Keats, Shelly, Wordsworth and Frost. And, in return, Nalaka teased her about all the surgical terms she didn't know. Wanitha would twist his ear until it turned red to punish him for this teasing. Their life within the university went on unchanged. The university was their haven, while outside, Sri Lanka roiled in the horrors of war.

The afternoon silence gave way to the sounds of a northern evening: trees rustled in the breeze that came up from the Jaffna lagoon, crickets sang and birds began to return to their nests for the night, kovil bells rang everywhere. The Jaffna Base Hospital towered in the dwindling twilight. Nalaka was at the hospital doing part of his internship. For him Jaffna was a completely foreign place. To start with, the people here did not, for the most part, speak Sinhala. Yet, despite this language barrier, his Tamil colleagues and other staff members tried to bridge the gap, helping him out as much as they could. It saddened him to see the state of Jaffna, with its underdeveloped infrastructure.

Wounded soldiers were brought in every now and then to the hospital, blood gushing out of their shattered flesh that was sullied with hot sand. He treated them with care and concern. Caste, creed and ethnicity did not matter to him. To him they were all human beings. All of them Sri Lankans.

Unlike in Kandy, the shops closed early due to security issues. There were certain villages that couldn't be accessed, as they were in areas under the LTTE. People who needed to go there had to obtain special passes from LTTE officials. At night, Nalaka would be awakened by shell blasts. And if the blasts were close, he and his fellow internees would gather in common areas and go into the basement together.

Though Wanitha had been unhappy about him working in a war-torn area, Nalaka was firm in his decision to contribute in this way to the war effort. There were wounded Sri Lankan soldiers in beds, sometimes crammed two to a bed, some on mats on the floor. Nalaka went from patient to patient, surveying their records and prescribing medicine. His words soothed them and patients loved him because his presence lit up their hearts.

One afternoon, he was doing his rounds when his phone beeped. "Nalaka," Dr. Nimal said, "you are wanted immediately owing to an emergency. The vehicle is on its way. Please attend to the patient in it promptly."

The patient was a man of about 55. Dark, thin, with hollow cheeks and a mole beside his right eye, a pottu on his forehead. His leg had been severely injured and he was delirious with pain. As Nalaka examined him and gave orders to the nurses and attendants, he felt some odd sense stirring within him. It was as if he knew the man from somewhere. He shook his head. This must be somebody else, he muttered to himself. Yet his eyes were drawn again to the mole beside the right eye and he felt a tightness growing in his chest.

That day when Nalaka returned to his quarters, he took out the photograph and looked at the man Ramalingam, the mole under his eye. He telephoned Wanitha. Once she had heard him out, she said, "Nalaka, you have to show the photograph to him. It is the only way to know."

The next morning, Nalaka arrived at the Jaffna Base Hospital and began his duties. He checked up on his patients and made sure that the appropriate medicines were being distributed by the nurses. Once he had finished all his work, Nalaka made his way to the other ward, where the man he had treated yesterday was kept. The man was doing better. His wounds had been freshly dressed again this morning and he had been given painkillers. Nalaka, once he had checked his chart, came to stand over him, looking down gravely at the man. Then he took the picture out of his breast pocket and silently held it out to him, his hand shaking.

The man took a close look at the photograph. Nalaka's heart thudded as he watched him. A look of astonishment and wonder came over the man's face. He raised his eyes to Nalaka, studying him.

"Are you…?"

The man nodded.

After they had both got over the shock, Nalaka pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. "I wanted to meet you so much," he said gently, taking Ramalingam's hand. "I can't believe God has made this happen." Ramalingam smiled at him to show he was happy too.

Over the next few days, Ramalingam, rather than getting better, began to decline. The doctors could not control the pus that

flowed from his injured leg. Finally there was no choice left but amputation. Nalaka told his colleagues that he would like to break the news to Ramalingam. They agreed, because by now the story of this amazing coincidence had spread among the hospital staff.

When Nalaka told him the bad news, Ramalingam shook his head. "I'm afraid I'll lose my life, son," he begged.

"No uncle, there's nothing to worry about. Amputation will not be a risk to your life. It's the only way, otherwise in time the infection will spread to the rest of your body."

After much persuasion, Ramalingam grudgingly gave his consent, his eyes sad and defeated.

In the days after his amputation, Ramalingam's face was haggard. Nalaka got him a wheelchair and, as Ramalingam improved, Nalaka, in his free time, would take him to the canteen where they talked, telling each other about their lives. Ramalingam, explaining why he had joined the movement, said, "I believe in our cause, that we should be free and independent. Despite losing a leg, I am very happy to have fought for my people, to have shed blood for my race."

It was hard for Nalaka to hear this having been brought up as a Sinhalese, hard to accept that the man who had saved him also despised his race and did not want not to live with them in a united country. But he put his feelings aside and devoted himself to looking after this man who had been his saviour. "Thank you, uncle," Nalaka would often say. "I have run out of words to thank you. I don't know how to repay my debt to you."

He knew his residency was coming to an end soon and he began to devise a plan to take Ramalingam with him to Kandy when he left. Back to safety and away from this war.

Ramalingam only smiled when Nalaka told him of this plan and, in the next few days, Nalaka saw that Ramalingam had started to become depressed. When he questioned him, Ramalingam told him that his depression was over what his future held as a captured cadre. Nalaka had no real words of comfort as he could not deny the truth. He too knew what future awaited Ramalingam: prison and who knew what suffering within the prison. He had heard the stories of torture, and it was unbearable to think this might happen

to a man he had come to love. Ramalingam began to eat less and less food. However much Nalaka tried to persuade him to finish his meals, Ramalingam would not. He just shrugged and smiled.

The monsoon rains started early one morning. Water filled the drains, overflowing onto the roads on either side of Nalaka's quarters. The wind kept bringing birds' nests down from the treetops, leaves lay everywhere, torn and muddy. Nalaka held an umbrella above him as he ran to the hostel canteen. He bought a packet of rice for his breakfast, sat at a canteen table and started eating.

Once he was done, he took out his phone to perform his usual task of calling Ramalingam to say good morning. The phone rang many times and then a recording came on to say it was switched off. Nalaka thought the battery might have died. He would go across to the hospital and see Ramalingam.

He passed through the gloomy corridors that led to Ramalingam's ward. Some patients lay asleep on mats in the corridor, covered with thick sheets. Others lined up for the toilet. When he reached the ward, he saw that Ramalingam's bed was empty. "He has not returned from the toilet yet," Nalaka thought and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. Yet after some time, when there was still no sign of him, Nalaka inquired from the patient on the next bed. The man told him that Ramalingam sometimes went to pray to Lord Shiva. Nalaka went to the shrine room and saw a man in a wheelchair, his hands clasped above his head. But when he drew closer he saw it was not Ramalingam.

Confusion and fear began to ripple through Nalaka. After he had looked everywhere and still couldn't find him, Nalaka knew that he must do as his duty demanded. He went to inform the hospital authorities regarding the missing patient. A thorough search operation was launched for Ramalingam. The police and the Special Task Force were brought in but they too could find no trace of him. Listening to them, Nalaka came to know of their future plans for Ramalingam. Once Ramalingam was well enough, he was going to be taken in for questioning as a suspect in the bomb at the Bandaranaike International Airport, killing many people. For the first time, listening to them, Nalaka was forced to confront

what his saviour had done, something he had avoided thinking of so far. In the days that followed Nalaka became depressed. He missed the man he realized he had begun to think of as his father. And he continued to think of him in this way, despite what he had done.

The rainy season passed and, sooner than he knew it, his internship came to an end and Nalaka prepared to leave Jaffna. He was given the certificate that would allow him to work as a doctor. When he received it, he silently pressed the certificate to his heart and thanked his saviour for the life he had given him.

A few days later he left Jaffna, looking forward to that moment when he would get off the bus in Kandy and fall into Wanitha's soothing embrace.

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EVERYONE HAD THEIR EYES TRAINED ON ME

Michelle Handy

I feel everyone's eyes trained on me, waiting for the show to begin, for the streams to meander down my face as I mourn the loss of my 'mother'. I don't know how the priest and the funeral home tracked me down, I thought I had covered up my tracks very well. But with the war over, many more channels are open for finding someone these days, particularly someone alive. "That's her eldest daughter you know," the people around me whisper. "Well, actually her stepdaughter. But she loved her like her own, she even called her Amma." They murmur these things amongst themselves as I look down into my stepmother's face, pale, powdered, painted and preserved so the mourners can say their final goodbyes.

I take a few steps back. My makeup is still in place, un-smudged and so it will remain. As I move back the priest comes forward and speaks of the woman lying before us, extolling her many virtues, while I idly wonder where priests who lie go, once they have been laid to rest. Finally he says, "Let us pray. Let us pray for her soul and for the life she lived." As I bow my head in the universally accepted show of prayer the irony of the moment is not lost on me. I am remembering the many times that I prayed as a little girl for this very day.

Remembering those futile prayers, I am right back at the place that I had hoped never to revisit and have strived so hard to forget; back home in that L-shaped house with the verandah that went round the bungalow, the paint peeling off the walls, chickens scratching in the backyard, the surrounding palmyrah fence with gaps along the bottom. I remember how, as a child, I would go down on my haunches beside these gaps and count legs as the herds of cattle were driven by. Remembering the house makes me angry. The home that I once had there is now only a house to me, the warm security it gave me gone with Amma's death.

Every night out on the verandah Amma would sit me in front

of her on the floor while she sat on a chair, hairbrush in hand. She would then gently tug my head towards her and run the brush through my hair. "A hundred strokes a day Shanthi, that's how to keep your hair pretty, kutti." Her nimble fingers would feel through my hair untangling knots, the same way she untangled the knots of life. She had a magical way of making everything seem okay. Whenever a friend suddenly disappeared from school, Amma knew just the right thing to say to convince me that my friend would be back again. As Amma and I sat like this talking about the day and what I'd studied at school, I would try to comprehend how studying my times tables was going to help me in this world we lived in.

As Amma and I chatted, Appa would also come and sit on the verandah. He would listen to our mindless chatter, occasionally chiming in, "So tell Appa also what you studied today in school," then telling us about his day in the field. When the talk finally petered out we would all sit in the semi-darkness, just us, just sitting, everything that was the world beyond our fence, shut out.

Soon it was time to go in, to close and lock the door and windows, putting our faith in those flimsy metal bolts to keep our house safe from the bullets that flew in the night, which Amma assured me were just crackers heralding yet another celebratory festive day.

Sometimes Amma and Appa would stay up talking into the night. Now I realize that they were probably just praying and hoping that we all lived through the next few hours. Hearing them talk, I used to run out of my room to join them. Amma's stern face would greet me as I emerged. She would chide me to go back to bed. Appa would laugh, take me into his big arms, balance me on his tummy and carry me to bed.

One night I overheard their whispered conversations, because they had raised their voices in their anxiety. "I think we should take Shanthi out of school Appa, it's getting dangerous," Amma whispered.

"It's better she go to school," Appa replied. "Let her enjoy whatever little childhood that she can. We'll protect her, I'll walk with her to school in the mornings."

Our daily routine was simple, but I loved every moment of it. Amma somehow managed to drive the war away, made it seem so far away. When the 'crackers' became frequent, I would spend the night in Amma's arms, surrounded by her smell of spices, wood smoke from the kitchen, the coconut oil in her hair, and a smell that was just her.

I was 12 when Amma died. She went to town for market day and never came back, as a bomb went off in the bustling market place. I remember waiting for Amma to come back wondering why she was taking so long. Then Appa came home early from work, took me in his arms and said, "Amma isn't coming back from the market, Shanthi." He began to weep as I sat there not comprehending what had happened, waiting for Amma to come back and make everything alright.

A year later, Appa came home one day, looked at me gravely and said that things were going to change. He was getting married; I needed a new 'Amma'.

"No," I screamed, "Amma is coming back, I don't need a new Amma, I have one already! You can't get married again Appa, what will Amma think?"

He only looked at me with sad eyes and sighed. "Amma is never coming back from the market, kunju. I am marrying Rani and you will have a new Amma." With one final look at me he turned and went into his room, leaving me with the overwhelming news that once more within the span of a year my life was going to change.

All I remember of the day itself is the dress I wore to the wedding, a red dress with white dots. And just like that I had a new mother.

After the wedding she came home with us, to my Amma's house. Imposter. I remember how she went down on her haunches in front of me and said, "You can call me Amma, I'm your Amma now." As she stayed there on her haunches, our eyes level, I noticed her smooth skin, no wrinkles. She looked more like an akka than an amma. Looking into her eyes, I saw what I now realise was fear of the unknown new life she had to adapt herself to. But at the time I was too blind to see this, hating her for trying to replace my Amma.

After she had been with us a few days, I was outside playing in the garden governing over my subjects - sticks, stones and flowers - when she came up to me and said, "Shanthi, could you sweep the house kutti?" I grudgingly obliged because she added, "Young girls who want to be ladies someday must learn to do these things." And so I learnt, and did what she said. Yet I pulled away from her attempts to reach out to me. "Shall I comb your hair for you Shanthi?" would be met with a hostile, "I can do it myself." She would go out to the verandah every evening and sit down on a chair, hairbrush in hand, hoping that I would come and sit between her knees. She waited each evening in vain. Eventually she stopped trying to reach out.

Yet strangely in those rare moments when I reached out to her, she would push me away. The first time the 'crackers' started again, I rushed to my parents' room and leapt into her arms as I used to do before with Amma, feeling glad for the first time that I had a new Amma to hold me through the night. But she cried out, "What are you trying to do? Go back to your own room Shanthi. You're too old for this nonsense," and pushed me away.

"Amma I'm scared, can I please sleep here only for tonight please?" I begged.

"No Shanthi, be a good girl and go sleep in your own room, these things are normal, it will go away soon."

I realised that I no longer had someone who would hold me in her arms and spin me a web of stories convincing me that the bombs were merely crackers; that I should get used to this because the 'crackers' weren't going to stop anytime soon.

On the day I turned 14 my stepmother sat me down. "You're a big girl now, Shanthi. You will one day be someone's wife and eventually be a mother too. You need to prepare for these things. That's what my Amma told me, and she was right. Girls need to be good wives and mothers." This was when the training, as she called it, began.

She taught me how to cook, each curry done to her satisfaction. She made me sweep and mop till the floor was so clean you could eat off it. It became a daily battle. "Sweep the floor kutti," she

would order and I would reply, "I can't, why don't you do it?"

"Shanthi, do what I tell you to, I know best," she would say sharply. "If you finish your work now you can go out and play." She would coax me into doing the work, by this promise of free time to play.

She took it upon herself to teach me to sew, and we would sit on the verandah, she inspecting each stitch of mine, and making me redo it each time I got it wrong. One day I had had enough. I got up, threw down my work and began to yell, "I don't want to learn how to sew, it's pointless and annoying. I'm going to tell Appa. He will see to it that I don't have to do this. Amma never made me do these things."

She only looked at me as if my behaviour was perfectly normal and replied, "To be a good wife you need to be able to sew properly. When you have children, who's going to sew their clothes?"

Frustrated, I screamed "I don't want to be a wife or a mother. I don't care about those things. I hate you! I hate you!"

She stood up abruptly and slapped me. Then sat back down again with a resigned look on her face, as I stared dumbfounded. She put her face in her hands and said after a moment, "This is the way it has to be Shanthi, you don't understand now, but one day you will. I'm doing all this for your own good, just like my Amma did for me."

As soon as Appa stepped through the door that day I ran to him, sure that he would take my side. I began to spill out my woes, about how 'Amma' had slapped me. Appa let me run on for a bit, then he looked at his wife and said, "You must do what Amma tells you to, don't disobey her. She knows what's best for you." I was dumbfounded for the second time that day. The man who had been the only constant in my life, who had protected me and carried me to bed, was taking 'her' side, and acknowledging the necessity of my beating.

After that, the placating stepmother I knew was replaced by a towering figure of rage. Her frustration and anger at her own circumstances had finally boiled over. She understood now that

Appa didn't care what she did, that there was very little Appa cared about these days. She could do as she pleased and this new found revelation gave her strength and fuelled her rage.

The next day she was teaching me to cook when she screamed, upon tasting my curry, "There's too much salt in the curry Shanthi." Her mouth was drawn into a ghoul-like grimace, spit flying all over and drenching me. "How am I supposed to give this to your father? You ungrateful child. He works morning, noon and night to feed you and to send you to school and you try and poison his food?"

I cowered back against the wall, as her large palm flew towards me, my face stinging from the slap. I broke down and cried. "I'm sorry Amma," I sobbed, "I didn't mean to poison Appa, it was an accident, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I groveled over and over again.

She just looked down at me, a confusion of emotions on her face. "You're useless, child."

"You need to learn to be a good wife, you useless thing," became her daily mantra. I soon began to believe that I was a useless thing and began to strive to be a good girl, to be useful, to give myself some worth. I began to think that the only duty of a wife was to get her daughters to do their duties and teach daughters to be wives. And, if she had stepchildren, to hate them. Or maybe it was just me, maybe she hated me because I was worthless or wasn't hers. I couldn't blame her. Why should she love me if I wasn't hers?

When my brother Raju was born, I was pulled out of school to help look after him. I resented him for it. I had liked school even though I had to walk two miles to get there. School had got me away from my stepmother.

Sweep the house, wash Raju, cook dinner, no not like that you foolish girl, like this, SLAP, don't you know anything, SLAP, you useless thing, SLAP, you worthless thing, slap sob slap sob slap sob. Motherhood, rather than softening her, had raised her ire at me, as if I was responsible for burdening her with yet another child. Each day dragged on into the next.

I would pray every night that a miracle would take me away

from this life, that somehow I would be removed from it. Over time, my prayer changed. I began to pray not to be removed but for her to be taken from this life so that finally I would be free.

All that training to be a good wife was to be put to good use. Appa, under my stepmother's instructions, began to look for a man to take me as his wife.

When my stepmother told me their plan, I was appalled. I was only 15, I didn't want to get married. I wanted to go back to school, I wanted to learn of far off countries that were so different from my dusty country where rivers ran red, where seeds of death were sown and fields of bodies harvested. I yearned for that escape that I had read of in those lovely pages.

"Please, Amma, don't make me get married, please I promise to do all the work. I'll cook every day and look after Raju, please don't make me get married," I groveled. But even as I spoke I knew deep down that I would be married, and there was very little I could do about it.

"Shanthi," she said with a sigh, "don't start, you're getting married. Now stop this nonsense and do your work. This is how it is for young girls, you're no different." I went back to work crushed. I was the fool for expecting anything else.

Appa was my only hope. I waited that day for him to come back from the fields. I imagined him agreeing with me and taking me into his arms, like he used to do. As Appa came in I walked up to him, gave him his cup of tea made just the way he liked it, led him to his chair, waited till he sat down and had leaned back.

"Appa, please, please, please don't make me get married. Let me go back to school, I promise to do all the work, I promise to be the best in class, Appa please! If I get married who will help Amma with Raju? I promise I'll be a good girl, I'll stop complaining and do everything you and Amma want. Just don't marry me off! Please!" All my life was pinned on my words.

Appa opened his eyes, looked at me as if I wasn't even there and said, "Not now Shanthi."

In that moment, I knew all was lost. Sobbing I left the room,

realizing only then that my stepmother had been in the room all along, watching from a dark corner.

In a house as flimsy as ours, sound travels and, as I stood in the next room and wept for the life I was losing, I heard my stepmother talk to Appa. In a subdued voice I heard her ask Appa, uncertainty laced through her voice, "Are we doing the right thing, Aiyah?"

"Not you too Rani, you know how it is."

"Yes Aiyah but she's only 15, even I wasn't that young, she doesn't even know why we're doing this, she must be feeling so… so… Aiyah, I know what it's like to be her. Are you sure we're making the right decision?"

"Rani, believe me I don't want to do this to her either, but things are getting bad. They have started going into the villages and taking young people, even in broad daylight. And these people are never heard of or seen again Rani. I will not let that happen to her. It's better for her to get married. It's just better that way." I squeezed my eyes shut, angry at him, angry at the militants who were going to the villages, angry at everyone. Why did this have to be my life?

I heard a chair scrape across the floor as my stepmother sat herself down with a long sigh. A sigh that I now realise spoke of pain and regret, as she watched her history repeat itself, maybe even guilt. But, to my 15-year-old self, it was a sigh of admission that I must be married. "Better a child bride than a child soldier," she finally said.

A few days later, I was sitting on the verandah with Thambi on my lap, murmuring to him as I rocked him, when Appa came home and, avoiding my eyes, went inside calling out. "Rani." When she came to him, he said in a subdued tone, "I found someone for Shanthi. He will make a good husband. He has a plot of land that he tills. When I spoke of how we were looking for a husband for Shanthi he said he'd be interested. Kamala his wife was killed during one of the raids and he needs someone to look after the children."

I listened in horror. *He has children. He has children, he has children.*

Soon I would be a mother.

"Appa, please don't make me marry him," I wailed, putting my brother down and rushing in to them, "please don't."

"Don't worry kutti, he is a good friend of mine and I know that he will look after you and provide for you the way I do. He needs a wife; it's a good match. Don't worry kunju, you'll be fine."

"I don't want to get married," I continued to sob, trying in vain to appeal to Appa and my stepmother.

She looked at me with sad understanding, then gave a resigned little shrug and said what she had before: "Better to be a child bride rather than a child soldier, Shanthi." She turned and walked away.

I was scared. All I wanted to do was escape. I longed to be a bird rising up off the ground, never to return, floating free with the winds; high above the ground where no one could reach me, where no one could touch me.

Rajan worked with Appa. I had a vague recollection of seeing him once or twice but all I remembered was that he was a big man. The traditional first meeting was to take place soon.

One afternoon he came home with Appa. Rajan seemed bigger than I remembered, taller and fatter, with grey streaks beginning to run through his hair.

I sat there in silence, my eyes shifting between the grey in his hair, his belly that sagged over his trousers, his whiskery face with its unkempt betel-speckled beard and his enormous hands with their filthy black nails. Rajan and my parents spoke of the wedding as if I wasn't present. Come to think of it, I wasn't really present that day. The business meeting concluded, Rajan studied me for a moment, bade me farewell and left. His side of the transaction was done, and apparently so was mine. The wedding was to take place in a month. I finally admitted defeat; I was getting married, that much was certain.

Resigned to my upcoming nuptials, I sought to find out what my life was going to be. Appa was happy to oblige, telling me all I needed to know. I think he thought I was genuinely interested. "He's a good man Shanthi, he'll look after you well and he earns

enough money to keep you well fed. He has two children, very nice children, you will like them, just like our Raju." This was the most talkative I'd seen Appa in years. It pained me that my wedding to a man far older than me, was what had got my father chatting again. I was to be the mother of two, my oldest would be eight and my youngest five. Soon I would be someone else's 'Amma'. I vowed I would not be like my stepmother, I would not take my anger and frustration at the marriage out on them. But what did I know, I was only 15. I kept coming back to Rajan's grey hair, his pot belly and his betel-speckled beard.

It wasn't going to be a grand wedding – just a priest, a registrar, and that was it. Rajan my betrothed came to see us often now to sort matters out. On these visits he treated me as if I was still a child, and not his wife to be, looking through me, uncannily like how Appa did. I began to think that my life wouldn't be too different to my life now. I would simply be looking after two new children in place of just Raju. It seemed as if Rajan was going to treat me the way Appa treated my stepmother, with indifference. I began to see a future that I could tolerate, a future very similar to my present with new faces substituted.

About a week before the wedding, Rajan found me alone at home. My stepmother had taken Raju to the doctor and Appa was working in the field when he entered the house. Something was different, Rajan seemed different, and I felt a pinprick of fear. I looked at him and, putting into practice my stepmother's coaching, I said, "Can I get you something? Tea maybe? Appa won't be back from the field for a while."

I was nervous. Rajan kept looking at me, staring. Something was very wrong. He took a step toward me, and I unconsciously took one back. He took another step forward, I another one back. For every step forward he took I took one back, seemingly dancing in perfect harmony. He was close now, so close, inches away. I could smell the stale sweat dried on his body from working in the fields, I could see the drops of red that had splattered faintly about his mouth and beard, his teeth also red from the betel he chewed, the black grime on his body and underneath his fingernails. I looked

up into his face noticing his grey hair, his moist sweaty skin, his eyes and how they never met mine. He was twice my size.

With a grunt of impatience, Rajan reached out and grabbed me. I screamed, the suddenness of his action startling me. I felt his weight crashing into me, pushing into me. I began to kick and scratch, clawing at his face, his arms, his shoulders, whatever skin I could reach, while he held onto me in a crushing embrace, as if he were made of stone. He finally picked me up by my shoulders and threw me onto the ground, the force of the fall making me limp. He began to lower himself onto me and I began to scream again, first for Amma, Appa, anyone, to get his crushing weight off me, then at him to please leave me alone; finally I screamed in pain, begging him to stop. Then I was silent. Who was I to resist him? How was I to fight him off? My screams amounted to nothing. So this is what it is to be a wife, I thought — stifled screams, smothered sobs and oppressive silence. He left me a heap on the floor.

I shook like a dead leaf in the breeze, so dry within that I felt I would crumple to dust at the slightest touch. I had got a glimpse of what my life was to be. Once I said those fateful words "I do," my life was going to be nothing but pain, fear and silence.

That night I lay in bed knowing that it was futile to even hope that sleep would capture me in her soft hands. I knew I had to do something but I was scared, so scared. After all, what could someone as worthless as me do? It would be a long time before I would have a proper night's rest again, before I would be able to get the nightmare of that large man on top of me out of my head. The images of that afternoon running through my head were like someone had pressed replay and the button had got stuck. Yet these very images, as the night progressed, began to give me the strength I needed. A resolve slowly hardened in me. This wasn't going to be the story of my life. I refused to accept that this was all my life was meant to be. "Rather a child bride than a child soldier." My stepmother was wrong! "Rather dead than his bride," I said to myself.

I got up, went to my cupboard, grabbed my school bag and began to stuff it with whatever my hands came upon. Then I left

my room. Tiptoeing through the house, I was a shadow, as I left it all behind. I was sweating, my heart seemed to be a marching band, but I crept along, determined to get out. As I hurried to the gate I began to doubt myself. It was night, there would be LTTE members about; I could be abducted, I could be killed. I stopped uncertain, but then the image of Rajan's body pressing down on me flashed through my mind and I ran, not caring if I made it through the night. I was taking my life back, and I didn't care where I ended up so long as it was far away from the place I called home.

Up to today I don't know how far I ran or in what direction I ran or how I found the courage and energy to keep running through the night. But God must have been with me. I finally ran out of energy and sat down beside a wall, exhausted but exhilarated. I had finally done it, I had escaped! I had absolutely nothing, yet I hadn't felt this good since Amma had died. I soon fell asleep, exhausted.

When I woke up again, it was early morning. I got up and walked on until I passed by a convent. Desperate for food and help now, I walked in and knocked. I was received by a nun, whose shock at seeing me on the doorstep was almost comical. She regarded me with kind eyes, then reaching out took my hand and led me in.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "Was your family lost during one of the raids?" I silently shook my head from side to side. "Then what is it dear, that has made a young girl like you come to our home?" It all came pouring out, I spoke like I hadn't in years; I spoke, I cried and I spoke some more until finally there was nothing left to say. When I was finally done, she said, "You have a sanctuary here for as long as you need it."

The nuns gave me a home at the convent and there I stayed, an orphan whose parents were still living. I often wondered if I should inform my parents of my whereabouts, let them know that I was fine. But then I wondered if they had even bothered to search for me. Perhaps they did do a desultory search and then gave up faster than most parents would.

The prayers and service are finally over. I look down one last time at the woman who made my life so miserable and think again of what my life would have been like, had I not run away that night, seeing the person I could have become, a mere shell of myself, angry at all the world for the innocence that I had lost. But I am a mother too now, with a little daughter who places her trust and her life in me. I would do everything, anything, to protect that little life. In this world, with its dark lurking shadows, what would I do if I had been in my stepmother and father's place? For a moment I am overwhelmed by the choice that faced them. "Rather a child bride than a child soldier." My father, I have learnt from the priest, died of a sudden heart attack, not long after I left. The strain of it all must have killed him.

I lean forward to gently touch my Amma's forehead before I leave and am surprised when a tear falls on her face.

Michelle Handy *comes from a mixed Tamil-Burgher background. She has no direct experience of the war and draws inspiration for her story from the girls she met at a convent in Batticaloa. She has experienced what it is to interact with those who come from different ethnicities and cultures. She hopes to facilitate better relationships and interactions between communities through her writing.*

THE MEMORY BOX

Hasitha Adhikariarachchi

Sri Kanthi couldn't tear her eyes away from the shining earrings and bracelets, the bright colours of the outfits worn by the group of young ladies who were visiting the convent. Their earrings had many dainty parts like mini chandeliers, unlike the traditional big, gold earrings her Amma used to wear for kovil. Amma had a pair of gold bangles but she never wore bracelets. Sri Kanthi made eye contact with one of them and the lady smiled. *She's kind.* Sri Kanthi was pleased at the friendly gaze of this stranger, but meeting anyone eye to eye was unusual for her. Every time Sri Kanthi went beyond the convent compound, on her way to school or to court, she tried to avoid eye contact with the men scanning her from head to toe. Whenever these men did happen to make eye contact with her they smiled as if showing concern, but Sri Kanthi felt there was a hidden message that she was unable to interpret.

Sri Kanthi was sitting in the last row of the convent's meeting room next to the old wooden door. The group of young women from Colombo was sitting on the stage. Their well-groomed figures and bright colours contrasted with the faded beige wall behind them. Sri Kanthi looked away through the window at the concrete arches of the gateway to the convent.

The visitors were asking many questions. A Tamil man who introduced himself as a school teacher translated the English-speaking women's questions. One of the women, wearing a black abaya, also spoke Tamil. A few of the girls in the hostel answered their questions but the others remained silent. Sri Kanthi wasn't listening to anyone but now and then some of the words drifted into her consciousness: "During conflicts..." "Troublesome times…" "Your studies…"

Sri Kanthi looked up and saw cobwebs tangled on the wooden trusses supporting the roof. A question from one of the women grabbed her attention: "Do you face any issues when you are going to school? Perhaps when you pass army checkpoints?"

"Why do you ask all these questions?" Sri Kanthi muttered to herself in a low voice. These types of questions were very familiar to Sri Kanthi and other girls in the convent. There had been many similar groups in the past, and the same types of gatherings in the convent's meeting room. They asked the same questions, distributed books and new clothes, clicked their cameras and then they walked away.

One of the women was saying something long, the English she spoke not easily understandable to Sri Kanthi. The translator paused a while before he translated the words of this woman.

"These ladies are university students studying literature, they are here to help the girls in the convent with their studies. They want all of you to pass the A level exam. They want you to enter university and excel in your higher education. They are asking your backgrounds and experiences to see if there's anything that prevents you from achieving your goals."

These words sounded sincere. If they really intended to do what they said, then they had to be saints, Sri Kanthi thought. Many social workers had visited them before and tried to change their lives. But they gave up after some time and left.

Sri Kanthi took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She visualized the statue of Saint Mary, her face divine and pure. A flush of courage went through her and she raised her voice. "You said you all are university students. Didn't you face any troubles during your A Levels?"

The man quickly translated and the women nodded their heads to say they understood her words. The women spoke to each other and then said something to the translator. From the tone of their voices Sri Kanthi realized an inside joke had been made; they were teasing the translator. The ladies laughed and looked at Sri Kanthi with inviting eyes gesturing her to join in their joke.

But how could she laugh with the translator? He had to be from this area. *Perhaps he knows my past.* If Sri Kanthi laughed at him, wouldn't he reveal her past to these women? And after knowing the truth, wouldn't these women despise her like her cousin sisters did?

The translator started talking to Sri Kanthi with a shy smile. "I'll answer your questions according to my own experiences. Don't think too much about the problems in your life. We cannot stop obstacles appearing on our path. If we start thinking about our problems they occupy our minds all the time and we will not be able to focus on our studies. Set targets and think only about your targets. Study well, enter university and then you'll get a good job. People will look up to you when you have a good job."

Sri Kanthi carefully analyzed the translator's face. Dark oily skin and curly black hair. A typical Tamil guy in his late twenties. *Anna too would be his age by now, if he was alive.* Sri Kanthi sighed and the warmth of her breath brushed her upper lip. If Anna was alive.

A memory rose in her of how she used to walk to school with Anna. He was six years older than Sri Kanthi and he knew what was good for his little sister. Whenever Anna was around she felt protected. "Sri Kanthi, don't play with the next door boys!" Anna's worried voice would call to her. Once Anna had punched the two little sons of their neighbour because they had pushed Sri Kanthi while playing and wounded her knee. Later Appa punished Anna for beating the neighbour's kids. But thereafter Sri Kanthi's playmates in the neighbourhood didn't dare to hurt her.

If Anna was alive he would have earned money, so Amma wouldn't have had to go to Saudi Arabia for work, leaving Sri Kanthi alone with Appa. After she left, Appa, who was constantly drunk by now, beat Sri Kanthi every night and did other things to her. There had been nobody to save her, until she begged her aunt to let her stay at her place. After seeing bruises on Sri Kanthi's skin, her aunt questioned her. Sri Kanthi wept in her aunt's arms and uncovered her secret. The aunt informed the police and Appa was put behind bars. Appa got released on bail after the court hearing and the court decided that Sri Kanthi should stay in the convent under the supervision of a probation officer.

The women stood up, their action breaking into Sri Kanthi's thoughts.

"We are leaving now," the translator said. "Tomorrow we are taking you all to the Peace Garden. Be ready by 9 a.m."

The ladies walked out into the corridor. Sri Kanthi saw Mother Superior and Sister Matilda go with them. The girls slowly went to their rooms. Sri Kanthi followed the four other girls she shared her room with.

Sister Matilda stood with a dozen girls under the arched portico of the convent waiting for the bus that had been arranged by the group of university students. Excited eyes on timid faces were fixed on the gate. The shadow of the convent's pillars made a bar pattern on the grass. Standing with the girls, all of them dressed in their best outfits, Sri Kanthi examined her reflection in the glass doors of the convent. Her thick curly hair got messed up easily by the wind. She ran her fingers through her curls pressing them down.

"The ladies have planned to stay in our hostel for three days, because they like to spend time with you. They could have easily stayed in a luxury hotel," Sister Matilda told the girls before she instructed them to be friendly with the ladies and ask them about their lives in Colombo.

Some of the girls in the convent had visited the Peace Garden earlier and Sri Kanthi had heard about the wonderful experiences offered there. They had told Sri Kanthi about the dancing lessons they had, the games they played and the painting they did. A painting by a girl from the convent was once selected for printing in the Peace Garden Calendar.

The bus arrived and Sister Matilda gestured for the girls to follow her. The pretty faces of the smiling ladies appeared through the windows of the bus. They waved like a bunch of colourful butterflies flapping through the air. The girls formed a queue to get into the bus as Sister Matilda had instructed them earlier. Sister Matilda wanted the girls to be on their best behaviour in front of the ladies.

Sri Kanthi gripped the metal bar of the footboard and climbed

in. The bus was air-conditioned and the metal bar was very cold. The windows of the bus were covered with yellow and green floral curtains edged with tassels. Sri Kanthi inhaled the chilled air, fragranced by air freshener that smelt of gardenia. The coldness gave her goose bumps. The ladies were purposely sitting with spaces next to them and the girls were expected to sit with them. Today there were fewer ladies present, only half the group. One by one the girls sat. Sri Kanthi took a seat next to a Muslim woman. They smiled at each other; Sri Kanthi remembered this lady was the one who had spoken in Tamil yesterday.

The bus started.

"We want you to mingle with these ladies and speak freely," Sister Matilda said in a grave manner, her thoughtful eyes shining behind her reading glasses. Sister Matilda was always keen to try new things that she hoped would help the girls learn about life outside the Eastern Province.

"What's your name?" the Muslim lady asked in Tamil.

Sri Kanthi felt cold air entering her throat when she opened her mouth to speak. "Sri Kanthi," she said, happy to be speaking in Tamil.

The Muslim lady had fair skin. Her round face with high cheekbones and upturned eyes reminded Sri Kanthi of ancient paintings of Hindu goddesses. The lady was wearing a black sequined abaya, just like yesterday. The abaya was like a warning to Sri Kanthi. She'd heard that women wearing abayas belong to Muslim extremist families.

"I'm Nazreen. Today our group formed into two clusters. The other set is going to interview random families in Pasikuda, while we go to the Peace Garden." Her smile made her eyes glow.

Sri Kanthi had seen many Muslim women in Batticaloa before, but this was the first time she was able to talk to one. Sri Kanthi's two uncles, who had campaigned for a well-known Tamil politician of the area, were killed during a fight with a group of Muslims. Thereafter her family declined to associate with Muslims.

"Don't play with Muslim girls," Amma had said a few days after

her uncles' funeral, angry when she saw Sri Kanthi playing with the next door girls. Tamil girls, both Hindu and Christian, went to a Tamil school while the Muslim girls went to a Muslim school. Thus the chance to befriend Muslim girls was rare for Sri Kanthi. She never understood why this school segregation was necessary when both Tamils and Muslims spoke the same language.

But this lady is from Colombo, she must be different from Muslims in Batticaloa, Sri Kanthi thought to herself to justify going against Amma's wishes. Amma, who had gone to a land of Muslims to earn money and had stopped sending letters.

In her first letter, Amma had written that she had to cook for twelve people in her employer's house and she was left without food often. In her second letter, she wrote saying she had been beaten when she was caught searching for something to eat in the kitchen cupboards. In her third letter, she said she had planned to escape from the employer's house and go back to the agency which provided the job contract. Sri Kanthi's family never found out what happened to her after that letter. Appa inquired at the Foreign Employment Bureau but they were unable to find her whereabouts. The agency informed them Amma had terminated the contract and walked away. People said she must have died in the foreign land. News about migrant workers who died or were disabled because of sexual violence, abuse and torture was frequent these days.

Sri Kanthi touched her forehead to check that the pottu she had pasted was in place. Whenever she walked under the harsh sun in Batticaloa, the sweat on her forehead made the glue of the pottu melt. Nazreen was enthusiastically observing Batticaloa town through the window. Perhaps it was the first time she had been here.

"Have you been to the Peace Garden before?" Nazreen asked, looking directly into Sri Kanthi's eyes again, her own glowing with an invitation to friendship.

"No... No." Sri Kanthi's voice sounded shattered to her. It had been a long time since someone looked at her in a friendly manner. After the court case against Appa commenced, her relatives looked

at her with disgust, other girls of the convent with eyes wet with sympathy, and men on the road with lust.

The air inside the bus was getting colder. Sri Kanthi felt an agitation in her abdomen from the cold. Nazreen, however, was sitting comfortably. *Her abaya must be keeping her warm.* Sri Kanthi looked around and saw other girls from the convent keeping their hands crossed over their chest. Sri Kanthi also crossed her hands to cover her chest from the cold air.

"Isn't the view beautiful?" Nazreen pointed towards the sea.

Sri Kanthi nodded. The view was very common along the coast line of Batticaloa – sea, palmyrah trees and fishermen's boats. The road, as they went along, leaving the town behind, got narrower and bumpy. The sun rays peeping through the curtains pierced the head scarf Nazreen wore. The sunshine added a glow to Nazreen's fair skin. Sri Kanthi looked at her hands and compared her skin tone with Nazreen's.

Amma was fair and so was Anna. Sri Kanthi was dark like Appa. After Anna died, caught in crossfire, Appa was drunk every evening. He sold everything once his money was over to buy kasippu. Sri Kanthi recalled the ringing tone of Amma's voice, her tearful face pleading with her aunt to look after Sri Kanthi in her absence. "I have no choice. My husband has lost his mind. He has even mortgaged the deed to our house. Getting a job abroad is the only way I can secure Sri Kanthi's future."

The bus jolted into a small pit and jerked out of it. Sri Kanthi rose up from her seat a few inches, then fell back. Everyone in the bus sighed and laughed. For the women from Colombo, it must be a fun journey, rolling and bumping, she thought.

After a few moments, Sri Kanthi started feeling sick, an unpleasant taste on her tongue, like she was about to throw up. "Akka, I feel I have to vomit," Sri Kanthi told Nazreen, in a panic. She was ashamed of her helplessness.

"Keep your head on my lap. Try to sleep a while, you'll feel better." Nazreen put her hand around Sri Kanthi's shoulder and motioned her to put her head on her lap. Sri Kanthi was hesitant for

a second, but she was afraid the bus would bounce again making her vomit in front of everyone. She put her head on Nazreen's lap and closed her eyes.

"Akka." Sri Kanthi touched Nazreen's arm. The bus had finally come to a stop.

"Yes, we are here!" Nazreen smiled warmly as Sri Kanthi sat up and looked through the bus window.

A pair of tall figures were standing in front of the bus. "Wow!" Nazreen pointed at the two boys stilt-walking in the Peace Garden.

Sri Kanthi saw a large mud hut and smaller mud huts, floral patterns painted with lime paint on the walls, a pond and a tree house in a margosa tree. It was a normal hot day in Batticaloa but the large pond in the Peace Garden brought coolness to the air. The many shades of green of the bushes made the garden look like a botanical garden.

"See that mud hut!" Nazreen said after they got down, pointing to the larger mud hut where some children were painting with crayons and watercolours. "Shall we also try drawing and painting?"

"Mmm... I have only tried painting a few times before," Sri Kanthi said.

"Then that makes two of us!" Nazreen giggled.

Sri Kanthi had a good time with Nazreen in the Peace Garden. They painted, even though neither of them had much experience of art, both of them laughing at their ineptness but also complimenting each other. The Garden was animated with playful kids who looked like a swarm of flying honey bees. The sound of children singing echoed from the mud huts, their roofs made of dried and smoke-treated palmyrah leaves. Some children were sitting in the shade of huge margosa trees and reading. The birds' chatter mixed with the crunching sound of dried leaves under Sri Kanthi's feet as she and her new friend went about trying different crafts and activities.

As they worked together, Nazreen told her about her extended

family and her university friends. "My grandparents and aunt's family also live with us. I have a younger sister and two younger brothers. My five cousins are all boys."

"Your house must be a huge one," Sri Kanthi said, surprised.

Nazreen nodded. "Our house is where my father and aunt grew up. My father built a new section when my elder brother was born. My family lives there. My sister is about your age. She doesn't like to study. I always tell her knowledge is the most valuable asset a girl can have. I wish she was willing to learn like you." Then Nazreen fell silent as if waiting for Sri Kanthi to say something about herself.

Kadavule, please don't let her ask about my family, Sri Kanthi thought, her hands cold with sweat. "Come, akka." She pointed to a mud hut which some children were decorating. "Let's go and help them."

After an exhausting but fun day Sri Kanthi and Nazreen returned to the convent. Once they had got off the bus, they went quickly to shower and change for dinner, promising they would meet outside the dining hall and go in together. Sri Kanthi was a bit late arriving because she had to share her bathroom with her four roommates, but Nazreen was waiting for her. The bell rang indicating dinner and the two of them nodded, smiled to each other and went in for dinner.

Sri Kanthi, as she sat at the dining table next to her friend, wondered whether Nazreen would feel uncomfortable when the Christian girls said their prayers before meals. Sri Kanthi, who was born a Hindu, had learned to adapt herself to the daily routine of the convent.

As Sri Kanthi took a bite of bread soaked in hot dhal curry, she noticed the translator who had been with the ladies yesterday, walking towards them down the corridor. Beside him was Mother Superior. His face was dimmed as a dark cloud and Mother

Superior looked tense.

When the man and Mother Superior appeared in the dining room doorway, the room fell silent. They signaled gravely to Nazreen and the other women of her team. The ladies got up and went out into the corridor. "Girls, girls," Sister Matilda called out to the silent staring girls, clapping her hands, "get back to your meal, please." Sri Kanthi tried not to watch the ladies in the corridor but her curiosity overpowered her and she sneaked discreet glances in their direction. They looked worried, talking to each other in hushed tones. Sri Kanthi noticed an ant struggling in her glass of water. She put a finger inside the glass and took the poor insect onto the tip of her nail. After a while, the revived ant started running along her finger. Sri Kanthi placed her hand on the dining table and the ant moved to the surface of the table.

"Ah that's sweet. You saved the tiny creature's life." Sri Kanthi looked up as Nazreen sat down again, smiling.

"Sri Kanthi, I'm afraid our team has to leave tomorrow early morning. There has been a change in our schedule."

Sri Kanthi frowned at Nazreen with surprise. "Yesterday Sister Matilda told us you would be staying a few more days in the convent."

"Yes," Nazreen said avoiding Sri Kanthi's eyes. "Some facilitators of our project are coming from abroad, so we have to be in Colombo tomorrow. It wasn't planned however."

Sri Kanthi and Nazreen silently ate their dinner. The sound of bread being chewed and water being poured from jugs to glasses was all that could be heard in the dining room. It was clear the other girls had also heard the news and were subdued and disappointed. Nazreen and Sri Kanthi said goodnight to each other after dinner.

"I believe our team will get more chances to visit you later," Nazreen said squeezing Sri Kanthi's hand. Sri Kanthi smiled. They went their separate ways to their bedrooms which were located in different corners of the convent.

The bright light and warmth of the sun woke Sri Kanthi the next morning. Her roommates were already awake and had bathed and put on the old gowns they wore in the convent when nobody visited them. Seeing their shabby dresses, Sri Kanthi realized that the ladies had already left.

The painting Sri Kanthi had made yesterday in the Peace Garden was on her study table. She had drawn two girls holding hands, one girl taller than the other wearing a black abaya. Sri Kanthi remembered Nazreen's words when she saw the painting. "They look like sisters."

Sri Kanthi had a bath and pulled one of her old gowns quickly over her head. The nuns provided, as much as they could, good books and dresses for the girls, but it was hard for them to provide well. The number of girls residing in the convent had increased rapidly after the end of the civil war. Sri Kanthi knew there were a few other girls in the convent who had also been raped. She guessed all the girls in the convent had untold stories, more or less bitter, like her own.

She went back to looking at the painting and a moment later Sister Matilda entered, pushing aside the curtain in the doorway. "Sri Kanthi, Nazreen left this letter for you." She held out a piece of folded paper.

"Sister, you told us that they would be staying longer. What made them go back suddenly?"

"Well," Sister Matilda said, coming further into the room, "some of their team went to Pasikuda, to interview some locals, while you went to the Peace Garden. There, a politician confronted them and demanded to know what authority they had to interview people, whether they had any connection to NGOs and so on. Also that politician informed the police. Later the organizer of their project was questioned by the police. That incident made the organizer decide to leave immediately fearing some harm might come to the team."

After Sister Matilda left, Sri Kanthi turned the letter over in her hand, wondering why Nazreen hadn't told her about this incident yesterday during dinner. Perhaps she thought Sri Kanthi was too

naive to understand such situations and that she shouldn't expose the brutal side of people to an immature kid.

If I had told her everything I have been through, I doubt she would still think me immature or naive, Sri Kanthi thought with a bitter smile. She unfolded the piece of paper. Nazreen's Tamil handwriting was neat.

Dear Sri Kanthi,

We are leaving early morning when you all might be sleeping. I sense you have hidden talents for drawing. I would be happy if you continue drawing and painting.

When I was little, my English was weak. My parents hadn't learnt English so they couldn't teach me at home. Also, they were unable to pay for extra classes. But then I self-studied a lot and asked my peers who were brighter than me to help. Now I can communicate in English very well. I want you to do the same.

God Bless you!

Yours,

Nazreen akka

A smile spread over Sri Kanthi's face. Even though Nazreen was gone, at least she had been kind enough to leave a letter. And in the letter, Nazreen had answered the question Sri Kanthi had asked on the first day they all met in the convent's meeting room: how she could overcome her obstacles and succeed in her A Level exams.

Sri Kanthi opened the drawer of her study table. She took out a worn cardboard box, her 'Memory Box', and opened it. She put Nazreen's letter and the painting she had made alongside a few photographs of Amma and Anna, and the three letters Amma had sent from abroad.

Hasitha Adhikariarachchi *grew up in Kegalle and later moved to Colombo due to her employment in the computer software industry. Currently she is reading for an MBA at the University of Kelaniya. As a kid she loved reading, which opened her to stories from lands that were far away, and created in her a passion for writing. She wrote the first few pages of* 'The Memory Box' *during the* Write to Reconcile *workshop. The story is based on the experiences she gathered throughout the workshop in Batticaloa.*

POEMS

Yogarajah Atchuthan

MIRACULOUS HEALING

Intending to thank you
I sit to write this poem.

In that IDP camp,
when all was lost,
you came.
The loud speaker announced a visitor for us,
we ran to the visitors' shed.

You were there with a smile,
Father, in your white cassock.
A snarl of barbed wire separated us from you,
like cattle we crowded close as we dared
unable to stretch even our fingers
to touch your warmth.
All we could do was gaze.
We saw you, Father,
you saw us too.
The sight of you, Father,
gave sight to us all.
The smile you gave
swept away our grief for a moment,
the loss of my two brothers,
relatives, hopes, home.
"How are you all?
Atchuthan, we are here
for all you need."
Those words gave us life.

Your love extending
beyond boundaries of faith
filled our parched souls.
You, Father, had come to see us,
Hindus in your parish.

Father,
the barbed wire separated us,
but your love penetrated through.

When we returned to our tents
You were with us
but, no one knew.

PERVERTED LIFE

IDP! IDP! IDP! Camps!
I had heard of them
but was too little to understand.
Children can play all the time
was what I understood.
Pleasant enough.

But as a man
I was taken to a camp
from the Wanni, after the war,
carrying my two little kids,
spouse lost.

As a gift on that day
they gave me a tent,
a very small tent

to share with another family.
Three young women,
fair and beautiful
in a husbandless household.
A plastic sheet separated us.

In need we all were,
supporting each other.
At a tube well we lined with cans,
waiting eight hours for our turn,
nights and days,
patiently.

Common kitchen and bathrooms,
common toilets,
we queued everywhere, no privacy,
but we were all alive.

Two months passed quickly.
As a big family we lived in that small tent.

In the absence of my spouse,
appetite strengthened.
Secretly I gazed at the women
while they were undressing,
through slits in the partition.

Talkative and fair
the second daughter,
her interested eyes on me.

We went to fetch water.
Short puffs of breath
in the moon's shadow,
pressing against her.

Madly we shared,
madly we enjoyed,
in empty tents, common toilets, bathrooms,
tasting flesh forbidden.
Later my interest transferred
to the other two women,
doing the same things with pleasure.
The women were soon pregnant.
My kids were helpless
but I could not stop.

One evening,
I was called to the office.
My spouse was there,
eager and happy.
She hugged me and cried loudly
her eyes searching for our children.

The three other women
beautiful and fair
lingered in my mind.

PLEASE APPA....

What would you like little baby
when I return from London?

Only you, Appa.

Toys or books,
which do you like more, kunju?

All my books are full of pictures
of parents telling stories, Appa.

I will tell stories, kunju,
till you go to sleep, once I come home.

When will you come, Appa?
Will you bring Amma this time?

Dear baby, dearest baby,
this time also I'll return alone.
Amma is somewhat busy.
The gods keeps her without worries.
My little kunju, my life.

Yogarajah Atchuthan *was born and bred in Mullaitivu. Due to the civil war, he faced several displacements and had his schooling under many trees during his childhood. He was displaced with his parents during the final phase of war from Mullivaikal, taking with him only a worn sarong, a torn bag of documents and a mammoty to dig bunkers when needed. He spent three months in an IDP camp before he was released to follow his university studies. Currently, he is teaching English in the Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna. He wishes to build mutual understanding among the people of Sri Lanka through his writing.*

A LOST HOPE

Pakeerathy Patkunanathan

Rasik is seated in a rattan armchair on the verandah reading the newspaper, when he hears a crash from inside the house, followed by Mufetha's scream. He rushes inside. The noise came from the bedroom and when he enters he finds Mufetha standing in the middle of the room, sobbing. The broken pieces of a cup and saucer are scattered around her. Her nightdress has absorbed the hot tea, but she doesn't even feel the sting of the tea, which is lighter than the wound in her heart.

Rasik stares at Mufetha hopelessly, knowing he is partly responsible for her state. Sometimes the grief one feels is so intense it can't be expressed merely with words. During these times, Mufetha breaks the thing that is nearest at hand. What probably happened was that as she was having her tea, the thought of their son Riyas came to her mind and this thought made her lose her mind and aroused her anger. When Rasik steps towards Mufetha she gets even angrier and roars in a rough voice, her gaze on Rasik, "I want my son, I want my son. I miss him a lot, I really miss him. You are responsible for his vanishing." Mufetha wails in grief, not aware of how loud she has become. She doesn't care.

"He will be back, don't worry. I promise you I will get him back," Rasik consoles Mufetha, hugging her and patting her head. He tries to take her out of the room without stepping on the pieces of porcelain from the broken cup and saucer.

"Stop touching me. Leave me alone. I believed you. I committed my life and my children to your hands, but you failed. You failed us. You don't deserve me and my children." She struggles to get out of Rasik's grip.

"Please come with me." Rasik tightens his arms around her and gently propels her towards the door.

"I don't believe you. You won't get back my son. You are a liar," she screeches and struggles further. Not able to get away, she bites Rasik's hand.

"Ah! Stupid woman," Rasik shouts and slaps her hard across the face. This unexpected blow shocks her into docility. Rasik has brought the situation under control, but he feels shame at having hit his beloved wife. The tears gush from his eyes and he lets them flow down freely.

He puts her on a sofa in the hall and gives her a glass of water, with the medicine prescribed by the doctor for her condition. Then he sits beside her and lets her lean on his shoulder. She is still weeping, but is now exhausted. He hopes the medication will take effect soon and calm her down.

He rests his head against Mufetha's. Her accusation rings in his soul and he asks himself, as he has done so often in the last five years, if he made a mistake, if his greed and stupidity were to blame for this situation. He glances at the group photo of the management students from the Eastern University, carefully enlarged, framed and hung on the wall, easily visible from all directions. It makes him recall how he met Mufetha for the first time. The memory comes gushing back, fast and clear as if it happened yesterday, unforgettable.

"Good morning senior with the blue shirt, I love you," a soft trembling voice addressed him. He was sitting with his fellow students on a bench under a big tree, which was allocated for the third years. He turned quickly to find a pretty girl wearing a bright, flower-patterned hijab standing behind him, a red rose in her right hand. She didn't raise her eyes above his shoulders. A group of final year students stood a little distance away. They had compelled her to do this as part of her ragging. Her eyes were full of tears, ready to pour down any minute, her lips trembling, her hands tightened around the books she held to her chest. The seniors pointed to Rasik and told her to propose her love. As she had no choice she did what they said muttering, "I ask you to marry me." Having said that, she dashed away. His eyes swiftly followed her red face full of shyness, his mind and ears captivated by her tender voice.

After that, he became friends with Mufetha, who was kind and gentle, and their friendship continued through university. After

they graduated, they decided to marry and seal the bond that had strengthened between them over the years. As Rasik established himself as a businessman and the owner of a restaurant, Mufetha remained a housewife, helping him in the business by doing some accounting.

They were overwhelmed with joy when they were blessed with Riyas, their first child. He was a mixture of Rasik and Mufetha. The captivating twinkle in his eyes and his sharp pointed nose were Rasik's, while his happy smile and olive skin were from Mufetha. His every action amused them. At the age of three Riyas got a sibling, his sister Nushrath. Nushrath was a playful baby. She was frequently asking questions and finally her brother nicknamed her the 'mobile questionnaire'. Sometimes she was scolded by Mufetha for her stubbornness.

In those years, Mufetha was at her happiest, an active busy mother who managed their finances and home wonderfully. Rasik never ceased to marvel at her assiduousness as a wife and mother, the way no task daunted her. Both children, as they grew, were very active and intelligent. Mufetha, because she was a housewife, spent all her time with their children and they were very attached to her. Despite his hectic schedule, Rasik also gave time to them and took them out twice a month – an outing he greatly enjoyed and looked forward to. Their parental guidance made the children successful in their studies and disciplined. They were decent children who had the confidence of their parents' love.

Rasik's eyes move from the university photo to the one of a smiling Riyas, dressed in a blue denim checked shirt and taqiyah. The photo was taken on his tenth birthday, his last birthday celebrated with his family.

On that day they arranged a grand party for their son as he had finished a decade in the world. Rasik gave him a bicycle as a gift. Riyas was thrilled at his Vappa's gift and he hugged him and thanked him. Mufetha had spent the whole day making delicious dishes such as mutton chilli fry, dam kay boti kabab and palak gosht. All the invitees enjoyed the food, games and gifts.

There was an unexpected moment of joy for the family when

Raseem, Riyas's class teacher, turned up. He had come to praise a good deed Riyas had done. Riyas had found a wallet on his way home near the school gate and handed it over at the principal's office. It was Raseem's and contained 50,000 rupees, his identity card, driving license and credit card. He had withdrawn the money that afternoon to pay the hospital charge for his father's eye operation. When he found that his wallet was lost, he had been very upset. The principal and another teacher visited the hospital to give him his wallet. After settling everything at the hospital, he had come to thank Riyas and also to congratulate his parents for raising such a fine son. Rasik and Mufetha were very proud of their son. The assembled guests also expressed their praise and congratulations and the couple was overjoyed, feeling the same happiness as the day their son was born.

Yet, during this happy time in their lives, the war raged around them. As it reached its peak, a lot of businessmen in the East started to receive calls from unknown men demanding money and threatening to abduct their loved ones if they refused. As a businessman and a rich man Rasik too received such calls. When he got the first threat, he discussed it with his business friend Sabeeb. Sabeeb coolly told him that he had also been threatened with such calls, but he didn't worry about them and they soon stopped. Rasik decided to disregard them too. Within a six-month period he got three or four calls but there were no reprisals for ignoring them. He also heard that the famous textile owner Rahuman, who responded to such calls, was continuously being asked for money. He had been bled of his money and was close to bankruptcy. Rasik decided to manage the situation by just ignoring it.

A few days after Riyas's birthday, they were to go on a trip to Kandy. It was a reward to Riyas for doing well in his grade five scholarship examination. That morning, Mufetha, busy as a traffic policeman, rushed between her husband and children, helping them with their packing and also preparing their breakfast.

"Did you see my new camera?" Rasik asked in an annoyed voice, as he came into the kitchen. "I put it in the cupboard but now it is not there."

"You all want me for everything. You have already put it in your hand luggage," Mufetha replied.

"Umma, can you allow us to take a bath in a river please?" Riyas requested, as he came into the kitchen.

"No. You can forget that idea. I won't permit you to get into a river."

Riyas pouted in disappointment. Nushrath was with him and now both children started to cry and plead with her. Rasik calmed them down by saying that they could swim in the pool at the hotel in Kandy.

"Thank you Vappa, we love you so much!" both of them cried and showered him with kisses.

After they had run to get their bags, Rasik saw that Mufetha was not happy with what he had said. She was terrified, for some reason that her children would drown. He couldn't help smiling to himself because now Mufetha was pouting like a child. He made a conciliatory gesture, touching her shoulder. "We will allow them in the baby pool. No harm will come to them there," Rasik said. Seeing she was still upset, he added, "Don't spoil the mood, darling. I think this is our first visit to Kandy after our second honeymoon, isn't it?" he whispered in a husky voice. He lifted up her chin with his fingers and examined her blushing face.

"Okay, okay don't be silly," she giggled at him.

He was dazzled by the warmth of her smile.

The sound of his son calling out that they should go soon brought him back to the world. He looked at the time. It was 8.50 a.m. They had planned to leave home at about nine. He went to make sure that the children had packed their bags correctly and were not taking too many toys.

At 9 a.m. sharp Rasik's family came out with their luggage and put it into the car. Their faces were shining with happiness, the children's eyes twinkling with excitement. In their joy, they did not notice the strangers in the van which was parked by their gate. Rasik settled himself in the driver's seat and Nushrath got into the back. Mufetha and Riyas pulled the gates open and waited for

Rasik to reverse out onto the road. Mufetha began to lock the gate with the padlock in her hand. Meanwhile, Riyas made his way towards the passenger door.

What happened next happened so fast that Mufetha and Rasik barely had time to react. A masked man jumped out of the van, rushed up to Riyas and seized him. Riyas screamed and grabbed at the door handle, the door swinging open as he struggled with the men. For a moment Rasik and Mufetha were frozen with shock, but then Nushrath's scream brought them to their senses. Rasik leapt out of the car, grabbed Riyas and held on, shouting to their neighbours for help. Mufetha had joined him by now and she grabbed the man from behind trying to wrestle him off her son. Now the other two men jumped out of the van and rushed forward with sticks. One of them hit Rasik so hard he fell down with a scream, clutching his arm. Mufetha had managed to grab her son and she wrapped her arms around him so the men couldn't get at him. One of the men grabbed Mufetha by the hair and dragged her off her son, flinging her to the pavement, where she split open her forehead. Their neighbours by now had come out of their gate and seeing what was going on, they rushed towards the scene, crying out at the kidnappers, who were now running towards the van with a struggling screaming Riyas. Rasik, with a burst of energy, jumped up and rushed after them. Mufetha despite her injury also struggled to her feet and hobbled towards the van.

"Vappa, Umma, help me, help me please!" Riyas screamed, as the men pushed him into the van. "Don't leave me with them Vappa, save me!"

The men jumped in, the van revved its engine and took off.

"Help, help, oh! My son, help to catch him, please, oh! Allah what can I do?" Mufetha wailed as she staggered after the van.

One of the neighbours had jumped into his car. He pulled up beside Rasik and shouted for him to get in so that they could chase the van.

They drove after it but once it came onto a main road, the van mingled with the rush hour traffic. Try as they might, they couldn't keep track of it and after a while they lost it in the melee of vans,

cars, jeeps and trishaws.

When they returned home a large crowd had gathered in the hall. Mufetha was sobbing, her head buried in her hands. The neighbourhood ladies tried to console her by patting her shoulder and arms, offering soothing words that Rasik would find her son. When Mufetha saw her husband without Riyas, she fainted.

Rasik didn't know how to handle the situation. He lay down and put his head in his hands. Somebody advised him to call the police. Someone else told him to get advice from the Ulama. In the middle of all this commotion, the phone rang. Rasik and Mufetha jumped up when they heard it. The living room became silent. Rasik crossed the room, his face pale, and picked up the receiver.

"I think you are expecting this call. I already warned you." The voice was familiar to Rasik from those threatening calls. "If you refuse to give us what we want, your child will be got rid of. You must pay 10 lakhs within two days. If you delay, we are not responsible for your child. I'll call you after a couple of minutes to tell you the venue and time of our meeting to exchange the money and your boy. Don't get help from the police. If you do, we won't show any mercy." The phone cut off.

"I made a mistake. I should not have ignored it. It is my carelessness," Rasik cried.

"Who called you? What did they say? Why are you shivering? What's the matter?" Mufetha grabbed his arm.

"Mufe, our child has been kidnapped for 10 lakhs, I'm sorry dear I was threatened by an unknown person for money last month. Like any owner of a restaurant in Eravur, I get many threats. So I just ignored it. They called themselves the LTTE. But nowadays everyone puts on the mask of the LTTE and does their criminal activities behind it. I didn't want to make you panic, by telling you. Don't worry Mufetha, I'll get Riyas back."

All the time he was speaking, Mufetha's horror and anger were growing. When he was done, she backed away from him. "You are the only reason for the loss of our son!" she cried. "If you had said a single word about the threat I wouldn't have let Riyas out of my sight."

Again the phone rang and everyone became silent. When he answered, the kidnappers told Rasik they wanted him to meet them with the cash at a ruined house near the lighthouse.

Rasik went there alone as they instructed, with the money. He didn't inform the police as he wanted to take responsibility for his mistake. The ruined house was a shelter for bats and rats, its walls and roof broken. He was scared to go into it because of snakes, but the thought of his son urged him forward. He found no one there. He called "Nana, Nana," but no response. He laid the money on the floor and left.

In the days that followed, Rasik and Mufetha waited for Riyas. Rasik was unable to look his wife in the face. He walked up and down, up and down all day long. Mufetha would gaze at him and then at the gate, hoping her son would appear there. But soon her patience would wear off and she would get angry, not only at him, but also at her own impotence. Nushrath had grown sullen and quiet, no longer asking questions. The sound of her mother's anger would set her off screaming and sobbing.

Some experienced elders in the neighbourhood came to talk with Rasik. They advised him to make contact with the Ulama. Rasik went with some of them to meet the Ulama. He listened to them and promised that he would contact the LTTE and other groups and make some inquiries. He had no success. The groups shook their heads and said they were not involved.

Finally, the Ulama advised Rasik to go to the police station. Two of his friends accompanied him.

The sergeant they spoke to heard them out and then he cried, "Are you a fool? You should have come to the police station first. Are you an illiterate person Rasik? How could you do this?"

"I love my son very much sir. He is my soul. Already I had made a mistake by ignoring the threats. So I wanted to get him back at any cost. Please forgive my fault and help me to find my son," Rasik pleaded with the policeman.

"I will try, Rasik. People don't trust us and that makes us angry. Leave this with me. We have to consider the case carefully." The

sergeant began to gather the details, his heart melting at Rasik's plight.

"And yet we are still waiting for Riyas," Rasik thinks as he watches his sleeping wife next to him, the drugs having finally taken effect. "Even though the war is over, we still wait." Rasik is still not sure if he made the right decision to ignore the threat at the start. He has come to know that some of his business colleagues who took the threat seriously still had their loved ones abducted. In other cases, they were asked for more and more and more money until finally they had none to give. He has tried every possible way to search for Riyas, but all routes lead nowhere. The only thing he tells himself he can do these days, is take care of Mufetha and his daughter. The rest is in the hands of God.

He feels Mufetha sliding down and props her up.

"Vappa, Vappa, where are you?" Nushrath calls from her bed. She often has nightmares these days and wakes up calling for her brother.

Rasik makes Mufetha comfortable, putting a pillow under her head, stretching her out on the sofa, covering her with a sheet. Then he goes to Nushrath.

He is the caretaker of his family.

Pakeerathy Patkunanathan *was born and bred in the Jaffna peninsula and has spent much of her life living with war. She is an English teacher by profession, presently following English Literature at the University of Jaffna. She got the theme for this story from a visit to an area of Batticaloa, during the* Write to Reconcile *workshop. With this story, she hopes to create a long-lasting impression in the minds of the readers, of the scars of war.*

YOU STRIKE, IT STINGS

Deborah S Xavier

August 15th, 2001

"Damn it woman! Can't you hear the baby crying? Please get that thing to shut up!" Kavindra shouted, covering his ears. "It's giving me a headache." He was mentally exhausted from hearing the monotonous siren all the time. The last few weeks had been unbearable.

"I'm in the bathroom… you'll have to carry him or you'll have to wait," Roshani shouted back, trying to close the tap so she could be heard. "And Kavin!! Stop calling him *'the thing'*. He's *your* baby, our son!!" she added, shaking her head in frustration. *It's been only three weeks, maybe he'll adjust.*

Roshani had hoped that her husband would go back to being normal once the baby was born. When they found out she was pregnant, like any first time parents-to-be, they had both been really excited. The doctor's consultations, the scans, hearing the heartbeat of the fetus, all of it had been exciting, and Kavindra had been truly delighted. It was only towards the end of the pregnancy that Roshani noticed him acting strange. He would wake up in the middle of the night sweating, and he'd seem all moody and dark during the day. Roshani had attributed his behaviour to the anxiety of impending fatherhood. After Keshan was born, however, Kavindra had become a total stranger. The man she had fallen in love with seemed lost within the man who now lived in her house. She was deeply concerned.

Roshani stepped away from the bucket and reached for her towel. Given Kavindra's state, leaving Keshan alone with him for too long was probably not advisable.

Kavindra slammed the book shut and got up. *Come on Kavindra, pull yourself together and calm down… That's your baby man, your son… Take a deep breath.* Kavindra inhaled deeply, trying to follow his advice. But it didn't help much. The sleepless nights, the constant reminders, the guilt, the self-loathing, they had all taken their toll

on him, and he was close to breaking point.

The night after he had found out that Roshani was due in the third week of July, he had woken up with the feeling that he was drenched in blood, the crying of a child and non-stop laughter ringing in his ears. He had thought that it would pass, but it only escalated with more images of bleeding children in his dreams. As the days of July passed by, he began to have a frequent dream that woke him up, terrified: Roshani screamed with agony as he lovingly held up his son, about to do him some great harm. He waited filled with dread, hoping that the child would not be born on that fateful day in July, feeling as the day drew closer that he was the plaything of the gods.

When Roshani had gone into labour on July 24th, he knew that the gods were mocking him. He had always wanted a child to call his own, and had looked forward to giving his child all that he had been denied when young. As he held his newborn son in the hospital, the pregnancy that he had once considered a gift, seemed like the beginning of a punishment by the gods, who would slowly wreak their vengeance on him. Kavindra stomped over to the cot, ready to do whatever it would take to get the baby to shut up. Yet, as he reached the cot, his fatherly instincts made him pause and look down at his son. The baby stopped crying, and looked up at Kavindra.

His eyes, they are so dark, so intense. Kavindra gripped the cot as Keshan smiled. *Were you stupid enough to believe that you could lead a normal life? The gods will never allow it. They are already mocking you by your son's date of the birth.*

"I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…" he whispered to the baby, shaking uncontrollably with remorse.

Keshan gurgled in reply.

July 24th, 1983

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me… Radhika kept repeating the verse

in her head, trying to calm herself, trying to keep her faith. She was terrified. She believed in the verse with all her heart, but she couldn't help being terrified and she was not the only one. The entire bus was vibrant with terror, everyone crying out, each to their own god. The children never stopped wailing, no words of comfort seemed sufficient to calm them. They probably sensed the trepidation in their mothers' voices despite their soothing words. The bus driver's booming voice, cursing in Sinhalese and demanding silence, only made the situation more fraught.

It was as if the weather and the events of the day were in perfect synchronization. The sky was dark with chunky clouds and droplets rattled the windshield of the bus. Radhika leaned her head on the window and closed her eyes. She found herself at a loss, because she didn't know what else to do. She took a deep breath. *Viresh… at least Viresh is safe….*

Their initial plan had been to migrate abroad, together. Viresh applied through several agencies for various vacancies but it had taken more time than they had anticipated. By the time Viresh managed to secure a job in Singapore, they had found out that Radhika was pregnant. Complications in the initial stages of her pregnancy had prevented her from traveling with him. And thus, instead of living within the safety of the cozy apartment she had seen in pictures he had sent her, here she was stuck on this bus, trembling with fear.

However, given the situation, Radhika felt she was privileged to be in the bus. When she first heard rumours of the rioting, she had gone to her local church for refuge. They had arranged for her to get onto one of the buses organized by the government to take people to safety. Her being pregnant had gotten her a seat in the bus, however it did not guarantee her safety.

Please keep me safe… Viresh needs me… Keep all of us safe, there are so many children, so many mothers… please keep my baby safe, Radhika cried out within, as tears streamed down her cheeks. She was usually so calm and collected.

She placed both her hands on her bloated tummy as she felt a movement. "Oh," she sighed. The woman sitting next to her managed a thin strained smile. Radhika offered an equally strained smile.

"How many months?"

"Now it's eight months, I'm due in September," Radhika said. "Your daughter?" she added, gesturing at the baby girl the woman was cuddling. "How many months?"

"Six," the woman replied.

"She's such a beauty," Radhika said, stroking the head of the baby, feeling her cotton-like hair. The baby smiled. *So delicate, so vulnerable… please Lord, keep her safe from harm.*

"What's her name?"

"Suhashini… Do you know where they are taking us?" the mother blurted the question she had started the conversation to ask.

"I don't know, but I did overhear someone say Ramakrishna Hall, Dehiwala," Radhika said, raising her voice so that she could be heard above the panic of horns. She glanced outside. The road was packed with cars that didn't seem to move. If cars were not so expensive people would have probably just abandoned them and moved on. There were so many people on the road, as commuters tried to get back to their homes and Tamils tried to get to refugee camps or the homes of friends where they would be safe. Then there were the soldiers and policemen armed head to toe. They just stood there; whether they were for or against Tamils one could not tell. The rain only made the situation worse.

"Ah, Ramakrishna Hall, then we'd be safe…. right? They wouldn't dare come into a religious place, specially a place giving refuge to children, mothers and mothers-to-be… right?" the mother asked, looking to Radhika for reassurance.

"Yes, I think we'll be safe… we better be because we're close by," Radhika replied, willing herself to believe in what she had just said. The bus screeched to a halt in front of a tattered building, whose walls were eroded by the salty breeze of the nearby sea.

Radhika took a deep breath as she looked at the building with its gates open wide, welcoming and offering shelter. There was already a significant crowd in the courtyard, probably brought there by similar buses.

"Quickly get off…. everyone… get off," the driver shouted from the front seat. But he need not have bothered because people were rushing to get down. There was pushing and pulling, screaming and cursing as they all tried to squeeze through each other. They acted as if the bus, once their refuge, was now a ticking bomb. They hurried like they were afraid it would explode any second.

Radhika's immediate instinct was to join the others in the mayhem to get down. But she knew she would never make it. She had to be careful, she could not afford to be pushed around in the bus and she certainly couldn't afford to be sandwiched. So she waited, allowing those who were in a hurry to get down first. It would just be a couple of minutes' difference. Suhashini and her mother were already off the bus, and making their way towards the hall.

Radhika got up from her seat when the pushing had subsided and was about to move towards the door when the driver suddenly shouted, "Don't get down! Tell everyone to get into the bus, quickly."

Everyone outside started to scream and run towards the bus.

Radhika was confused. *Why are they running back? And why are they pointing towards the sea?* Her heart began to beat faster. She put her head out of the nearest window, and froze. Radhika slumped down into a seat, struggling to make sense of what she had seen. Running towards them from the railway tracks was a tsunami of thugs, weapons raised. The bus driver's cries, calling out again to everyone, made her jump up and look out again. People were rushing to get into the bus, wild and savage, pushing at each other. Some mothers tried to ensure the safety of their children by trying to push them through the open windows of the bus, attempting desperately to make the children let go of them, while others just pushed and tried to burrow their way through each other to safety.

The thugs had drawn closer and she could see now the glint

on their knives and axes. Their raised sickles and knives reflected the sunlight, making them look eerie and demonic. Not all of them looked like thugs, some of them under ordinary conditions could have passed for university students. But to Radhika, they all looked like Goliaths. She didn't quite understand all the Sinhala slogans they were shouting, but the words she was able to grasp, "Tiger" and "kill", filled her with terror. *When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me…* Radhika screamed the words in her head, forcing herself to calm down. She was shivering. "Please save all of us, please save us… Please, please…" she mumbled like a lunatic.

The proximity of the thugs increased the level of panic as people began to claw and beat each other to get on the bus first, shoving and trampling the elderly and the very young. Those who had no hope of reaching the bus just ran towards Galle Road. Fathers and mothers, as terrified as their kids, carried them and ran in all directions. Some of the people rushed back into the hall, trying to bar the doors.

The bus started to inch backwards. People trying to get on screamed and wailed. Some just grabbed hold of a part of the bus, dragged along by it. "Wait, wait, more people are getting in," Radhika shouted at the driver.

"Can't wait miss, we need to go if you want to see your baby," the driver shouted back, accelerating in reverse gear. People continued to scream and push, trying desperately to get themselves and their children into the bus.

"No please wait!!" Radhika desperately shrieked as she tried to grab the hand of a little boy who was being lifted up by his mother.

For a moment she felt the child's soft palm in her own but then he slipped from her grip. "Please… No…" She sank into her seat weeping. As the bus pulled away, she didn't have the strength or the will to look back. *All those people, do something!! Save them, protect them!* She leaned back in her seat, eyes closed tight, flooded with guilt, relief at her safety, and then a more intense guilt at her relief.

Suhashini… Radhika looked around, suddenly remembering the delicate baby with the lovely smile. Her eyes scanned the bus, trying

to find Suhashini and her mother. They were not on the bus.

He was possessed with hatred and a thirst for blood. The anger, hurt and rage built up over time due to his abusive, irresponsible father and weak, pathetic mother fueled his rage, giving him the power to speed as they raced towards the bus. He had never run so fast, he felt wild, the drops from heaven refreshed him; he felt good. "The lion hunting down the tiger coated donkeys… run all you can, today you'll die…. You think you can kill our people, take our land?" Kavindra screamed out loud with his fellow killers.

Today would be the day he'd truly be part of this gang. He had found refuge and friends among them, but he had never been invited to join them on one of their assignments. Whenever a job came up, they would go, leaving him behind. Today he would show them that he could handle it.

When news of the 13 soldiers and their mutilated bodies reached Kavindra's village, everyone had been worked up. To kill is one thing, but to disgrace dead bodies by mutilating them? He had never felt so much hatred; he had never before hated anyone enough to want to kill them, not even his abusive, irresponsible father.

"Why should we sit and watch while they kill and mutilate our people? Why should we sit and watch, when people are willing to pay us to take revenge?" Kalu Ranga their gang leader had roared before they boarded the train from Galle. At that moment Kavindra was convinced that all Tamils deserved to die. The needle he had shared with his friends gave him confidence and courage.

The bus outside Ramakrishna Hall had picked up speed and started to move off. People ran after the bus pleading, carrying their babies, dragging their children. Kavindra charged into the melee screaming to himself, *Look at them, pathetic beings… wait till all of you meet death… death is us… I have the power to kill… the power to kill, kill!*

He reached out and yanked a woman by her hair. She shrieked in agony, holding her baby tight, trying to escape his grip. "Too bad, you're Tamil and married, I'd have liked to keep you around," he whispered menacingly, reveling in the power he had over her,

reveling in how she struggled, trying to free herself, like a fish that had been taken out of the bowl and placed on a chopping board.

"Please let my baby girl go… help her live... " The woman looked at Kavindra begging him to show mercy, to spare the lives of her baby and herself. Kavindra looked at the child cuddled against the mother, oblivious to the danger she was in. *A tigress, she'd grow up to hate us, she'd grow up to fight us.* Kavindra let go of the woman's hair and tried to seize the baby, yanking at its limbs. The mother and child shrieked. Kavindra hit the woman. The shock of his blow weakened her grip and he yanked the baby away from the mother.

"No, please don't! I beg you, please let my daughter live… please don't harm her… we didn't do anything wrong," the mother cried out, reaching for her child, trying to get her back.

"The gods would bless you, please just let her go… you do what you like to me, but she... she's just a child!" the mother sobbed uncontrollably holding on to Kavindra's arm, begging him.

Holding the mother off with one hand, he hoisted the baby up by the back of her clothes and gazed at the child for a moment, wondering how to end her life. She was so tiny, so vulnerable…and suddenly Kavindra was not sure what he should do. The mother stopped struggling, watching him carefully, hopefully. He lowered the baby, holding her with both his hands, confused.

Kavindra looked around. All his comrades continued moving on, their paths marked by dead or bleeding bodies. He recognized his friend Dotta and others taking their time with each of the bodies, searching them for gold, before mutilating the corpses, just to disgrace them even more. He looked again at the fragile thing in his hands. She had stopped crying and was smiling at him, as if she was safe. She gurgled.

"Ado machan, Kavindra."

It all happened in a fraction of a second. His friend Dotta yanked the baby by the head out of Kavindra's arms and swiftly threw it to the ground. The child hit the tarred road like a heavy fruit falling to the earth.

"Suhashini, aiyoo, Suhash… arrrr!" the mother shrieked, and

fell, hands reaching out towards her child who lay twisted and misshapen, oozing blood. Kavindra staggered and someone, probably Dotta, steadied him.

"That's how it is done Kavindra, you don't try to breastfeed them," Kalu Ranga cried, coming up. "You just kill them and move on… Remember we have a mission to complete, now go, go kill someone for real."

Kavindra's head was spinning. He looked at the mother who was cradling the mess of her child in her hands. Kalu Ranga had told him to kill. *Maybe you should put the mother out of her misery.* Kavindra picked up his axe and took a step towards the mother. But he couldn't. Trembling, he turned away and collapsed to the ground.

September 18th, 2001

"Amma, I'm home," Suhashini called out flinging her school bag over her chair, as she walked towards the kitchen.

"Oh, so how was school? Were the chocolates enough?" Radhika asked, smiling at her daughter before turning back to stir the curry.

"Ah, yah they were enough… I'm 18 Amma!! Your little Suhashini Kutti is an adult!" her daughter cried giggling as she hugged her mother.

"Yes, Suhashini Kirubina, you are officially a major, but remember you're still my daughter," Radhika said hugging her back, thankful to have her daughter alive and well here in this cozy little apartment in Singapore.

Deborah S Xavier *was born in Jaffna, during the war. After her family was displaced from Jaffna, they went to Singapore and, three years later, returned to Jaffna before moving to Colombo. She believes that it was their faith that helped her family through the challenges and perils of war. Radhika's character reflects her experiences and attitude in the face of war. Even though Deborah was not born at the time of the riots, the different stories, experiences and emotions, coupled with her own personal experience, have shaped this story.*

THE EAR STUDS

Lahiruni Ekanayake

Rajeshwari examined her reflection in the glass mirror. The cracked surface showed her aquiline nose, deep-set eyes and weather-beaten skin through which traces of a fairer shade lingered. Her hair hung in two long braids on either side of her oval-shaped face, eyes with irises that shone like black velvet. Soon, Sivanathan would come and kiss the top of her brows, trace her eyelashes with his fingers. At the thought of him, Rajeshwari touched the sides of her face in horror. She could almost feel the hairs of his moustache pricking her skin, his breath coming out in heaving gasps, his bold face gleaming even in the darkness. Though Sivanathan was in his early thirties, to her, at 14 years, he was old. His cracked lips parted in a smile that revealed a missing front tooth.

Rajeshwari covered her face with her hands. Her moan was muffled by the gust of wind that blew just then, causing all the windows to bang shut. For a moment, the walls and Rajeshwari shuddered in unison. The wind swept through a mass of exercise books strewn across the table. One fell to the floor with a thud. Rajeshwari bent to pick it up. From the discoloured pages of Tamil writing emanated the memories of her schooldays; of happy afternoons spent under palmyrah trees, seated at wooden chairs and desks, giggling with friends and learning. *Friends*. Rajeshwari turned that word over in her mouth several times. It felt like trying to chew an old piece of bubble gum. *Some things can never really be forgotten*, she thought, *they only remain buried at the back of one's mind*.

Thilini had been her closest friend, an energetic girl who belonged to a family that had permanently settled in their town on the east coast. Rajeshwari remembered how she and Thilini would impatiently wait until lunch break at school to buy the sweet chapattis that Mahirifa sold in her small outlet.

One time her Appa unexpectedly had a fall from his bicycle and Rajeshwari had to stay home and tend to his badly injured right leg. She could not leave her mother to shoulder all the

responsibility, and keeping Appa in a private hospital with a servant at his disposal was a luxury they could not afford. Thilini visited Rajeshwari's house after school every day, an exercise book in hand, in which she had written the stuff taught that day. She would stay to assist her and Amma with the daily chores. When the day's jobs were done, Rajeshwari used to go outside and lean against the wooden fence with a heavy heart. Then Thilini would come, pat her hand and whisper in her ear that her Appa would get better, that everything would be alright soon.

Rajeshwari remembered the tears of disappointment welling in Miss Manohari's eyes, on the day she announced with a voice that shook, "I can't keep up school anymore."

It was not safe to step out into the streets anymore. There had been too many murders, too many fights, too many abductions that never went reported – abductions that *still* continued. It had been almost three months since she went to school.

As Rajeshwari slumped down on her bed, her eyes fell on the plastic doll that Appa had given her for her 12th birthday, two years ago. She drew it close to her and hugged it tightly, her eyes shut, chin resting on its golden head. Its innocence was comforting against the evil in the surrounding world.

She thought of that dreaded day around two weeks ago when she suddenly discovered that she had been sentenced to a jail term that would never end.

"Kannu, I have to tell you something."

Rajeshwari had sensed the gravity in her mother Thangamani's voice. They were in the kitchen, making dhal curry that night and Rajeshwari had just scooped up a handful of mustard seeds and thrown it into the frying pan.

"What is it?"

Rajeshwari noticed the flustered look in her mother's eyes.

"Sivanathan has told your Appa that he is willing to marry you."

Rajeshwari stared at her mother as if she could not believe her ears.The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them."Do you really mean that, Amma?" she cried harshly.

"He is a good man, kannu. He will look after you well."Thangamani began to sob.

Rajeshwari was too consumed by anger to feel any sympathy towards her mother's tears. She had seen Sivanathan cycling around the village and what she remembered most was his white banian that had betel stains down its front and his moustache which was greying in some places, even though he was only thirty. "He is good? Does that settle everything then? Does it change the fact that he is twice my age?"

"We have no choice. I did not raise you to be dragged away by some power-hungry bastards and turned into a fighting machine. He'll be coming on Tuesday to see you. Shout all you like kannu but there's no one to listen," Thangamani had snapped back at Rajeshwari, wiping the tears off her eyes as she left the kitchen.

Rajeshwari had stared at her mother's retreating form, too overcome by frustration to say anything more.

Her thoughts now wandered to her first meeting with Sivanathan. He had strode in through the open door, smiling so widely that Rajeshwari had thought bitterly that his cheek muscles must hurt. He had donned a checked shirt over a white verti for the occasion and brushed his oiled hair backwards over his head so that, unlike on other days, he had the look of a gentleman. He settled himself comfortably in a chair and started rambling about his life, his palmyrah estate and his plans to open a new garment factory in Batticaloa. Once or twice, he stopped to ask Rajeshwari questions regarding her family and her interests, but her abrupt "yeses" and "nos" made him soon give up his attempts at conversation.

As Rajeshwari stared at him, she noticed that his smile when he looked at her actually reached his eyes. Sivanathan, suddenly aware of her intense gaze, blushed. "Don't worry my girl. I will try my best to make you happy." He stammered over his words and Rajeshwari saw, really saw for the first time, a sheen of caring behind the lustful expression in his eyes. Rajeshwari unwillingly admitted to herself that her Amma was right, that it wouldn't be something like "the wicked Lord who had trapped a lamb". Yet trying to console herself he was good felt like searching for the taste of sugar in a bittergourd.

Rajeshwari glanced at the doll cuddled in her arms. Lately, the

doll had given her a recurring nightmare. In the dream, the doll was no longer in its beautiful dress, but instead its hair was tucked under a skullcap and it wore a green striped uniform matted with blood. The doll pointed a water gun at her, its eyes cold with a determination to kill. Several times, Rajeshwari had woken from her sleep, screaming, bathed in sweat. She wondered whether she was on their list. She did not know which was worse, them or Sivanathan.

Outside now she could hear her mother Thangamani talking with Mahirifa next door. Rajeshwari craned her neck to listen to what they were saying.

"Does she still send you letters?" Thangamani asked.

"Yes Akka, but only once in a while."

"Don't worry. She'll be alright." Yet her mother's words sounded hollow.

"Yes Akka, she has always been tough."

Rajeshwari leaned a little further forward. Now she could see Mahirifa playing with the tassels on her shalwar, forming little spirals as she twirled them around her fingers. Round and round they twirled. "How is Rajeshwari doing?"

"She's fine. We have no choice."

"You need not worry. Sivanathan is a good man. I have known him since he was a small boy. He has never done anything wrong."

"I know, Akka. But I wonder why he waited this long to get himself a wife."

"Probably because he strived all his life to be a reliable businessman. As far as I am concerned, he treats that beloved palmyrah estate of his like a wife."

"He will not let my kannu suffer then?" Her voice shook as she spoke.

"Be glad. They won't touch a married woman. So long as you know she is safe and alive, unlike me you can breathe in peace."

Rajeshwari thought she heard Amma sigh in response. Yes, there was no choice. None at all. She wondered whether anybody at the wedding would bother to question how she was feeling.

The sequins in the sari that was draped around her fragile bones were not sparkling. They looked lifeless. She could feel her mother's fingers running through her hair, busily working a knot at the back of her head. Rajeshwari knew this was the last time she would feel Amma's caressing hands on her head. Glancing up, she saw her own helplessness mirrored in her mother's eyes. Sometimes, the grief one feels is so intense that it can't be expressed in words.

When the ends of the dangling ear studs pierced her earlobes, the pain that burst from her almost closed earlobes made Rajeshwari wince, even as she recalled the day she had stopped wearing earrings. The memory came gushing out, fresh, powerful and clear, as if it had been yesterday.

She had heard her best friend, Thilini calling, "Rajeshwari!" in a trembling voice and she had rushed out of her bedroom to find Thilini standing at the doorway, clutching a black suitcase in her right hand. Rajeshwari had gaped in surprise at the bag, then, seeing her friend's grave expression, she had hurried to her and grasped Thilini's other hand.

"Where are you going Thilini? What is happening?"

"To my maama's house. I have to hurry Rajeshwari. Thaththa is waiting."

Thilini pointed and now Rajeshwari saw Thilini's parents standing a few feet away, also laden with belongings, their faces numb with fear.

"But why…why…what is going on? Please please Thilini don't leave. Don't leave," Rajeshwari cried, but at that moment a shower of gunshots broke out in the distance. The fighting had started again between the Armed Forces and the LTTE, who were fast approaching. It was not safe for Sinhalese people to live here anymore. Not safe for young girls like Thilini and Rajeshwari to hang around as usual eating, drinking and laughing together.

Rajeshwari wrenched her heart-shaped ear studs off her ears and pushed them into Thilini's hands. "Don't forget me, Thilini," she pleaded. A delighted smile spread across Thilini's face for a moment, then even as she smiled her eyes filled with tears. The

friends looked at each other for a long moment and finally Thilini turned and left. Rajeshwari watched her best friend leave, her pink ribbons becoming a mere blur in the distance.

They had met in the single-storey clay building that the villagers called the "Batticaloa Pre-School", a place where all the Sinhalese and Tamil villagers sent their children to be educated. Thilini was wearing a blue cotton dress the first time they met. They had shared a desk and, by the end of that day, were friends. Later when they were best of friends, Thilini would draw bizarre caricatures of Rajeshwari and herself in a black notebook. In one drawing, both of them had hair that touched the ground, faces too large for their bodies and the same design of frocks that fitted their matchstick arms and legs. In another drawing a huge ice cream towered above them, bearing the caption "Best Friends". The two of them peeped out from behind it, grinning.

Rajeshwari came back to the present to find Thangamani in the doorway, beckoning her to come, slightly impatient. Casting a final glance at her room, Rajeshwari blindly followed her mother into the living room. She was glad that her face was half shrouded, the sari drawn over her head. She did not want to meet the eyes of even the few guests gathered for the occasion. There were no special celebrations. They could not afford it. Sivanathan would tie the traditional thali necklace around her neck and that would be the end of it all. Rajeshwari noticed the greedy look in his eyes as she staggered up to him, once or twice tripping herself in the sari that was too long for her and dragged along like a python. Sivanathan had buttoned his coat so tight that the gold buttons were close to bursting. Rajeshwari's eyes fell on his robust face, his greying moustache, his bloated belly. *This is my husband*, she thought.

Rajeshwari had just reached Sivanathan when there was a rush of footsteps outside approaching their house. Before anyone could react, the door was flung open and three men in green striped uniforms rushed in. For a fraction of a second, there was a numb horrified silence. Then the thali slipped from Sivanathan's fingers and fell to the floor with a resounding clink. Startled exclamations broke out now from the gathering, but the moment one of the

cadres flashed his revolver around the room everyone fell silent.

"We've got a whole lot of goods here," he declared as he walked up to Rajeshwari who had collapsed onto the floor in shock. He prodded her head with the revolver butt.

"Don't touch her you bastards. Take me. Kill me instead." Sivanathan flung himself on Rajeshwari, trying to shield her. Rajeshwari, who had been in shock, now came to her senses as she felt Sivanathan's weight on her body. She began to scream, appealing to her mother to save her. Thangamani tried to come to her but Mahirifa held her back, urging caution. One of the men was holding back her father.

The cadre with the revolver grabbed Sivanathan by the collar, dragged him onto his knees and placed his gun against his temple. He was about to pull the trigger when another cadre said, "Leave him. A piece of scum. Not worth shooting. We can tap him for money later." The man spat on Sivanathan as he let him go.

"How much do you want?" Sivanathan pleaded. "I will pay you to not take her."

Thangamani and Rajeshwari's father also began to plead with the cadres, offering anything to free Rajeshwari, but they refused to listen.

"Be proud, Amma. Your kannu will be a heroine in no time." The cadre who had spoken grabbed hold of Rajeshwari and tied her hands behind her back. The guests began to murmur in protest and sympathy. To silence them one of the cadres cried, "Does anyone here want to die? "He fired a shot at the roof. The guests screamed and, fearing for their lives, rushed out of the house.

Rajeshwari knew that no amount of protesting or yelling would save her. She stared numbly at her parents as the cadres dragged her out. Thangamani began to scream as her daughter was taken from her, and her screams followed Rajeshwari as she was led away, gradually fading away behind her.

Rajeshwari stood looking at the worn out walls of the building, silhouetted against the few stars that shone above. Her home had

not changed a lot since the day she left. Lately, she had seen Amma in her dreams and the desire to see her face had surged within her like a powerful wave. She had felt the same wave of longing a year ago, when she'd heard that her father had died in the shelling, but she had been too carefully watched then to come back. Now, walking up the rubble path to the front door after three years felt like entering a world that was foreign. Rajeshwari sighed, adjusted her uniform and stepped inside.

Amma lay on a torn mattress that was slumped across the floor, the coir ends sticking out of its edges. Rajeshwari walked up to her and gently shook her by the shoulders, observing how three years had added a lot of lines to her mother's face. At her touch, Thangamani woke up as if she had been shot. Her look of fear gradually gave way to a delighted smile. She pinched herself to make sure that she was not dreaming. Then she reached out lovingly to touch the war-scarred face of the LTTE female cadre crouching beside her. Rajeshwari recoiled at her touch. Affection was a feeling she had forgotten a long time ago.

"You have come at a good time, kannu. There's a lot of pongal rice left." Her mother started rushing around the kitchen, putting out the special curries she had prepared the day before for Thai Pongal.

"No Amma, I don't want anything," Rajeshwari insisted.

Thangamani stopped in her tracks to stare at her daughter. Rajeshwari had loved pongal rice since she was a child. "Please kannu, just eat. I know you want to," Thangamani insisted, thrusting a plate at Rajeshwari.

For a fleeting instant, Rajeshwari wanted to break free from the rule that forbade cadres eating anything that was not provided by the LTTE. She rubbed her hand across her forehead.

"No Amma. Please take it away. I am not hungry."

She did not want to betray her longing; did not want Amma to guess that it was nothing but self-denial.

"I am happy Amma. I tell you. Happy that they dragged me away."

Thangamani stared at her daughter in silence, not fooled by this declaration.

"I am happy Amma," Rajeshwari repeated in an almost angry

tone. A defiant look came into her eyes.

"I heard you."

The awkward silence that followed was only broken by the cacophony of crickets outside.

"Well, I must get going then. My thalaivar doesn't know that I came here tonight. Don't tell a soul that you have seen me."

Thangamani watched Rajeshwari disappearing into the shadows of the night.

Rajeshwari kept on pressing the trigger. Her bullets penetrated right through the plastic sheets that made up the windows of the mud hut. The mission had been to decimate this Sinhala village, get rid of the vermin polluting their homeland. She heard the villagers' cries of pain all around her as they tumbled onto the floor inside their huts, others trying to escape and getting shot in the single street that ran through the hamlet. After the village had fallen silent, Rajeshwari emerged from behind the bush, where she had been hiding. She put the rifle back into the latch made in her trousers. "Good…" Her work was finished for the day. Already, she could see her comrades scattering in different directions through the village.

Rajeshwari peeped in at the mud hut she had fired on a few minutes ago. The roof had been blasted by bullets and mortars. Sunlight streamed in and shone on a family of three. A bleeding hole lay in the side of a teenage girl's neck, where the bullet had gone in. Rajeshwari went inside and knelt down beside the girl, her trembling hands reaching for her ears. The earrings were flower shaped. She felt an intense relief flood through her.

Rajeshwari stepped outside. Wandering among the masses of women, men and children strewn across the village, she butted them with the soles of her shoes to make sure they were properly dead. The disengaged arms and limbs, the babies lying in pools of blood, the eyelids that still fluttered what was left of their life — over the years, Rajeshwari had become impervious to the horror of it all. She knew it was brutal, inexpressibly brutal, but there was no

escape. She was destined to do it as long as she wore this uniform. Yet, as she walked among the dead, she continued to do what she had been doing since the day bullets had started flying out of her rifle. She bent down and cautiously turned the corpses of teenage girls over, checking their earrings, the blood rushing to her head and then draining in relief every time the earrings were not the ones she had given Thilini.

Lahiruni Ekanayake *is a first year student majoring in Law at the University of Colombo. She was born and bred in Kurunegala. Her passion for writing since childhood has urged her to explore human emotions, how people grapple with grief and the power of memories. Although she doesn't have any direct experience of the war, she was greatly moved by the practice of child marriages in the East, as a precaution against the forced recruitment of young girls during the war. She learnt about this on a field trip during the* Write to Reconcile *workshop in Batticaloa. Her story captures the psychological profile of a girl caught in these complexities.*

POEMS

Luxika Nagendiran

ISOLATION

I too still have dreams and desires,
but my only visitor is disappointment.
War caused 'man-erosion'
like flood to soil.

Sunlight touches the surviving neem leaves,
acid raindrops kiss my fractured feet.
Though beheaded,
my deadened skin
still feels the rain and warm sun.

Calls of cocks and crows,
barks of dogs, chuckles of babies,
tinkles of passing bicycles,
sonorous clanging of the Pillayar kovil bell,
all ceased long ago.
Only gales of wind,
no gentle breezes here.

I yearn to see my father's face
before embracing my death,
which is coming like an old woman
crossing a broad road.

My mother's bleeding face
still reflects in the cracked mirror
of the bombed bedroom,
her feeble cry echoing in

each of my surviving bricks.
Sprinkles of warm blood still remain.

I am in a free prison,
peace and people
forbidden to enter
the HIGH SECURITY ZONE.

VOICE OF AN OLD WOMAN ON VICTORY DAY

I don't care about the next world,
I don't care about the afterlife,
All I trust is God has powerful sight
in daylight, in the deep of night.

Our lips sealed, freedom trussed,
he's watching everything from above,
heeding our soundless cry.
You brag and declare
you've established peace,
but in this rotating world,
you reap what you sow,
not in the next birth
but in this one.
You can oppress us,
but like our misery,
your success is impermanent.

One day we too will
celebrate our Victory Day.
Not your demolitions and reconstructions,
but our freedom to honour,

without fear, our missing.
To offer our public prayers,
for their corpses,
now sown seeds
in a deserted battlefield.

Then this dead peace will revive,
refreshed, restored, resurrected.

INCURABLE SCARS

No fence to the wind of memory.
Inexplicable losses increase the distance
between Life and Existence.

They say "peace regained,"
but Life is not just skin
to be mended with plastic surgery.
My fair face hides my distorted heart,
the scars living and pricking inside,
like first love.

Forgetting the unforgettable
is easy for those who have brain,
but hard for those who have heart.

WAITING (HAIKU)

The velocity
of violence at its peak.
Who will press the brake?

DEAR WAR (HAIKU)

You are HIV
but not incurable, coz
we've free vaccine, LOVE!

Luxika Nagendiran *was born and brought up in Jaffna. She is an old girl of Chavakachcheri Hindu College and is currently following English Literature at the University of Jaffna. Facts that she got from victims of war are reflected in her poems. She feels that the scars of war cannot be forgotten.*

WAITING FOR MY SON

Naduni Dineisha

On March 1st 1999, seven months after my son, Shihan, had left school following his A Levels, I went to his room to have a talk with him. While I was walking towards his room along the verandah, I heard the hoot of an owl. It was a bad omen and, for a moment, I paused, unsure if what I had planned was really the right thing for my son, who had been troubled for so long. It was my fault, I knew, for marrying a man who had turned out to be an abuser.

I had met my ex-husband Mahesh when I went to deposit money at the Sampath Bank. There behind the counter, was a handsome man, his upper body gracefully long and straight. As I stood in the queue, I kept watching him, unable to take my eyes off his beautiful profile. Suddenly he looked up and saw me. I smiled at him. He managed to engineer it so that he served me and we could talk. From that one conversation many others followed that subsequently led to our love affair and marriage.

It didn't take long for the abuse to begin. The pretext, if one needed a pretext, was my family, who had disowned me for marrying a man from a lower class rather than one from our own aristocratic Kandyan background. Mahesh chafed at their disdain for him and he took it out on me, spitting the words 'magistrate's daughter' as if they were a profanity. I put up with the abuse even after Shihan was born but then, in the 12th year of our marriage, when Shihan was four, an episode occurred that broke my resolve to stay married.

That night, as Mahesh often did, he came home late from drinking with his friends. I heard him thumping up the front steps and coming towards the living room where I was reading a magazine. Our son was playing on the floor with his toy gun, sitting at my feet.

Mahesh used his usual pretext to pick a fight with me – insulting my parents and family. When I finally lost patience and retorted, telling him to stop, he grabbed at my long hair and dragged me up

from the sofa.

"Stop!" Shihan shrieked, jumping up. "Don't you dare touch my mother! You are like a gladiator! I hate you!" My glance slid to Shihan. His eyes were ablaze with a hatred I had never seen before.

The sight of his own son threateningly pointing a toy gun at him threw Mahesh off his attack on me. He stumbled back and cursed Shihan, crying, "You rascal! Nice way to treat the man who feeds and clothes you! You cannot be my son! You are NOT my son!"

Shihan rushed forward and hit Mahesh on his shin with his toy gun. Mahesh cried out, more from surprise than pain, and stepped away.

"Leave him alone, he is a just a child." I put myself between my husband and Shihan, fearing for my son. I could tell that Mahesh wanted to beat him. But he was now too exhausted from drink to take me on first.

After that incident, my child began to change. He lost his normal cheerful demeanour and became sullen and withdrawn. At first, I thought that he would forgive his father and love him again. This was not the first time he had witnessed Mahesh's violent behaviour. He usually glowered at his father and left the room. But this time, after marching out of the room shuddering and clenching his small fists, he sat brooding in the farthest corner of his room and kept the lights switched off. He didn't let me come near him, caress him or talk to him. Finally, when I started to weep saying that not only his father but he too had abandoned me, he crawled across the floor from his corner to where I was sitting on his bed and hugged my feet. His hands looked so fragile and his grasp was feeble. At that moment I understood that my son was truly suffering from my husband's irrational behaviour. I was not my husband's only victim any more.

The next day, I threw away strict notions of pride, honour, dignity and social respect, ingrained in me from childhood, and went to see a lawyer I knew.

After a two-year battle I won the divorce case and got full custody of my son. Thus began the new life of Abhimani Elkaduwa, the

only daughter of the late magistrate of Kandy. My family, despite the divorce, would not take me back into their fold.

This removal from the violence did not help Shihan much. He bore the scars of my violent marriage deep in him. He used to be a quick learner but now became backward in his studies. Moreover, our neighbours complained of his violent acts such as hitting their dogs, pulling their daughter's plaits and throwing stones at their windows. When I questioned him, he always said that he had to do it because he was jeered at by people who said how honourable my father, the late magistrate, was, and how my marriage and divorce had tainted his good name. He always referred to the people who jeered at him as *'that old hag'*, *'that old midget'* or *'that bloody rascal'*. I was summoned at least once a week by the principal of his school, Trinity College, who complained about my son beating fellow students or quarrelling with seniors.

Yet, the old gentle Shihan was still evident from time to time. He was afraid of thunderstorms and would come running to my room and cuddle up to me in bed when there was lightning and thunder. He collected stamps and loved them dearly. He used to kiss his stamp book every time he admired his collection. When I would give him a foreign stamp that was not in his collection, he was always delighted and would hug and kiss me before he ran to put it in his stamp book.

The school counsellors and the sports teachers advised me to engage Shihan in martial arts and sports that would direct his intractable anger in a positive direction. Once I had done so, he began to improve. He got angry as quickly as he used to, but he was better, much better, at controlling it. By the end of his school career, Shihan had won colours, had been Sports Captain and Boxing Captain, was a karate black belt holder and the best Cadet Captain in the history of the school.

Yet, such great achievements did not make me feel proud of my son. Instead, they scared me. Whenever the mothers of the other students congratulated me on my son's various achievements, I welcomed their praise with a broad smile so they would think I

was proud of Shihan's achievements. I knew that the fire of his anger had not expired in all these years. It was simply diverted to things that won him all his certificates and medals. I started to worry about his future. Once his school days of boxing and cadets were over, what would become of his anger? Would it erupt again into acts of truancy? I knew that he must not idle at home now that his school career was over.

When I arrived in Shihan's room, I found him sitting on the bed reading a sports magazine. I greeted him and sat on an easy chair by the bed. After some small talk I said, "Shihan, now that you've done your A levels, what do you plan to do in the future?"

He thought for a long time and finally said, "I don't know Amma." He sounded lethargic. His face had lost its usual confidence.

"Don't you think that joining the Air Force will be a suitable and prestigious option for you? Friends of mine suggested this and, the more I think about it, the more sure I am that it would be the perfect option for you."

"I don't think so," Shihan said emphatically, shaking his head.

His categorical dismissal surprised me. "Why not? For a young man like you who was the best ever cadet captain of Trinity College, I don't think there exists a better opportunity. Besides your personality suits the defence forces more than any other profession."

His face darkened and he straightened his upper body.

"Amma, I know the strong personality I acquired through sports at school. I know the Shihan whom everybody sees as an exceptionally talented sportsman with an unpredictable temper and an aggressive attitude. Yet, I can't accept that personality as my own. I think that somewhere things went wrong and that Shihan the boxer, Shihan the cadet captain and so on is just not me. It's somebody else that possesses me."

His fists were clenched hard, his nails digging into the centre of his palms. The taut muscles of his broad chest were heaving. Shihan stood up and went to the window. He grasped the grill

facing away from me. He was trying to calm down but I saw from the movements of the muscles on his shoulder blades that recovering from any agitation was still laborious.

I knew that Shihan the cadet captain was not the son I had brought into this world. But, what could I do? I could not reverse time.

"Putha, I am not done," I said looking at his back.

"Go on," he murmured without turning towards me.

"If you don't want to be a military man, what do you want to be?" I carefully articulated the question after double-checking how every word sounded in my mind. I did not want to rouse his anger and bring this important discussion to an abrupt end. He was a talented young man; it was my duty as his mother to help him make decisions that would benefit his future.

"I never really thought of that. But maybe…" Shihan was hesitant, almost embarrassed. Embarrassment was an emotion rarely seen in Shihan.

"What is it putha? Tell me, I am ready to accept anything. I am your mother."

He turned towards me and looked me full in the face. It struck me how handsome he was. At 6'2", he towered over me, well-built with an angular physique, square jaws and piercing eagle eyes that accentuated his fiery personality. Though the colour and the shape of his eyes resembled his father's, they didn't look cruel. Instead there was a strange moist softness to them.

"I want to be an artist," he finally blurted out.

I frowned not understanding what he really meant by the term, artist. He never sang even nursery rhymes, never wrote or painted anything. Since I did not want to hurt his feelings or rouse his anger I said, "Well, that's a very good thing. But the best thing is to pursue the talents you have already developed and choose a career in line with them. Besides, the country needs strong young men like you."

Shihan did not answer. But his body tensed and his eyes became sharper.

I stood up and went to the shrine room leaving him to think about my proposition. I believed that I had done the right thing. That I, as a dutiful mother, had guided my son correctly. Still, I was feeling strangely depressed and I hoped a visit to the shrine room would calm my emotions which had been stirred by those words I hadn't expected from my son. The visit to the shrine room did soothe me but the anxiety about Shihan's future was not eradicated.

That night, Shihan didn't come to the dining room. We usually had dinner together and I was worried by his absence. I knocked at his door and tried to force it open. It was locked from inside.

"Shihan, what's wrong putha?"

He didn't reply. I called out his name again and again. Finally he grumbled, "Let me be…"

I went back to the dining room and cleaned the dishes. I threw the food I had served onto his plate in the bin, as I was sure he was not going to eat. After that, I went to bed and lay there unable to sleep, mulling over the desolate, gloomy ambiance that had suddenly emerged at home and in our lives.

I must have finally fallen asleep in the small hours because when I woke up it was morning and Shihan was standing in the doorway, softly calling to me. I sat up in bed, watching him. Usually he came to my bed and kissed me or cuddled like a baby. Today, he looked forlorn and kept his distance. His skin looked sallow from lack of sleep, his eyes were sunken and his hair was a mess.

"I've decided to join the Air Force."

I should have felt happy, maybe even triumphant, but I did not. There was a languid and gloomy feeling hovering over my heart, my body, my house and my son like the ghost of a cruel ancestor.

"Shihan, this is not compulsory. If you don't want to go, I can easily find you another job. You know I have influential friends," I heard myself say, contradicting my earlier conviction that a military career was the best option for him.

"It's my decision. And it's not influenced by you or anybody," he said with a tone of finality, then turned and left the room, holding his head high. He looked confident like a soldier marching to the

final battle.

Later that morning, we completed his application to be sent to the Air Force. After several rounds of interviews, where he scored impressively high marks, he was recruited as a middle-rank officer. The high-ranking posts were within his reach. More importantly, he was doing his duty by his motherland and I was finally proud, truly proud of my son. His talents did not scare me anymore.

I remember when Shihan came home after the final interview. He was beaming. The eagle eyes he had inherited from his father were glinting. To me that glint looked ruthless as if he was already hatching a strategy to eliminate the Tigers, singlehandedly. Whatever it was, he looked like a young man who felt strong, manly and stable, a young man truly proud of his achievements. I embraced him. That day, I was happy for my son.

Six months after being recruited, Shihan got his first holiday. I prepared his favourite dishes – mutton kurma as part of the main course, and chocolate mousse for dessert.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, I heard the bell ring and ran to the front door. When I opened it Shihan was standing on the doorstep. He sprang to embrace me and lifted me off my feet. I began to scream with happiness.

"Your little son is a grown man and a Wing Commander in the Air Force!" he shouted in his deep voice, laughing at my helplessness as I begged to be put down.

"Ha… How are you Shihan? Did you miss your old Amma?" I asked him, panting from the unexpected exertion when he finally put me down.

"What a question! I dreamt of you every night Ammiyo," he said cocking his head to a side like a small child. His mouth twirled into a grin.

"Really! You'd better find a beautiful girl to dream about, Wing Commander," I said teasingly.

"Oh come on! I just got my post and you want me to find a girlfriend? By the way it's easier to find a boyfriend in the camp," he said winking at me as we entered the living room.

"Girlfriend or boyfriend, I don't mind. All I want is your happiness!" I kissed him on the cheek. There were tears in my eyes.

In the six months he had been away, he had grown and changed. He seemed genuinely happy now and I could see that I had made the right decision, that I had chosen the correct path for my son. I felt confident that the years ahead would bring him greater and greater success and happiness.

Yet, not three years after Shihan joined the forces, I found myself sitting at the Air Force HQ, filled with dread at the news that had brought me here. A young officer in the prestigious Air Force uniform gave me a cup of tea. I looked at him and he must have seen my worry because he said, "Please don't worry Madam. First drink this. Then I'll definitely take you to meet the Air Marshal."

I stared at the reddish brown colour of the steaming tea. Did the bastards shoot my child? Did he bleed blood as red as this tea? Did his bullet wounds steam like this steam? I laboured to push aside such terrible thoughts. Shihan needed my help. I could not let my strength seep away and lament over my son yet. I was not a weak, ignorant mother to believe that my son was dead merely because he was reported missing. Without seeing the body I was not prepared to believe he was dead. I had heard cases of people returning home after being missing for decades. "My son can be, must be living somewhere in the unexplored wilderness of the Wanni," my heart kept saying. Maybe his head was damaged and he could not remember even his mother? Nobody knew what had actually happened. Had he been arrested by the LTTE, did he die when the camp was bombed? Or did he manage to run away? Nobody had answers to these questions. I was not going to believe that my son was dead and make it easy for the Air Force and the LTTE to forget him, to cast away his case as they continued fighting each other for a small piece of dry northern land.

I had started to communicate with my son in my mind. I hoped somehow he would hear my words and take heart. I had heard that the thoughts of a mother could be felt or even heard by a desperate child no matter how geographically distant he or she was.

After about an hour, I was admitted into the Air Marshal's office.

The office was spacious. It had a slightly claustrophobic feel as all the walls were covered with thick curtains. I felt as if I was going to faint. The Air Marshal sat behind his large desk, a middle-aged man with an aquiline nose. He had intense brown eyes that followed me as I came in. He rose to his feet courteously. "Good afternoon Mrs. Willoraarachchi. Please sit down," he said in his deep voice and sat gracefully down.

"Thank you sir." I sat down and kept looking at my hands clasped together searching for words.

"I know how you feel Mrs. Willoraarachchi," he said keeping his clasped hands on the large office table. "You are not the only mother who has had this terrible loss. I am extremely sorry. This is the nature of war. But still we haven't given up hope. We are doing everything in our power to recover your son and other officers who went missing during the attack."

"What do you mean by 'everything' sir? What are you doing at present to recover them?"

He seemed slightly taken aback by my directness. "There is a troop looking for… bodies at the moment. Of course, if the missing are still alive they will immediately report to me."

"Do you honestly think that my son is dead?" I asked, fighting back my tears.

"Well Mrs. Willoraarachchi, the chances that your son is alive are really minimal. But that does not mean that there is no possibility for him to have escaped. We have to wait."

"Wait without doing anything?" I asked heatedly. I felt blood rushing to my face.

"There is only a certain extent we can go to in searching for missing soldiers. The North is now a war-torn area. The area where the battle happened is no longer in our hands. So we cannot send a troop to Elephant Pass to search for the missing." His voice was flat. It was evident that disappearances were nothing unfamiliar to him.

"That means if Shihan is still alive, he has to find his own way home. Nobody is going to help him," I said heartbroken.

"We are doing our best, I assure you Mrs. Willoraarachchi. I cannot put the lives of another troop of soldiers in danger to look for one missing soldier. I am sure if your son is alive, he does not expect a troop to come in search of him putting their lives in danger. He was an efficient, intelligent and very brave soldier. He is a war hero. Whether he is dead or alive, you should be proud of him and stop grieving. I'm sure your son would not want to see you in such an aggrieved condition as you are in now." With that he stood up and I knew our meeting was over. I stood up reluctantly.

"Be proud of your son. I emphasise, he was one of the bravest and strongest soldiers that I have seen in my 20 years' service," he said in a tone of finality.

Once I had left that office and set off for home, my head was full of racing thoughts. I did not care whether Shihan had become a hero or not. All I wanted was to make sure my son was living and that the Air Force was taking every measure to recover him.

Why had I sent my son to war instead of keeping him under my shelter and protecting him? My conscience berated me for sending Shihan to the military forces. I hated my friends who had put such a notion into my head. How could I send that child to the war? A war that had been going on for so many years and showed no hope of ever coming to an end. "You are the most irresponsible mother on earth," I said to myself. "You did everything wrong! First you chose the wrong man who ruined your child and now look what you've done! What a mother you are!" I pulled at my hair to silence these thoughts.

It was evening when I got home. I changed and went to the Temple of the Tooth. Though I thought this little excursion would calm my mind, it brought back memories of worshipping the tooth of the Lord Buddha with my son. While I was roaming about the temple premises, however, I found myself remembering the Kalandaka Jataka Story where Yasodhara, the wife of Siddhartha who later became Lord Buddha, was born as a squirrel in a previous birth. In that story, her baby falls into the sea and she tries to bail out the sea with her tail to find her baby. Though she cannot empty the vast sea using her humble tail, the effort keeps her hopeful and

she attains spiritual salvation.

That story gave me the insight I needed. I must search for my son on my own. He was not lost in the sea. He was in the northern part of the small island of Sri Lanka. If I went to the land of the Tigers, I would be able to find him. Or at least discover what had happened to him.

Two weeks later I travelled to the part of the Northern Province that had just been taken over by the LTTE. The Air Marshal, when I told him of my plan to go and look for my son, insisted that even my bones would not be found if I ventured to do something so outrageously foolish and dangerous. All I said was, "After a mother has lost her only child, there's nothing more for her to lose."

Finally, when he saw he could not budge me, he gave in and assigned a military escort to take me to the border that divided the government controlled area from the LTTE controlled area. The soldiers who accompanied me bade me goodbye saying "Budu saranai! May the gods protect you and may you be able to find your son!"

First I had to meet an officer of the LTTE who would listen to me and take me to meet a more senior officer.

I started walking along the open road. Palmyrah trees stood like skeletons on the greyish sandy ground. On either side I saw small shack-like houses that had clay walls and palmyrah thatched roofs. They seemed deserted. But then, as if they had materialized out of the earth, cadres came from behind the deserted huts and approached me as if I was a dangerous animal, guns pointed. I held up my arms and spoke. I already knew a fair bit of Tamil from my ayah and other domestics in my family home. But I had also carefully rehearsed what I would say with a Tamil friend. "Please, help me," I said, carefully enunciating my words. "I'm not affiliated to the government, the Army or the NGOs. I want to find out what happened to my son. He was an officer in the Air Force. He went missing during the attack on the Air Force camp in Elephant Pass. Just help me to meet someone who can help me. That's all I ask from you," I pleaded.

As I spoke I could see the shock on their faces. The last thing they

were expecting was a mother who had come looking for her son. After some hurried consultation between them, they motioned me to come with them. We walked down a narrow footpath that went between two huts towards a thicket. After walking for about three minutes, we came to another shack built of clay and thatched with palmyrah.

"Moorthi, Moorthi, there is a lady from Colombo to see you," one of the cadres cried.

After a few seconds a young man came out of the house hastily buttoning up his shirt, looking me over with amazement. He seemed somewhere between late teens and early twenties. After he recovered himself, he bowed his head and said to my surprise, in good English, "Good evening Madam. What brings you here?" He had a slender body but looked very fit and confident. His thin muscles were well toned. His dusky skin had a glow to it.

"My son went missing during the battle at Elephant Pass. I want to know what happened to my son. Please help me. Let me meet your Thalaivar," I begged him. He was surprised by my straightforwardness.

"It's not in my power to do that. But I can introduce you to a Captain of our organisation. By the way, I am very sorry about your son, Madam," he said sincerely.

Moorthi accompanied me to another hut and introduced me to an old woman there named Easwari. He asked the old woman to put me up for the night. He said he would negotiate with his Captain to meet me the following day or the next. He said the Captain was very busy at the moment.

Over the course of that afternoon and evening, I got to know the old woman. I called her Amma and she called me Madam though I told her not to be so courteous. She said she was sorry she didn't have a bed to offer me before she laid out a palmyrah mat on the floor. Then she took me to a tube well where I washed myself with the brackish water.

As I lay on my mat, I thought that this was all like a dream. Here I was, sleeping in Elephant Pass which belonged to the LTTE. I had

met an LTTE cadre just a few hours ago. I was feeling strangely brave and happy; proud of myself for having come so far for my son like the squirrel-mother who continued to bail out water from the sea to find her son. Will I too fail like her or will I succeed? I lay there filled with anxiety that I would fail. I soon fell asleep from fatigue.

I woke up next morning as a thin ray of mildly warm sunlight fell on my eyes through the palmyrah door. I sat up on the mat and straightened my aching limbs. I felt sorry for the poor people who lived in this war-torn land who had no chance of a night on a bed.

When I was having my breakfast of chapatti and dhal curry, Moorthi came in. He was dressed in a white verti and a white shirt. He smiled brightly at me.

"Good morning Madam. I just came to check on you. How do you feel? Did you sleep well?" he asked with his gentle smile.

I assured him that I had slept well, trying to return his friendliness.

"Today, I am taking you to meet Captain Thavandiran. He is a kind officer. He will look into your case."

After I had finished my breakfast, we left the hut and walked along a narrow path. We went further into the thicket of dry zone trees that were skeleton-like and parched. There were a great many palmyrah trees and cactuses. Moorthi seemed to know the thicket very well for he walked on with confidence. After about five minutes, we came to a clearing where a young man was waiting for us. He was clad in the LTTE uniform. I was a little scared at the sight of the uniform. He was taller and more muscular than Moorthi. He had dark eyes, really dark skin and a moustache. He looked intently at me for some time, then greeted me.

"Please talk with him. Don't be afraid. Good luck!" murmured Moorthi and retired to a respectful distance.

The Captain was waiting for me to speak, so I related my story in my halting Tamil and he politely paid attention as I did so. When I was done he nodded to say he had taken it all in, then he spoke, his English also good. "I am very sorry about your loss, Madam.

But in a war one's aim is to eliminate one's enemy. I don't think our Thalaivar would want to meet you. Even if he does, he will not give your son back to you or give you a chance to meet him if he is held captive. I am sorry to say this but we are *officially* enemies and there is no agenda or protocol for handing over army soldiers held captive to their families." He gave me an apologetic grimace and I sighed.

"Why are we enemies, Captain? What's the point of this ridiculous war when I am allowed to enter and stay in your territory, when I am addressed as Madam, given food and board for free, and when a Captain of the LTTE postpones his duties to meet and comfort me?" I asked looking directly at him.

He looked pensive. I heard Moorthi sigh behind me as if he too felt the futility of the war.

"I understand Madam. But you and I are not the decision makers. Your son paid, most probably, with his life. The same or worse could happen to me or Moorthi over there. What can you and I do to change that? It is the nature of war. We don't have the power even to take decisions about our lives." His eyes had grown larger as he spoke. He was correct. We were all pawns, which he would not say out of fear or loyalty to his side. But his meaning was clear to me. We looked at each other speechlessly for a long moment. What more was there to say? Finally, we bade farewell with heavy hearts.

"Let's hope that there will be a day when we'll be friends. Thank you for everything Captain," I said with a deep sigh.

"Let's hope so Madam. Till then try to calm yourself. There is surely nothing you can do. You came so far. You are a brave woman. There aren't many women who would have come so far," he said with a polite nod.

I thanked him and turned to leave. The Captain asked Moorthi to escort me. Moorthi made arrangements for me to go back to the border. I went to say goodbye to Easwari Amma. I gave 5,000 rupees to the toddler who was her grandchild, as I was sure the lady would not accept money for her hospitality. I worshipped her before leaving the shack.

"I pray to god Ganesh to send your son home safe," she said as she embraced me. There were tears in her wrinkled eyes. Even Moorthi who was waiting by the palmyrah door looked sad.

We walked up the narrow path and came to a small junction where a man was waiting with a bicycle. He gave the bicycle to Moorthi and nodded respectfully.

"Please get on the cycle," Moorthi told me. That was the only means of transportation available for us. He pedaled all the way to the border. When we parted I held both of Moorthi's hands in mine and asked whether there was anything I could do for him.

"There is nothing I want, Madam. Just remember that we were as kind to you as we could be, with our slim means," he said.

"Thank you for everything, Moorthi. May the triple gem and the gods bless you," I said tearfully.

"May the gods bless you too Madam and may they send your son back to you." With that, he turned his bicycle and pedaled back. I sensed that he was not comfortable near the border.

I crossed the border and was soon met by a border patrol who took me to a small restaurant run by the Army where I could spend the night.

The following morning I left by bus and arrived in Colombo. From there I took a cab and returned to Kandy. It was 2 am when I arrived at my desolate home. I went into my bedroom and fell on my bed, weeping at the powerlessness of my situation, the futility of the journey I had taken.

Today is his 31st birthday and a year has passed since the war ended. I went to the Temple of the Tooth with a puja of milk rice to make an offering on behalf of my son, who is still missing.

The world expects me to believe that my son is dead. But how can I believe that without seeing his corpse? What if he is still living somewhere with a distorted memory so that he does not

remember who he is? Yesterday I read an article about a missing son coming home after 27 years. Isn't it possible that my son too might turn up one day at my door?

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THE LEGACY OF WAR

Easwarajanani Karunailingam

The unmercifully hot April sun burns Kilinochchi and the fan in Sarath Gunathilaka's tea stall circulates the hot air, made even hotter by the oil in his pan where he fries vadai. The heat is made worse for Sarath by the grinding and squealing of the Yal Devi train at the nearby station, the line having finally been restored, so that the train can come this far.

Sarath offers two vadais and a Necto buddy to a customer with a smile. He glances quickly at the clock on the wall then turns and looks through the window. As expected, Anu is returning from school, walking fast with her heavy school bag towards his tea stall. The weight of the school bag and the heat of the sun seem too much for Anu. She is bent forward and Sarath feels very sorry to see her in this state. Though 11 years old, she looks like she is seven. Sarath quickly takes the key hanging on the wall and hurries to the entrance.

"My school bag has torn," Anu says as she comes up to him, holding out the bag. "When Amma comes I'll have to ask her if she can buy a new one for me." She frowns as she knows her mother cannot afford a new bag.

"Oh, it's okay. Give it to me, I will see whether it can be repaired," Sarath says with a smile.

"It can't be repaired," Anu replies sorrowfully.

"No problem child, Amma will buy a new one for you." Sarath smiles reassuringly and Anu smiles back as she takes the key from his hand and runs towards her home. Sarath observes her torn school bag bumping along on her back. It is blue with the UNICEF stamp printed on it but looks greyer due to dust and dirt. The zip has come off the track and her Grade six history book is peeping out at a slant.

Sarath knows Anu's family hardships very well. When Anu's mother, Malar, was expecting, her father Navaneethan died in the war. To make ends meet, Anu's mother does road development

work and odd jobs. Every day after finishing her household work Malar sends her daughter Anu to school and gives her house key to Sarath. She comes back home at 5 p.m.

Anu opens the door quickly to get away from the heat. She removes her shoes outside and places the school bag in a corner once she enters. She pulls off her socks and feels her feet that are burnt through the thin soles of her shoes. She runs to the plastic barrel of water and soaks her feet with water. Then she takes a quick bath and rushes into the kitchen. "If I learn cycling quickly I can go to school and return home without burning my feet," she whispers to herself.

Anu opens the rice pot. There is enough rice for lunch and dinner. She puts some rice on a tin plate and opens the pot of curry. She draws three imaginary lines, dividing the curry into three portions, then takes one. For the last four days she has been eating rice and dhal curry. The lunch is cold. She doesn't care about this and eats it quickly. After finishing her meal, she washes her plate and goes outside. She closes the door and stares at the new bright pink slippers she has put on. After a moment she goes back indoors, slips into her old pair and then, shutting and locking the door, she skips towards Sarath's tea stall.

When she arrives, Sarath looks at Anu's feet. "Why didn't you wear your new slippers? Are they too small for you?"

"No. They might get broken while I learn cycling. I wish to use my new slippers carefully because you gave them to me," she adds with a smile.

"But I would be happy to get you another pair if the new pair breaks," Sarath says. Anu grins. She runs back and returns wearing her new slippers.

"I am ready now. Please give me the cycle," Anu cries, rubbing her hands together.

"Yes. Yes, come." He wheels the bicycle out from the shed behind the shop. "You are getting better and better each day, Anu," he says in an encouraging voice, testing whether the brake is okay. When he is in front of the shop, he holds the handle with his left

hand and the carrier with his right as she gets on.

"Don't hold the bicycle, I will not fall. Let me ride alone," Anu says with confidence in her eyes.

Sarath smiles. "Be careful then." He lets go of the bicycle. "Go straight and ride your bike away from the road." As Sarath instructed, Anu pedals the cycle in a straight line, away from the road.

As he watches her he finds himself thinking of Amandha, the daughter of his elder brother, a soldier who died in the war. Now Sarath and his brother's wife look out for Amandha's welfare. The death of his brother and the suffering of his sister-in-law and niece have made Sarath, himself an ex-military officer, come to hate the war. This hatred increased when he fought in the last phase of the war at Kilinochchi. One day he saw the dead body of a mother. Beside her, a child of about two years was searching for milk from her breast. After seeing this terrible scene he became totally opposed to war.

Now that the war is over, Sarath wants to do something for the people of Kilinochchi, which was the reason he set up a shop here. But his Sinhala is the obstacle. The Tamils here are afraid of Sinhala speaking people. They also do not know that Sarath is an ex-military man and he knows better than to tell them. To the people in the area he is known as "tea master". Although the people here hesitate to speak to him, partly due to the language difference, he is well loved by the children of the area. They enjoy spending time with him because he flies kites with them and plays cricket. Sarath knows that he needs time to befriend the adults, or so he tells himself to stay convinced that it is worthwhile sticking it out here. As part of his military training he learnt some Tamil but now, talking with the children, his Tamil is rapidly improving, and he is sure the people here will begin to trust him once they see the effort he is making to be one of them.

"My legs are hurting. I'm going to stop," Anu says in a tired voice as she rides up to his tea stall. She hops off and takes his bicycle around to park it in the proper place. Then she sits down next to him on a stool.

"You have enough time to learn cycling. Don't be in a rush, Anu. Look, you are already riding alone. That's really excellent," Sarath says in an encouraging voice. Anu smiles, happy at the praise. Sarath takes some murukku from his bottle, puts it in a bowl and gives it to Anu. He also gives her a milk packet.

"Thank you," Anu smiles again.

Looking through the doorway, she sees her mother walking towards them. "Oh, Amma has come early today. Amma I am here," Anu shouts. Malar gives her a quick glance and keeps walking. She looks different today. Usually Malar wears a brown shirt over her sari. After finishing her work she takes off the shirt and comes home only in a sari. But today she still has the shirt on. Sarath stands up expecting that she will, as usual, stop for a moment to talk about Anu's cycling and exchange pleasantries before continuing to her house. But Malar only nods briefly as she draws near the shop, looking like she intends to pass right by it.

Sarath comes out with Anu and calls out as she approaches, "You are looking tired today. You should have seen Anu, she was riding alone. After a week she will be able to come and pick you up," Sarath says with a laugh trying to cheer her up. Malar gives him a faded smile as she comes up to them.

"Any problem at your workplace?" Sarath asks.

"No, I am feeling tired."

But Sarath feels something has gone wrong at her workplace. He doesn't want to be too intrusive so he pats Anu on the back and says, "Okay, take care. Anu good night." He waves and Anu does the same as she follows her mother towards their house.

"Amma," Anu cries as she hurries to keep up with her mother, "now I can ride the cycle alone. Soon we can buy a cycle. I will go to school by cycle and also drop you at your workplace." They have reached their home and, since Anu has the key, she opens the door for her still silent mother. "Also my school bag is broken, I need a new one."

Malar runs into the house and sits down in front of her husband's garlanded photograph, hanging on the wall. She puts her head in

her hands.

This action of her mother's is new. Anu goes over to her cautiously and sits down. "What happened Amma? Why are you crying? Don't you have enough money to buy a cycle for me?"

Malar doesn't respond. Instead she is thinking of what her supervisor Sundaram said to her today. "Tomorrow is the last day. You think and decide."

Sundaram is an agent who hires daily paid workers to do odd jobs in connection with development work. He is also a money lender.

Malar is in debt to Sundaram. Her house was built under the Indian housing scheme, where the beneficiaries had to contribute a percentage of the money and their physical labour. People who were poor borrowed money at a high interest and made their contribution. Some people even mortgaged the deeds of their new houses to get the required money. Malar borrowed 50,000 rupees from Sundaram, giving the deeds of the new house as surety. Now she cannot pay even the interest.

Sundaram lends money to women like Malar who don't have family support and then tries to bring them under his control. He has been trying to coerce Malar into marrying him saying, "However much you try, you won't be able to return my money. The house is already my property. But don't worry, I will keep you also." Sundaram, since he hired her, has insisted that she cook and bring meals for him. Malar is afraid of him so she cooks in the morning and takes the meal to him at their workplace. He has threatened that if she doesn't bring food in the morning he will come home for dinner. With the other two women who have borrowed money from him, he scolds them using bad language and demands they return his money. At the beginning when they borrowed money, they did not know that Sundaram was a womanizer who lends money to women and later compels them to have sex with him. Malar only half believes this proposal of marriage, sure that Sundaram, if he does end up marrying her, will desert her or kick her out of her home, once she is his wife.

As usual today also, when Malar went to work, Sundaram tried

to force her to agree to have him. Though she is quite good looking, it is not her beauty that is the chief source of his attraction to her. He is interested in her because she is a lonely young woman without relations, a woman he can dominate. Sundaram says tomorrow is the last date to repay the borrowed money, if not she has to marry him. Malar is afraid and has agreed to repay the money tomorrow. "Oh that's nice," Sundaram said sarcastically when she told him, probably knowing that she had nowhere to get the money from. "If you don't give me the money tomorrow, I will come to your home and get it. Even better, my darling, I will come to your home tonight itself and collect it from you," Sundaram added with a sexy look.

"Please don't come to my home, I will give your money tomorrow," Malar replied and immediately left her workplace returning home early.

"Amma, Amma what happened?" Anu shakes her shoulder. Malar opens her eyes and her mind comes back to her present surroundings. Her face is sweating. She jumps up, goes to the door and checks whether it is properly locked, her hands shaking. Anu looks at her mother with confusion. She thinks that her mother is angry because she asked for a new school bag and cycle.

Malar walks into the kitchen. She puts rice and dhal curry in two plates and gives one to Anu. Anu notices that her mother holds the plate of rice but does not eat, her face troubled.

"Amma what happened? Please tell me. Are you angry with me?" Anu's voice breaks, about to cry.

"Anu, do you know how much in love your father and I were? Then this war came and flattened our newly built house. We ran away from this area to save at least our lives and yours. Despite our loss, we all had each other. Your father was the biggest gift in my life. But now I am living only for the sake of you… but…"

Malar stops and begins to weep aloud. Anu also cries afraid and bewildered. She looks at her father in the photo, wearing a wearing a pink and blue checked shirt. She never knew her father but she has heard so much about him from her mother. Anu's father Navaneethan now only gives his smile. Anu closes her eyes and prays silently. "Father you look kind, strong and handsome. Please

come in my mother's dream and tell her not to cry."

Suddenly Malar gets up and washes her hands and face. She makes Anu's bed. "Anu eat quickly and go to sleep," she orders in a broken voice. Anu does not want to make her mother sad, so she eats quickly. All the time that she is eating, her mother stands rigid by the kitchen counter, lost in another world, arms stiff by her sides, fists clenched. She has never seen her mother like this before; it is like another person has taken possession of her mother's body, a demented person.

"Are you not going to sleep?" Anu asks as she gets ready for bed.

Malar does not respond. She goes and sits again below her husband's photograph gazing up at him. Her thoughts go back to the days when she was being courted by Navaneethan.

"Navaneethan, how much do you love me?" she would often ask him.

"I love you as much as you love me. Enough, dear?" he would say playfully, and when she would pretend to pout, he'd laugh, kiss her and declare, "Malar, I wish I could decorate you with gold ornaments. But I am not rich enough to do so."

"You are priceless Navaneethan," was always her reply. "More than all the gold in the world that you could decorate me with."

After taking a long last look at the photograph as if she will never see it again, Malar sighs and starts to get ready for bed. Once she is lying down, she covers her face with her sheet. She closes her eyes tightly. Within a few seconds, the image of Sundaram's drunken face with his red blinking eyes comes to her. She pushes off the sheet and listens to some dogs barking on the road. She knows she cannot get the money to pay Sundaram. Soon he will come with his demands and she will have no choice but to give in. He will come to live here with her daughter. The thought of Anu having that man for a father is too much to bear. She cannot do that to her daughter. And she doesn't trust Sundaram and what he might do to Anu when she comes of age. The thought of her daughter violated by that man causes a sound of frustrated despair

to escape from her.

She gets up from the mat, thinks for a minute, then quietly steps into the kitchen. She picks up a sack filled with coconuts and places it against the door. She looks at Anu who is fast asleep. Suddenly she hears the sound of footsteps moving around her house. She swallows with fear and closes her eyes tightly. After a moment, the footsteps die away. "Enough!" she thinks to herself fiercely. "I have had enough. If I can't save myself, then at least I can save my daughter."

The next day Sarath Gunathilaka opens the huge rusted padlock of the tea stall at 6 a.m. as usual and rolls up the door. He is so busy with his task that it takes him a moment to notice some policemen gathered in front of Malar's house. There is also a police jeep there. Sarath drops the padlock and runs towards the house. As he draws near a couple of policemen emerge from the house with Anu. When she sees Sarath, she cries out his name and runs to him crying, throwing her arms around his waist.

"Oh my God! Anu tell me, dear. What happened?" Sarath cries, but Anu continues to weep, unable to speak.

"I am Sarath, ex-military man. What happened?" Sarath asks in Sinhala of a policeman who has come up to them.

"Are you related to this girl?" the policeman asks in Sinhala.

"No. I am from Anuradhapura. I am running a tea stall here, I know this family well," Sarath replies.

The policeman points to an old man in a checked sarong and white shirt who is standing with the police. "Last night that old man saw the mother of this child, walking fast. Something about her agitation worried him and he followed her. She went to the railway station nearby and got down on the track. Once he realized what she was going to do, he shouted and rushed towards her, but she ran down the track in the direction of the approaching Yal Devi train. As there is nobody to take responsibility for the body, the government authorities will bury her. This poor girl is now an orphan," he says sympathetically. Sarath's eyes fill with tears. He can feel his legs trembling. The policeman nods to him and walks

away. The jeep starts up, the policemen get in and it takes off in a cloud of dust.

By now a crowd of villagers have gathered and Sarath sees the looks of sympathy on their faces as they gaze at Anu. Yet, he knows that they don't have the money to take responsibility for another child. Most of the families here are woman-headed families, their earnings are from their daily labour. War has taken away not only their assets, but also their strength and hopes.

The people start to disperse. The old man who witnessed Malar's suicide comes to Sarath. He knows that old man, Krishnan. Krishnan lost his wife and children in the war. He is a well-educated retired postmaster, fluent in Tamil and Sinhala. At nights he sits under a margosa tree by his hut for a long time, lost in pensive thought. But sometimes he comes over and chats with Sarath.

"Thambi, only the bombing has stopped but the effects of war are continuing. Now people are fighting to live peacefully," he says. "What will become of this little child?"

"Anu is my daughter," Sarath declares, realizing as he speaks that he has made a decision.

After a moment Krishnan nods to say he has made the right decision. "Let things that could not be done in my generation start in yours. May Sri Lanka be a land with peace and harmony. Kill the legacy of war with kindness," he says. He touches Anu who is leaning her exhausted head against Sarath's chest, still clinging to him.

Sarath looks carefully at Anu. He takes her up in his arms and kisses her on the forehead. "Don't worry my child. I am like your father from now on. I promise you, I will never make you cry. Take your valuable things from the house and come with me," says Sarath confidently.

"Where?" Anu asks.

"We are going to Anuradhapura," Sarath replies.

Anu goes in and takes her torn school bag, her mother's overshirt and her father's photograph. She also puts on her new slippers. Sarath takes Anu's hand and looks for a long moment at her tiny

house. Her hand feels small and fragile in his large war-scarred hand. "If Anu's father had not died in the war she would never have suffered like this," he thinks to himself. "This terrible war has killed the husbands of many women like Malar. I am also partly responsible for these cries, like I am responsible for Anu's tears."

He knows now that living here in Kilinochchi he can't make much of a difference to the lives of the people around him. He can however make a difference in one life.

The next day, when it is nearly time for the train, Sarath locks up his tea stall for the last time, then takes his cycle out of the shed. He loads his suitcase and Anu's school bag, which now contains her father's photograph and her mother's shirt, onto the carrier. Then he sits Anu on the seat and begins to wheel the bicycle. Anu keeps an arm around him, feeling protected, holding him tightly. The ride to the nearby station is slow but smooth.

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EVERYONE'S A TIGER UNTIL PROVEN OTHERWISE

Lilani Anuruddhika

The screech of the train's brakes, the jostle of iron and a sudden jolt made Duminda open his eyes and look around. Finally at Pettah. The announcer started his usual chanting: "The express train that arrived at platform number…" Duminda considered it a waste of the vocal cords. Everyone knew it was Pettah – the centre of Colombo's hustle and bustle, buses going everywhere, a million feet treading in various directions. Duminda got off his train and walked towards the station exit. He soon came to the queue that he hated — a grumbling line of men and women at the exit, the army checking every bag, big and small. A thousand complaints were written on a thousand impatient faces, but no one dared utter a word.

"Where are you from and what reason do you have for coming to Pettah?"

The officer's sharp words made Duminda stop his mental criticism and focus on answering. "I work at the Central Bank. I'm from Hikkaduwa."

"Hm. Next!"

Duminda hurried away as the officer started to harass the next person in the long queue.

These constant checks and interrogations irritated the hell out of him, but everybody went through the same suffering. To Security, everyone was a Tiger until proven otherwise, and if you were Tamil, the grilling was worse.

Duminda hurried towards the buses, jostled by the crowd. He had heard someone calling, "Mahaththaya! Mahaththaya!" At first he didn't pay attention but when the cry became more insistent, he turned and saw a scrawny boy dressed in dusty black shorts and a dirty cream T-shirt running towards him. The boy was gesturing intently to him and waving Duminda's wallet. "You dropped it, Mahaththaya. I didn't touch anything. You can check."

Duminda took a glance through. Not a rupee was missing. It was a rare thing, this honesty. For a moment, Duminda studied the boy, who had a mature look well beyond his age, which he guessed to be 12 or 13.

"What is your name?" he asked the boy finally.

"Kumaran, Mahaththaya."

A Tamil. He should have guessed from his strangely accented Sinhala. Duminda didn't care. Tamil or not, the boy had been honest. That was the only important thing. On closer examination, Duminda noticed the unkempt look of the boy, his starved and weather-beaten body. Yet he had bright eyes, the fire of life burning in them. Duminda took Kumaran to a nearby café and treated him to some short eats, which quickly vanished. The boy was clearly hungry.

"Shall I order more?" Duminda asked, truly feeling sorry for the boy.

"No," Kumaran replied contentedly, smiling to say he was full.

"You are a good boy, son." Then impulsively he declared, "I would like to buy you a meal every day, if you will allow me."

The boy examined him, clearly measuring Duminda to ascertain his intent. "Okay," he said. "Mahaththaya seems to be a good person."

And so their friendship started.

Every morning, before running to catch the bus to Fort from the train station, Duminda stopped to have a chat with Kumaran and treat him to breakfast. Though Kumaran looked about 12 or 13, Duminda discovered he was 15 years old. Kumaran, whose Sinhala was very good, had a lot to talk about once Duminda got him started. He found out that Kumaran's parents were killed in the 1983 riots and that he had lived for a short while with his uncle but his uncle's wife did not want to keep him. "A stray boy can never be trusted," she had said and his uncle had no choice but to get rid of him. Whatever wealth they had was hers. They lived in her house. "My uncle brought me here one day, and told me to try and survive as best I could," Kumaran told Duminda, his tone

not so much sad as contemplative. "I didn't want to make more trouble for him, so I agreed."

Duminda felt sad to hear all this, but he also admired the boy for being able to put his uncle's interests ahead of his own. "You live alone then?"

"Yes. But I have friends. Shivadasan, the cobbler, he 'keeps an eye on me,' as he says, and keeps me out of trouble. This life is good. But, it is not safe. Especially with what is going on."

"What do you mean not safe?" Duminda wanted to know what threatened this innocent boy.

"Can't you see Mahaththaya? Your people kill our people, our people kill yours. What will they get by killing each other? Nothing. Yet still they go on killing and killing and killing … and then, who will be left to live and cheer for the victory of either side? My parents always taught me that this country is for all of us. I think now, they were mistaken. Each side is trying to grab the country and chase the other away."

Duminda was reluctant to accept such a pessimistic view of the country but, in a corner of his heart, he knew the boy was right. It was useless and terrible, the way the government and the rebels fought over the country.

"You ought to go into politics someday, son," Duminda replied, trying to lighten the mood.

"Maybe. Someday, I'll do something for my people," Kumaran said, a faraway look settling on his face.

In the following weeks, during their many conversations, Kumaran asked Duminda a number of questions: where he worked, what he did, where he lived, who he was married to. He was sad to hear that Duminda and his wife, who had met during their university days, couldn't have any children because she'd had an operation to remove her womb due to the threat of a cancer. They had not been married when she fell sick, yet, despite not being able to have children, he had still wanted to marry her.

Duminda felt it was easy to talk to this boy, who listened attentively, asked genuine questions, and then gave appropriate

responses and comments.

"Sometimes, when I see other people with children, I feel sad," Duminda confessed a few days after the conversation about his childless state. "I love children. You Kumaran, have greatly reduced that pain, though. You are almost like a son now."

Duminda felt a rush of emotions when he saw the look of happiness in Kumaran's face at these words.

Duminda worried a lot about Kumaran and would tell him, "Son, always be careful. The country is not very safe. Don't talk with suspicious people and don't accept parcels from unknown persons, whatever price they pay you for taking it somewhere."

"I know Mahaththaya," Kumaran would reassure him with a laugh. "But I do have to work sometimes as a porter. I have to find money to eat. Thanks to you, now I get good food once a day. You are a different Sinhalese, unlike those who look at me insultingly and say, 'Tamil bastard, who knows if you are a Tiger cub or not.'"

Kumaran's calm repetition of these words of hatred made Duminda's heart heavy with fear for the boy's future. 'God,' he thought, 'when will this end? When will these poor little children see society looking after them, instead of looking down on them? How long will they brainwash our children to hate those who are from a different race?' Duminda wanted to take the boy somewhere safe. He was not a father, but he felt as if this was his own son.

About two months after their first meeting, Duminda told Kumaran one morning that he wouldn't be coming for a few days. His wife's brother, an army officer, had got hit by a landmine and his leg would have to be cut off. He needed to stay back in Hikkaduwa to be there for his wife and her family.

Kumaran looked sorry and somewhat guilty. "You are so good to me, Mahaththaya, and yet my people hurt you." Then, after a pensive silence, he added, "You are so good to me, yet others of your race insult me and my people … I wish I could put an end to this!" he exclaimed, with a fervent look in his eyes.

"It's not your fault Kuma, it's not my fault either," Duminda reassured him. "You are just a child. And I am an ordinary man. All

we can do is wait for this madness to end. I will be back as soon as I can; till then, stay safe, and keep away from mischief," Duminda said jovially to try and add a little humour to their conversation. Kumaran nodded and watched Duminda walk away with a grave expression on his young face.

Duminda stayed at home for a week, instead of the two, three days that he had told Kumaran. On the day he came back to work, he got off the train and hurried to their usual meeting place, a large mango tree with a CD stall under it. Kumaran always waited there, saying he loved to hear the newest Bollywood songs played free of charge. And there he was, Kumaran, waiting as usual.

"Hey, boy, come here," Duminda called out and Kumaran's dusty face lit up.

"Mahaththaya! I thought that maybe you wouldn't come to meet me again," Kumaran cried.

"No Kumaran. I'll never forget you. Things got worse. My wife's brother's leg got infected and I was very busy running to and from hospital. Thankfully, he's okay now. His leg was cut at the knee. His left leg."

Kumaran didn't reply. He stared ahead. His face looked as if it was stretched at the edges with the effort of holding onto to his usual carefree expression.

"Hey boy, what's the matter?"

No answer. And then, as if he suddenly realized that Duminda had questioned him, Kumaran turned with a forced smile. "Mahaththaya, we cause you a lot of trouble, isn't that so? See, if there were no Tamils, there wouldn't have been this war. Nothing." Kumaran's words were heavy, his face clouding over again.

Duminda felt sorry. Being a Tamil was difficult these days. "Oh c'mon boy! Not all Tamils are to blame for this mess. You shouldn't blame your whole race like that. The problem is just with some Tamils, not all. And some Sinhalese too of course. Kumaran, you are a good boy. Don't worry. This war will come to an end." But Kumaran continued to look unhappy, his fists clenched.

"I am late for the bus already, Kumaran. I have to go. Here's

a chocolate bar for you and some money for breakfast. Fix your mood boy! I want to see a smile tomorrow." Duminda patted him gently on the shoulder and left, with a troubled glance back at the boy.

Pettah gulped the boy's figure in the thronging crowds as Duminda walked away to the pedestrian bridge that would take him over to the other side where the buses stopped. Every day, before going to office, Duminda bought the newspaper to read in the bus. He approached the newspaper stall and peered in across the counter.

"Ah sir! You came to buy the paper. Lakbima as usual?" The man at the stall, a fat, bald-headed mudalali, smiled broadly at Duminda, his betel-stained mouth looking like one of the many tunnels through which the train travelled.

"Yes yes. The same. Any special news today?" Duminda inquired, looking around the bus station. Among the workers in their office attire, he could see the camouflaged uniforms of soldiers who moved through the crowd looking for security risks.

"Apo, the war is getting worse sir. Yes, it is. These bastards are hitting like mad, sir. And now they are said to have sent their suicide bombers to Colombo. Some of them are even children sir! See what dogs these LTTE bastards are," the man went on. Duminda felt his patriotism was limited to selling his newspapers. If he could impress his customers with the horrors of the war, he knew that they'd buy newspapers, just to read about the war.

Duminda bought Lakbima and went to board his bus. He sat on a corner seat and started reading.

"CASUALTIES RISING IN THE WANNI" read the headline.

Duminda folded the newspaper after reading the article, and glanced out the window. Because of the speed of the bus, the passing buildings looked like they were being fast-forwarded on a film.

Duminda was an accountant on the fourth floor of the Central Bank. All that day as he worked hard, spending long, tiresome hours in front of a computer, the newspaper man's words, mixed

with the words in the paper, echoed in his head. Suicide bombers… children… Kumaran… Oh no, wait. Kumaran? How did he even enter into these thoughts? He was only a boy. Just a little boy. But a Tamil boy. He realized he didn't really know anything about Kumaran, who his parents were, where he came from. He knew nothing at all, except what Kumaran had told him, and that could all be a lie. Duminda shooed away his thoughts. Kumaran was a poor boy. Not a killer. He must not let himself get carried away with all these sensational headlines.

The next day, as if in apology for these thoughts, Duminda arrived with some new clothes for Kumaran. He could barely contain his keenness to give him the clothes, impatient with the delay of the security checking. He rushed to the mango tree. And there he was, his boy. Seeing Kumaran in the same dusty black shorts, the torn cream coloured T-shirt, now dirty and dusty, Duminda felt excitement at the surprise that he had for the boy.

"Hey boy, wear this, okay?" Duminda said, tossing the bag casually at Kumaran, inside which were a new pair of black shorts and a purple T-shirt. "You've been wearing that same outfit for ages. It's time to change."

Kumaran looked inside but, much to Duminda's surprise, a glum expression came over the boy's face. "Yes Mahaththaya, it's time… to change."

"Cheer up boy. You are not in debt to me, if you are thinking of that. Just promise me that you'll wear it tomorrow," Duminda said, for some reason feeling even guiltier about his thoughts yesterday.

"Why don't you stay at home tomorrow and rest, Mahaththaya? You always work hard. You'll get sick," Kumaran suddenly said. He looked pleadingly at Duminda to agree with him.

"Stay at home? Rest? Ane! Ane boy! Do I look like an old man who might drop dead right in front of you? Of course I am coming to work tomorrow. Why shouldn't I?" Duminda was amused at Kumaran's sudden concern for his health. This must be the reason he had been glum yesterday too. What a strange boy, what a good boy, to think so much about him, to worry about him in this way.

"But it's good to take a rest now and then Mahaththaya. Colombo is not so safe these days." The boy suddenly sounded like a grown up man, advising a youth. For a moment, Duminda's suspicions from yesterday rose in his mind but, having dismissed them before, he pushed them aside, again feeling guilty as he looked down at this dirty, half-starved little boy. Kuma was just concerned about him.

"Okay, okay my son, it's kind of you to worry about me, but put it out of your mind. I am in good health." He glanced at his watch. "I have to go to work now, the train was late again. Here, here is some money for breakfast. I will bring you a story book tomorrow. Now I must go. See you tomorrow! Don't forget to wear those new clothes," Duminda called out as he walked away. Before he turned the corner, he glanced back and saw Kumaran standing where he had left him, clutching his bundle of new clothes and staring after him. "That boy," Duminda said to himself, "how sweet of him to worry so much about me."

Next day, the sun glared like a Hacks toffee, red and burning. The air of Pettah smelled of dust and rust and clogged drains. A good bad day, Duminda thought. Good as it was not raining, bad as it was unusually humid and hot for the end of January.

Today the train was on time and so he had plenty of time for breakfast. Duminda walked to their usual place to meet Kumaran, eager to see him dressed in the purple T-shirt with white stripes and the black pair of shorts. But, when he turned the corner and glanced towards the mango tree, he saw that Kumaran was not there. Once he got to the mango tree, Duminda stood in its shade looking around. Maybe Kumaran had gone to change into his new clothes. Time passed. One minute. 15 minutes. Half an hour. No sight of Kumaran. The rush hour buses roared off, taking away some of the noise with them. All Duminda could hear now was the rustle of the leaves, the *hm, hm* of pigeons, as if they knew what had happened to Kumaran but wouldn't tell him, and the two-four beat of the trains as they came and went.

Duminda could not wait any longer. He was already late. He started to walk towards the buses, disappointed. "What could have

prevented him from coming? Something must have gone terribly wrong," he said to himself.

Duminda was still perplexed and worried when he reached the entrance of the Central Bank. As he went through his work duties, various possibilities flitted through his head. 'Kumaran might have fallen ill, it rained yesterday and maybe he got wet. Kumaran might have come early, waited, and then left. I was late yesterday too, so maybe that's what happened. Kumaran must have felt shy in his new clothes. Kumaran…' His thoughts were interrupted by a loud crashing, as if something had rammed into the building. He jumped up, looking at his colleagues who were staring at each other in shock. A second crashing sound, followed by rapid gunfire, sent them all to the windows to see what was happening below. A lorry had rammed its way through the gate into the building, and masked men were exchanging fire with the bank's security guards.

"The Tigers are attacking, that lorry must have bombs in it!" someone shouted, and they all started screaming and shouting, some women wailing. Yet no one knew what to do, where to go. The next moment, as if someone had issued an order, they were all rushing in a single human flood towards the door. Duminda managed to get out of the office into the corridor. People were shoving and pushing each other to get into the already overcrowded elevators. Duminda rushed to take the stairs. Before he reached them however, there was a terrible shattering sound as the lorry full of explosives went off. The building quivered and shuddered as if it was made of cardboard. Chunks of the ceiling began to fall in around them, and the walls began to crack.

"Get under the tables! Don't run out! They might have guns!" Duminda heard someone shout. Inside his head, everything had gone numb. There was another loud crash and Duminda felt himself thrown off his feet. He fell hitting a glass partition that shattered into shards around his fallen body. Duminda struggled to raise himself. All around him he could hear wails, groans, screams. There was blood all over him. His or someone else's, he didn't know. He could hear people shouting, sirens, ambulances.

He managed with great effort to roll over on his back and, as he did so, a part of the ceiling fell on him, trapping his legs. "Help me, help me," he cried weakly holding out his hands to the people rushing by, jumping over him, some stepping on him. The world began to blur. He felt as if he was rapidly being pulled backwards down a corridor.

The last thought that rose in his mind was Kumaran's warning about staying away, his grave face as he spoke. No, no, he would not believe that of his boy. He would never believe that of his boy.

The world went black for him.

Lilani Anuruddhika *is a young writer, still schooling in Galle. She prefers to talk of love, forgiveness and friendship rather than of hatred and war. Lilani wants to become an inspiration to others and believes that we are given our lives by God to keep others happy.*

POEMS

Rubatheesan Sandranathan

THE DREAMING OF A DREAM

I had my terror dream yesterday.
Maama was digging a bunker in the rain
to keep his family safe from shelling,
not too deep but wide enough to shrink everyone into.
I was standing yards away eating kurakkan pittu.
A screeching sound; never knew it was reaching us.
I watched him spatter,
human flesh mixed with soil; blood rain.
He dug his own grave.
I dug out the rest of the bunker, never cried.
I wash every day to get rid of my sins.
A bloodbath.
Maama smiles back at me,
I smell nasty.

I walked over dead bodies,
just human flesh I robbed.
Jewels, thalis, earrings,
anklets, nose rings, wedding bands,
wallets, some with money,
some with family photos,
folded in two.

I took everything except their souls,
didn't look at the faces,
innocent in death.
Built my empire thus.

Can't sleep at night,
some come and dance.

Amma took her life when
she found out about her beloved son.
"I should have killed you when I gave birth.
Like your father,
real cunning bastard."
She regretted giving me milk from her breasts; everything.
I was just sad.
Then I started to dream for them,
a coward with his pen.
Least I can do,
cheating myself with characters,
telling manipulated stories to the world.
The poet writing this poem
took his Maama's ring.
Now they are doing good in sweet heaven.
Can you see a Phoenix?
It's me.

A FAMOUS GIRL FROM AN UNKNOWN VILLAGE

Maybe I am famous.
'She is a former cadre,'
'She was raped by the army,'
this is the certification of my purity.
Two legged animals
with their scanning looks

rape me everyday
top to bottom,
ask me for one night stands.
Like every girl, I used to dream of Him.
He is far away now
beyond belief.

CEILING FAN

May 17 2009 AD 9:28 GMT
Little girl knew
the moment of facing death,
sweating, panicked
running to stay alive,
dark faces hiding their fears,
"Don't worry child, it's going to be okay,"
bunker deep and dark like the people,
breath and heartbeat one on top of the other.
Amma says, "Give me your hand,"
lifts her up with one arm,
tight to her hip.
The little girl lifts her Barbie
with one arm, tight to hip.

A machine in the air with whirling fans
announces the coming of angels.
Then the show begins.
Fighter jets circle,
bees flying to a rhythm,
Barbie's leg is broken
but she is still beautiful,
market becomes a cemetery

the ghosts rambling, murmuring to each other.
Little girl asks the important question:
"Amma, appa enga?"
Mother, where is father?
Over and over the same question with tears.
"Saniyan, summa erudi."
Fool, be quiet.
A wolf whistle turns into a shrilling hurricane,
A ball of fire punches the earth,
blood gushes from her left ear.

May 18 2009 AD 22:30 GMT
In a hospital bed,
no Amma or Barbie,
can't open her eyes
pain in every cell
of her eyeballs.
When she finally does,
a helicopter whirrs above her head.

Rubatheesan Sandranathan *is an independent journalist from Jaffna, now based in Colombo. Currently he is attached to the Sunday Times*

VOICE OF A SOLDIER

Sapna Supunsara

"Worship your father, Praneeth!" Swetha says while giving me a proud smile.

"Thaththe! I will be like you one day and I'll fulfill my duty to this country," Praneeth says as he bends down and touches my feet.

"I know you'll be a great soldier," I say as I glance at the photograph of myself on the table next to where I sit. It was taken soon after my training was completed and it shows me with my best friend Sugath and other privates who were in the same batch. We are all wearing our uniform which I was so proud to put on that day. It was the first and last photo that I was able to take with my friends.

Praneeth at 14 has my strong build and Swetha's bright eyes. He has always wanted to do good things for his country and has said so, since he was small. But today on his 14th birthday, I see that he is serious about a career in the military. I sigh and look at Swetha, both of us thinking so many thoughts about the future.

"I need to see those eyes again," I said as I touched his skin as soft as a flower. Praneeth was only three months old when I went off to join the Sri Lankan army. My widowed father had insisted on this because I had been so good at cadets. Slowly I had come to see that he was right, that I had a talent for the army and could do some good by serving my country. Though my decision worried Swetha, my determination to protect my country was strong enough that she finally accepted my decision.

"Please be careful." Her sudden grip on my arm made me still for a moment. Then I kissed her on the cheek, kissed my baby once more and left our house, not wanting to look back, afraid I would

lose my will. In the battlefield there is nobody to protect us because we are the guardians of every living being in this country.

After a long journey by bus I arrived at the Diyathalawa training camp. Seeing the faces of the soldiers at the entrance, their trained bodies and military precision, I felt nervous about my ability to survive training and make a success of myself. Gathering myself together, I went up to them and showed them my papers. They looked them over and admitted me.

When I entered the camp the first thing I noticed was the neatness and cleanliness all around me. There were different varieties of flowers nicely planted in different patterns. There were about 300 soldiers training in the camp. In front of the dorm assigned to me, were a group of soldiers chatting and laughing with each other while adjusting their uniforms and polishing their boots, though they were already polished. I halted some distance from them, unsure.

"What are you doing standing there? Come over and join us," a young soldier called out to me smiling. He reminded me of my best friend who always loved to start new friendships.

"What's your name?" he asked as I came up to them.

"Viraj, and you?"

"Sugath. I am new as well. I just found out how tough the training here is," he said with a wry smile, gesturing to the other soldiers who laughed knowingly.

Every morning we had to run 15 kilometres carrying logs on our shoulders. Then we practiced shooting for hours. Throughout our training there were only a few who didn't get any punishments. I had many because I was not a punctual person since childhood. Sometimes I had to hide in the mud and shoot for a whole day. The worst thing was bathing with cold water at three in the morning.

"How is your family? Did you get any letters?" Sugath often asked.

I would nod because Swetha wrote once, sometimes twice a week, often sending a photo of Praneeth who was changing all the time. "I am worried about my son," I would often say as emptiness

spread through me. "He will forget who I am." I missed Praneeth a lot, even more than Swetha.

"Maybe next week we might get holidays." Sugath took up a photo of his beloved fiancée and started to talk about her as he often did. He was going to marry her during his next holidays. To keep ourselves happy, we talked often about our future plans once this war was over.

We didn't get our holidays as we were sent to the operation in Thoppigala. Every day soldiers were killed by the LTTE as it was a jungle area that was difficult to fight in. As front line soldiers we were the first ones to put ourselves in danger, but we all had courage and a strong desire to see the end of the war. Not long after I joined the army, fear vanished from my soul forever when Sugath said one day, "I am ready to give even my life to save my country." He was so firm in saying this that I felt I had to match his courage too.

As the war grew more intense, we worried about more and more bomb attacks. Some days we didn't even get a chance to sleep very much. Our goal was achieved in the East soon after the battle at Thoppigala. The entire Eastern Province was captured by our armed forces and the LTTE evicted from the area. We were next sent to the North for new operations in Kilinochchi and Omanthai.

I still remember the day Sugath pushed me aside roughly as we were walking through a field in Omanthai. I turned to him annoyed and found him staring at the ground. I had nearly stepped on a trap made by the LTTE. He had sharp eyes and keen battle instincts.

That day we had to walk several miles through the jungle as we had to capture a large area of Kilinochchi. I was walking along when suddenly I felt as if my leg had slipped. I glanced down and saw a burst of blood on my shin.

"Hey!!! Your leg is bleeding," Sugath shouted. "How do you feel? Do you want some water? You've been shot by a sniper."

I took the bottle from my rucksack slowly, grimacing.

"Are you in very bad pain?" Sugath asked seeing my expression.

"Yes…" I moved my leg slightly. By now the others in our troop

had gathered around. The corporal who was our commander came to take a look at me too. "Soldier," he said to Sugath, "take him back to base. I will radio base to send our medical team to meet you."

"Come on, it's time to go," Sugath said once the rest of our troop had left. He took his rucksack along with mine and picked up his gun.

We had to walk back through the jungle for about two kilometres to get to base. All the while, the sound of firing drummed in my ears. To avoid getting shot, we decided to creep like snakes along the ground. We had slithered along like this for some time when suddenly Sugath cried out, stiffened and collapsed, arms spread out on the ground. Before I could react, I heard the sound of running footsteps. I turned expecting to see the enemy and was relieved to see it was the medical team. The casualty soldiers put Sugath and me on stretchers and took us to the ADS, the Advance Dressing Station, where injured soldiers were treated.

When we reached the Station, the doctor there said, "Corporal… it's useless sending him to the Medical Dressing Station." Even though I was in great pain, I propped myself up on my arms and looked searchingly at the doctor. He nodded at me and smiled sympathetically. I knew what he was trying to imply. Sugath was beyond medical aid.

In the days that passed as I got better, I mourned the loss of my friend. It was only two weeks to his wedding and he had been daydreaming about it even though we were struggling with all our strength at every moment in this battle. Losing him was a hard blow to me and to our assault team. He had gifted his life to our country.

After I recovered, I became even more determined to see the end of the war, remembering often how my friend had said he would give his life for his country. I always went to whatever temple was nearby and worshipped the Lord Buddha. Every time I went, I would think of my family and hope that soon I would see them and worship alongside my mother and wife at our village temple. I

dreamt about my son every night. The situation was turning more terrible as the war escalated, more and more soldiers dying.

I was assigned to operations in Mullaitivu. My days were fatiguing as we were constantly attacking and soldiers died from unexpected bomb attacks and anti-personnel mines. Every day I was thankful for my luck. But then finally my luck left me and one day I fell to the ground in a pool of blood. My leg had been injured. Our section commander called out to our platoon sergeant. I don't remember much more of what happened. I lost consciousness and woke up in the Palali hospital. I was then taken to the army hospital in Colombo, still delirious, still unaware of what had happened to me.

The day I finally regained consciousness is one I will never forget. I awoke to find that I was facing the window, my head turned in that direction. I raised my hand to ward off the light and looked around the hospital room. What had happened before I lost consciousness slowly came back to me. I started to pull myself up but felt a curious lightness, an emptiness somewhere in me. I tried to move my legs and then noticed with dawning horror the way the sheet and blanket dipped below my knees. I cried out and the nurse came running. In her eyes, I saw the truth of my condition. 'I will never be able to run, never be able to feel the warmth of the ground under my feet,' was the first anguished thought that tumbled through me.

In the days that followed, I was in deep shock. However, that soon wore off and reality set in. Every time I thought of Swetha, I felt paralysed with fear. How could I tell her? I drove myself crazy thinking about it the whole day. I longed for my friend Sugath. If he was here, he would have taught me how to face the problem.

As I slowly recovered, I saw many other soldiers in the same situation as myself. I talked often with the soldier in the next bed.

"Are you afraid of facing society, that people will see you as a cripple?" he asked me.

"No… never," I answered.

"Then… do you hate yourself?" he asked curiously.

"Yeah... I do..." I said quickly. Losing my legs made me hate myself.

"Never do that! Never hate, because your hatred will pull you down to darkness where you cannot find any light!"

I went over his words several times. He was warning me about what my future would be if I went on hating myself.

A few days after that conversation I finally called Swetha.

"How is our baby?" was my first question.

"He is fine… Viraj what happened to you? You didn't call or send us a letter since you started operation Sathjaya," Swetha cried.

"I… we were attacking continuously. So I didn't get a chance to call you or write a letter," I said after a moment.

"When are you getting holidays?" she asked.

"Next week," were the only words I could spit out. How could I tell the truth? What would their future be? My son was only one year when I last saw him.

"Did you get through to your wife?" the soldier asked when I returned to my bed, hobbling on my crutches. I had told him that I'd gone to make the dreaded call.

"Yeah… but I lied to her," I said.

"I can understand that," he said. "But when they see you, they will be shocked. Are you ready to go home?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes…" I replied reluctantly as I got back into bed.

Later, our battalion commander, Colonel Kulasekara, came to talk to me.

"You did a great job for our country!" he assured me. "You shouldn't be worried, we are always with you. I have appointed an officer to help you if you need anything. You can win back your life. Get your strength back, Viraj." He shook hands with me and left. He had come to tell me that I was being discharged the next day.

The journey back home made me feel nauseated; my lack of legs made me feel unsteady in a vehicle, like a ship rocking in the

waves.

When we arrived at my house, Swetha came running to the door, carrying our baby. I spent a few minutes in the jeep, gathering myself together, and then I slowly got down. She didn't move an inch, just looked at me straight, examining my body, my crutches, and my lack of legs. I hobbled over to her, thinking of Sugath, remembering that I was a hero. I had given my limbs for my country. I recalled my colonel's words that I could win back my life.

"What happened to you?" she whispered.

The baby started to cry. Trying to hide her tears, Swetha touched my shoulder. "Viraj, come inside … I'll help you." She struggled to smile.

I shook my head. "I can help myself. I can win back my life. I still have my strength, Swetha."

Soon after I came home, many friends and relatives visited as if I was a newborn child. Their visits made me increasingly annoyed. They only asked about what had happened, but nobody asked about how or what I felt. They offered empty words of sympathy.

As the time passed, loneliness became my only friend. Sometimes talking even to Swetha made me upset and vulnerable.

My father, who had insisted I join the army, started to regret his action, constantly moaning that this was all his fault and he had done a terrible thing to his son. His words made me angry.

"Please stop this nonsense," I would shout at him when he wept and asked for my forgiveness.

"I'm sorry, putha. I tried to do the best for you…" he would say continuing to weep.

"The best for me? What the hell are you talking?" I would yell.

"Viraj! We should go to the temple," Swetha would often say after one of these arguments with my father. She hoped these visits to the temple would calm me down and help me find happiness.

I only wanted to be alone and once Swetha realized this, she began to hand Praneeth over to me more and more to look after,

feeling I should not isolate myself. My disability meant that she had to go out and work so we could make ends meet. She decided to teach in a nursery school which was run by one of her friends. She had a good knowledge about everything when it came to children. At first I was angry to be given this role, as if I was a woman, but then slowly I began to enjoy my time with my son. His face would light up with joy every time he saw me and he would gurgle and hold out his arms to me. To him, I was a hero. He did not see my disability, did not see me as a pathetic thing. The first word he spoke was 'thaththa' not 'amma'. I was overjoyed, as if this was my greatest achievement.

Yet life was still hell for me. I often felt a pain in my limbs as if they were still there. Then one day I read an article that inspired me, written by a ten-year-old schoolgirl. The topic was My father. At the end she said, 'All war heroes are like my father who tried to protect me, even risking his life.' I thought of my friend Sugath and felt as if he was smiling down at me, telling me I was doing well, assuring me I was doing the best I could. I thought also of his fiancée and how he never got to marry her. I felt thankful that I was alive, that I could be with Swetha and my son.

I would never wish for my son to join the army, but if he still wants to when he turns 18, I will be proud of him. I have never regretted my decision to fight for my country, even though I am a disabled soldier.

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SNAPSHOTS OF LOSS

Janani Balasubramaniam

Kalai:

"Amma, Amma! Don't go!" he cried.

Shiva shook in his sleep, rapidly uttering a string of disjointed words. Kalai gently stroked Shiva's forehead which glistened with salty wetness, as he moved his head from side to side as if the red-tongued, wild-eyed fury of the Goddess Kali had manifested in him.

Another night, another episode.

"Om Shanthi, Shanthi, Shanthi," she repeated silently, her eyes squeezed shut. *Be patient, Kalai,* she told herself, *this will end someday.*

It had been six years since they had arrived on foreign shores, but these spells had not ceased. For Kalai, each episode brought with it a mixture of guilt, fear and regret. They say that time heals all wounds, but the scars of memory are not easily mended. Without the comforts of home, this proved to be even more difficult. Proximity of their own kind that she was used to in Jaffna was alien in London. Kalai missed the warmth of her family and fellow villagers back home – there was always someone who offered help. Daily life in London seemed so choreographed – school, work, forced accents, Tesco dinners, interrupted sleep and early mornings. For Kalai, life in London was a single shade of grey, much like the cold winters that she had not gotten used to. *All for the children*, she convinced herself.

Kalai remembered well the day that things took a turn for the worse.

"Run, run, run!" Kalai shouted, laughing, as she chased behind Selvi and Shiva as they shrieked with giddy laughter. Shiva's stubby legs gave way as he reached the edge of the field of lush tobacco leaves. Collapsing on the ground, he lay on his back and was soon joined by Selvi who began to tickle him. Kalai approached them, short of breath, watching as they rolled around in the dirt.

Cheeky animals, she thought to herself. In a few weeks, the leaves of this field would be dried and hung to be cured and thereafter mixed with kithul treacle and sold. The process had always seemed complicated to Kalai but it was her family's lifeblood – she would have to learn.

This was her paradise, 35 perches of fertile land in the heart of Jaffna. Although she was not the legal proprietor of this vast stretch of neatly ordered green, she loved this land of her father's like it was her own. It was the closest tie to her childhood, since her parents had died six years earlier. She still remembered the last day she saw them, just before they left for Colombo to attend a wedding. Their mother was nervous about leaving her for four days at an aunt's place. She had hurriedly packed a suitcase with three pattu saris and told her to behave. Just before they left, Appa had made sure to buy Kalai her favourite snack, parithithurai vadai, although Amma did not like buying snacks from street vendors. Hours after her parents would have arrived in Colombo, a neighbour informed them about a bomb in the centre of the city. A day later, they were told their parents were among the casualties. Selvi was born prematurely a week later to Kalai's older sister Aarthi.

Aarthi had married Gajan at 23. Theirs was an arranged marriage but, in the two years that had passed, they had learnt to love one another. Gajan, although only two years older than Aarthi, was dependable and enterprising. In addition to managing a grocery shop, he looked after their father's tobacco land, which had been given to sub-growers. Kalai remembered the day Gajan's family had come to see Aarthi. She had been dressed in an orange sari with red patterns. Their horoscopes had been matched previously and all that was left was mutual consent. Aarthi told Kalai months later that he was the only person she had ever met who made her feel like she had known him in a previous lifetime.

As young parents, raising Selvi was challenging. Kalai was responsible for the child and helped with household chores. Soon, she became Selvi's first role model. Selvi would follow her around the house devotedly, as if they were physically attached. Kalai

would find Selvi daubing her black pottu on her face in front of the mirror and mimicking her when she dressed. Three years later, it was time for Selvi to share; Shiva was born, and Kalai found herself fulfilling various roles – playmate, friend, sibling, and parent.

It felt like their secret, this world of vast blue skies, verdant fields, a multitude of palmyrah trees and yellow light. Kalai let out a sigh of contentment as she lay down beside Selvi with Shiva's head on her lap.

"When are we going to get ice cream?" Selvi asked after a moment, eager-eyed.

"Be patient, chellam, we have to wait for Appa and Amma," Kalai replied. "They will be here soon."

"Appa told me I can have two – mango and vanilla," Selvi said gleefully.

Whistling to herself, Kalai momentarily closed her eyes. But then she sat up abruptly as she heard Aarthi's familiar high-pitched voice in the distance. "Kalai, Kalai!"

Lifting Shiva onto her waist and holding Selvi's left hand, she hastened to the field gate.

"Aarthi, we're here, Selvi and Shiva are with me," Kalai shouted back. She still could not see her sister. Once she went out of the gate, she finally saw Aarthi's small frame in the distance. Her sister was kneeling on the ground with Jimmie, their dog, circling her. Why was her body contorted so? Why was her face bruised?

"Akka, what's wrong?" Kalai cried as she ran towards Aarthi, leaving the children behind. When she reached her, she crouched down and shook Aarthi's shoulders. Aarthi was sobbing furiously. The children had joined them. Selvi's lips began to quiver as if by instinct. Shiva squatted on the ground, pulling Jimmie's tail, and blinked curiously at Aarthi. He reached his arms forward as if to be carried.

"What happened Akka, why aren't you telling me?" Kalai pursued, vexed at the lack of response. She placed her palm on Aarthi's cheek, examining an angry red bruise. Aarthi's mouth opened momentarily as if to say something but nothing came out.

Her breathing was rapid as her shoulders heaved, face streaked with tears.

"They took him, Kalai – Gajan, they took him from me," she wailed, her hands on her head, as she collapsed in Kalai's arms. "They were on motorbikes, three men, they had guns, why did I open the door Kalai, why – "

"*Shhh*, Akka…" Kalai muttered into Aarthi's hair. Selvi was now sobbing, holding onto Aarthi's hand as if attempting to take in her pain.

"I should have hidden inside the house, Gajan wanted to wait, I said we were not guilty, what did we have to hide?" Aarthi continued. "They didn't take the jewelry, or the safe. I told them they could have it, Kalai, even Amma's ottiyanam. They only wanted Gajan. They hit him with a rifle, Kalai, just after one man slapped me; I remember his face, young. Why do they want him? He's gone, Kalai."

Since the ceasefire, abductions were on the rise and no one knew who the abductors were, or where the abductees were taken, or why. It was like a parallel world that everyone shied away from and did not dare to explore. The army, the LTTE, 'unidentified groups', 'paramilitary outfits' were cited as abductors. In most cases, the abducted were never heard of again. At least death was certain, a confirmation.

"We will find him, Akka, I know we will. Vishnu Anna will help us," Kalai said softly, although she knew the chances were not in their favour. Kalai was grateful for Vishnu Anna. The son of Appa's friend, Vishnu Anna was Kalai's only stable source of comfort besides her family. Apart from helping her with school work, he always seemed to be available when she needed someone to talk to.

"He said he would come back, Kalai, but he's gone I know, and I didn't do anything about it," Aarthi said weakly, defeated by the weight of her grief. Kalai had no words – she could lie to others, but not to herself.

And then there was Selvi, and Shiva. How does one explain a

missing father to a child?

February 2004 was when Kalai became an adult. Not when she turned 18, two years later.

Aarthi:

She lost herself that year. Sorrow dug a permanent cavity in her mind; it was a constant sadness which was not eliminated by forced happiness or the occasional random fit of laughter she shared with her children. Aarthi took herself to bed frequently. She was tired and rarely left the house. It was as if she had forgotten how to smile. It was as if her soul had dissolved into nothingness.

"Akka, eat something," Kalai would beg. Aarthi was sullen as she looked up from the *Udayan* newspaper she was reading.

"I'll eat later," she would reply.

Two years on from Gajan's disappearance, Aarthi was still unable to find her footing, to get on with her life. On the second anniversary of Gajan's disappearance, she found herself contemplating her lack of progress as she watched Kalai tending to her children, more their mother now than she was.

"Sithi, I'm hungry," Selvi cried, tugging at Kalai's skirt.

"OK, chellam, let's eat, Amma will eat later. Vishnu Mama will be here soon," Kalai replied, setting out four plates on the table.

Aarthi watched apathetically as Kalai fed Selvi, only moving to pass the dishes around. They ate in silence. Aarthi could feel Kalai observing her every move in the hope that there would be a break from routine. Aarthi was exhausted from this scrutiny – she felt like a patient constantly being monitored for signs of life. Yet, she did not blame her sister for her concern.

Aarthi watched as Selvi started to drum on her plate, distracting Kalai.

"Sithi, I want to play with thambi," Selvi said.

"No Selvi, he is asleep right now, you can play with him tomorrow," Kalai responded sternly.

Selvi sulked as she looked towards Aarthi for support. Aarthi

picked up the *Udayan* and started to read it. She did not have the energy to respond. Moreover, she felt like she did not have the *right* to respond. Selvi got up and ran to the bedroom to wash her hands. Aarthi put down her paper and gazed at the empty ceramic plates on the table that Kirupa Uncle had sent them from London. Kirupa Uncle was Appa's classmate and a staunch supporter of the LTTE. Although they had never met, he was a glorified character in their minds – Appa used to tell them how Kirupa Uncle would question the principal at school. He was fearless and unafraid to identify himself with the movement.

When she heard about Appa and Amma's death in the bomb blast eight years ago, Aarthi could not help thinking how strange it was that they had met their fate not in war-torn Jaffna, but hundreds of kilometres away in the capital. It seemed ironic, especially since Appa had always attempted to distance himself from the movement, a cause he had mixed feelings about.

Aarthi was her father's favourite. She remembered the day of her wedding when Appa was emotional to see her leave, although Gajan had kept reminding him that she was still going to live in Jaffna. This was the first and last time that she had seen Appa cry, he who used to say that crying was a sign of weakness.

She sighed now as she thought of the day Gajan had first come to see her, after their horoscopes had been matched. She remembered being nervous in her orange sari, afraid that she would embarrass herself. Amma had asked her to serve tea of the overly saccharine kind. She was annoyed to have to do so, did not like the docility that this entailed. Gajan had noticed that she was annoyed and casually mentioned that he would help himself, and that he was more interested in talking to her, privately. Aarthi and everyone else present had been taken aback. These occasions usually consisted of both parties being silent and the elders talking about mundane matters which were of little relevance. But, this was different; Gajan insisted that both of them go outside to the small verandah. Aarthi had not been sure if she liked his candour. They sat in comfortable silence until Gajan ventured, "I just want to ask you if you really want to do this…"

Aarthi responded brashly, "Well, I don't have to decide anything right now, do I?"

"I was hoping you would say that," Gajan replied slowly.

Their communication in the months that followed had been mainly through a series of letters delivered by Kalai, and the occasional furtive meeting. She did not remember the exact point at which she fell in love with him, but it did not take long. Open-minded, understanding and a great listener, Gajan always knew what to say at the right moment. Six months later, they were married.

Aarthi continued to stare at the plates. Minutes ticked by as they both sat in silence. Finally Aarthi, unable to bear her sister's scrutiny, retreated to her room, newspaper in hand.

Kalai:

Kalai did not look up as her sister left but instead continued to trace the embossed motif on a plate. *Not today then*, Kalai thought to herself. Kalai had become accustomed to conversing with herself; her mind was an open uninhabited forest where her thoughts ran free. She had not given up on Aarthi but she was sometimes tired of being the responsible one. At 18, Kalai was parent to her nephew and niece. When their father had disappeared two years ago, Selvi and five-year old Shiva had nested themselves under Kalai's protective wings. To them, she was more than an aunt – she was a friend and sibling. Though this was a burden sometimes, at other times when they were all playing together, the child in her found release. This made the responsibility of their upbringing bearable.

Aarthi would help with daily chores but she would do so listlessly. Most of their time together was in the kitchen. Few words were spoken. All that would be audible would be the clinking of the stainless steel and running water as Aarthi methodically washed the dishes. Kalai missed the Aarthi she knew and prayed that time would reawaken her soul.

Apart from the children, Kalai's only other companion was Vishnu Anna. He was dependable and Kalai liked that about him.

Although he was five years older than Kalai, he was easy to talk to and frequently checked up on how the children were faring. She did not have to feign cheerfulness and, with him, she felt taken care of. Vishnu Anna's connections with the LTTE also gave her a sense of security, especially at times like these. She never asked him about his involvement but he knew that she knew – it was an area they both deliberately sidestepped whenever it arose.

Where is Vishnu Anna? He was supposed to be here an hour ago, Kalai thought to herself. *Be calm, he will be here soon, he might have gone to the base, just be patient, he always turns up.*

She heard the characteristic knock, scratch, knock on the door and ran to open it, plate in hand.

"Anna, I was worried!" she said, as he stepped in carrying a large brown bag.

"I had some things to do, Kalai, we need to talk," he replied seriously, his broad face tense and tired.

"OK, but you must eat first!" Kalai responded, as she served idiyappams on to the plate.

They sat down at the table in silence as he ate, and all that was audible was the tick-tock of Amma's small clock which had outlived her.

"So, tell me," Kalai prompted.

"I have brought you something, Kalai, you must listen to me carefully. This is not a good time." Vishnu Anna reached for his bag, drawing out several sheets of paper and four passports. "These are visa application forms and a letter from your father's old friend, Uncle Kirupa. Here are passports for all of you. Times are not good and things will only get worse. You need to leave. All of you. Uncle Kirupa will help you. Take these. You must apply for a visa and leave to London."

"But why Anna, this is our home. We can take care of ourselves. How will we survive in London?" Kalai replied. "How did you get these passports, our pictures?"

"Don't ask me all these questions. You have to trust me. You have to leave. I will join you soon," he responded stoically. "Fill

these forms out for your visa, I would help you but I have to go now. No one must know."

Kalai had many questions which she refrained from asking. Now was not the time. She had hoped for a more agreeable leisurely dinner, but times *were* changing and she realised she had to change accordingly. Just three days ago, a shooting had taken place in Colombo, killing a minister. It was expected that more attacks would follow around the country with more reprisals for those in the North. Who knew what would happen next; she thought of the last word she had looked up in her English dictionary, *vo-la-tayl, volatile,* she thought to herself, *the best way to describe this situation.*

Vishnu Anna got up to leave.

"OK Kalai, keep these passports safely. No one must know," he said as he shut the door behind him.

Some days after this conversation a blast took place in Chunnakam while she was visiting Vishnu Anna at his house near the Catholic Church for help with her Mathematics lessons. They didn't hear the blast but soon a neighbour came running to tell them that there had just been an explosion by the Chunnakam police station. Kalai dropped her pen in alarm and spoke rapidly, her face pale, "Selvi, no! I need to go —"

"I'll go with you. I'm sure she is fine, the kovil is nearby," Vishnu responded evenly, "You can't go alone, it is not safe."

"No Vishnu, I have to go now, you must stay – it is more dangerous for you than for anyone else," Kalai replied, hurriedly slipping her slippers on.

"Kalai, you don't understand. There are things you cannot control." Vishnu raised his voice.

"Vishnu, I cannot lose everyone. Please stay. I will be back soon with Selvi," she cried.

She left quickly without turning back. Aarthi and Shiva were at home but she had dropped Selvi off on her way, at her school friend's house near the Chunnakam Sivan kovil. The friend's home was closer and so she ran first towards it.

As Kalai ran through the centre of Chunnakam town, she saw

people scuttling like crabs looking for lost treasures on the main road. Houses stood, three-walled and doorless. Bodies lay strewn on the pitted road – some still, some moving, people in shock and people crying. A dormant fog of dust cloaked the path ahead as if Nature was intentionally attempting to mask the scene.

When Kalai reached the home of Selvi's friend, her eyes came across a corpse wedged between a pile of rubble and the frame of an ornate wooden door, now partly demolished. It was Selvi's friend. Kalai covered her mouth with her palm to stop herself from retching as the stench of blood and brown earth wafted through. She suddenly felt alone and wanted to run away. A gecko chirped ominously as if to keep her company. *You must not give up*, she told herself. As she approached what remained of the kitchen, she stumbled on an intact grinding stone at the entrance and her eyes raced towards a long braid entwined in the rubble. It was Selvi. Momentarily relieved, she rushed towards her niece. Kalai lifted Selvi's limp hand out of the heap of stone, chipped cement, household utensils and cracked ceramic. Her smooth coffee-coloured complexion was now charred and ashy, dusted with soot. She felt her pulse, yes, she could feel a faint stir in her wrists. Her own heart thumped vigorously against her white blouse.

Selvi stirred slightly. There was a deep crimson gash slashed across her arm. "Kalai Sithi, what happened?" she mumbled as if awoken from a deep slumber. Her eyelids were encrusted with sand and beginning to shut again.

"Don't worry, Selvi kutti, we are getting out of here," Kalai replied with feigned confidence, lifting Selvi's frail figure gently out of the rubble.

But what about Akka and Shiva? she thought to herself, still numb with shock, briefly scanning the scene that lay before her. *OK, first find somewhere safe for Selvi, and then look for them.*

Kalai knew that Vishnu Anna's house would be the safest place to go to. Carrying Selvi in her arms, she ran all the way back through the chaotic streets to Vishnu Anna's house, just beyond the centre of Chunnakam.

"Anna! Annaaaa!" she cried loudly, thrashing the gate open

wildly. "Selvi is bleeding, please do something, please Anna, please wake her up! Where's Akka? I don't know where they are, Anna, Shiva…"

Vishnu ran out the moment he heard her. He rushed down the steps now and stood still as she came up to him, staring at Selvi in shock. Recovering himself, he took the child in his arms, trying to pacify Kalai. "Don't worry Kalai, she will be fine, we will take care of her, come sit down. It is not safe outside, you can't trust anyone anymore, the neighbours… everyone is watching."

Kalai shook her head and rushed back to the gate. "I must go and find Akka and Shiva."

"Kalai! Kalai, whatever you do, keep away from near the police station," Vishnu Anna shouted.

She ran back towards the scene of carnage in central Chunnakam. The town was like a disturbed wasps' nest. Groups of people stood around the wall-less shops. Spotting the small figure of an infant in the distance, Kalai's eyes lit up in hope.

Shiva, Shiva, she prayed under her breath.

The child lay on his back against the remnants of what appeared to be a pink cot, his arm positioned awkwardly as if it did not belong to him. He reached his other arm up towards Kalai as if to be carried, but seeing that this was not the familiar cherub-like face of her beloved nephew, she continued onwards to Aarthi's house near the market, thinking to herself in a curiously calm way, *I am in such shock that I actually mistook someone else's home for mine.*

When she reached what remained of their house, she was caught off-guard by her own reflection in Aarthi's dressing table mirror which was now chipped at the edges. *Who is this frizzy-haired stranger staring at me?* The table stood in the soot-covered remnants of Aarthi's room – two and a half walls painted in Barley White, now grey. She gaped at her reflection again. Her eyes were red and teary and her arms were caked with a fine layer of dust; she traced her index finger over the contour of her face, then let out a startled sound as a pair of large soulful eyes also appeared in the reflection, followed by the familiar leg-hug.

"Shiva! Where did you go?" she cried with relief, bending down to lift the now crying child. "You are safe now." Kissing him on his forehead, nose and cheeks, she examined his feet which were sore and wounded. Hugging him close, she vowed to herself that she would never lose him.

"Amma, Amma," he cried repeatedly, pointing towards the empty doorway. But Kalai could not find her sister anywhere.

In the year after the bomb blast, disappearances and forced recruitments became increasingly common. Factions within the rebel movement were causing disturbances throughout the country. With two children under her wing now Kalai understood the risks of living in a war-torn environment. Their futures depended on her. Vishnu Anna had offered a way out of this life of uncertainty and danger. He urged her to fill out those forms, to apply for the tourist visas. She finally did when he told her that he too had decided to go with them. With factions forming and breaking away within the LTTE, he didn't know who were his friends, who were his enemies any more. His life was at constant risk.

Despite her reservations about leaving home without knowing about Aarthi's whereabouts, Kalai could not disagree that the move was in their best interests. Although the initial years had been difficult, Selvi and Shiva had both settled in well at school. Kalai had found a part-time job as a cashier in a stationery store – minimum wage but it was sufficient with Vishnu's support. London was a different world – here, anyone could be anyone, the baggage of their past could be discarded. Kalai came to like aspects of London. She developed a particular fondness for the London Underground. It was not chaotic and there was something comforting about being shuttled in a train with absolute knowledge of your destination.

Vishnu continued to be her main support and gradually they fell in love with each other. Kalai married Vishnu in London a year after they had achieved refugee status. It was a simple ceremony, without the usual pomp and grandeur of a traditional Hindu wedding. Kalai did not mind. Vishnu was family before he became

family. It did not seem like a title was necessary to establish their relationship.

Despite the distractions of London, Kalai was constantly obsessed with finding Aarthi. She knew that Shiva was the last person to see her but she did not want to stir his repressed memories. Perhaps, someday, he would come to terms with what had happened but, until then, she would not help him to remember; Kalai did not think the pain was worth it.

Aarthi:

A group of women stood in a queue in the Sabhapathipillai camp in Chunnakam. Dogs wandered freely in this sandy aluminum and palmyrah-thatched purgatory. The winds carried pockets of heat which dissipated in the narrow alleys of this web of congested lives.

"What is your name?" the social worker asked.

"Aarthi," she replied.

"How many children do you have?"

Aarthi began to sob furiously, her shoulders heaving under the weight of merciless memory. She raised her hand indicating two.

"Where are they, amma?" she continued, gently.

"They are not with me right now," she replied.

Earlier on that day of the bomb blast, Aarthi had been roasting flour in the kitchen to make pittu when there was a banging on her door. She had rushed to the door thinking it was some bad news about Kalai and Selvi but found, when she flung the door open, two men with guns standing on her front doorstep. One of them was large and burly with a heavy jawline. The other man was tall and slim; he was older, his face slightly withered.

"You need to come with us right now," the burly man had barked, pointing his rifle at Aarthi.

Shiva, who had hidden behind Aarthi, clutched onto her legs. Aarthi held Shiva firmly, as Jimmie howled in the doorway, cowering in fear as they waved their guns.

"You leave him, we have some questions," the older man said, signaling at Shiva with his rifle.

Aarthi's heart sank. "Is my husband with you? His name is Gajan. Dark with a birthmark on his left arm? Please tell me he is with you…"

The burly man kicked Jimmie as he continued to howl. Shiva ran towards the dog.

"Ji, Ji," he stuttered, unable to pronounce the entire name.

The older man immediately grabbed Shiva. "You come with us or – " he pointed his gun towards Shiva's head. Shiva immediately began to cry.

"Amma, Amma," he cried, as he struggled to wriggle away from the man's strong grip.

The sight of the gun near Shiva's head was sufficient to break her shock.

"What do you want? Why are you here?" she cried.

"Stop asking us so many questions bitch, come with us or you know what will happen," he repeated.

The burly man walked around the house, prodding at objects with his gun. "There's nothing, just some money in a till," he said, emerging from the bedroom.

"I don't have much, take my jewelry, anything else, but just leave my son alone please," she cried wildly, tears streaming down her face.

"We saw him, Vishnu, visiting here last night, we know what he has in mind with those passports and forms. That coward, planning to run away. You think you can hide him from us, you think we're stupid ah?" the burly man snapped. "Where's your daughter, pretty girl ah?"

Aarthi was taken aback, she stuttered. "My daughter? She's only eight, she's innocent, she isn't here, don't do anything please."

"No you stupid bitch, the big girl, with long hair, pretty," he said, winking at the older man.

It suddenly dawned upon Aarthi that they were talking about

Kalai.

"She isn't here," Aarthi cried. "We are all innocent, please leave us alone."

"She thinks this is some sort of joke," he shouted to the older man, who placed his palm on Shiva's mouth. Shiva cried out, holding his arms out as Aarthi ran forward to hold him.

"You're coming with us," the older man growled, pushing Shiva to the floor as the burly man grabbed Aarthi and dragged her towards the door.

"Amma, Amma, don't go!" Shiva screamed.

"Let's go! We're done here," the burly man shouted, as he dragged Aarthi into the darkness.

Since she was abducted, Aarthi had spent several years on the move in the hope that she would be reunited with her family. For six years, she had shifted across camps, in the hope that she would find someone, perhaps Gajan, or Selvi, Kalai or even Shiva. Strangely, their loss had made her overcome her state of impassiveness and injected her with the will to continue her search. She spent time thinking of every detail of their appearance. She drew sketches of them and distributed them around the camps. She spoke to social workers and described her circumstances in detail. But none of her efforts had yet proved to be successful.

In February 2012, six years since the day she was abducted, Aarthi revisited what remained of their house. Nature had taken over – it was now fallow land, with awkwardly-placed blocks of cement. *If only the trees could talk*, she thought to herself, *they saw everything, they would tell me what happened.* She stooped to pick up a round stone to take as a memento of her first visit back in all these years. Vishnu's house was permanently closed although, remarkably, still standing. The black gate was slightly ajar and now she noticed that there was a white jeep parked in the driveway. Aarthi's heart skipped a beat. She rushed towards the gate and saw a broad-shouldered man, with his back towards her, by the gate.

"Vishnu?" she uttered softly. "Is it really you?"

The man, holding a large camera, turned abruptly and looked at her. He shook his head. "Sorry, ma, I am not from here," he responded.

Despondent, she walked away, clutching the stone tightly. As she walked away she recalled, as if they were talismans, Shiva's dimpled face, Selvi's mischievous smile, Gajan's way of wrinkling his forehead when he was amused, Kalai's deft fingers braiding her hair. She would continue her search, she would never give up.

Janani Balasubramaniam *is a social researcher who was born in Kandy but spent the first seven years of her life in Lusaka, Zambia. She also lived for three years in London where she pursued her undergraduate education through which she developed an interest in migration, multiculturalism and diasporas. Her story stems from her interactions with members of the Sri Lankan diaspora.*

POEMS

Fathima Nusaira

AFLOAT

I am ever floating
in the memory of that storm,
full of smoke
invading like a fog,
a fire storm.

Like a guard dog barking
after the goods are stolen,
we carry our bleeding
ammas, appas, thambis,
loading them into lorries, buses.
The Forces, after continuous firing,
busily gather dead bodies.
Corpses queue along the earth,
waiting to meet the deeper ground.
Even in the hereafter,
they won't make a sound,
won't cry out even as ghosts.

Refugees have gathered.
I stand among them a lifeless person.
Suddenly I regain my senses,
search for my mother, my home.
In the rubble, a burnt
hand clutches our brown basin.
Only three fingers
have survived the carnage.

A refugee's life is tedious.
Those who try to escape
this controlled world are caught.
The Forces force everyone as they wish.
From the morning, when we eat,
until night when we sleep
I am ever floating
in the memories of that storm.

LADY BANYAN

She stands,
no head, no hands, no trunk,
just snarl of root, a burnt stump.
Tells me her land is Batti too,
though in her youth, it wasn't a city.
I was the tallest and fattest,
I gave the meadow my shade.
Men, crows, white doves,
cats, cows and goats too
nested together in my coolness.
Folk dance, kabaddi, card games,
martial arts, kavadi, ifthar,
all good and bad were in my shade.

One day, I smelt the stench of war,
it was running towards us from afar.
Shooting, burning, screaming.
I cried like Kaaliaatha,
moving my hands.
People hugged my trunk,

as if wanting to hide inside me.
Snakes of bombs stung my hands,
my arms broke, my head caught fire.

Oh, Lady Banyan,
I smell your odour of endless pain.
You are useless,
as I am powerless.

THE TERRORIST (Haiku)

Emotionless man
who became entangled with
the gun, in his youth.

Batti – Batticaloa.

Kabaddi – a traditional game.

Kavadi – a type of religious penance performed by Hindu devotees.

Ifthar – the meal taken by Muslims when they break their fast during Ramazan.

Kaaliaatha – a Hindu goddess who saves people.

Fathima Nusaira *was born and brought up in Eravur in the Batticaloa district and has completed her degree program at the Eastern University. From her birth, she has endured the sufferings of war and lived a life on the edge of war's horror. She hates war and only loves peace, and tries to express this sentiment through her poems.*

CHOCOLATES IN THE FREEZER

Ruvini Katugaha

Dust motes were dancing in the soft golden light that penetrated through the window, cleaved into stripes by the metal bars that blocked their path. The warmth teased my hand as it fell on my rough suntanned skin which I had acquired courtesy of the merciless sun and the intense training while I was stationed in Mullaitivu. The beams manipulated the shadow of my pen, elongating it to twice its original size. The nib that I held a fraction above the surface had yet to make contact with the sheet of paper resting on a hard cover book, balanced on my knee. The paper remained obstinately blank.

"Write it down Adithya, it helps," Dr. Kumaraswami had said. Easy for him to say, he didn't suffer from memories. I did.

The hand that held the pen trembled slightly. I didn't need Dr. Kumaraswami to know that it was a post-traumatic tremor that could also have been caused by severe damage to the brain. I learnt that in medical college.

Being a military doctor was not on my list of priorities. Appachchi wasn't thrilled with the idea but considered it a better choice of career than the others that I came up with to escape living my father's dreams for my life. He saw me as the black sheep in the family. The others in blind obedience never resisted. I was the one with crazy notions, and one of Appachchi's worst fears was that his third and youngest son would turn out to be one those good for nothing *kalakanni* fellows with long hair and a guitar flung across his back, singing in those reality shows like a hippie. In my father's eyes, anyone with long hair was a hippie; anyone with any part of his skin pierced was a hippie; and anyone with even a slight bit of a creative skill that didn't involve fighting terrorists was a hippie. In essence, he thought anyone who was not in the Sri Lankan Army was a hippie. That's how all his sons ended up in the army.

I laid down my pen, the end of which I had slightly nibbled, and closed my eyes. I needed the memories.

"Putha," a voice called from the entrance to my room, "it is time to catch the train." I took my time opening my eyes and turning to her. Even without my glasses I could still make out the short plump figure partially blocking the early morning light that competed to enter the bare spacious room. I slipped my glasses on. She stood there under the door frame, her unfocused gaze sweeping the room, with a strange look upon her face that was hard to read. I glanced around to see what she was looking at. There wasn't much to see in the room. It was devoid of any personal touches. Except for the majestic four-poster bed, carved by an experienced hand, and the large volume of books, piled on almost all available space including the dressing table, nothing else existed. Definitely no personal touches. The bedspread was plain, the curtains, the tablecloth, the bare walls, all had no story to tell. I liked to keep it that way - the perfect image of a guest room even a year after I had moved into it. The room that had its walls plastered with posters of rugby teams and a sweating Sanga, who had just scored a century in a T20 match, was upstairs, with its three beds in three corners.

My eyes involuntarily went to the half-drunk mug of tea under the bed, now a tourist destination for the red ants marching towards it with military discipline. Her eyes didn't appear to be settling there. Instead she glanced out of the window adorned with a white lace curtain.

I pushed the mug further under the bed with my heel, then slowly stood up and drew myself to my full height. I started towards her and a whiff of araliya fragrance greeted me as I drew closer. If I was ever asked to describe my mother in one word, I would have said araliya, because that was how she had smelt for the past 27 years, my entire life. A handbag hung loosely on the crook of her arm, her hand resting lightly on the mahogany doorframe.

I knelt down at her feet to obtain her blessing. Her free hand automatically ran over my stubs of hair – the crew cut that I couldn't seem to abandon, even though I was long discharged. "Come home safely, Amma," I whispered into her hair as I got up and planted a kiss on top of the streaks of grey and black neatly pulled into a bun and secured with a hair net. She mustered a

smile for me. She didn't ask me to accompany her and neither did I volunteer. It was better this way. She always went alone, and came back alone.

I followed her along the corridor to our verandah where the car was parked. The number plate was a Sri Lankan military one. My father, tall, broad-shouldered and heavily built, his collar crisp and starched – I swear one could cut oneself on it – leaned against an antique walking stick, his pride and joy. His face framed by the neatly trimmed beard that hid his powerful jawline was enveloped in great rings of smoke emitting from a wooden pipe. Appachchi must be the only man in this century that still smoked that old-fashioned pipe. No one asked him why. He was the Hitler of the house, with a slight limp and a fake leg.

He eyed me wearily. Our gaze met for a few seconds. I could read the thoughts going on behind those slightly bulging eyes hidden by a mass of bushy eyebrows. Appachchi and I don't see eye to eye on many things but surprisingly, one of the rare things we do agree on is the futility of these trips Amma makes. Any sane man would, especially a man who survived the war. Amma, never having experienced the horror of war in the battlefield, but only seen it on the 8 o'clock news, didn't see the futility of her desperate attempts. And we, who knew this horror well, didn't have the heart to point out the futility of her actions.

Appachchi gave me a curt nod and got into the car. He was going to drop Amma off at the station. He never wasted words. Amma on the other hand stood there giving final orders to Sweety Nona about Appachchi's diet and medicine. "No kithul hakuru for Lokuhamu while I am gone Sweety Nona, I don't want Lokuhamu getting sick again. Make sure he takes his pills on time and make sure that Adithya baby's meals are served to the table while they're hot."

I remember the first time she went. I remember begging her not to go, screaming the words out to her over the din of the bad reception. Telephone calls were a luxury while I was serving in Mullaitivu, especially for private use. Cell phones were as useful as bricks over there, the reception was that bad. The phone in the

commander's office was for emergencies only and I don't know how she got the call through to me in the first place. I guess being a Brigadier's wife had its occasional perks.

"I am a mother, Adithya. I have nothing to lose," she had said in an unusually calm tone. After that, I never asked her not to go.

After the car had disappeared down the driveway, I remembered the mug under the bed and quickly went to retrieve it before the ants conquered and claimed the whole bed as their territory.

I took the mug and emptied its contents into the sink, then opened the lower portion of our classic Singer fridge, so old, some museum might actually offer us a wholesome amount to get hold of this relic. I surveyed the inner contents on one shelf - my pile of Swiss chocolates sent faithfully every year by Mahappa, my favourite uncle. Unlike Appachchi, his brother, Mahappa lacked devotion to the army. As a result he was now living in Switzerland with both legs intact, while Appachchi was without a leg and two sons.

My chocolates were neatly stacked and arranged on the top left shelf of the fridge. Just like they always were. It was the *only* pile there. Kuma's pile had ceased to exist for nearly a year. I pulled the freezer door open. The contents toppled to the floor. An avalanche of chocolates and almost every edible snack invented on earth. As I bent to pick up the snacks, my gaze rested on a Mars Bar, which was probably past its Best Before date. A small note was attached with sellotape. '*Hands off pig. These are Loku's*'. That was Kuma's idea of a practical joke. Hard to think he would have written that note two years ago when he came home for the final time.

Write it down, my foot. Dr. Kumaraswami can go to hell.

My eyes rested on the photograph hanging at an awkward angle on the outside of the freezer door, stuck there with a pineapple shaped magnet. The 21-year-old Loku, the birthday boy in the picture, is every bit like Appachchi. Well, minus the extreme patriotism that is. Kuma is beaming, all 32 teeth on display. His teeth were the only fair part in his body, earning him the title of 'Kalu' Kuma. Kuma's right hand is on Loku's shoulder while the other keeps two fingers over my head. You can trust Kuma to ruin

any photo, any day.

I looked away at the fruit bowl on the kitchen table, with its ripening mangoes, then my glance slid beyond the kitchen window to our neighbour's mango tree – now bare and feeble – swaying gently, just visible over the vast wall that imprisoned our house. That tree and Kuma went back a long way. We had two mango trees on our land but Kuma's constant yearning was to eat the fruits from this specific forbidden tree or what he called "Dasaya's tree". Being on our neighbour's land, the fruit tasted sweeter to Kuma. And Mr. Dasanayaka – Kuma's arch-enemy before he joined the military – would usually give chase with an ekel broom in hand.

Mr. Dasanayaka took extreme joy in complaining about Kuma to Appachchi at least thrice every week, and Appachchi increased his joy by inviting him to watch the 'execution' of three boys as Kuma used to say, his dramatic side getting the better of him. Yes, all three boys. Whatever Kuma received both of us received in equal proportions. Loku, for failing to stop him, and myself for providing moral support. There was no hearing, no trial. Just punishments.

"You want to go see if we can climb the wall from our side and reach the mangoes from here?" Kuma would ask me even before I had recovered from the sting of the cane and its marks had faded away. Nothing could dampen his spirits. He considered annoying Dasaya as the sole purpose of his life and the reason for his existence. He used to call it 'Mission Dasaya'.

Podi Dasaya – Mr. Dasanayaka's youngest daughter – was also on Kuma's list. All three of us would sit on our wall facing the road and watch for her as she came home after school. Kuma would call childish names after her – *paaththaya, hoonu pattiya, omlet kella* being his top favourites – and she would run home crying. I never called out names – Kuma specialized in this – but just sat there to provide Kuma with moral support. So did Loku. But there came a time when Loku would not join us on the wall to lie in wait for Podi Dasaya. We were going through the all-girls-are-stupid phase while Loku, being many years older to us, was going through the

randomly-breaking-out-in-pimples-and-voice-cracking phase. He got extremely annoyed when Kuma called her *bathali* because of her chubbiness, and that was one of the very rare times that Loku beat us up.

Kuma got back at her for that beating, one rainy day. I was not briefed about that mission but, as the provider of moral support, my presence was required. Instead of us perching on the wall, Kuma waited inside the gate and the moment Podi Dasaya walked by he ran straight at her and knocked her down face first into a huge pool of mud, that he had clearly had his eye on all along. Kuma ran but I forgot to run, horrified and amazed by this muddy vision before my eyes.

Dasaya stalked in five minutes later through our front gate, accompanied by his extremely muddied and crying daughter, chunks of dried mud in her pigtails. The caning that followed was brutal and Kuma bore its marks to his very last day.

"So did she fall face first?" Loku asked while we were all cleaning the bathroom floor an hour later using toothbrushes – Appachchi preferred military style punishments.

"Yep it was awesome Loku. You should have seen her face. She was standing like this and..." Kuma got up and acted it out with a comical expression on his face, spicing it up using his drama skills. "... her skirt flew right up to her face like this." He demonstrated using his T-shirt.

Loku was silent for a while and then he burst out laughing. We laughed for a long while. That day we got Loku back. So much for his first romance.

My eyes travelled back to the picture taped to the freezer. If Loku inherited Appachchi's looks, then Kuma inherited his talents. I inherited nothing.

Kuma was an overachiever. Whether sports, studies or mere charm, he excelled in all. He was Appachchi's pride and also his bane, as he usually said when Kuma got on his nerves, which happened on average about three times per day. Appachchi constantly swore that one day Kuma was going to send him to

the grave with his antics. He was wrong. Kuma went to the grave before he did.

I can't remember ever seeing Appachchi as proud as he was the day that Kuma came home as Head of the Commandos. Appachchi had never done anything that remotely resembled a display of affection. Yet that night he was found polishing Kuma's lifetime collection of medals that took up almost two thirds of our trophy cupboard.

It was a different Appachchi back then. His fake leg never hindered him from running around the house after us with a raised cane. Sometimes, when Appachchi was in one of his 'moods', he would join us on the front lawn for a game of rugby. In our family rugger was given the status attributed to religion in other households, second only to Appachchi's devotion to the military. Most of our childhood injuries were home-made courtesy of this devotion to the so-called "rowdies' game" played by gentlemen.

Now it was almost impossible to get Appachchi to leave his armchair on the verandah even for meals. Appachchi was grafted into that chair with only his wooden pipe for comradeship. He never spoke about Kuma's medal of valor the military awarded him for laying down his life in a heroic act of bravery for the country. He didn't even touch it. It lay there neglected among Kuma's other achievements inside the trophy cupboard.

Mr. Dasanayaka with unusual tenderness in his voice told me that the military made sure Kuma had a grand funeral and his coffin was laid to rest by his subordinates in the absence of both his brothers. I had come back from the hospital after nearly three months of being in a coma, just in time for his almsgiving. My parents only told me of his death after I came home.

Mr. Dasanayaka's daughter was in the forefront in helping Amma around the house during the almsgiving and I was amazed to see a hint of moisture in her eyes. If Kuma knew that Podi Dasaya now trod the sacred ground on which he once ruled, he would have strangled me for letting her walk through the front door. As the almsgiving proceeded, I wanted to get the choking feeling out of my throat, but my years of conditioning didn't allow

it. In our house the maximum age for tolerating crying was five. At school the boys called anyone who cried a girl. In the army? Well, they had a string of obscene words for any fellow who cried. Without healing tears, we men were left with the rib-crushing choking feeling that simply consumes. If you asked my opinion, the girls got the better bargain.

I came home to find that Amma was a stronger personality than I had ever imagined her to be. There were dark circles under her gentle weary eyes and her hair seemed greyer than before, but she stood tall and went about handling the various tasks of the almsgiving that needed her attention, giving orders to Sweety Nona now and then. Appachchi just sat there exhaling slow streams of tobacco rings, avoiding eye contact with anyone. His gaze always avoided the double glass doors of the trophy cupboard in the sitting room. Amma had come to terms with Kuma's loss, it was Appachchi who still hadn't.

Yet another day, I found Amma asleep clutching a framed photograph of Kuma in her bed. Amma clung to the photo like a dying spider I found under the kitchen table when I was five. That spider refused to let go of the egg she was carrying, even as the ants tore her apart. Her two legs still twitching, she clung to the egg.

Maybe Appachchi knew about this and maybe that was why he did not raise a single word of objection to the devala-temple-pooja pilgrimages she made in search of Loku. She had let go of Kuma but not Loku. Not yet. To her there was still hope. The coffin had not come home, *yet*.

I couldn't take it anymore. I ran into my room and grabbed my wallet. My gaze for a fraction of a second fell on the blank sheet of paper on my bed. Oh what the hell, I folded it and crammed it into my trouser pocket.

A few days later, I went back to see Dr. Kumaraswami.

"So let us start from the beginning. What happened at the camp, Adithya?"

The memories came back. HER…

When she came to me she was bleeding. The shelling had not been kind to the villagers and the evacuation not fast enough. The trucks brought in a steady stream of wounded civilians. The air was filled with the sound of screaming and weeping like metal against metal. With no hospital for many miles, a temporary camp was established in a primary school building adjacent to the army base, the bleeding masses overflowing its premises. Everywhere I went, a stench of blood, gunpowder and burning skin accompanied me. I had my own unique stench: surgical spirit and morphine. I was called in to attend to the wounded until they could be transferred.

I remembered her so well because of the unusually large pottu that dominated her forehead and the burnt hand that cradled her bleeding brother. She had pulled her brother out of the fire that had trapped him. At least that is what it looked like to me. She did not exchange a single word with me and made sure that her hard face with its stubborn jaw was turned away from me. Her charcoal black eyes were her only beauty.

"So, what about her?" Dr. Kumaraswami queried.

"She was a Tamil," I said through gritted teeth. He didn't even flinch.

"And this bothers you?" he asked mildly.

Maybe it was high time that I changed my therapist. He didn't get it. He never would. She was like our neighbour Dasaya's mango tree: forbidden and out of bounds.

I had treated many civilians but her face stuck in my mind because of the matchbox incident. The lights in the civilian quarters were switched off at approximately 9 pm and no one was allowed out after that. I made it a habit to check up on the critical patients one last time before I retired to my quarters for the night. As a sea of darkness engulfed the camp, it washed ashore grains of memories that stayed hidden in daylight. I could hear the sleeping villagers muttering the names of loved ones they had to leave behind, as they tossed and turned with a burning fever. Some were curled on mats on the floor hugging their knees. Every slight sound, even my

footsteps, unsettled them, and they would start up and gape at me with fear filled eyes. For a couple of days I didn't notice that my matchboxes were disappearing. When I did notice it, I lay awake to catch the thief. A burnt hand gently slipped in through the metal bars of the window and fumbled silently on the table until it found the matchbox. She grabbed it and faded into the darkness like a prowling wild cat. I followed her to the civilian quarters where she ducked under a desk. Underneath was her brother. She cuddled him and told stories till the matches ran out.

The story she told was called *'Sinna Meen Kunju'*. She spun the simple tale into such beautiful word pictures that the scene was visible to me as I stood there in the dark. For the first time in my life I was glad that I had learnt Tamil in my preliminary training period. It was tedious and I was a dunce at it. But time and experience had taught me the skills that the teacher couldn't. My daily interactions with the civilians coached my Tamil to a much higher level. Kuma however, spoke it like it was his mother tongue with a slight accent.

Leaning against the trunk of the tree I used to shelter my presence from her, I listened to the story of a little fish living in a small brook in the woods who was afraid of the dark. All the others made fun of him for this fear. One day he peeked out of the surface of the water and saw a beautiful face that shone a very long way above him. Her dark hair was adorned by the soft stars like a string of jasmine flowers. He looked at her and called out to her. The moon lady looked at him and felt sad for the little fish, so she gifted him with a cloak similar to the one she was wearing so that the little fish would always have her reflection and would never be afraid of the dark.

I don't know why I liked the story so much. Maybe because it reminded me of that one night when I was not more than five years old and thought that Amma was dying in the next room with a high fever. I crept into Loku's bed and asked him whether Amma was going to die. I remember even Kuma, who tried to put on a brave face, slowly crawling under the bed covers next to Loku.

Loku, not sure himself, asked us "Do you want to hear a story?"

and told us a made up story about three brothers who wanted to play rugger and had a mean father who did not let them. The story, however it was intended at the beginning, ended up with Superman. After my brothers fell asleep, I lay there listening to the comforting sounds of slow breathing.

After that day, I made sure there were matchboxes near the window and I often followed her to hear her stories, standing behind the tree that sheltered me from her. I don't know why I did that but maybe, in the monotony of everyday life, these stories helped me forget the realities of war for a few seconds, and made me feel comforted like I was in Loku's bed again listening to Kuma's and Loku's soft breathing.

She caught me before long. Her keen ears must have picked up my movements while I was waiting by the tree. With that stealth of a wild cat she used to steal my matchboxes, she snuck up behind me. All of a sudden she had me pinned to the trunk, her heavy breathing falling on my face. I could smell the soft fragrance emitting from the single jasmine flower she had stuck into her braid. It felt strange having her this close to me but, at the same time, there was some sort of a comfort in it as well. I didn't want to hurt her. I pulled out the torch and shone the beam on to her face. She let go of me with a gasp, squinting her eyes to block the blinding light. I re-directed the beam to my face and I could see her face slowly registering who I was. She gritted her teeth and walked away. I wanted to call after her. I had to ask her something: Was the moon-lady afraid of the dark too?

She avoided me after that, not coming for matches again. We never ran directly into each other, but sometimes I would see her staring at me from a distance, hatred written all over her face. No thank you, no acknowledgement for the man who had saved the life of her little brother, when she first brought him in, no acknowledgement of my kindness with the matches. I was used to hostility or indifference or just blankness from my Tamil patients, but her hatred, for some reason, made me cringe within.

One day, while I was checking on a patient, a shadow fell on the mat where the patient lay. I looked up from where I knelt to find

Kuma smiling down at me his megawatt grin.

"Heard that my little brother was in the area flirting with the good-looking nurses," he cried loudly for the whole ward to hear. He winked and pulled me into a bear hug. I felt the blood rushing to my ears, the tips turning warm, embarrassed by his words and the smiles of the other staff. Kuma mercilessly tormented me for this unusual form of blushing while we were growing up, and I could see from his grin now that he was enjoying my discomfort.

"I didn't know they put idiots in charge of the Commandos, Kuma," I threw back.

"I got in through the special quota for idiots," he beamed. I couldn't help chuckling.

I led him outside to avoid him embarrassing me any further. We slowly walked down the lane just outside the military base catching up on what we had missed in each other's lives.

"So Amma … is she … still the same?" Kuma asked without meeting my eye.

I knew what he was referring to. But we never discussed it, at least not without a great awkward silence. I dug the parched soil with the heel of my boot. "Yes … still the same." I dug deeper.

"I tried Adhi, I tried very hard to believe he is alive. Not just for Amma but for Loku. But I can't lie to myself. Loku is not coming back. He cannot come back to us, Adhi."

"I went through all the bodies, Kuma. Loku's wasn't there. Maybe, as Amma says, he could still be out there…" I trailed off. The hole beneath my heel was growing deeper.

"And you believe this?" He looked straight into my eyes, his gaze penetrating into my soul.

I concentrated on my hole-digging project. "She needs to let go, Adhi. She can't go on like this. She is hurting herself. She doesn't mean to but she is hurting … us."

Life without Loku was hard as it was, without having to see Amma stubbornly clinging to this irrational hope. All human reason evaded her. The facts were simple. Loku was gone, lost in a battle like so many others. And Kuma, being the most intelligent

member in the family, had come to terms with it before the rest of us.

Kuma changed the subject, steering our conversation away from the dark and gloomy sea of past memories. He was good at that sort of thing. He always was. We began to chat about the progress of the war and our old school friends. As we did so, passing soldiers saluted Kuma, recognizing him even in civilian attire. He was royalty and they treated him that way. Kuma was the youngest ever to be appointed as Head of the Commandos. There was yet to be a mission that he was defeated performing. He would rather die than surrender or retreat. He was a mastermind when it came to strategic warfare. His exceptional performance, coupled with our father's legacy in the military, ensured that he was ranked among royalty. I was referred to simply as the 'other brother' of Commander Kumuditha.

Kuma was filling me in on a friend of ours who had recently emigrated to America when the girl walked past us carrying a pot of water. My eyes instinctively followed her figure. I felt Kuma's gaze on my face and I quickly looked away, my ears burning.

He flicked my right ear. "Oh, somebody has a crush," he chuckled.

I looked over my shoulder pretending to be searching for who he was referring to. My attempt at this ruse set a stream of chuckles off in him.

"Well, can't say she is good-looking though, but I guess that's OK. You never cared for looks anyway. I mean considering the fact that you are not the most good-looking man yourself."

My jaw dropped open.

"I guess I should let Amma know to stop trying to find a proposal for you. I must tell you little brother, we were all afraid that we would have to find you a girl to marry rather than you finding someone, given your strange inability to charm the opposite gender. Do close that mouth brother. You look like a goldfish. No wonder girls don't find you attractive." He ruffled my hair

affectionately as my mouth snapped shut.

"So, do you think Appachchi will like her?" he asked, his eyes following her.

"What?!" I nearly choked. He smiled.

"Don't worry, I don't mind. But machan, get her to take off that hideous pottu. It looks like another eye." He roared with laughter. When Kuma laughed all his muscles laughed. Not just his face. His whole body joined in laughing. All a person could see was a heap of muscles quivering. No wonder people stared at him thinking he was having a fit.

It bothered me. Not because he teased me, but because he didn't mind she was Tamil. I averted my eyes from the laughing Kuma and fixed my gaze on a withered coconut tree in the distance that stooped low as if it had lost its reason for living. A sigh escaped from me.

"Ethnicity is what we *choose* to put on Adithya," Kuma continued gently, "not something we get from our father's surname. The war is never going to be over little brother, if we think like that. When we are done with this war, we'll find something else to fight for and then something else." He stared into the distance.

I couldn't believe it! Kuma giving me advice! Impossible. My brothers had assigned roles in my life. I would only go to Kuma for advice if I had to break someone's nose or pull off a practical joke. All the rest of my problems were handled by Loku. Maybe it was Loku's absence or finally Kuma had grown up, I don't know.

I was examining him, trying to discern the reason for this change in him when a soldier we hadn't noticed hurrying towards us, came to an abrupt halt before us, a look of fear and urgency on his face.

"Commander Kumuditha, you are requested to…" Before the soldier could finish, we heard a blast in the distance and spun around, the stench of gunpowder overwhelming our senses.

"Impossible!" Kuma cried uttering a curse. "It can't be... This is a secured base, how can they get in?" I stared at him trying to process his words but, before I could ask him anything, Kuma was

running towards the base. Then I realized what was going on. I ran after him and was consumed immediately by a sea of panicking civilians running haywire.

The LTTE had entered the perimeter through the northwestern border of the primary school where the civilian quarters were. They were gradually making their way into the military base. It was clear to me that they already knew exactly how the defense units were positioned and had chosen the weakest point to penetrate through. They had chosen the right day to attack too when all the army commanders of the regiments in the area had gathered in the base for a briefing. It was as if fate itself was playing a cruel game with us.

Kuma was fighting the waves of people, running towards the ranks of soldiers who had taken position in the southern flank of the camp and opened fire on the LTTE. They answered blotting out the sun with a hail of bullets. I felt them whizzing by me. Then there was a blast and suddenly the ground rose up to meet me. As I lay there, feet thundered past me, their sound muted by another sound that came from within me. *Lub dub… Lub dub…*A monotonous melody, strangely comforting, like a lullaby. The images around me started to go blurry, like some painter had smudged his painting with hasty brushstrokes. There was some sort of a crimson liquid covering me. It was oozing out from every part of my body. *Lub dub… Lub dub…* My breathing had grown laboured and slow. Kuma...I turned my head and searched for his sleeping face that I expected to see next to mine as we three lay in Loku's bed. I blinked several times to get rid of the blurry colours that swam into my eyes.

Kuma, where was he? I lifted up my spinning head towards the source of some sound and saw Kuma running towards the bullets with something in his hand. His actions seemed laboured and strained as if someone was pulling him backwards. The sound coming out of his mouth was distorted like he was under water. The thing in his hand, it was a grenade. "No Kuma!" I screamed but no sound came out of my mouth. Yet, as if he had heard, he seemed to glance back towards me, a faint smile playing on his lips. And

then there was the explosion. A flash of orange embraced Kuma. I felt the warmth of it radiating towards me, the ground beneath me shaking and trembling, pieces of debris covering me. I heard a rumbling as if a convoy of trucks was approaching and turned my head to see the primary school building surrendering to the explosion of orange that had consumed Kuma. The building was slowly beginning to topple in on itself. I could hear the groaning of its collapsing structure. Then suddenly, there she was with her unusually large pottu, holding a gun, pulling me away, away from the collapsing building.

Start from the beginning. Go back to where it all started. After I left Dr. Kumaraswami's office that day, I went to see where it all ended. Kuma's tombstone stood apart, it didn't fade into the background with the others. His heroic act of bravery earned him a special place in the graveyard and his tombstone carried the story not of his life, but of his death. Even among the dead Kuma was a legend. The family joke was that Kuma could find something to laugh about, even at a funeral. He was that addicted. Kuma died smiling and it made me feel good.

I sat down next to the tombstone. My fingers trailed across the words engraved as his epitaph. *A brother who wasn't afraid to see beyond what his eyes saw.* I had insisted on it being engraved. No one asked me why.

Get it off your chest. That was what the doctor told me. I heaved a big sigh. Sitting there beside Kuma's bed of soil, I wrote a letter. Not to Kuma, but to Loku.

> *Dear Loku,*
>
> *I am not sure why I am writing to you, I was never a good letter writer. I was just thinking about what Kuma told me the last time I spoke to him. That was the most intelligent thing that ever came out of that featherbrain head of his. Even I was impressed. I was wondering Loku, maybe he was right. Maybe we just got it all mixed up. Maybe we are fighting the wrong people. And*

maybe we just don't know why we are fighting…

The war is over Loku. Amma is still going round the country searching for you. After she got over the devala-temple-pooja phase she started going into LTTE territory and demanding that they give a list of names of Army prisoners in their custody. Now she goes to every bunker where they found LTTE prison cells, trying to find out whether you were detained there. Don't blame me. I tried. Well, now we know where Kuma got his stubbornness from. She is convinced that you are alive. I am convinced that you are not.

Love,

Adithya

P.S. By the way machan we moved your chocolates to the freezer.

No one would see this letter, not even Dr. Kumaraswami. I sealed it in an envelope and locked it in a drawer in our old bedroom almirah that we used to share as boys.

Ruvini Katugaha *was born and bred in Kandy. She is currently a law student in the University of Peradeniya and feels passionate about reaching out to others through writing. She strongly believes in the futility of ethnic hatred and war. A true story she heard during the* Write to Reconcile *workshop inspired her to write this story.*

POEMS

K. Jepakumar

DISPLACEMENT

Discovered no happiness on the new land,
Invented jobs that give us no money,
Separated from our relations, among strangers,
People angry at an uncaring government,
Light of oil lamps illuminates our lonely lives,
Animals encircle us wanting their land back,
Cover of palm leaves protects us from sun and rain,
Elephants, frequent guests, rattle our flimsy houses,
Members of Parliament bring pageants but no solutions,
Everyone toils with lips sealed tightly shut,
No way to make a bright future here,
Terrible to think this is our home forever.

VANISHING

Vanishing gives the shivers,
vanishing swallows happiness,
vanishing intensifies fury, is torture, stings.
Vanishing is a slow poison for the mothers,
of the Eastern Province.

REBUILDING

Oh Pasikuda!
Hotel Malu is fun,
foreigners stroll in the setting sun,
the sea shimmers like silk,
busy road, fast food, a casino soon to come.
Oh Pasikuda!

Local men sitting idly,
while hotel workers from elsewhere
gobble the fruits of development,
teenage mothers with children on hips,
from old men they married
to avoid conscription during the war,
villages with orphanages
for children of the raped.

Ethnic pride broken,
your people float
in this flotsam of the new.

Kulanthai Jepakumar *was born in Mankerny, Vaharai, Batticaloa. Due to the civil war, his father disappeared when he was six and he underwent several displacements. Rev. Father Paul Satkunanayagam finally took him into his orphanage, facilitated his studies and became his guardian. Currently he is pursuing a degree program at the Eastern University Sri Lanka. He has been involved in Sri Lankan youth programs for 14 years especially peace building programs. He is interested in writing poetry based on peace and harmony.*

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WRITE TO RECONCILE II

In this second Write to Reconcile Anthology Sri Lankan writers, both at home and in the diaspora, take on the subject of the country's civil war and the post-war period, bringing alive the absorbing diversity that is Sri Lanka in all its beauty and joy, its aggression and horror: a Muslim family struggles with the abduction of their son by armed men they suspect might be LTTE; a Sinhalese soldier and a young Tamil woman in Jaffna fall in love and try to make a life for themselves against great odds; a teacher recalls the death of her brother, an ace pilot for the Sri Lankan Air Force; a young Tamil immigrant in London remembers his Muslim boyhood friend and their endeavour to maintain a friendship despite the escalating inter-communal conflict in Batticaloa; a young Tamil-Canadian woman ponders her mother's incredible bravery in making a life for her family in a foreign land and the price of that bravery.

This poignant and inspiring collection of stories and poems gives readers a vivid portrait of Sri Lanka's history in the last thirty plus years, the people affected by this history, and the stories they have to tell.

WRITE TO RECONCILE

NORWEGIAN EMBASSY

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