

## On the Third Day

Thiru wiped his forehead with the cuff of his heather blue sweatshirt. The griddle generated enough heat that, even on a chilly December day, he didn't need to wear a jacket to keep warm. Peering over his shoulder, he breathed in the cool air scented like damp earth and stared at the heavy gray clouds hovering above Washington Square.

It's nothing like the sunny, clear winter skies of Sri Lanka. The mornings on the beach, waiting for the boats to return.

He stared at the blackened expanse of the griddle, fatigued.

I don't understand. It's been three days now, and we haven't heard anything. But what do I expect? From what I've seen of the destruction on TV, the STD phone booths probably got swept away with everything else. They're probably on the bottom of the ocean, half-buried in muck. So how can anyone call?

As he sprayed a coating of oil on the griddle, he calculated the time in Sri Lanka.

It's nearly midnight at home. There's no chance we'll hear anything until morning their time.

Three days earlier, on the morning of December 26, he lied on his futon in his apartment in Jackson Heights, studying a long crack in the ceiling. The thin curtain on the window diffused the dull light entering from outside.

Why don't Americans celebrate Boxing Day? Everyone else does.

"Thiru?" His wife called from the other room. "Thiru, you awake?" She stood in the doorway, the hem of her maroon sari billowing around her ankles. She had oiled her hair but not washed it. The fragrance of the coconut oil reminded him of his childhood, when his mother oiled her hair. "Thiru?"

"What, Radha? Can't you let me sleep on my day off?"

"You better get up. It's important." She said it in Tamil. It sounded more eloquent, more urgent than the English. "I heard something on the radio about an earthquake and a tidal wave. They said thousands could be dead. In Phuket, India, and home."

He sat up, pushing the red-and-yellow batik bed cover to the side. "What did they

say about home?”

“Not much. A tidal wave hit. Whole villages were washed away. That’s all they know.”

He knew the ocean, knew the beach, knew the villages. He couldn’t imagine a wave large enough to destroy an entire village. “When did it happen?”

“In the morning there.”

“When the boats were out? Or after they landed?”

She shrugged. “You know these Americans. They don’t give you details about anything overseas. It’s not important to them.”

“Shit.” He rose from the mattress, the sudden upward motion draining the blood from his head. Darkness engulfed the periphery of his vision for a second before clearing. He pulled a blue-and-green striped kurta over his head and hurried to the other room, the cotton fabric of the loose kurta waving flag-like in his wake.

Radha followed him. When she first heard the news that morning, she resisted waking him. Sunday was his only day off. But as the announcer on the radio updated the story every ten minutes, the devastation seemed to magnify, the chances that the disaster affected his family increased. If she let him sleep, he would be angry. Standing in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the jamb, she watched him dial the string of numbers needed to activate the calling card. She sucked in her lower lip, oblivious to the faint taste of coconut oil.

Thiru heard the familiar message, often received when calling his home village. “We’re sorry. All circuits are busy. Your call cannot be completed at this time. Please hang up, and try again.” So he did.

She studied him as he dialed five more times. With each attempt, his fingers moved faster; he hit the buttons on the keypad harder. The skin between his eyebrows creased, and his mouth twisted into a sneer. After the fifth failure, he jammed the handset into its cradle. She wanted to know what he planned to do next, but she was afraid he would turn his anger and frustration on her.

He growled, with his mouth closed. It sounded like the low snarl the stray dogs in their village made when guarding a scrap of half-rotting food pulled from the garbage dump in the market.

He removed the phone directory from the drawer on the telephone stand and turned to the inside front cover. He skimmed through the list Radha had penciled in the blank lines under the heading Emergency Numbers. With one finger marking a number, he dialed the phone with the thumb of his other hand. While he waited for a response, he paced between the kitchen and the window overlooking the street.

After twenty minutes of silence, he spoke. “I want to book a ticket to Colombo, Sri

Lanka.” A pause. “Just one. What’s your next available flight?” Another pause. “Three weeks? I need to get there now.” A longer pause. “I can’t wait three weeks. Even three days is too long.” Slamming the handset on the receiver, he yelled obscenities in Tamil. He threw the phone directory to the floor, its pages fluttering as it slid toward the worn sofa.

Radha stayed near the kitchen doorway. “Thiru, don’t be upset.”

“What do you want me feel?”

“Why be upset? What could you do if you did get a plane? What would you do when you got home? You don’t even know if you can get home.” She wondered if anything in their village even remained.

“But I’d be in Colombo. I’d be closer. Here I’m two oceans away.”

“And if they did have a seat, how would you pay for it? We struggle now with what little you make. We’re lucky daal and rice are so cheap. And if you stopped working to go home . . .”

He stared at her sandaled feet, too ashamed to meet her dark brown eyes, too angry to listen to the news broadcasting through the tiny speakers of the radio.

During the past three days, his emotions settled and solidified, like the algae-covered surface of a stagnant pool. He couldn’t sustain the mood swings—frustration to sorrow to anger to despair and back again—without collapsing from emotional exhaustion. Working at his cart stabilized him. The activity occupied his mind, spared him from sitting idly in the apartment, waiting.

Ladling batter from a plastic bucket, he poured the fermented rice and lentil mixture on the hot griddle. With the flat bottom of a steel cup, he swirled the batter around the griddle, the white liquid spreading across the oily surface like foamy surf surging over wet, packed sand. He glanced at the customers queued on the sidewalk.

Five people. That’s good for the week after Christmas. And it should be the last crowd for the afternoon. That’s good, too. I don’t think I could handle another crowd today. Don’t think I could keep up with them. I’m just too tired. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s usually not this hard, but I feel so weak. I don’t know if I can get through the week, not without more sleep. Maybe the crowds will be small this week, not swamp me, not exhaust me.

Glancing above the griddle, he detected a shadow that lingered on the greasy plastic shield that separated him from the street. He leaned sideways and saw a young woman in a navy blue overcoat reading the laminated menu that hung on the front of the cart.

“They’re dosas, from South India. They’re like a crepe with potato filling inside. They come with coconut chutney and sambhar. It’s South Indian vegetable soup. All my food is vegan, just rice, lentils, and potatoes.”

“Vegan? That’s great.” The woman looked at him. “Are you from South India?”

“Yes, from Thiruvananthapuram. It’s the capital of Kerala, in western India.”

These Westerners, they’re so easy to fool. They can’t tell a South Indian from a Sri Lankan, and they can’t pronounce the names. Tell them some South Indian names, and they’ll get confused, stop talking to you, and leave you in peace.

“I heard South India is beautiful, but it’s really hot. You must hate the weather here.”

“You get used to it.” He checked the dosa browning on the griddle. “Have you had South Indian food before?”

“Never. What would you recommend?”

“The Pondicherry dosa. It has salad and vegetables mixed into it. It’s healthy with good flavors. I can make it as spicy as you want.”

“I think I’ll try that. Something hot and spicy on a cold day like this sounds great.” She went to the end of the queue, the heels of her boots clapping on the sidewalk, her suede purse swinging at her side.

Scooping a dollop of filling from a plastic container, he arranged it on the dosa. A trail of steam rose from the mound of potato seasoned with turmeric, roasted mustard seeds, and sautéed onions. The oily scent of the browning dosa shell mingled with the earthy aroma of the filling. He removed a wide spatula from the rim of the griddle. After folding the edges of the shell over the potato mixture, he cut the dosa with the blade of the spatula. He transferred it to a Styrofoam box and handed it to a middle-aged man in a heavy leather jacket.

Steam seeped from the joints of the Styrofoam box, the tiny white clouds dissipating slowly in the cold air. Seeing the steam triggered an unpleasant thought.

Another winter outside. Freezing rain, snow, bitter cold, wind chill. It won’t warm up until spring. I hate this part of the year in this city. But what to do? I freeze or we starve. I can wear warm clothes, but Radha and I can’t eat them.

He always enjoyed winters in Sri Lanka—warm weather, lush landscapes, sunny skies. No need for a bulky parka with a fur-lined hood, no reason to wear overstuffed gloves. Just a cotton shirt and shorts or light pants during the day. Even the ocean felt pleasant and comforting. The ocean that once sustained them, physically and financially. The ocean that seemed so benevolent.

As children living in a village on the beaches of southern Sri Lanka, he and his brothers would wade through the surf on Sunday mornings, waiting for their father and uncles to return with their small boats laden with fish. Once the boats were emptied, they followed the men to the open-air market to help sell the catch. Their makeshift stall, nothing more than some warped sheets of plywood resting on up-ended cinderblocks, sat in a shaded corner of the market, not far from the chai wallah.

At lunchtime, his father would send him to the chai wallah for tea, and young Thiru would return bearing a battered aluminum tray stacked with an earthenware kettle and six glass tumblers. He preferred the wallah's creamy, spicy chai to his mother's. Her tea seemed watery and never sweet enough. In the evening, on their way home from the market, the men stopped for paan, a pungent tobacco plug wrapped in a betel nut leaf, while Thiru and his brothers ate sweets made from chickpea flour or boiled buffalo milk.

His father and uncles had passed away years ago, but his mother and aunts remained, and his brothers. One moved to Colombo to work as a laborer in a factory, safe on the western side of the island. The other stayed in the village to manage the family's three boats, unprotected and unsuspecting. Had he been in the market when the tsunami washed ashore? Or maybe at home with his wife, their three children, and his mother? Not that the market would have withstood the waves raging across the sand, nor their house.

Three days ago, on Sunday night, Thiru sat on the worn sofa in their apartment in Jackson Heights, his fingers playing with a small hole in the ikat sheet that covered the lumpy sofa cushions. He surfed between the various twenty-four-hour cable news channels, watching the images from Sri Lanka wash across the screen. The light from the television cast flickering shadows on the walls of the darkened room.

Radha emerged from the bedroom, her braid of black hair draped across her shoulder and down the front of her yellow cotton kaftan. "What are you doing, Thiru? Come to bed. You have to work in the morning, and you'll be tired if you don't sleep."

"I don't want to sleep."

She glanced at the television and saw images of tangled, twisted debris that had been offices, shops, and homes. "What's the good of doing this, Thiru? What are you looking for?"

"Nothing. Anything." He pointed the remote at the small television and switched to another news channel. "I can't even tell what villages they're showing. There are no landmarks. Nothing's left to identify them. Nothing at all, just smashed rubbish."

"Then why watch? Come to bed."

"Soon. Soon." Going to bed would be useless. He would simply lie there, awake, worried about his family. He wanted to believe that watching television would make him feel more connected to the disaster and ease his guilt about not being there to help, but it only intensified his anxiety, making him realize how isolated and helpless he was. He wanted to reach through the screen and take control of the camera so he could search through the rubble with its lens. But he couldn't. He could only watch passively as the camera panned across a decimated landscape.

The window in the greasy plastic shield above the griddle slid open, and a youthful,

earthy-brown face peered inside. "Hey, Thiru, my man. How's it going?"

"Diyan? You're still here? I thought you went home for the break."

"Only for Christmas. I can't stand being out of the city." He looked at the griddle. Its heat steamed up the lower edges of his glasses. "I heard about the tsunami, and I was wondering about your family. Are they all right? They weren't affected by it?"

"No, no, they're fine. They're in Colombo, on the western side of Sri Lanka. It hit in the south, far from them."

I see Diyan so much. Don't want him coming up every day asking if I heard anything.

"You never mentioned where they lived, so I wasn't sure. But it's a big country, and if something had happened, I guess you wouldn't be here."

"No, I would have got the first plane there. Do you want anything?"

"Not today, thanks. I'm on my way to meet some friends, and I thought I'd check with you to see if everything was okay. But I'll be back tomorrow. I'm already missing my mom's homemade dosas." He tapped the plastic shield with his fingertips. "See you, Thiru. You take care." Diyan's face vanished from the window.

Why can't I lie to myself like that? Tell myself they're all fine. They could be. Some people lived. Even a baby survived, carried on the waves and left inland. And many temples are still standing. Maybe they were in the market when it hit. Maybe they saw it coming and made it to the Shiv temple near the market.

He scraped the surface of the griddle clean with the blade of the spatula. The repetitive motions of spreading the batter and cleaning the griddle comforted him.

I wish I could keep myself busy like this at home. Keep myself from thinking. After dinner and before bed, that's the worst time. They're all asleep at home. Nothing is happening there. But I'm still awake here, waiting for the sun to come up there so something can happen, so they can start searching again and start getting the phone and electric lines back up.

When they start working at home though, it's time for me to get to bed. Just when someone might call, I have to go to sleep. And that's when they would call, while I'm asleep. Maybe that's why I'm not sleeping so good. Maybe I'm afraid I'll sleep too deeply and never hear the phone ring. That might it. I'm waiting for that call even in my dreams.

Thiru turned toward the next customer in the queue. "What would you like?"