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## A Pair of Birds

### Abstract

Raja found it finally, buried in the debris, lodged between the fallen rubble. He picked it up carefully, wiping it gently with his palm. Without its blue backdrop wall, against which it had been hanging for as long as he could remember, it had lost its colour. The flying white birds had lost their vibrance, they looked washed out, their fluid motion as they flew into the sky, did not seem quite life-like now. The picture was dirtied anyway. He was tired, washed out, like the pair of birds in the picture. He would sit down a moment. The air was full of human ashes and screams and cries. And lonely and silent.

CHANDANI LOKUGÉ

## A Pair of Birds

Raja found it finally, buried in the debris, lodged between the fallen rubble. He picked it up carefully, wiping it gently with his palm. Without its blue backdrop wall, against which it had been hanging for as long as he could remember, it had lost its colour. The flying white birds had lost their vibrance, they looked washed out, their fluid motion as they flew into the sky, did not seem quite life-like now. The picture was dirtied anyway. He was tired, washed out, like the pair of birds in the picture. He would sit down a moment. The air was full of human ashes and screams and cries. And lonely and silent.

Two children came up along the road, with dirty faces and ragged frocks. Seeing him, they passed on, turned in at the next burnt-down heap of house, and began, with hurried alert eyes, to look round. They had their dreams. Perhaps they would find beneath a brick or stone, a thali, or a bangle. How wonderful that would be.

'There's nothing at all here,' said the elder child. 'Someone has already beaten us to it.'

They stood together forlornly, it was the last probable treasure store down the lane, except for the charred ruins on which this tiresome man sat. They stared at him. Would he move? Perhaps he would not mind, if they searched the area.

'Look around this place. You might find something. See, I found this,' he said to them, 'You might be luckier.'

They came up to him warily. He did not seem to be from the police. They took the picture from him and looked at it.

'Of what use is this old burned picture?' they scoffed, gaining confidence.

'You can't sell it or anything. Not like finding a brass vase or a gold ring. Like Sunil's loot. He's rich now, he sold the thali to the mudalali, and he has enough money to get married with.'

'Who is Sunil?'

'Our brother. He was collecting money to get married, for as long as I can remember. He's the scavenging man, who pushes the garbage cart down this road. It does not pay, you see.' The child finished maturely.

He wished the children would go away now and leave him alone. Making hay while the sun shines, he thought. Buried passions surged within. The children moved away, and with a stick began to dig among

the charred remains of his house. He picked up a heavy stone, if he threw it now, at them, at least one would be hurt. At what part of which body could he aim it? The head, or the leg? Either way, the child would cry out in pain, in horror, there would be blood oozing out of another body, another cry would pierce the evening quiet. He stood up, lifting the stone over his shoulder, poised to throw it. There was a singing in his ears, he heard the shouts, the screams, his mother and his sister, dragged out of the house by their father, the men with their crowbars and sticks, maddened faces and shining sweat-covered bodies in the darkness. And then the splintering glass, the blood gushing out of his father's head, where they had struck him, the burning, the fire eating in, spreading into the bedrooms, to his books, enveloping all. The two children had turned, they were gazing at him innocently.

'There's nothing here, Sir,' they said, 'We are going home.'

He dropped the stone. And sat down again. Drained out, empty.

He shook himself, he had come here to think. Not to relive the past. What was there of the past anyway? His father was dead, his mother and sister in the refugee camp. He had to plan, as the head of his family now, he had to plan, settle things for his mother and sister. Where could he start? Menik wanted them to come and stay with her family. But in her kind offer he saw only patronising condescension. He visualised his mother and sister, sitting hidden away in a back room somewhere, eating off the left-overs in the house. He was only working himself up again. He tried to calm down, and dropped his head in his hands. He was being unnecessarily cruel now, he admonished himself, he knew Menik, she only wanted to help. So many of their other Sinhalese friends wanted to help. Lal, Maithri, they had been with him round the clock, after they had heard of or seen the tragedy. He had been abrupt, cold and unfriendly. Perhaps he had hurt them, cut them off altogether. He could not help it. He wondered if he had been foolish. Perhaps he should have accepted their help. He was really helpless. They had just this ten thousand rupees in the bank, and his sister's dowry, awaiting her marriage. He could not touch that, it was a sacred fund. And he had his job. They could seek political asylum in England or France, he thought.

He stood up and wandered on, down the road to Maithri's house. He felt embarrassed, were they on two sides now? But Maithri had offered his house to his family during the riots and they had been friends for nearly ten years, classmates, neighbours... and had Maithri's father not been working in Jaffna, he was sure, the destruction of his house would never have taken place. He remembered suddenly, with a flash of gratitude how Mr. Seneviratne had taken special care of them in the last riots of '81. Well, it was worth a try anyway, it might ease the misery in his heart, if he could communicate it to Maithri. Share it with him.

Maithri stood by the gate of his home. He looked around moodily – three houses down his lane, all of them saved in the last riots, because of his father, lay in ashes today. Our peaceful nation, he thought, our religious, beautiful people, how violent they were when it came to a national problem. He remembered having read somewhere about how the Sinhalese reacted violently to injustice – quick to anger, quick to forget. For the past how many years, had this ethnic problem been brewing beneath the surface? Yet, they had grown up, side by side, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, he and Raja. What had nationality to do with friendship? They had hidden three Tamils in their house during the past week, friends from the front house. Shanthi too. He wondered if their friendship could be love. He liked everything about her, the way she walked, the way she talked, the way her vivacious eyes met his, half shyly, half coquettishly when he spoke to her. But last week they had fled to Jaffna. Nothing remained for them here, the house lay in desolation, broken, half burnt walls and flapping windows, like the skeleton of some grotesque animal, exposed to sun and rain. He heard the postman's bell. He leaned over the gate. But the postman did not stop at his house.

'Nothing today, Sir,' he smiled sympathetically and rode on.

Maithri felt, more than saw, his mother's shadow move away from the window. From morning she had been hovering about the verandah waiting for the letter that failed to come. From his father in Jaffna. Was anything wrong, he wondered for the hundredth time, why was there not even a phone call? But perhaps the telephones were out of order in Jaffna. He had tried to call last evening but failed. Perhaps they should try sending across a police message tonight. But no news meant good news, he thought again. And his father must be very busy. He looked up and down the lane, restlessly.

Jaffna. What was Jaffna like today? His thoughts dwelt again inexorably on his father. Usually, he skirted this issue, and filled his mind with lesser things. But now. How was his father? His mother's worried face made him want to avoid her, they were helpless here, they could do nothing but wait, wait for news that he was still alive, wait for news that he was shot dead. He remembered reluctantly, painfully, the argument that had taken place between his mother and father, the day his father brought home his transfer orders. He was to take command in Jaffna the next day. His mother had been so angry.

'You have no right to go away to Jaffna. You have two children. They will have a dead father in a week, if you go. It is just a death trap, Jaffna, you said so yourself yesterday. See what happened to Wije and Gunadasa. Where are they now with their heroics? Dead. Ashes. And where are their families? Forgotten. You can't afford to die for your country when you have a family. Of what use is a dead hero?'

'Look Chitra, I am not trying to be a hero. It is important that you understand that. It is just that I am a police officer and I have a job to do.'

How can I get the transfer cancelled at this moment. I have no choice in the matter at all. I am in the police, you know.'

'They will kill you, Lal, you know what the terrorists are. Tell Suren. He will get the transfer cancelled. There must be so many others who have not served in Jaffna yet. Who are free and unmarried, let them go.' But there had been no hesitation in his father's voice, no indecision when he said,

'It is out of the question, Chitra, you know it, let's not get hysterical about it, I'm not on some suicidal squad, and really not cut out to be a hero. And you can't forget my horoscope - I'm to live to be a good eighty years, remember? Nothing is going to happen to me.'

His father had not been joking. His voice was strained with the tensions of his work. Had he been trying to convince his mother or himself?

And when he had been taken away in the jeep, with his single suitcase of clothes, his last thoughts had been of them at home.

'Be very careful, don't go out at night, Maithri, look after your mother and sister. I leave you in charge. Just be careful, I will write to you as soon as I can.'

As the jeep turned the corner, he had looked back, and Maithri had been surprised, his father was not a sentimental person. He was afraid for his father. And filled with anger for these terrorists who created all this havoc in the country. 'Eelam' my foot, Maithri thought furiously, separatism, division, all words - we have to fight them, they must not break up our country.

'Let Shanthi go to hell,' he said aloud, angrily.

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He did not see Raja until Raja stood in front of him. The two gates were closed. Raja stood just outside on the road. Maithri looked at his friend. He opened the gate.

'Hallo, come in Raja, I was thinking of something and didn't see you really.'

He smiled, his arm went around Raja in a familiar gesture. But Raja felt Maithri's effort. They had been friends too long for either to pretend anything. Yet, just now pretence was necessary, and so he smiled a smile he did not really feel.

'Sit down. Nangi, bring something for Raja to drink, he's looking hot and sweaty.'

His sister came in a few minutes later with a glass of fruit juice. She served it to him, smiling - she liked Raja, they were like brothers - Raja and aiyā. She sat down on the arm of a chair.

'It must worry you that schools are still closed nangi. There isn't much time left for your exam now, is there?' Raja tried to make conversation. Examinations, he thought, it was a topic that was safe. Impersonal.

'Just two months more. We have not even covered all the syllabuses yet, but it's not so important. We are all so worried about thattha being in Jaffna,' she said wistfully. 'We have had no news from him for three days. Perhaps he has no way of sending a message across. Nothing in the post today too, aiya.'

'I know,' Maithri said.

They sat quietly. They had never been quiet like this in the past, Raja thought, they would all talk together, and Maithri's mother would sometimes admonish them, 'Make less noise, people will think there is a street brawl in the house.'

But they would not care. Now this silence, stretching, stretching, before them. Yawning into nothing.

'So, how are auntie Rose and Saku? You should have brought them here, Raja, they would have been safe with us, they could at least have eaten some good food.'

'Thank you. They are doing very well at the camp. At least, they are not feeding on scraps falling off someone's table.'

Raja's mouth was dry by the time he uttered the last word. He cringed, seeing the hurt gather in Maithri's sister's eyes.

'Maybe it's for the best, Nangi, I don't suppose thattha is being treated kindly by those Tamils in Jaffna,' Maithri retorted, furiously.

They sat tongue-tied, staring at nothing. Confused. Uncertain of what next to say. Damn these Tigers.

'But Shanthi's family is in Jaffna too, isn't it? They will take care of him.' Raja recommenced the conversation, with an effort.

'If the terrorists let them. If those devils find out that Shanthi and her family are helping a Sinhalese, they'll all be wiped out,' Maithri said.

'Was nothing left of your things? No books, nothing?' Maithri wished that his sister would shut up. But Raja did not seem to mind. He showed her the picture of the birds.

'This is all I could find. Maybe the looters were luckier.' He could not keep the bitterness from his voice.

'You are lucky your lives were saved,' Maithri cut in again. He could not help it. There was this anger in him. They had no business to sound like holy martyrs, he thought, it was their own people who started all this and someone had to pay the price. Why should it be his father? Better the Tamils themselves, and Raja was a Tamil. Maybe in his secret heart he was himself a Tiger, or wishing that he was one.

'You would not say that, had you seen everything going up in flames that night. Or were you with the mob yourself? I did not know that your sympathies were with them,' exclaimed Raja. He gripped the arms of his chair. What was the meaning of this? They were arguing, weren't they? So they were now irrevocably on either side of the dividing line. The Tamils and the Sinhalese. Doesn't he care that my mother and sister are starving, homeless in the camp?

How can Raja forget, Maithri wondered, very hurt, how he had begged of him to bring his family to this house.

They were both angry and full of resentment.

'Come, now,' Nangi said. 'What is the matter with the two of you? You can't settle the country's problems, don't be idiotic. You'll be hitting each other in a minute.'

She went away into the house. She was getting a little tired of it all. But she could not blame anyone. Could she?

Maithri's mother came towards them a few minutes later. She carried a basket covered with paper.

'I have prepared some food for Rose and Sakuntala, Raja. You can take it along with you to the camp when you leave.'

She sat down sighing, trying to think of something to say. She felt the tension in the air. But her thoughts returned to what was uppermost in her mind.

'I don't know when these problems will settle down, I was listening to the news just now, there is a forty-two hour curfew imposed in Jaffna commencing at noon today. Thaththa must be in such danger...' Her voice trailed away. She gazed into the distance. Raja stood up.

'Thank you for the food, auntie,' he said taking the basket, 'it is kind of you to have bothered.'

'Tell Rose and Saku that I will come to see them soon,' she tried to smile.

'It's just that I am so worried about Lal.'

'Of course, I'm sure they will understand. Don't worry about it.'

Raja moved towards the door. He glanced at Maithri. Maithri stood up with an effort.

'I'll just go up the lane with Raja,' he said to his mother.

'Come right back,' she admonished quietly.

They walked together up the lane.

'Smoke?' Maithri offered his half-smoked cigarette to Raja.

'Sorry, machang. It's thaththa being away that keeps getting us down.' He tried clumsily to make it up.

Raja was silent. They were passing his house.

'I think of your father too, had he been here, my house would have been safe. We keep thinking about that, back in the camp. He is a good man, your father. When did we ever argue about nationality before this. It is just this... Let's forget it. What can you and I do anyway, from here.'

Maithri saw Raja to the bus.

'Don't come this way tomorrow. It is not safe to wander around by yourself. I will bring something for your people to the camp.'

Raja did not reply immediately.

'Thanks,' he said, at last, trying to sound grateful. Maithri watched the bus out of sight. Then sticking his hands in his pockets he moved away.

As he neared his house, he saw the police car parked by the gate and the small group of people gathered by it. He stopped walking and stood



rooted to the gravel. He bit his lip desperately. He saw his sister extricate herself from the clutching hands of friends. She came running towards him. She stopped before him. He drew her to him and held her tightly. He looked beyond the gate. He saw his mother walk into the house surrounded by neighbours.

'A land mine,' his sister sobbed.