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2024

‘Beautiful,
heartbreaking’

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‘Blazingly brilliant’

CELESTE NG

‘A superb writer’

SUNDAY TIMES

BROTHERLESS NIGHT

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V. V. Ganeshanathan

BROTHERLESS NIGHT

‘*Brotherless Night* is my favourite kind of novel, one so rich and full of movement that it’s only later I realize how much I have learned. Ganeshananthan drew me in from the very first line, and the intricacies of her characters’ lives made it easy to stay’ Sara Novic, author of *True Biz*

‘A remarkable, unflinching novel that delicately, with surgical precision, exposes the deep wound at the heart of a long, cruel war’ Romesh Gunsekera, author of *Reef*

‘A beautiful, brilliant book – it gives an accounting of the unimaginable losses suffered by a family and by a country, but it is as tender and fierce as it is mournful. It is unafraid to look directly at the worst of the violence and erasure we have perpetrated or allowed to happen, but is insistent that we can still choose to be better’ Danielle Evans, author of *The Office of Historical Corrections*

‘This is a heart-rending book about connection and survival, and one which sweeps you up in its brilliant storytelling’ *i*

‘When we return to New York two decades later we’ve begun to understand how the Tamil “terrorists” defy this label as much as any other. Ganeshananthan triumphs in her portrait of them as complex individuals – “people you might know or love”’ *Spectator*

‘Stunningly great’ Curtis Sittenfeld, bestselling author of *Rodham*

‘A heartbreaking exploration of a family fractured by civil war. This beautiful, nuanced novel follows a young doctor caught within conflicting ideologies as she tries to save lives. I couldn’t put this book down’ Brit Bennett, bestselling author of *The Vanishing Half*

‘With immense compassion and deep moral complexity, V. V. Ganeshananthan brings us an achingly moving portrait of individual and societal grief’ Celeste Ng, bestselling author of *Little Fires Everywhere*

‘Ganeshanathan is a superb writer. The pace and tone of her tale is exquisitely judged and the prose almost electrically alert to the nuances of the story she is telling. I wept at many points in this novel and I also wept when it was over’ *Sunday Times*

‘A real eye-opener of a book’ *Good Housekeeping*

‘Sashi’s storytelling is a perfect fit for the delicate balance she is forced to walk by virtue of living in a society where running afoul of the dominant forces, saying the wrong thing, levelling too impassioned a rebuke, can prove a capital offense’

Omar El Akkad, *The New York Times Book Review*

‘A beautifully written story of resilience, loss, human connection and survival amidst the complexities and violence of war’ *Ms.*

‘A searing and intimate depiction of the Sri Lankan Civil War from the point of view of an aspiring doctor . . . Ganeshanathan credibly captures the horrors and pain of the conflict felt by those caught between loyalties. It all makes for a convincing and illuminating war novel’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘Through this moving story, Ganeshanathan traces the human aspects of war – the physical losses and tragedies as well as the conflicts of values that are often the true battlefields . . . [she] forces the reader to discard a binary description of the world in favour of a more complex, human one’ *BookPage*, starred review

‘A careful, vivid exploration of what’s lost within a community when life and thought collapse toward binary conflict . . . a novel for our own country in this odd time’ *New Yorker*

‘Prepare to have your heart well and truly pummelled by this searing story about a young Tamil woman growing up as the Sri Lankan Civil War explodes around her . . . at times, it’s hard to remember that this rich and nuanced novel isn’t actually a memoir – so convincing is Sashi’s voice and so compelling her story’

Bookseller, Book of the Month

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‘Riveting, heartbreaking and extraordinary for both its empathetic gaze and its clear-eyed depiction of the brutality of war,
Brotherless Night is a masterpiece’ *Star Tribune*

‘V. V. Ganeshanathan’s novel *Brotherless Night* reveals the moral nuances of violence, ever belied by black-and-white terminology’ *The New York Times*

‘The best historical fiction novels don’t just tell a great story – they reveal a side of history that their readers may not be familiar with.

V. V. Ganeshanathan’s *Brotherless Night* does just that . . . [It] is a powerful work of fiction; one that reminds the reader what it means to live through war, and stand as a witness to history’ *Town & Country*

‘*Brotherless Night* is a gut-wrenching counter to the moral absolutisms hawked in all conflicts throughout history. It is also a love letter to the act of telling (of, more accurately, writing) truth to power, even when language feels like an inadequate and ineffective weapon’ *Tortoise Media*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

V. V. Ganeshanathan is the author of *Love Marriage*, which was longlisted for the Women’s Prize in 2008. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *The New York Times* and *Atlantic Monthly*, among others. *Brotherless Night* draws on sixteen years of research into the Sri Lankan Civil War. Since 2017, Ganeshanathan has co-hosted a podcast called *Fiction/Non/Fiction* with novelist Whitney Terrell, about the intersection of literature and the news, featuring writers like Marlon James, Madeline Miller and Jia Tolentino. She teaches in the MFA programme at the University of Minnesota.

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Love Marriage

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BROTHERLESS NIGHT

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THERE IS NO LIFE FOR ME APART FROM MY PEOPLE.

—*Rajani Thiranagama*

HISTORY IS ALSO A CASUALTY OF TERROR.

—*Rajan Hoole*

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BROTHERLESS NIGHT

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PROLOGUE

NEW YORK, 2009

I RECENTLY SENT A LETTER TO A TERRORIST I USED TO KNOW. He lives near me, here in New York City, and when I opened the envelope and slid in the note that said *I would like to come and see you*, I thought of how much he had always required of me and how little I had ever asked of him. Even when I was growing up in Sri Lanka, before I had ever heard the word *terrorist*, I knew that if a certain kind of person wanted something done, I should comply without asking too many questions. I met a lot of these sorts of people when I was younger because I used to be what you would call a terrorist myself.

We were civilians first. You must understand: that word, *terrorist*, is too simple for the history we have lived—too simple for me, too simple even for this man. How could one word be enough? But I am going to say it anyway, because it is the language you know, and it will help you to understand who we were, what we were called, and who we have truly become.

We begin with this word. But I promise that you will come to see that it cannot contain everything that has happened. Someday the story will begin with the word *civilian*, the word *home*. And while I am no longer the version of myself who met with terrorists every day, I also want you to understand that when I was that woman, when two terrorists encountered each other in my world, what they said first was simply hello. Like any two people you might know or love.

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PART I

A NEAR-INVISIBLE SCAR

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1.

The Boys with the Jaffna Eyes

JAFFNA, 1981

I MET THE FIRST TERRORIST I KNEW WHEN HE WAS DECIDING TO become one. K and his family lived down the road from me and mine, in one village of the Tamil town called Jaffna, in Sri Lanka. The Jaffna peninsula is the northernmost part of the country. Many people have died there: some killed by the Sri Lankan Army and the state, some by the Indian Peace Keeping Force, and some by the Tamil separatists, whom you know as the terrorists. Many people, of course, have also lived.

In early 1981, I was almost sixteen years old. I already wanted to become a doctor like my grandfather, and I had recently begun attending my brothers' school, where girls my age were accepted for Advanced Level studies. In those days, I thought mostly about the university entrance exams. K, too, dreamed of medical school. And this was what made us alike, long before K chose the movement, long before I treated patients in a New York City emergency room. Long before we became so different.

K had the upper hand from the first, not because he was one year older, or a boy, but because I was his patient. Our meeting was both gruesome and fortunate for me. On the day that we met, I was boiling water for tea. I had to use a piece of cloth to hold the pot's metal han-

dle. But that morning the cloth slipped, the handle slipped, and the pot slipped, pouring scalding water all over me. I screamed and screamed for my mother—*Amma!* My shrill voice carried out onto the road, where K was passing. Letting his bicycle fall in the dirt at our gate, he ran inside.

By the time he reached me in the kitchen at the back of the house, Amma had already found me. As bubbles rose and popped on my skin, I shut my eyes, but I could hear her sobbing, and the sounds of pots and pans clattering to the floor. With every clang, heat flared around and inside me. Under my skin, another skin burned. I cried and called for Murugan, Pillaiyar, Shiva.

“Sashi!” he said, and I opened my eyes to his face without recognising it. “Sit!” he said, and pointed to a chair. When I kept screaming but did not move, he grabbed my hands, pushed me down into the chair, and peeled my blouse up, baring my scorched stomach. I heard Amma’s *aiyo!* beside me as though she were speaking from a great distance. Snatching a bowl of eggs off the table, K began cracking them onto the wounds.

“I have to fetch water—” Amma said. Clutching a pan, she tried to move past him.

But he put his shoulders between her and the doorway. “This will cool the burn,” he said.

She stood there uselessly. I stared at him, trying to focus on anything but the pain, and saw only his thumbs working in and out of the eggshells, scraping the slime of the whites cleanly onto the swelling rawness. He did it very swiftly, as though he had had a lot of practise, as though every scrap of egg was precious. My skin was so hot that even now, when I remember those quick and clever hands and the slippery shock of relief, I cannot quite believe that the eggs did not just cook on my flesh.

When the last one was cracked and steaming on my skin, K looked up at Amma. “Are there more?” She did not respond, still stunned. “More eggs?” he said. She blinked, then nodded. “Good—keep covering the burn. I’ll go for the doctor—”

When K returned with the physician half an hour later, the older man looked over the makeshift dressing with approval. "It should heal," he said. "You may not even have a scar. My own mother used to crack eggs onto burns. This is not the kind of medicine they teach in school. Whose idea was it?"

K glanced at me without saying anything. I crackled inside still.

"I didn't know what to do," Amma said softly.

"His idea," I said.

So I began as K's patient, though he ended as mine.

SO MANY FOODS REMIND me of K now.

When he came to visit me a few days after the accident, his aunt Neelo came with him, bearing my favourite maampazham—mangoes—and vaazhaipazham, the special small, sweet bananas that grew in their yard. My mother must have mentioned that I liked them. The fruit pleased me, but for once, I felt more interested in the boy, who until this moment had belonged more to my brothers than to me. I tried to examine him without being too obvious. His shirt was tucked unevenly into his trousers, which were too large. He looked sturdy, but not skinny, and had a rim of hair on his upper lip that was not quite a moustache. It barely showed—he was dark from the sun. Thick, black-framed spectacles dominated his thin, sensitive face. He wiped them carefully with a handkerchief so worn it was nearly transparent. I did not know then that it had belonged to his late mother.

He replaced his spectacles, and when I realised that he was studying me with equal intensity I looked away. Everyone always spoke about how clever K was and what an excellent physician he would be. But those people were only speculating. I knew absolutely, with an indebtedness that ran through my body, and I felt both envy and something else that confused me. The thick lenses distorted his eyes, but it was too late; I already knew they were lovely and old, full of a certainty that appealed to me. I wanted that certainty for myself, to be someone who could look at burned flesh and then touch it.

K looked over at my mother and his aunt, who were deep in conversation, and then back at me.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I feel better. But it itches,” I said, plucking at my blouse. My mother had given me the oldest, most worn dress she had, and still, every time the fabric touched my skin, I hurt. “I also want to do medicine. How did you know what to do?”

He shrugged. “It made sense, even though it wasn’t modern. The protein and fat soothe the burn.”

Out of habit, I rubbed at the wound. “Had you ever treated some—”

He leaned forward abruptly and put his hand over mine. “Don’t scratch it—you’ll scar,” he said. After a moment, he let his fingers fall away. I looked over at my mother and his aunt, who were still talking. I moved my hand from my stomach, and we sat in silence.

“Are your brothers here?” he asked finally.

They weren’t, and we sat quietly until Neelo Auntie came to collect him. He bid me goodbye with a formal face. “Good luck with your studies,” he said impersonally, as though his hands had never touched me.

So we were not friends at first, although he had already been more intimate with me than any other boy I had known.

When I was well enough to return to school, I walked stiffly through the green of our campus, looking for him. My torso was bandaged and schoolgirl-uniformed, the pain appropriately dressed and private again. As I walked, I laid my hand gently over the hurt to make sure it was still there. The burn matched my pulse in its throbbing, already on its way to becoming a near-invisible scar. He was the only other person there who had seen my injury—even my brothers had not—and I felt that he knew some indecent, vital secret that I needed to confirm. But although I looked for him in the sea of faces, he was nowhere to be found.

When we did meet again, some time later at the temple in our village, his moustache appeared slightly more successful. He glanced at

my belly, where one of my mother's old sari blouses covered smaller bandages. I lowered my arm across my body and looked away. Standing with my brothers in the line of men waiting to be blessed, K did not seem unusual. You would have thought him just one of many dark men with white smiles. And, you know, you would have been wrong.

LET ME TELL YOU about dark men with white smiles, these Tamil men I loved and who belonged with me. In my house there were four of them. Each of my brothers resembled my father in a different way. All of them had what some people call Jaffna eyes—dark and piercing. If you have seen such eyes, you will know what I mean.

Niranjan, my steady, sturdy oldest brother, had Appa's clear, straightforward smile, hooked nose, and thick hair. That year, Perianai, as he was called because he was the eldest brother, turned twenty-five. He had almost finished studying medicine at the University of Peradeniya, a too-long train ride away from us. Quiet, pleasant Dayalan, who was nineteen and the tallest among us, worked at the Jaffna Public Library and took classes while he waited to matriculate. He was mathematically minded but, unusually for someone pursuing engineering, also loved to read. He always carried a novel with him; as he finished each one, he passed it to me, in the same fashion Niranjan had given me his science textbooks. When he was not studying or reading, Dayalan spent hours tinkering with his bicycle, which he had assembled himself, from spare parts gathered around town. He might have been my father's shadow, so closely did his tall and solid build resemble Appa's. When Dayalan came home from work or class and stood in the doorway, Amma always looked at him a moment too long, and I wondered what she was thinking. Seelan, my hot-tempered, popular, bright third brother, was one year ahead of me, and in K's class. Like my father, he loved music and, in a good mood, could charm anyone. He was in his second year of preparing for Advanced Levels, the university entrance exams. And my youngest brother, Aran, the only one younger than me, was a skinny, precocious thirteen. He talked like

Appa, very reasonably, so that he seemed far older than he was, although he was only preparing for his Ordinary Levels.

If my brothers walked down our lane with K, as they often did, they were just five Tamil boys, capable of anything—wily pranks, endearing sweetness. But if you were not one of us, if you did not care to look closely, the five men who robbed a bank in March of the same year that I met K might have looked like any of them. Perhaps the five robbers, too, seemed capable of anything; they were the beginning of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil Tigers, and among them was the Tiger leader, Prabhakaran, who had already murdered the mayor of Jaffna, although he had not yet claimed responsibility.

Appa, who was a surveyor for the government, travelled around the country to different postings, and came home only when he was given leave, so when he heard about the robbery he wrote and told Amma to take all of her jewellery out of the bank and hide it at home. When she got his letter, I could hear her crying from my room all the way down the hall. I got out of bed to talk to her, thought better of it, and lay back down.

“But why does Appa want her to hide the jewellery?” I asked Seelan, who was trying to sleep in the bed across from me.

“What?” he asked, his voice muffled by his pillow. Periannai had come home from university on weekend holiday and taken a bed. After a flurry of rearranging, Seelan had come to bunk with me. The close quarters made us short with each other.

“Why does he want her to take the jewellery from the bank?” I asked.

“These fellows are stealing. Of course Appa doesn’t want to leave it there.”

“What about the money in the bank?”

“The jewellery is harder to replace. And he has some money here in the house too. But Amma wants to think everything is all right.”

“Do you think it’s going to be all right?”

Seelan rolled over again without answering, and, feeling foolish, I did not press him. A few minutes passed before I could hear him snor-

ing. Niranjan had gone to an international conference on Tamil language and culture in Jaffna proper several years earlier. Policemen had fired into the audience, and some of his friends had gotten hurt. Niranjan had come home stained bloody and silent and thoughtful. Days later, I saw him pull *Emergency '58*, the old bestseller about the 1958 anti-Tamil riots, from the shelf in Appa's study. When I wanted to take the next turn reading, Periannai shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "When?" I asked. He had already turned away. Whatever he was thinking about, he didn't plan to share it with his nine-year-old sister. But Seelan, only one year older than me, didn't wait for permission, or even for Niranjan to be done—he took the book from Periannai's desk. When my father realised what Seelan was reading, he tried to reclaim it, but Seelan would neither relinquish *Emergency '58* nor talk about its contents. When he was finished, he glowered as he handed it back to Niranjan. Periannai, who had not attempted to stop Seelan, gave him a long, measured look. "Did you learn what you wanted to learn, thaambi?" he asked. "Enough, Periannai," Seelan said. "More than enough about the government."

At sixteen, I still hadn't touched *Emergency '58*, but I knew it was a brutal testimony to Sri Lanka's willingness to slaughter its own Tamil citizens. My father's slim, battered copy of the book had taken on the aura of something forbidden and terrifying. Did I need to read it to know that because we were ethnic minorities, Tamils were considered expendable? I didn't know how old one needed to be to read the whole of a violent story. I didn't know if the whole of any violent story could be told. I did faithfully read the newspapers, which quoted Tamil political leaders saying that any move for a separate homeland in the northern part of the country would not be violent. The party my father supported had adopted a resolution saying exactly that the previous year—Tamils would work for a separate state in the north and east of the country peacefully, like the Gandhians, whom we admired. But we could no longer bear the discrimination of a government dominated by the majority Sinhalese, the Tamil politicians declared: no more second-class status for our language, double standards and quotas

for Tamil students, government-run Sinhala colonization schemes in traditionally Tamil areas, no more government-fomented anti-Tamil violence. The 1958 riots had taken place ten years after the British left, and the riots of my childhood, well into the years of independence, had also been vicious. But I knew that when Appa listened to Tamil politicians argue about the right path to self-determination, their incompetence and inconsistency worried him. When he went to postings in other parts of the country, he kept his own counsel, but at home, he often vented his feelings to Niranjan, Dayalan, or my mother. "These fellows would say anything to help themselves," he said darkly. I was never sure whether my mother was listening to him or not; she silently went on with her daily tasks: chopping vegetables, washing dishes, and sweeping up the cigarette ash he dropped as he pounded his fists.

Other empires had reached for Sri Lanka: the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the British had seized and relinquished it in succession, leaving in their wake peoples divided by colonial powers, ancestral angers, and bullheaded pride. Long before I was born, Sri-Lanka-then-Ceylon stumbled once more into a lazy, self-indulgent independence: the majority Sinhalese, smarting at slights perceived and actual, discovered ways for the country to promote their Buddha, their language, and their histories—a comeuppance for us, for Tamils, who were a minority, and who had flourished in English. Learn Sinhalese, or leave your job, Tamil civil servants were told—my father among them. I still haven't forgotten the look on his face when he told us.

Appa was lucky—unlike us, when he had gone to school in Jaffna, he had studied Sinhala and had several Sinhalese friends, and he still spoke the language fluently. But when Sinhala had become the only official government language, several years after the British left and well before I was born, the schools in Jaffna had stopped teaching Sinhala in protest. Now the language of instruction was Tamil; although I spoke excellent English, I could not say a word in Sinhala. My future depended on a language I did not know, no one wanted to teach me, and, on principle, I did not want to learn.

None of us, of course, liked to be told what to do. But we had also

seen enough to know the costs of that. When I was ten, some of Niranjan's friends had disappeared after protesting the changes in national university admissions that restricted the number of Tamils that could enter. I knew they had been putting up posters—Amma had forbidden Periannai to join them. They were imprisoned for two years with no explanation. Three years ago, when they were released, crowds turned out to see them return. But as far as I could see, their status as heroes had not gotten them much. They had not gone to university. They were clerks now, or unemployed.

They were not the only ones caught in the sights of the authorities. The police had begun to stop my older brothers and their friends on their bicycles, which were known to be the preferred method of transportation for Tamil militants and their supporters. But bicycles were the preferred method of transportation for almost all the boys in Jaffna—and most of the girls too. Since no one thought that girls were joining the movement, I could ride mine to and from school and sometimes to the market, where I did errands for my mother. But after that first bank robbery, after my mother retrieved her jewellery from the bank, Appa decreed that my brothers were to put their bicycles away.

THAT YEAR, SEELAN AND K studied for Advanced Levels together. On weekend mornings, they went to tuition classes for students in their year; then they came home and had lunch, at K's house or at ours, and went to the Jaffna Public Library to continue. I wanted to go with them in the afternoons, but could not bring myself to ask. K and I were studying the same four subjects—botany, zoology, chemistry, and physics—and I, too, needed to prepare if I was to have any hope of entering medicine. Proud and shy, I sat on the veranda and watched them leave rather than saying anything. On the first day, Amma saw me observing them and laughed gently. After they left, she set me up at Appa's desk, and I studied alone, drinking the cups of sugary tea she brought me. "Here, kuniyu," she said to me, setting a fresh one down. "You'll do as well as them."

By the third weekend, I was buried in my notes and resigned to my exclusion. But something had changed for my brother. “Well, come on,” Seelan said impatiently from the front steps that Saturday morning, as I lingered on the veranda.

I stared at him, confused.

“Are you ready?” K asked.

He had come to the gate and was waiting, I realised, for both of us. K grinned up at Seelan, and then, at an angle, at me. The glare of the sun hid his eyes behind his spectacles. He took them off and wiped them. Good luck with your studies, he had said. Perhaps he meant it.

I was careful to keep Seelan between me and K.

The walk was a hot, dusty three-quarters of an hour—long, without bicycles, but they had vowed to walk, and they kept their word. I found I didn’t mind too much. The weekend commute to and from the library gave us a chance to stop and talk with people we knew, to talk to each other, to think over the questions that were beginning to form in our minds. At first I just listened to the two of them talk and banter—Did you hear that record? Can you believe what happened in Muttiah Master’s class? Did you know the captain of the other school’s cricket team? Thank goodness we get a fresh frog for each dissection—but then I began to ask questions. What were the tuition classes like? They talked about their teacher, a slightly older man who had just graduated from the university. They imitated him, laughing, gesturing at each other wildly and lowering their brows as though they were giving great speeches, and I laughed too, but it was clear how much they respected and liked him. Whoever he was, he talked to them about politics in a way they wished their fathers and teachers would. They wanted to be taken seriously. Oh, how seriously I took K. I almost told him so. What kind of medicine did he want to do? Cardiology, he explained. His slim, elegant fingers sketched the shape of a heart in the air, and mine leapt with interest. And you? he asked. I want to be like my grandfather, I said, helping anyone who needs it. *First do no harm*, I quoted. I said nothing about the ways in which my Paata had bent and broken rules to aid his patients. Who knew what K would think of

such a thing? He turned then to my brother. What did Seelan want to do as an engineer? My brother spoke of bridges, how they were constructed to keep us safe, how precarious they could be, the physics of keeping them aloft. K made him explain and explain again and finally shook his head. "Some people think I'm clever, but I don't have a maths brain like yours, machan," he said. Mathematics was not my brother's only talent; one morning, Seelan began to sing under his breath, and that was when I learned he had been listening to music at the house of another classmate. He hummed the same melody—Bob Marley's "Redemption Song"—so often I learned it too and sang it back at him. Once, as I did, I turned to see K's eyes trained on me. He smiled and shrugged slightly. "You have a beautiful voice," he admitted, sounding surprised.

Everything felt like music in that month of beautiful walks. During that time, I realised how little I had known my brother, and how much I wanted to know his friend. When we arrived at the library, I separated from them and took to my own nearby desk, where I could hear them talking over their work, which was slightly more advanced than mine. Although sometimes I wondered if K was purposely discussing his lesson loudly enough for me to overhear, again, I did not dare to ask. And when we returned to the lane, K went his way, and my brother and I retreated to our house, where we fell back into our usual relationship. Seelan's brief congeniality evaporated; I was once again just an inconvenient sister. My disappointment at these moments washed over me like a familiar cold wind. The walks existed in a separate world, a world between the Jaffna Public Library and our house—a place K had somehow brought into being.

These days, I wish I had told Seelan how much I loved those interludes, how much I longed to bring their feeling into our house. Back then, I did not want him to realise the time was something he had given me, because then he could take it away. I had never gotten along as well with Seelan as I had with my other brothers, perhaps because of the closeness in our ages, or perhaps because I resented how masculinity and charm kept him from being accountable for the things he said

and did. Of the five of us, he was the most jealous, the most possessive. He had the sharpest temper, at least at home. But he was also the wittiest, the one who knew the news from far away, the one who had heard the newest music and whose friends swarmed wherever he went. He was popular with his batchmates because of his public charm and athleticism, but another part of his appeal was his wild cleverness. And as he was reckless with his intelligence, I guarded mine. We were nearly twins, but our temperaments were so different. Seelan and I had never had that much to talk about, or so I had thought. On those walks, I discovered that I liked my brother. Seelan was quick to anger, but how could I not love him when that anger was so frequently over our imperilled futures? Still, while my other brothers and I were easy with our affection, Seelan and I were not. Now I found myself shy around him for another reason: he was—and I had made him—the person between me and K.

I distracted myself with the textbooks I had inherited from Niranjana and the classes required to enter medical school. In each subject, we braced ourselves to be tested twice, with theoretical and practical exams. On paper, I felt safe and ready, but we considered the practical exams dangerous, as they were dependent on the whims of mercurial examiners. For physics, you might have to prove Boyle's law, or Charles's law, or Dalton's law. For chemistry, you were given a substance and asked to identify or make it: How do you mix hydrogen peroxide or prepare hydrochloric acid? Biology was divided in two: botany and zoology. For botany, we were asked to use a microscope to name a plant specimen on a slide. While I respected the students who—like my brother—excelled at physics, I found it dull. Chemistry and botany struck me as more useful and interesting. I liked the idea of being able to heal with some plants and substances and protect myself from others; I liked to walk through familiar spaces and recite the Latin names of their flowers. And zoology I loved.

I feared the practical exams, but the zoology test excited me too. Give me a knife, I thought; give me a pattern I can trace and memorise

and adapt to different bodies. We all quietly idolised the stern, balding zoology teacher, who trained us in the required dissections. He had gone to school with my father, and his name was Rajan Master. We called him Sir.

Sir was famous for sending students on to medical school. He spoke often and with fondness about those he had taught, many of whom had gone on to become prominent physicians. Some had even emigrated. The doctor he talked about most often and most admiringly, however, was not only a former student but also his niece, and the only woman on the medical faculty at the University of Jaffna. I had dreamed of going there since it had opened when I was nine, and listened to his stories hungrily. Anjali Premachandran taught anatomy, and, he warned, she was far stricter than him. She loved dissections, he claimed. Ours was a small town, and many of us already knew Dr. Premachandran from a distance. It seemed impossible that she had ever studied in our classroom, but we liked imagining her at our age. If we wanted to impress her, we understood, we would have to impress him first.

Sir handed us diagrams and made us memorise them well enough to redraw them without looking. Only when we knew them cold did he bestow blades. Eager and quick with my scalpel, I caught his attention and he warned me, bemused, that I was not a surgeon yet and, if I did not learn patience, might never be. "Take your time with the body, young lady," Sir advised. "Look how artful the mechanisms of living." Even after decades of teaching, he still sounded awed. Guided by his eye, I, too, marvelled at the lacework of veins and the soft, fragile balloons of tiny mammalian lungs.

During the final practical exam, Sir informed us, we would receive a frog, a cockroach, a rat, or the head of a small shark to dissect. We would practise with the same. If the frog, then you would have to open its chest cavity and show its major organs; if the rat, then you would need to display the heart and cardiovascular system. The cockroach, inconveniently small, required not only mounting on wax but also

washing; if you opened the lab tap too forcefully, you might wash away your entire carefully separated insect, and Sir would show you no mercy. You were permitted unlimited cockroaches, and even the indulgence of a fresh frog every time, but the heads of small sharks were precious and rationed one to a student, to be kept pristine in formalin when not in use. We were competitive enough that when the girl next to me found her shark head missing one day, I had no idea who to suspect; any of my classmates might have done it. “If I had spent more time practising, I would be able to identify mine,” Tharini wailed. “I ought to recognise it.”

I hated the formaldehyde smell, which nauseated me and followed me home, but on principle, I refused to complain or ask for any kind of indulgence during these lessons. Becoming accustomed to the medicinal scents was part of the training, I realised only later. And of the required specimens, the shark, of course, was the most difficult; you had to separate and display its intricate nervous system. If you fouled up, you had to practise with the dainty, ruined head, its malevolent eye staring at you balefully for the rest of the term. If you failed to bathe it in the formalin solution every time, its flesh might cross the precipitous border into decay.

The level of attention required was exhausting and exhilarating. When—giddy with new knowledge and equally horrified by the very real possibility of eventual failure—I occasionally lamented my situation, Amma reminded me of family legend: Paata. In my grandfather’s time as a student, she told me, university entrance had required not only theoretical and practical exams but also interviews; the interviewers could ask you anything they liked and were known to be capricious and cruel. (“Yet another habit inherited from the British,” my father would have said ruefully.) Paata—then only young Thanabalasingham—had had to travel all the way to Colombo for his appointment. There, the interviewer, a Tamil professor, asked him only one question: to describe the shape of a dagoba, a Buddhist temple. Startled, Bala, a Jaffna boy who had never been to a dagoba, fumbled his answer. He returned

to Jaffna despondent and almost missed the cutoff to enter medicine. "These exams used to be difficult," Amma said encouragingly. "But they have never been easier than they will be for you." This might have been true, but I did not find it reassuring.

I had more than a year left before my exams, but in one of his letters home Appa had advised me not to delay preparing. *If you want to become a doctor*, he wrote, *studying is now and always*. A choir of ancestors rose behind him, urging me on with fear, guilt, and ambition: Think of what your grandfather would have said, what your late aunt would have advised, remember your uncle who never got the chance to go to university! How many Tamil fathers had said such things to their daughters? Appa's letter came, as his notes always did, on the mail train, and Amma read it out to me, slowing down at *now and always*.

And so, in the mornings, K and Seelan went to tuition classes, and I went to practise my dissections; in the afternoons, all three of us went to the library to review notes for the theoretical exams. There, in the room across from us, where he had been shelving books since the very early morning, Dayalan observed the three of us and said nothing.

EVERYTHING WAS QUIET AND happy. Then, one weekend late in May, my father came home for a holiday between postings. We were all so eager to spend time with him that we lingered around the house rather than going about our usual routines. I was disappointed to miss the library walk, but content in my father's proximity. Appa was popular locally, though, and kept leaving for brief cups of tea with the neighbour, this relation and that relation. That Sunday afternoon he was visiting Saras Auntie and Jega Uncle, who lived four doors down, when Seelan and Aran came and found me reading in his study. They beckoned me over. I got up from the desk, which I had borrowed and spread with my papers.

I looked at their faces, their folded mouths turned envelopes of worry. "Tell me," I said.

Aran lifted a finger to his lips, then bent his head and murmured to me. "We've just heard on the radio—two men on bicycles, and one of them shot a politician in Jaffna town. And they rode off."

"Dayalan's bicycle is gone," Seelan said.

Panic rushed into me. Wetness pooled under my arms and at my neck.

"If he's cycling around, they could even be just arresting anyone on a bicycle," Aran said.

"Do Amma and Appa know?"

"No," Seelan said. "And don't tell them."

After they slipped back out, I tried to return to studying, but I could not concentrate. In the courtyard the breeze moved gently; I could hear the plants rustling and the neighbourhood dog snoring peacefully. I felt hotter than I usually did in Appa's study, the coolest room of the house. I got up to get a glass of water and realised that Amma was standing in the doorway.

"Are you feeling ill?" she asked me, reaching out to put her hand on my forehead. "You look flushed."

I slipped under her hand and into the corridor behind her. She turned to look at me, surprised.

"I'm fine, Amma," I said. I forced a small laugh. "What a lot of pages I have left to read. It's awfully hot in there. I'll just drink some water."

"All right," she said. "Food is ready. Is Dayalan back yet?"

"I don't think so," I said. "He probably had to work late at the library." New to the habit of lying to my mother, I found my tongue stuck thick and dry in my mouth.

Dayalan did not come. Amma kept the food covered on the back veranda for hours. She read the newspaper, waiting patiently. When it was nine o'clock, Seelan went to ask if she wanted to eat.

She looked up absently at the question. "I'll wait for Dayalan and for your Appa," Amma said. "You go ahead."

In my worry for my brother I had failed to notice that Appa had not

returned either. I was not the only one growing more nervous. When Amma urged us to eat, Aran shook his head uncomfortably.

Amma put the newspaper down then and looked at him sharply. "Aran," Amma said. "Do you know where Dayalan is?"

"No," Seelan answered for him, too quickly.

My mother looked at the three of us, arrayed there before her with our perfect, masked faces. She got up from the veranda and went into her bedroom. She brought the radio out and turned it on. We stood there, listening with her for a few minutes until the newscast began. Just as the voice on the radio was saying, "—policeman was attacked today in Jaffna town. A young man on a bicycle, believed to be part of the Tamil—" my father came in.

Appa looked around at all of us. "You've heard," he said. "Someone just rang Jega's house."

Amma motioned for him to be quiet.

"—man and two others—police are in pur—" the voice continued.

Appa reached out and turned the radio off. Amma looked at him.

"What is it?" she asked.

Aran glanced at Seelan for permission. Seelan nodded at him, but Appa spoke first.

"Dayalan's bicycle is gone."

Amma blanched. "He couldn't have ridden the bicycle. We told him. Some thief must have come and taken it."

"The bicycles are by the back gate. Nobody would have stolen it," Appa said. "He must have been late this morning and taken it. Did any of you see him leave on the bicycle?"

"Appa, it's all right," Seelan said. "He can just leave the bicycle at the library and walk. Or take the bus."

"He'll have been working all day," I said. "He won't have been listening to the radio. He won't know."

Seelan gave me a hard look. Amma and Appa did not need my help to worry.

"I'm sure he's fine, Amma," Aran said.

“He’s never been so late,” Amma said. “Can you go back and find out what’s happened to him?” Jega Uncle and Saras Auntie were the only ones on the lane with a phone.

“He must be on the way home. We have to wait and see,” Appa said.

“I think we should eat,” Seelan said. “I’m hungry.”

“I’m not,” Amma said.

She went to Saras Auntie’s and called the library, but there was no answer. When she came back, she took the radio into Appa’s study. As the rest of us had dinner without her on the back veranda, we could hear the voice of the newscaster over the whirl of the fan. I filled my mouth with rice and fried fish and made myself swallow. Appa and Aran traced their fingers around their plates. Only Seelan ate with his usual appetite. I wished Niranjan were at home rather than at university; he would have known what to say.

Later I took Amma a cup of tea, but she would not drink it.

“Thank you, kunju.” Her eyes, which were fixed on the ceiling, refocused on me for a moment. “When Dayalan comes home—” she said.

“When he comes home, he’s really going to hear it,” Appa said from behind me. He frowned, pushed a button on the turntable, and then lifted the needle into the groove of a record. “Don’t worry,” he said to my mother as the scratchy arpeggio of the music unfurled itself. She lifted her head to meet his eyes, which were full of reassurance for her. It was a look so private and intense I wondered if they had forgotten I was there. “Don’t worry,” he said again, and then: “I promise you he’s safe.”

Even then, I recognised that he couldn’t have known that. But I forgave him, because it was such an authoritative, fatherly declaration: he was hoping, even if he was also lying.

AMMA, WHO BY THEN was resting in my parents’ bedroom with the radio on and the fan turning above her, heard the noise at the door first,