

Boat People (excerpt)

Sharon Bala

A UN convoy had finally arrived, the first one Mahindan had seen in months: forty covered trucks and aid workers in flak jackets and helmets.

They handed out packets of rations - rice, beans and a bit of cooking oil - and in return requested information. How long have you been on the run? Are you injured? What supplies do you have?

The aid workers kept their voices low and their eyes on the uniformed cadres circulating among the masses, M-16 rifles slung over their shoulders. The aid workers were jumpy, flinching at every thump and sudden movement. Drones hummed overhead. From the A35 came the din of artillery, the Army and the Tigers exchanging fire.

A child ran in a looping figure eight, her arms held straight out like an airplane. Mahindan stepped out of her way to avoid a collision. The government had dropped flyers with directions to the No Fire Zone and Mahindan and his family had arrived here three days earlier, with thousands of others, trudging on foot, walking cycles bundled high with belongings, Tiger cadres marching beside them, everyone heading east together, ducking and jumping into ditches at the whistle of incoming fire.

The village was tiny, two dozen concrete bungalows and a pock-marked temple. Ganesha riding his mouse had been knocked off the facade. He lay upside down at the temple door and Sellian had picked him up and kissed his elephant head, then tucked the little statue into his pocket for safe keeping.

They were hemmed in on a narrow spit of land, the Indian Ocean on one side, a lagoon and the Army in the jungle on the other. Every day, more people surged in, with their tractors and their cows and their last resorts. They slept in fields and coconut groves, in their

cars along the sides of the dirt roads. They squeezed in where they could, filling in the spaces left empty by the dead.

The village heaved, swollen with the fears and exhaustion of thousands upon thousands of refugees. The air was heavy with humidity. The sun burned relentless day after day.

Those without tents constructed shelters out of sticks, plastic tarps slung over top. Others had only a mat, not even a tree under which to shelter.

Saris had been cut up to make bandages. Scraps of fabric were used to patch tents and sewn into sandbags, bright splashes of pattern and colour against the mud brown landscape.

Mahindan balanced a saucepan over a fire and squatted in a circle with his family. When the meal was cooked, they passed the pot around, eating straight out of it with their hands. Ruksala had a plantain. It was big enough for everyone to take one bite.

They had a bottle of silty water from the lagoon, which they used to wash their hands and another from the well which they shared between them. Mahindan let Auntie have the last drop and ignored the shooting pains in his stomach.

The school was being used as a hospital and some people had set up camp in the playground around it. Mahindan felt fortunate to have found a space for their tents here. The hospital's coordinates had been transmitted to the Army. A red cross was painted on the roof. In its shadow he thought they would have some safety.

The Tigers had mobile artillery units: long-nosed cannons mounted on wheeled planks that fired off blasts of orange-grey smoke. The Army had multi-barrel rocket launchers. The Tigers shot off five shells; the Army hit back with forty. But by the time they returned fire, the Tigers had hitched their howitzers and rolled off to a new location. The horizon exploded in shellfire flashes and smoke plumes. Every day, the shelling crept nearer.

The sun had set and it was dusk. The field beyond glowed, lit up by a thousand cooking fires. In the playground, people swarmed all around, their legs brushing by the small family circle. They called to each other, groaned over injuries and soothed crying babies. A murder of crows soared overhead in a sweeping circle then settled in the trees. Men wheeled out barrows through the back doors of the school. No one had strength any longer to dig proper graves.

The playground equipment was pock marked and rusty. A little girl stood on the rubber seat of a swing, squealing, her braid flying out behind her. Boys swung like monkeys, past the missing bars. The children shrieked and yelled. They tripped each other in jest, fell and jumped back up unhurt. The children were indestructible.

Sellian had been eyeing the seesaws and the moment one was free, he and Prem jumped up and ran to it.

A Tiger cadre was touring the perimeter of the playground with a megaphone. She wore fatigues and a cropped hair cut. Her tone was calm and even, a soothing cadence. There is no reason to worry, she called out. Our line is secure.

There was a burst of machine gun fire in the distance, an angry retort. One of the aid workers had told Mahindan that the Army had used the UN convoy for cover to move their line forward. They were now reportedly 800 meters away, closer than ever.

You two go, Aunty said.

Take the children to safety, Uncle agreed. We are old. You must leave us.

They spoke quietly, all of them leaning into the circle, holding their hands to the fire as if to keep warm.

They will shoot us, Ruksala said.

The Tigers had cadres stationed along the length of the lagoon. People said they were

firing at defectors. But there were other rumours too. People spoke of a counter strike, another Tiger victory to embarrass the government. The UN convoy had revived hope of international intervention. Standing in the food line, Mahindan had heard an old man weep: Will no one help us? But the convoy had left and Mahindan knew in his heart that no one else was coming.

Anyway, we will die, Uncle said. Carry the children. Run fast.

Do it first thing in the morning, Aunty said.

There were land mines in the jungle and there would be more shelling. And then of course, even if they made it, there would be the Sinhalese.

We do not know, Mahindan said. What it will be like over there.

Mahindan watched his son, straddled on the wooden board, hung suspended in mid air. The seesaw was painted in camouflage with a tiger stripe pattern. There was a wooden toy rifle affixed to each grip. The boys were playing their favourite game: Lions and Tigers.

Tamil Ealam! Prem shouted. We will have freedom!

Sellian imitated the juddering blasts of an AK-47. I will rape your mothers, he yelled to his cousin. I will eat your dirty Tamil babies.

Might be better on the government side, Ruksala said. Might be worse.

There is no reason to worry. The cadre's voice came to them again, magnified over the cacophony. The Tigers will protect you. You are safe here.

They watched her pick her way around playground equipment and cooking fires. Bits of bright silk and paisley fluttered in the breeze. Children had made kites out of palm fronds and sari scraps. One had gotten caught in a tree and a boy climbed up to retrieve it, feet spread apart, bare toes gripping bark. His mother stood below with her arms out. Come down, she called. Aiyo! This child! You will fall and break your neck and then you will die!

Let us not speak of this now, Ruksala said. Tomorrow we will take a decision.

Mahindan pitched his tent in the last of the evening light. A million stars shone in the sky. This was the tent he had inherited from his father. As a boy he had strapped it to the back of his bicycle and gone to the ocean with his cousins. They had camped on the beach and woken up covered in bites, angry red bumps all over their arms and legs. At home, the mothers had yelled: Look what these foolish children have done now!

Life was always high drama. The mothers were martyrs and their sons were yakkas, little devils, fashioning trouble from mud and sticks and garden snakes. But in unexpected moments the mothers would soften. Frying onions or pumping water, they would suddenly pull the boys against them and squeeze until they yelped. Amma! I can't breathe!

Sellian stumped over, his whole body sinking under the weight of exhaustion. The rush and excitement of a cooked meal and the seesaw had faded and he was ready for sleep. They called goodnight to the others in the tent beside them and Auntie blew a kiss. Ruksala's eyes were red and tired. The gunfire had gone silent though they could still hear the drone high in the sky.

Mahindan lay with Sellian in his arms, wishing Chithra was with them and feeling grateful that she was not. He was asleep in moments.

A scream pierced his dreams. Mahindan clutched his son instinctively. Shells and rockets crashed all around. The ground under them rumbled. Shouts of fear and anguish were drowned out by the whistle of incoming fire and thud of falling debris. The tent shook. Mahindan was terrified it would come unmoored, fly away, leaving them exposed.

He was desperate to know if the others had been hit. Sellian whimpered in his arms. His eyes were wide open, blinking with panic. Mahindan kept his arms tight around his son.

His son who was still whole and unharmed. Every second was another scrap of life. Every second they were both one moment closer to death.

Life did not feel precious. A man had screamed into Mahindan's hand as the doctor sawed off his ravaged leg. The grandmother on the side of the road with her skirts flung up over her face. The young couple and the twisted ruin of their bicycle. Where was the value in any of this?

The shelling went on for hours. Sellian would drop into sleep, only to be jerked back awake by a crash. Mahindan rubbed circles on his back. He felt the wild thumping of his own heart, clamouring to be free of his body. People were dying all around them. Let it be fast, he prayed, holding his son. Let it be fast.

All these months they had spent limping across the country. What had it been for when now, at the end, they were all consigned to share this ignominious death. Here, huddled like animals, in an open graveyard. Pawns for the Tigers. Spoils for the Lions.

A shell exploded so close the whole tent shuddered. There was an almighty boom, then a bright orange flash and for a split second, everything was illuminated: the blue mat under them and the small leather suitcase. On the walls of the tent, the outside world was reflected in grotesque shadows. Shapes flung through the air. Then both sight and sound went blank.

Mahindan felt the heavy thud of rocks raining to the ground. Something large landed on part of the tent, the fabric collapsing in under its weight. He gathered his son closer, turned his head away. This was death, this was how it came, with a great noise and then abrupt, hollowing silence.

He moved his jaw and still heard nothing. The earth beneath them had stilled, as if it too had given in to death. Finally, finally the shelling had ceased.

Sellian's whole body was damp with sweat and tears. He had wet his pants. The smell of urine was sharp. But he was alive. They were both alive. Outside the tent, all around them, was the agony of the dying and Mahindan was relieved to be deaf to their cries. Ruksala, Prem, Aunty and Uncle - dead? alive? injured? He was paralyzed by fear and horror and the slowly calming beat of his own heart. Sleep came swiftly, all enveloping, and he gave himself over to it with relief.

Sound was the first sensation to reach him - a rooster's grating crow. The tent was riddled with tiny tears and holes, singed by flying shrapnel. Pinpricks of light dazzled in. Mahindan left Sellian sleeping and crawled out of the tent.

The world, on fire all night long, lay smouldering. The smoke made his eyes water. The stench filled his nose and mouth - charred flesh, shit and the metallic twang of blood. He choked, doubling over, and when he opened his eyes, he saw a finger on the ground, severed, a gold band still ringed around it.

Through the haze he saw the wreckage - the earth gouged, tents ripped to shreds, sandbags blasted open. A man, his clothes in tatters, limped past in a daze.

People lay slumped in trenches, dead in the graves they had dug for themselves, their clothing sodden with blood. The swing set lay on its side, two people pinned underneath. The dead were dead now and the survivors wandered aimless, crouching in front of bodies, turning over debris. No one called out to their loved ones.

There was a crater in the ground where his family's tent had been. Bits of steel, flesh and clothing were sprinkled like confetti all around.

His hearing was pitch perfect now. The slap of his rubber slippers, the playground gate swinging rusty back and forth, the tortured sounds of a crow dying in a bush and the

mournful caws of its compatriots perched on the roof of the school. It was all very loud in the thin morning light.

Trees were snapped in half. A young man's body lay slumped where it had fallen. A mother was dead on a mat, two babies at her bared breasts, one still crying. Another child, naked, hung flayed on the chain link fence.

At the base of the slide he found Ruksala's torso, her hands still cradling Prem's head. Auntie's arm was slung over a tree branch, and Uncle's upper body with it, sliced clean at the waist with surgical precision.

Mahindan remembered the amputation, the grinding saw, the man's jerking body, his eyes rolling back. Ruksala's eyes were open. Mahindan turned away and dry heaved.

A voice came to him from the jungle, far away but crystal clear. Amplified by a megaphone, it rang out in Sinhala. Mahindan heard the foreign words and understood their message. The war was over. The Army had won.

He straightened and turned away from the carnage, looking out to the horizon. The morning sky was a clear bright blue. Dew rose in a delicate mist off the paddy field.