

Tsunami: A Survivor Remembers

In January 2005 Chulie Kirtisinghe De Silva found comfort in recording her memory of December 26 2004, the day the generous sea robbed her family and her country. It took her much longer to find the courage to share her writing and at first she did so with a mere handful of people.

As long as I can remember I talked to the sea. The sea behind our ancestral house at Hikkaduwa on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka was my friend. The sea listened to me, soothed me, fascinated me. At the end of school holidays when everyone was ready to go back to my grandmother's house to go to school and when everyone had packed themselves into the car, I would say please wait a moment, let me say a final goodbye to the sea. I'd run back to the beach, shoes in hand for a last touch of the sand, a last breath off the water. My father and family indulged me in this ritual.

A week after the tsunami, once again I went to talk to the sea. I had to walk through the next-door Poseidan diving station to get to the back of the house which gave directly onto the sand. Childishly I wanted to ask why it had turned into a monster which devoured my brother, Prasanna. He was the only one in this generation to have been born in the house itself. I have always been proud that I was born in Hikkaduwa, but Prasanna was the true son of the Hikkaduwa house; the house whose walls enclosed him in his last moments.

My grandfather built this house nearly 100 years ago and called it Siri Niwasa, "gracious house". My father who inherited it called it The Garden on Sea. As I stood outside its brokenness that day nearly a year ago, chiding the sea, a solitary black high-heeled sandal of mine teetered on a broken slab of concrete. There were two middle-aged rotund foreign ladies wrapping themselves in bathing towels, the cinnamon stick fence was gone, the coconut trees that my father lovingly planted were stripped bare to the roots. The sea was ever so gentle kissing the beach, but had no answer for me.

This Boxing-Day weekend was like many hundreds I had spent in Hikkaduwa. Wherever we were, England, Malaysia, Brunei, or Australia, the pull of this house was very strong for all of us. When I first went to England, I used to write to my father three times a week, missing the love and warmth abundant in this house. I dreamt about the sea, the coconut trees, me lying in the back room reading, munching

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Chulie de Silva and family at Siriniwasa. L to R: Ysoja, Chulie's older sister; Chulie; Chulie's brother Prasanna; and two cousins. Photo © Dr. Bertie Kirtisinghe

on hakuru nuggets, little sweet jolts of palm sugar. Once when I was late replying to a letter from my father he chided me: This account will be closed soon, and then you will have only memories - ashes of thoughts.

I was very tired after a heavy week of year-end work but all I wanted was to go back to Hikkaduwa, do a little bit of reading as before, walk on the beach, and talk to my friend, the sea. Hikkaduwa was celebrating Christmas with all the trimmings. Disco music mingled with laughter, fire crackers burst intermittently. The night was humid and sultry, there was no breeze to stir the coconut trees. I hung on the cinnamon wood fence and watched the moon streak the waves silver. I heard my 13-year-old nephew, Mathisha, telling my sister-in-law, wake me up at 6 a.m I want to jog, and I called across to him, hey, call me too, I'll join you.



Sri Lanka, Photo © Chulie
Kirtisinghe De Silva, World Bank

Next morning he jogged, while I walked, with his faithful mongrel Lassie running ahead of us as usual. The sea was calm, the reef exposed, sky blue with lashings of pink. We exchanged customary greetings of good morning with other early joggers. School children were warming up for a swimming lesson and I smiled as they exercised with their little faces all screwed up in concentration. I stopped at the straw hat stand and chatted with a lanky boy as he was setting out the hats. I was happy to see my childhood friend, Laleeni, in her garden. She and I chatted across the fence as we had done over the years growing up and talked about getting together on New Years day, when her sister - and my bridesmaid - Vajira, would be in Sri Lanka.

Perhaps curiously for someone who chats to the sea, I have never learnt to swim properly. That day too I splashed around in the shallow waters and was pleasantly surprised that the water was quite warm. My brother was proudly playing host to my elder nephew Kanishka and his batchmates from the Colombo University Law faculty over the weekend. I watched the budding lawyers play cricket on the beach, a gaggle of boys, not yet men, burdens of life resting lightly on their shoulders. Floating lazily around I looked tenderly at our house through the coconut trees, my brother Prasanna reading the Sunday papers in the planter's chair, my sister-in-law flitting around serving tea to the boys. I thought how blessed we were for the joy this house gave us.

The tide was coming in too fast, the little waves were getting a bit higher - funny this shouldn't be so I thought fleetingly as I got out of the water and headed for my freshwater shower. As I came out of my room, Prasanna asked Akka, sister, when are you going back, give me your car keys, I'll wash your car. This was another ritual. Whenever I came down for the weekend Prasanna, a car freak who loved everything about cars, would wash my car for me. I told him I was going after lunch and he replied that the Sunday English papers were in the main house. He returned to read his favourite, the Sinhala "Lakbima" on the verandah of the cottage. This separate one-bedroom cottage, located behind the main house, was just a few yards from the sea. This in the hey day of the Hikkaduwa house was the outhouse, where coconuts and cinnamon wood was stock piled. Now it was the favourite meeting place where all of us gathered for sundowners and an unbroken view to the horizon.

Having read the papers sitting in the kotu midula, the inside courtyard open to the sky found in many old houses, I went to the kitchen. My Amma, my mother, is a fiercely independent lady renowned for her cooking. Not only would she do her own cooking but would cook and pack enough curries to last me two weeks in Colombo. As I chatted to her, I was tucking into her stringhoppers and ambul thiyal, a fish curry specialty of the South. She was reminiscing about when she came to the house as a young bride almost 60 years ago. The 96-year old house was crumbling a bit at the edges but still charming; so was my mother, lines on her face more marked but still lovely and gracious at 82.

My sister-in-law Padmini had sent a plate of rice cooked in coconut milk. Kiribath is the closest Sri Lankan thing we have to a risotto. Made on special occasions, kiribath is a perennial favourite. Having dished out a portion, I went in search of her to ask for the hot lunu miris, the traditional fiery onions and chilli accompaniment to the rice. The time would have been about 9:20 a.m. Passing the back verandah where I normally have all meals, I noticed that I had not closed the door from the bathroom leading to my room. For a moment I hesitated wondering whether I should go in and close it. It can wait, I decided.

Back in the kitchen I barely had time to set my plate down when my younger brother, Pradeep shouted get Amma out quickly, the sea is coming in. At the same time I was forming the words to ask her what's that noise? But I don't think I had time to complete the sentence. Kanishka, my older nephew and two of his friends were there and we were all urging my reluctant mother to move<./p>

None of us were prepared for the huge terrifying torrent of water that burst around us as we took the first few steps. We were thrown, pushed and propelled with such an unbelievable force. Reactions were instinctive. The boys lifted my mother, held her above the water and swam with her. Huge concrete slabs, dislodged, came careening towards us but swung away miraculously. My mother was screaming what's happening, what's happening, has a big pipe burst? I just let my body go - this was not a force I could fight.

But my mind was swirling as fast as the water - odd thoughts, memories of a team leadership training we had done, an exercise in desert survival and I thought good grief, this is exactly the opposite. Another thought was of a D.H. Lawrence story, The Gypsy, and its references to a flash flood. Not too far away was the thought will we survive this? We shot past my brother's Mazda and I can't remember how we went over the gate and a parked Pajero. I saw my mother being carried to dry ground close to the police station and a policeman coming out to help her, but I was being carried away by the current. A desperate lunge and I held on to a metal grid at the front of a hardware shop as dislodged metal sheets, iron poles, cars and bodies swirled past. A man across shouted at me swim here we'll catch you. Can't swim, I'll hang on here, I shouted back. My flip flop sandals were getting entangled in the debris and I kicked them off. Another man climbing on to the roof of the shop was shouting follow me climb up here. I looked at the rickety pole and the derelict roof and decided to hang on as the current pulled me back and lashed



Back view of the house, demolished courtyard. Photo © Jim Rosenberg.

me once more against the metal grid.

Then just as it came, the water ebbed away.

My one thought was my mother - I went searching for her, pushing past the swarm of people screaming and crying. I found mum seated in a chair across the railway line. She stretched out her palms and feet and smiled: See not a scratch, your father must have looked after me.

Unknown to us, probably the same time I was walking back to the dining room with my plate of kiribath, a wave slightly bigger than usual had washed the beach. The boys playing cricket cheered, the wave had cleared a good smooth pitch. The next slightly bigger one, still not yet frightening, brought the cinnamon fence down. Kanishka though had the presence of mind at that point to urge his 12 or so friends to run towards the house. The water swirled ankle deep in the cottage. Prasanna had called out to Padmini, my sister-in-law: the sea is a bit rough today. Padmini came outside to cover the plates that she had set out on the cottage verandah for the boys' breakfast.

Curiously, no one looked at the sea. No one saw what was coming. Within seconds the water was six feet high, and then over the roof, tossing it away. Prasanna, Mathisha and Kanishka's friend Amila, caught in the swirling water, tried desperately to hang on to a beam. The torrent catapulted Padmini through the same corridor I had walked safely just minutes ago. A heavy six-foot long sideboard twirled around effortlessly and came at Padmini. With superhuman strength she managed to push it away with her shoulder. Amila lost his hold and Prasanna managed to pull him inside and shouted at Mathisha: Buddhu putha go, my precious son, go. The water pushed Mathisha and Amila out of the house and they clutched desperately to two coconut trees. Amila shouted to the younger Mathisha to hang in at all costs. Mathisha turned and saw the walls of the cottage collapsing, Prasanna, his father, crumbling under the falling rubble.

Padmini, struggling in the torrent of water sweeping her forward saw Lassie atop a floating cushion. She saw Pradeep, my younger brother, and together they turned back, frantically searching for Mathisha, jumping over toppled wardrobes they get to the back verandah to see Mathisha's grip on the coconut tree loosening. He falls. But the waters are receding.

I settle my mum on the first floor of the house and run back to Siri Niwasa leaving a Belgian tourist lady who I had rounded up to keep an eye on mum. As I run down the stairs I hear the tourist telling Amma: You must have been a very pretty lady. And I hear my mum's reply: No, I was just pleasant.

The front of the house is still standing but the death and destruction abounds.

The debris is all over the place. A brown layer of silt sits over everything like vomit - splintered glass, clothes, hand bags, a toilet bag, the empty box of an after-shave cologne I gave my brother last new year, my favourite blue and white polka dot shirt. Beyond the kotu midula there is no house. I cannot find my room; it has collapsed like a pack of cards. There is no furniture in the house. I couldn't go beyond the doorway; that doorway that my father had told us umpteen times was the doorway of love.

