Niromi de Soyza

Tamil Tigress

My story as a child soldier in Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war

ALLEN & UNWIN
To the ones I loved and lost
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Concealed by the shadow of a large water tank, I sat on the heel of my right foot. The air was sweetly pungent with the smell of ripening bananas and palmyra fruit. Cicadas buzzed relentlessly as a blazing sun rose to evaporate the condensed dew in the fields we had just scurried through. The small, sparsely-populated village was luscious with its manioc and banana plantations, palm trees, and water birds in flight. But all this was lost on our small platoon of twenty-two; over half of us young women. Appreciation of beauty is a luxury of the untroubled mind.

It was two days before Christmas 1987 and I was seventeen years old. The only sound I could hear was that of my thumping heart; all I could see was the fear in the faces of the others. Sweat trickled down my back. We were silent. Our ears were finetuned to any sound of stealthy footsteps and our eyes to any sighting of strangers. Our fingers were primed on the triggers of our rifles. It seemed like a typical morning for us as Tigers, but that was about to change dramatically. By the time the sun would set on us this day, nothing would be the same again.

At first light, our sentry had reported seeing soldiers. ‘Hundreds of them have just stepped out of the cover of the banana plantation,’
a panic-stricken Vadhana had panted as she stood at the doorstep of the abandoned house we were occupying. There had been fear in her large brown eyes. We had barely put our weapons down after the usual dawn stake-out.

The house we were in was unfinished—floors had not been laid and, without doors and windows, the frames let the outside in. We had arrived the previous night in darkness and slept on the dirt floor. The night before that we had been elsewhere—in another abandoned house, in another village.

I had been on 2am sentry duty and there had been nothing unusual to indicate what was to come. I had stood under a mango tree with my AK-47 in hand, scanning the darkness and growing more tired as I watched the night sky. When a star shot past, I had wondered if Roshan too stood somewhere at sentry and was witnessing it. That thought sent a smile across my lips—I had seen him only two months before but already felt that I had lost him to another time, to another life. If we survived this war, no doubt we’d see each other again. Roshan had always known where to find me.

When Vadhana issued her warning we quickly gathered up our meagre belongings and scrambled out of the door in the opposite direction to the approaching soldiers. Over the past couple of months we had lost all our belongings. I now had only the shirt and jeans I was wearing (which stank of sweat and grime), my sarong (which doubled as a blanket and towel), an empty hessian sack (which functioned as a sleeping bag), my chest holster and rifle. We had lost our footwear in previous skirmishes; but we still had our kuppies, the cyanide capsules we wore around our necks. We were better prepared for death than for life.

We hurried through a banana plantation and entered a field of ploughed earth, where loose soil fell away under our feet. Wiry sunburnt men and women stopped work and gawked at us, shading their eyes with the palms of their hands.

‘Everyone, move forward!’ Muralie, one of our men-in-command, ordered. ‘It’s the only way out!’

That meant we would have to negotiate the main road we had
traversed the night before, which was heavily patrolled by armoured vehicles and jeeps. We would have to find a few seconds of opportunity to make it across alive.

We moved stealthily along a single dirt track leading to the road, flanked by palmyra trees, shrubs and overgrown vines. When we came up by the side of a water tank, Muralie positioned me there: ‘I want you to cover the right side, so those ahead of you can cross the road one by one.’

And so I sat on my heel, cocked my AK-47 and held it in position. Those at the front of the line poised to charge across the road.

And then we heard it. Machine-gun fire. Three bullets fired in automatic. It came from our far right, beyond the fields and houses.

We froze. A flock of parrots took flight in pandemonium. Silence followed.

I looked at Muralie as I realised that the soldiers were closing in on us from the right. I had rarely seen panic in those almond eyes. He urged us to move forward.

‘Hurry! Cross the road, one by one! Be very careful!’

I was behind Ajanthi and there were a few girls ahead of her. Cautiously we moved forward along the track towards the road. My heart was pumping rapidly. Occasional gunfire sounded a safe distance away. I tried to look ahead over Ajanthi’s shoulder. The barbed-wire fence on either side of the lane, covered with runners, mostly obstructed my view of the main road. Then I saw Nira step forward.

Bang!

‘Amma!’ Nira screamed for his mother. His right hand went to his chest. Then he collapsed.

Suddenly heavy gunfire and hand grenades began to spray at us from the sides of the road.

‘Get down to the ground!’ Muralie screamed. ‘Keep moving towards the road. We have to break through.’

We crashed to the ground.

The automatic gunfire sounded like festive firecrackers, interrupted by exploding grenades and mortars. Bullets whistled past my
ears. Acrid smoke from the explosions was thickening the air and beginning to irritate my eyes and lungs. I shuffled forward on my elbows and knees behind Ajanthi. My heart felt as if it would explode out of my chest.

Then I heard more gunfire from behind us, a couple of hundred metres away. The enemy was now closing in on us from all directions and this time I knew that we wouldn’t be able to escape. There was a metre-high water tank on my right and the few palmyra and banana trees that dotted the landscape on my left. There was no place to hide. Now the remaining twenty-one of us, with our few AKs and M16s, were going to have to face an enemy who was well prepared and equipped, and had been lying in wait for us since the early hours of the morning.

I saw Muralie grab his assistant Rajan’s AK and run forward. Muralie usually carried a pistol. ‘Idiots at the front-line, fire and break through! Break through!’ he shouted, seeing us hesitate.

At the back of the line the bearded Sudharshan was yelling obscenities at us: ‘Get going, you mother-fuckers! If not, I’ll blow your brains out myself!’

I aimed my AK-47 at the road while keeping an eye on my comrades in front of me. One of the girls, Sadha, made a dash across, followed by Jenny. I saw Sadha fall.

The noise of exploding grenades and gunfire was deafening. There was a lot of screaming. More and more jeeps and tanks arrived on the road, bringing reinforcements. A helicopter gunship hovered low above us, strafing.

I crawled forward on my elbows, still holding my AK in position, my forefinger stroking the trigger.

One of the girls, Saaradha, screamed, ‘My leg! My leg! Someone help me . . . !’

Then I saw a hand grenade flying over from the left side of the road in my direction. As I scrambled on my hands and knees to get away, I realised that Gandhi was in its path, behind the palmyra tree, firing with his AK.

‘Gandhi anna, duck!’
The grenade hit Gandhi and exploded. The young man’s head blew into smithereens and its contents of flesh and blood splattered, drenching me. His headless torso fell to the ground like a tree trunk. I wanted to scream but no sound came from my throat. Everything felt strange—as if I wasn’t physically there any more. I saw a smoke-screen around me, but I couldn’t tell if it was real.

By now, all those in front of Ajanthi had attempted to cross the road. Holding her AK in position, Ajanthi got off the ground and on to her knees. Briefly she turned around to look at me, just like she had at school, where I had sat behind her in the third row. Whenever she turned around to talk to me, a chalk duster would come flying at her.

‘I’ll see you on the other side,’ she muttered hurriedly.

I nodded, completely unsure.
Schools in Jaffna have the highest standard of education in the country,’ Appa, my father, had reasoned when the decision was made to send me, at eight years old, to Jaffna, 300 kilometres north of our home in Norton Bridge, a small town up in the central mountains of Sri Lanka, outside Kandy. ‘My mother has been kind enough to accept you into her home there, so you can become a doctor like your aunts and uncles.’

It was true: all of Appa’s seven siblings were highly educated and successful, seemingly in control of their lives. I had often heard Appa openly admire his sisters as beautiful, elegant and intelligent women. I knew he had similar aspirations for my little sister Shirani and me. I was glad of the opportunity, even if it meant that I would leave behind my hometown.

Kandy and the capital, Colombo, also had good schools, but I knew my parents had chosen Jaffna because it was a Tamil stronghold. They were feeling vulnerable living among Sinhalese in the south of the country.

Only a few months before, in July 1977, there had been violence against Tamils all over the country, and a few hundred Tamils were killed by Sinhala mobs. The riots had begun because, for the
first time ever, a Tamil political party had been elected in opposition, giving them relative power. During this time, my parents had instructed us to speak only in whispers after dusk, when the mobs mobilised, while they drew all the curtains and kept the lights off. We were sent to bed early.

I had also overheard my parents speaking of their luck that their requests for job transfers to the ancient city of Anuradhapura hadn’t come through, because in this city all the Tamils on board a train had been massacred. My parents had chosen Anuradhapura because it was halfway between my father’s city of Jaffna and my mother’s city of Kandy, which also meant that it separated the Tamil and Sinhala strongholds of Sri Lanka. Because the adults did not discuss such matters with us, I listened in quietly. There had been a real threat to all the Tamil homes in the Up Country where we lived—groups of rampaging Sinhala thugs had already looted and burnt down a few Tamil businesses. These groups had also tried to enter the Tamil settlements within the tea estates but were deterred by the large number of Indian Tamil estate labourers guarding their commune with machetes and batons. As a result, all the Tamils living in the Up Country were spared, workers or not.

‘We’ve been lucky this time. The Sinhala thugs weren’t able to take on the Tamils in this area,’ said my father to my mother. ‘But next time, who knows, the Sinhalese could bring in reinforcements.’

This was the first time I became aware that my family was one of only a handful of Tamils in the area that did not live and work in the tea estates, and it worried me. Nearly all of our neighbours, my parents’ friends, colleagues and some of my mother’s extended family were either Sinhalese or Burghers. When in public, we spoke either English or Sinhala although I had never once wondered why. I began to notice that we were different to each other although we looked much the same on the outside.

‘Appa, why don’t the Sinhalese like the Tamils?’ I had asked my father one day when he was fixing the chicken-wire around a newly built coop. When he wasn’t at work, Appa was always doing something in the garden or around the house.
'The Sinhalese and the Tamils have no problems, it is the political parties that stir things for their own gain,’ replied my father, still focused on the task at hand.

‘But why?’

‘So you could ask why, that’s why.’

That was how my father replied when he did not want me to ask any more questions, so I did not persist for fear of being scolded. In Sri Lanka curiosity was not a trait encouraged among children, particularly in girls, because those in power—often males, but anyone older, or of higher caste, education or influence—were always right and their reasons needn’t be explained or understood to the subordinate. Questioning was seen as defiance or challenging authority, for which we were often ignored, scolded or smacked, so we quickly learned to never challenge authority. I was lucky; my father never hit us and rarely scolded us, but he knew how to stop me from asking questions he didn’t want to answer.

He had replied the same way when I asked him about the distressing scenes I had witnessed at the town’s British-built railway station two years earlier, on my way to pre-school. It resembled a funeral but I couldn’t figure out who had died. Day after day scores of Indian Tamil estate-labourers and their families were boarding the train while others stayed behind on the platform. Everyone was wailing—it seemed to me that these people didn’t want to go wherever they were going and those on the platform didn’t want them to go. I saw children being pulled this way and that and elderly people being dragged along the platform against their will. There was always someone running after the moving train and someone jumping out of it. Also at the same railway station were mass loads of Sinhala Buddhist pilgrims on their way to the holy mountain, Adam’s Peak, all dressed in white, carrying waterlilies and incense, muttering chants, completely indifferent to their fellow passengers’ plight. This upset me greatly—something was terribly wrong.

Having realised the only way to know the truth was to eavesdrop into adult conversations, I had perfected the art of making myself invisible right in the room where the conversations took
place by pretending to be reading, drawing or catnapping. This way I learnt that Prime Minister Bandaranaike was deporting the descendants of over half of the Tamil plantation workers brought over by the British nearly a century before back to India. Many of them did not want to go because Sri Lanka was now their home, and they were being separated from their families, perhaps forever. I was relieved to know that my family was not going to be deported because we were Ceylon Tamils, not Indian Tamils, but still we were Tamils living in a Sinhala neighbourhood with the threat that the townspeople could turn on us at any time. While our Sinhala family and friends would want to protect us, this could put them in harm’s way too.

So the decision was made to send me to the Tamil stronghold of Jaffna so I could begin school in the first term of 1978, and my parents and little sister would follow once my parents’ requests for transfers to Jaffna were approved. If my parents felt apprehensive sending me so far away, to a place where communication was possible only by letters, they did not show it.

Soon after Christmas of 1977, Appa and I boarded the first-class observation car of the express train, Udarata Menike, in the mid morning. It was a comfortable air-conditioned journey but, except for the steam train’s rhythmic chugs and shrilling whistles, it was silent. In Sri Lanka it is considered disrespectful to speak to one’s elders unless absolutely necessary, so while Appa read the newspapers or sat lost in thought, I looked out at the rapidly receding cloud-topped hills, that rolling carpet of green, packed with tea bushes and speckled by white-roofed tea factories and cascading waterfalls. The tea-leaf pickers snaked their way up the hills, swiftly pinching off the tender shoots and throwing them over their shoulders into the wicker basket on their backs. I knew that as they plucked the shoots they’d be chatting away rapid-fire in the distinctive Indian Tamil accents that I would no longer hear in Jaffna, where only native Tamil was spoken. When the train wound its way out of long dark tunnels, there were children at the water spouts gushing down from the hills, smiling and waving as the train passed.
The steam train slowed down and came to a stop at Gampola, leaving the tea estates behind. As I followed Appa out of the train for the brief stop, I was hit by the smells and sounds of the platform. There were vendors of all kinds walking up and down, selling everything from handmade toys, *thambili* (tender coconut drink) and food. I was trying to decide between wood-apples, jambus, mangosteens and rambutans.

‘*Podi nangi* [Little girl], please ask your older brother to buy you a *malu banis*,’ pleaded a vendor in Sinhala. My father was often mistaken as my older brother or a young uncle. I looked at the young boy’s wicker basket—it was full of freshly baked triangular fish buns.

I resumed my position by the window, enjoying the delicious bun. The railway line wound its way besides Mahaweli Ganga, the longest river in our country, flanked by luscious green vegetation. On the river bed, a lean sunburnt man was scrubbing an elephant with a coconut husk. The afternoon sun shone on the distant mountains.

‘Both your grandfathers were station masters,’ Appa said suddenly as the train approached Peradeniya station. ‘It used to be a prestigious position in the British railways.’

I looked at the man standing on the platform in his smart white uniform and hat, resembling a pilot. I remembered the large black-and-white photos that hung in my maternal grandparents’ house in Hatton, a town outside Kandy—one of my Thaatha in his grand office, behind his desk in full uniform, and another one of him exchanging the baton with the guard. I had often asked Thaatha to elaborate on those photos, although I had heard all the stories many times before. I loved to see the look of pride on his face when he recounted those years as we walked through the garden down to the river—Thaatha in his tweed jacket, boots and hat, smoking his pipe. Grandmother, whom I called Aatchi, never allowed him to smoke indoors.

As an only son of wealthy Indian immigrants, Thaatha had been educated at the exclusive St John Boys’ College, a boarding School in Jaffna, then had his marriage arranged at eighteen and was allocated a government job in British-ruled Ceylon. Aatchi, his equal in wealth and caste, was only fourteen when she married him. She
was the granddaughter of a merchant landowner who had also made the move from India to Ceylon, seeking new opportunities. As a young mother, Aatchi had managed a household of twelve children and an equal number of staff, ensuring the children and the house were always impeccable. Even now, their elegant house was always filled with flowers, its walls and antique furniture adorned with her tapestries and crocheted pieces, and a magnificent garden surrounded the house.

Whenever I visited my grandparents, I could look forward to Aatchi making all my favourite foods. ‘Go out to the garden and ask Nadesu to help you choose the vegetables you would like for lunch,’ Aatchi would say, handing me a wicker basket and pointing outside to the gardener, her cluster-diamond jewellery dazzling in the sunlight. Her numerous diamond-covered piercings and stretched earlobes, and the traditional Indian tattoos that decorated her arms, were a constant source of wonder to me and Shirani. Although Thaatha had a few of those tattoos himself, they were more visible on Aatchi’s fair skin.

I did not have the same familiarity with my paternal grandparents. Appappa had died of a heart attack, leaving behind a young wife and eight children. Despite our annual Christmas holiday visits to the ancestral home in Tellipalai, a village in Jaffna’s countryside, I hardly understood my father’s family or their ways as Jaffna Tamils. They spoke a pure and ancient form of Tamil, different to that spoken by my mother’s family and in the Indian movies I had seen. It sounded more like a mix of two south Indian languages, Malayalam and Tamil. My father said it was because his ancestors had arrived from south India in the second century BCE and the contemporary language reflected the Dravidian language and culture of that ancient time. These people had settled predominantly in the north and on the north-east coast of Sri Lanka and now made up 13 per cent of the country’s population.

The Sinhalese (74 per cent of the population) spoke a derivative of Indo-Aryan languages and had also arrived from India but from the north some three centuries earlier. Both ethnic groups
were originally Hindu, but with the introduction of Buddhism from India in the second century BCE a vast majority of the Sinhalese had converted. My father’s family were among the small population of Tamils and Sinhalese who embraced Christianity during the sixteenth century when Sri Lanka was colonised by the Portuguese, the Dutch and later the British. These Christian converts were favoured by their colonial masters, who provided them with Christian private school education, scholarships in British universities and government jobs, creating an elite class and adding yet another layer of complexity to the traditions, language, religion and caste system that existed in both Tamil and Sinhala cultures. Over time, educated Christians felt they were better than the Hindus and the Buddhists. And the Buddhists thought the country solely belonged to them.

My mother’s grandparents belonged to the Indian merchant and landowner class of Hill Country Tamil Hindus, who migrated to Sri Lanka during the British era. The British also brought Indian labourers from South India to work in their tea and rubber plantations because the locals refused to. These recent Indian migrants and the Ceylon Tamils of the north did not mingle due to geographical isolation. My parents met when my father came to work in the south. They fell in love and married. Their families opposed their union because the northern Tamils (my father’s people) thought the Tamils of the east coast and Hill Country (my mother’s people) inferior. I, of course, had no idea of the tension that lay beneath the superficial politeness that existed between my family and my father’s.

Now, in the train on my way to Jaffna, I felt as though I was going to a new town to live amongst strangers, comforted only by the knowledge that my family would join me soon.

I expected that my life in Jaffna would be vastly different to that in Kandy because, like the two sides of my family, the two cities were different from each other in so many ways. Although Jaffna had beautiful beaches to visit, there would be no lush green lawns lined with orchids to run around in, no walks up the hills of tea estates, no collecting pebbles by the streams with my cousins. I would not hear Sinhala being spoken or see many foreigners. I would miss the
celebrations of the Buddhist and Hindu thanksgiving festivals, Esala Perahera and Thai Pongal.

In Jaffna at my Appamma’s house, I knew that the only festivities I could expect would be muted celebrations at Christmas. Appa had described the elaborate month-long Christmas celebrations in their ancestral home when he was a young boy, but since my paternal grandfather died, my grandmother had moved to their house in the city of Jaffna and no longer celebrated Christmas in such an extravagant way.

Dramatic hills now gave way to lowland plains as night fell. I must have dozed off as our train approached Polgahawela interchange because my father had to tap me on the shoulder. As we stepped onto the platform with our luggage, I felt the warmth envelop me. True to its name, the small town was resplendent with coconut trees. We went into the waiting room and ate our packed dinner of string-hoppers (rice vermicelli noodles curled into spirals and steamed) with beef and potato curry.

After waiting a couple of hours in the darkness, we boarded the northbound Yarl Devi express from Colombo. I was passing my favourite part of the country, the hinterland, but it was too dark to look out of the window of our sleeping compartment. The best part of our annual trip to Tellipalai had always been this—paddy fields, water buffaloes, white cranes and ponds full of Nil Mahanel, the water lilies. I had never cared much for Jaffna itself—dry and arid, with its uninteresting flat lands dotted with extremely tall palmyra and coconut trees.

On our arrival at Jaffna railway station, after an 18-hour-long journey, the first thing I noticed was the heat. It was now the early hours of the morning, before sunrise, and yet it was humid. The warm breeze carried the scent of jasmine. The taxi drove a short distance through quiet, densely-populated city streets and pulled up in front of an old Portuguese-period house.

As my father unloaded my little suitcase from the taxi, I stood outside the house. I had never seen anything like it. The houses here were built right onto the street. Their front verandahs were enclosed
by wooden lattice atop a short brick wall. There was no front yard. All the space I had enjoyed running around in the Hill Country had all but vanished here in Jaffna.

My father knocked on the door a few times before he yelled out ‘Amma! Amma!’

The door was flung open at last and a dark-skinned young woman, in a knee-length skirt and a white cotton sleeveless blouse, stood bleary-eyed.

‘Go inside!’ A voice came from behind her.

When the young woman stepped aside, I recognised the old woman in a white blouse and sarong—Appamma, my grandmother. The woman who had opened the door must have been her maid. Even at such an early hour of the morning, Appamma’s hair was in a neat knot at the nape.

‘Vaango Thambi.’

I thought the way Appamma welcomed her eldest son so formally—addressing him as her younger brother—was odd. And as was typical there was no exchange of warm embraces or pats on the back with us. In Sri Lanka, displays of affection in the presence of others were frowned upon, no matter the relationship between people; it was considered rude and disrespectful to those present. Even married couples in their own homes showed no signs of physical or verbal intimacy in front of their family. Children were treated the same way, and often the only physical contact made was for holding hands to help cross the road, or for smacking. So unsurprisingly Appamma now ignored me. We followed her with our luggage into a large, damp, dark house.

It was only when Appa left the following day, to return home to Norton Bridge, that I came to realise I would not see him or Amma or Shirani for a while. Suddenly, I felt lonely in the unfamiliar surroundings. No one here shared my past. I would no longer see my parents playing tennis together; or Appa dancing about the house to the Bee Gees, Tom Jones or the La Bambas; or Amma instructing the gardener or the cook. I would no longer witness parties where glasses clinked with Arrack (the local beer) while everyone spoke a mix of
English, Tamil and Sinhala, their mouths filled with hot fish cutlets or beef and potato patties. Such parties always ended with everyone joining in on the Portuguese-inspired *baila*, dancing and singing along. I knew I’d miss all of it. But, above everything, I would miss my little sister Shirani, who was nearly three years younger than me.

Shirani and I had been fairly isolated from the other children in our neighbourhood because the split-level bungalow we lived in was set in a large estate. It was the latest housing provided to my father as the regional assistant director of the Electricity Board’s technical college. The British-built house was fitted with all modern comforts, and with its many rooms and an established garden, it was enough to keep two imaginative young children largely occupied.

Despite this, Shirani was often down the hill at the corner shop smoking *beedi* (tobacco wrapped in coromandel leaf), freely handed to her by the shop owner. We had often watched with curiosity the strange ritual of the tea-estate labourers pulling out a *beedi* from the bundle and lighting them on the embers of a rope that hung on the side of the shop, and soon Shirani was doing the same. It did not matter to her, or to the shop owner, that she was the only girl at the shop, and a three-year-old at that. Every time, I would wave my finger at her in warning as I hung over the fence; but I would also feel envious—I simply did not have the courage to defy my parents’ instructions, which were that we should not take one step past the cypress tree down the hill.

Shirani, of course, would dismiss my warnings with a wave of her hand as she puffed away. She knew that I did not have the courage to tell on her either. She was equally cavalier with the home-made *thambili* wine that Amma made for Christmas. It took me months to work out the inverse correlation between Shirani’s extended day naps and the level of the wine left in the bottle.

In Jaffna my life soon became much more regimented. My days mostly began the same way: I woke up to the sound of bicycle bells
and the cawing of crows, and by this time the house would be a hive of activity and outside would be awash with sunlight and rising heat. Then my cousin Manel, who also lived in the same house with her parents, my aunt Imelda and her husband Ratnam, and I were sent off to school on a bicycle rickshaw. At our Catholic school run by nuns, every school assembly began with a bible reading, a recital of a section of the rosary and a moral lesson, and every school lesson began and ended with a prayer. The lessons were intense and I found the standard of learning expected of us was way higher than what I was used to in Kandy. In the evenings and on the weekends we were expected to spend much time doing our homework and revisions. It seemed to me that there was a lot of studying to be done in Jaffna.

In the afternoons, I would look forward to a kind-hearted Uncle Ratnam coming home from work as I did not much care to remain in the confines of the house, which had little or no outdoor space. Most evenings he took Manel and me somewhere on his bicycle—the Jaffna library, Subramaniam Park, Pannai beach and even to the famous cricket matches between Central and St John’s Colleges. If we had spare time after homework, Aunt Imelda sat us on the front verandah and asked us to guess the birth number (based on numerology) of unsuspecting passers-by, with prompts such as: ‘If a young person wears reading glasses, then they must be a studious number 4.’

One typical morning, as I headed to the bathroom at the back of the house, I heard Appamma giving orders to the maids preparing breakfast. Appamma was a good cook although by then, because of arthritis in her fingers, she only prepared some of her signature dishes: the fried squid-ink curry, purple yam pudding and odiyal kool—a kind of seafood chowder made with palmyra root flour, chilli and jackfruit. Now, the smell of steamed string-hoppers and creamy sodhi (coconut milk and tomato gravy) wafted from the kitchen.

‘Ayyo, St Anthony! How on earth did these devils return?’ Appamma cried out, her silvery grey hair unravelling from the tight knot she always wore it in. She was referring to the kittens prancing about in the backyard. She yelled out to my uncle, the only man in the house: ‘Ratnam, take these kittens away today and this time
take them across a body of water before abandoning them. Then they won’t know their way back.’ No one had a moral dilemma over abandoning the stray kittens. She went back into her kitchen tying her hair, muttering ‘St Anthony, save us.’

St Anthony was indeed Appamma’s favourite saint. Every Tuesday she took me along to recite a rosary and a novena for him at the local Catholic church, Our Lady of Refuge, and then we went off to see Michael, who owned an idol-making business in a tin shack at the back of the church and was considered a quasi-spiritual leader, to be blessed. Michael was a big burly man with curly hair who wore a white singlet and vaetti. His little shop was hot and crowded with religious statues so Michael appeared perpetually sweaty. He’d climb onto a wooden stool and take a blunt knife and a statue of St Anthony out from a glass box perched on a shelf; he’d then place the statue on our heads and sketch crosses on our foreheads with the knife. Michael muttered something in what he claimed to be Latin while he carried out this performance.

Appamma would then consult Michael on all her important matters—marriages, jobs, and the health of her adult married children. Sometimes Michael would give her a charm—an aluminium heart with a haphazardly drawn cross on it—to be placed under a pillow, a doorstep or wherever a miracle was needed. Like most in their community, neither of them saw any conflict in being Catholic and superstitious.

Appamma was otherwise a fiercely independent, self-assured woman. Sometimes my cousins and I would accompany her to her ancestral home in Tellipalai. On these expeditions, she’d often take a large bundle of papers—land title deeds—to ensure that those who leased her lands still remembered that she was in charge. As part of the educated Christian elite under the Dutch, and later British, rule of old Ceylon, her ancestors were fair-skinned, high-caste landed gentry. As we gathered up dried tamarind fruit from under the massive trees surrounding her Spanish-style villa, she would tell us how her family had owned vast farming lands both here and in Kilinochchi. We would shell and sample some of the fruit, making funny faces
at its sweet-and-sourness. The villagers would later salt the mature fruit, spreading the flesh on grass mats and letting it dry out in the sun. On an adjacent mat, red chillies would be dried.

‘Here’s some toddy for the young ladies,’ offered the toddy-tapper.

We had been watching the wiry, half-naked man do what he did for a living—collecting the fermenting liquid from the flowershoot high up in the palmyra trees. Wrapping his hands and legs around the trunk, he would come back down to earth with the white liquid secure in the clay pot tied to his waist.

‘That’s alcohol, and the three of us are just eight years old,’ said Manel, righteously.

‘You can have a taste,’ approved Appamma. And so he poured half a tumbler, from which we all took a sip. The sweet effervescent liquid numbed my tongue and went down refreshingly.

‘Chee, chee!’ spat one of my other cousins who was visiting. ‘It’s sour.’

Manel too made a silly face, pretending to be disgusted at the taste. I understood that this was a game—as young girls, we were supposed to show disdain towards such things. So I did the same, despite enjoying the drink.

Appamma, as usual, having sorted out all her land-affairs, would haul us onto the bus, along with large bundles of the dried tamarind and chillies, for the trip back to Jaffna.

One evening about three months after I had arrived in Jaffna, when I returned home from school Appamma was in the front room weaving yet another basket, a hobby of hers, despite the pain in her crippling fingers. ‘This came for you yesterday,’ she said and handed me a piece of paper. She censored all my letters, as dictated by our culture, where children had no identity of their own and were a commodity of their carer.

My chest tightened as I held the piece of paper. My father’s distinct tiny writing sprawled across the page. A lump came into my throat
as I read his news. Appa, an engineer, was leaving Norton Bridge for Dubai, having received a lucrative work contract. Although this was not our original plan, it was an offer he could not refuse. Tamil professionals were beginning to look for work overseas because it was becoming increasingly difficult to progress in their profession in their own country. I had once overheard Appa and his Burgher colleague Vernon Fernando (who was the director of the regional technical college) at our house talk about how very angry and disappointed they were for being questioned and put on notice by the local Sinhalese minister for granting merit-based admission to four Tamil men along-side ninety-six Sinhalese for the following year. They were ordered to decline two of these Tamils with top marks and offer their places to Sinhalese with lesser grades instead. There were many such incidences and Appa was getting fed up with the unfairness of it all. There were also economic reasons—educating Shirani and me in good schools and university, then amassing dowries to buy us good husbands. So even though Appa did not mention any of this as his reason, I knew why taking an offer overseas, even in a country where he knew no one, was more appealing than remaining in Sri Lanka with his family.

When I had watched him leave Appamma’s house in a taxi, chequered by the wooden lattice enclosing the verandah, I had desperately hoped that this vision would be soon replaced by a very different one—of him arriving. But I knew now that I wouldn’t be seeing him for at least another year.

But there was also good news. Amma and Shirani were due to come and live in Jaffna by the end of the year. My heart leapt with joy. I ran to my bookshelf, fetched a notebook and rapidly wrote a reply and handed it to Appamma as I was expected to. I watched her eyebrows pull together in displeasure as she read my letter. Then she looked up at me and tore my letter into pieces and dropped it on the ground. ‘Pick it up, you bastard child,’ she growled.

I wondered what in my reply could have upset her so much. I had written that I looked forward to Shirani, Amma and I living in our own house as a family again. I had said that I had not enjoyed living here in this hot and boring place without them.
As I picked up the pieces of paper off the floor, Appamma continued to shout: ‘You should be happy that I accepted you in my house. You are the daughter of that low-life Hindu Indian woman who stole my son. I can’t expect class and grace from you.’ She spat on the floor—in a symbolic sense.

It wasn’t the first time I had felt such hatred from her. There were occasions when, in the name of my mother, whom I believed had class and grace, I had been disparaged and even slapped. Only the previous week, when one of the visitors to the house commented how much I looked like my father, Appamma had remarked: ‘No, you are mistaken Mrs Amirthanayagam. She’s dark like her mother, with a face that never wakes up.’

I had always been aware that my mother’s and father’s families were different—my mother’s family seemed a jovial bunch, showing their emotions openly, while my father’s family were always guarded and measured, and I’d hardly ever seen them laugh. I had no knowledge of the circumstances under which these two families came together in marriage, but having listened to Appamma’s insults over time, I concluded that Appa had been expected to choose his bride from among the Jaffna Tamil community—Catholic, high-caste, tertiary-qualified, professional, refined, fair-skinned women of impeccable character, whose parents were capable of buying him at a dowry well beyond what might be expected or offered by any competitor. After all, she told me, there had been many such women ready in waiting. Instead Appa had fallen in love with Amma and married her without his family’s approval.

Soon after I arrived in Jaffna, I began to realise that I was a constant reminder to Appamma of her son’s failure to meet her standards. Before I had left Norton Bridge, Amma had advised me rather opaquely: ‘For the sake of the future, the past has to be sacrificed and the present endured.’ Although I had not fully understood what she meant, I had stayed out of Appamma’s way and in her presence spoke very little.

Perhaps because of this I had enjoyed being at school, where I could be myself. Despite the sometimes competitive hostility of my cousin Manel and her mother, my aunt Imelda, a teacher at our
school, I enjoyed learning and everything about school, apart from sport. I started to do well academically and in extracurricular activities such as the choir, band, singing and dancing. I had little difficulty in forming friendships and, in my spare time, I visited the grand old library with Manel and Uncle Ratnam and read for hours. Manel read educational books while I read adventures and mysteries. Tintin was a particular favourite. In these books, at least, it seemed that the underdog eventually won and justice was always served.

By the time Amma and Shirani arrived in Jaffna, Uncle Ratnam had already found us a room to rent from one of his relatives just a street away from Appamma’s house outside the centre of town. This had to be arranged by my father’s family because Amma may have unknowingly chosen the ‘wrong’ house, in a lower-caste or Hindu neighbourhood. In the four-bedroom house lived a young Catholic, high-caste family with three little boys, their aunt, a parrot with clipped wings (which nibbled holes in our rubber slippers) and Lucky, a flea-ridden dog. The tiny storeroom at the back of the house was converted into a kitchen for our use. The house had no air-conditioning or ceiling fans; it was a hot, cramped environment with no running water and an outdoor squatting toilet. Near the toilet was a well from which we had to draw buckets of water for indoor use. Other than a pawpaw tree, a coconut tree and some four o’clock plants, there was no other vegetation in the white sandy yard where we played cricket with the other children in the neighbourhood, chased by Lucky when we had to run between the wickets. Although Amma said very little about it to us, I knew she was terribly unhappy here in Jaffna. In addition to the house she disliked the heat and, unlike in the Up Country, here she had no hired help with household chores. My father’s family had welcomed her civilly, but without a kind word or a smile. Shirani was better accepted, and Amma reasoned that it was because of her fair skin and playful nature. I possessed neither of these attributes.
By the end of the following year, Amma, Shirani and I moved into our newly built bungalow in a leafy part of town, a few kilometres away from Appamma. Although I continued to feel my father’s family’s influence, the sense of suffocation I had felt was no longer so intense. Amma, on the other hand, bore the direct brunt of their dislike towards her.

At weddings and birthdays I overheard their slighting remarks to my mother: ‘While you’ve put on weight and look well, the kids are skinny and poorly dressed.’ I was partly to blame for this. Amma had forced Shirani and me to wear so much gold jewellery to these parties believing that ‘Other people will say you’re a peasant’s child if you have no jewellery.’ I felt that nothing mattered to Amma more than what these ‘other people’ thought, and though Amma had tried reasoning with me, I’d remove the jewellery and put it in my pocket before we’d arrive at a celebration.

I would watch Amma closely to see her response to her in-laws’ insults. She’d flinch but that was all. She never uttered a word in reply, instead, she’d burst into tears when she got home.

‘But why do you stay silent?’ I’d ask.

‘Speaking up would not achieve anything other than a bad name,’ she’d say.

On one occasion when I was about ten years old, Amma was subjected to what appeared to be an interrogation by a couple of my aunts and Appamma at their house. For the first time my mother broke into sobs in front of them, but still she said nothing to defend herself from whatever she was being accused of. She was enduring the present for the sake of the future, when one day her status as daughter-in-law of the eldest of sons would be accepted and welcomed.

‘Come on, let’s go!’ I said to Shirani, no longer able to tolerate this confrontation—neither the tyranny nor the timidity.

‘But, we can’t leave Amma on her own.’

‘She can stand up for herself if she wants to,’ I muttered and walked out in disgust. Shirani followed me, slamming the front door behind her.
One evening, Amma returned home in tears yet again from Appamma’s house. I had started to find excuses not to accompany her on such visits, which she felt were her duty as a daughter-in-law. I thought that Amma’s enormous capacity to forgive and forget made her prone to making the same mistake over and over.

‘What did they complain about this time?’ I asked, not really interested in her reply.

This time, however, her answer was unexpected: ‘It’s about you. They’re accusing you of having a boyfriend, and that it’s a reflection on me.’

A boyfriend? Then I remembered I had mentioned in passing my crush on a boy called Harry to one of my cousins. I should’ve known better. It was at the YMCA summer youth camp that I had first noticed him. I was now nearly thirteen and this had been the first time I had been in the vicinity of ‘unrelated’ boys. On the second day of the camp, I had noticed this tall, slim handsome boy at the back of the hall smiling at me. I suddenly felt an irrational fascination for him. But it all came to nothing—by the end of the camp, Harry and I hadn’t progressed past a few smiles. I never saw him again.

Jaffna Tamil culture did not tolerate romantic relationships, simply because it needed to maintain control on its social hierarchy of caste, education, wealth and religion which was only possible through suitably-arranged marriages. If one happened to fall in love with the ‘wrong’ person they were persuaded to abandon the relationship at all costs, because marrying someone of a lower status, caste or a different religion would bring disgrace to one’s entire family. Society did everything to discourage friendships between boys and girls from a very young age, and the whole town kept a close eye on our everyday behaviour in public. Even a split-second sideways glance at a boy passing on a bicycle was enough to have us reported to our school or family. A report such as this could cause you to be named and shamed by the nuns at a school assembly or, worse, expelled from school.

The same social codes applied to boys as well, but it did little to stop them from pursuing the girls relentlessly. It was our responsibility
as girls to uphold our virtues. We were told: ‘If the sari falls on a thorn or if the thorn drops on a sari, you know which suffers the damage.’ By the time we were teenagers, we knew what we had to do to discourage boys: avoid eye contact, refuse to speak when spoken to, not reply to love letters and decline gifts.

At twelve years of age being falsely accused of having a boyfriend by my relatives incensed me. Their dislike of me seemed to have grown since my family’s arrival and my better grades at school had worsened things with cousin Manel and Aunt Imelda.

‘Amma, it’s not true. You believe me, don’t you?’

‘They say, “As the sari is of its thread, a daughter is of her mother”,’ replied Amma, wiping away her tears.

I had thought that with my mother’s arrival I was no longer answerable to anyone other than her. But I now understood Amma’s desire to please her in-laws and what it meant for me—I would have to toe their line for the rest of my life.

It had been a terrible day for me, not only because of this unfair accusation by my father’s family, but also because of what had happened in the early hours of that morning: the government’s loyal armed forces had burnt down the magnificent Jaffna library I had so adored. I knew things were changing for the worse. Anger and frustration were mounting inside me.