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There is a particular time in the afternoon, when the breeze picks up over the lake, and the sun begins its madcap, dappled water-dance. Usually, by this time, you've clambered out, seesawing over slimy rocks; usually, by this time, you're just sunning yourself like an ancient carbuncled turtle. Your lover shifts and sighs into the rock, drifting into languorous dreams of childhood picnics. Perhaps it is just the deep slumbering goodness of things that takes over and plays dice against time and memory. Perhaps it is simply that we never really forget.

“I wonder how people get over something like that.”

“Mmm?”

He turns over, clear blue eyes opening, squinting against the sun. The sweetness in my skin hasn't caught up with my question yet, and it slinks back, pushing desultorily against this quickening line of thought.

“Lose a child. You know, like the kid in that show.”

A girl, just a girl in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her story has been obsessing us. I remembered now, that she disappears on the night her family goes camping. They'd left her behind to be on her own, to be grown up. Except she never would.

I will never have children. Having found love in middle life, passion is timeless and generous, opening and embracing separate worlds, making room for it all. It is too late for children, but there are his two

girls, and just the thought of anything happening to them knocks the wind out of me. They are old enough to want all that freedom; young enough not to recognize the ancient paths of violence and terror.

I sit up against the breeze, goosebumps peppering my skin.

I was young once. 16 in Kandy, a place that was sacred to Buddhists, and before that, before the measuring of time in chronicles, sacred to the Bhairavs who guarded the secrets of the mist capped mountains that ringed the puny habitations of man. But when I was 16, Kandy was a place where people disappeared off the streets. In 1989, Sri Lanka was a country petrified by the habitual violence that becomes a commonplace of conflict. And when I was 16 there were two wars, one happening next door and in the market place, and the other, more remote and long lasting, happening in the North and East. You couldn't know which one you were caught in. You could stand at the bus stop waiting to catch the bus home, and a black van would drive up, and the kid next to you would be snatched in front of your eyes. To be anywhere was to take the risk of being that kid in the wrong place at the wrong time. In a few days, a body would be left at the gates of the school, each bruise, gash, each torn finger a lesson to any of us who harbored radical hope or dared to dream of the promise of revolution.

In the end, I suppose I was lucky. One learns to bury the dead, and then to go on having conversations with them as if nothing has changed.

"I had a cousin like that girl. Killed."

"Accident?"

"No, murder."

"What?! Why?"

"I don't know. No one knows. Someone shot him."

"Was he involved in something?"

"No. Nothing like that. No. Nobody knows why. But they shot him at his house, on the driveway. His family was there. His kid sisters. He was 16."

A family never recovers from losing a child.

No one does.

They were distant cousins who had grown up in the Middle East and returned to Sri Lanka to be closer to family, to take on the responsibilities of caring for aging parents. Suranga's father was soft spoken, sure of himself and, even at first glance, the kind of person you just knew you could trust with your life. And Suranga was a younger, ballsier version of his father. Sharp as a knife, his barbed jokes would make you wince while you laughed at yourself, and yet, underneath it all, he had the kindness and solicitude of a wise and benevolent elder.

They settled in the lower hills that ringed the city, taking over an acreage and becoming gentleman farmers. My visits there were filled with laughter and long walks, all the kids tramping to visit chickens and splash around in the clear mountain streams that would gush unexpectedly around rocks covered in lantana and sunflowers. There were three generations in their family, and three in ours, and these gatherings over fried rice and spicy chicken curry would invariably end with grandparents swapping stories about notorious aunts and uncles while the children sneaked sips of ice cold shandy.

But Suranga and I were already not really children, and he made no bones about the fact that he had a crush on me. He was sure of himself, sure as well, that he would eventually win me. But even at 16, my affections were always contrary, and usually spoken for. I much preferred to long for the hopelessly arrogant and inaccessible young buck who would casually flirt with me and my best friend at the same time. I would swallow the humiliation, retreat to some corner to scribble my bruised heart and ego into a diary filled with the kind of nonsense a teenager high on Hemingway could cook up. Suranga watched all of this with a mixture of irritation and pity, sensing already, that I preferred to document life rather than get caught up in the mess of living. He would sit with me in my corner, offering a logical analysis of the situation, and exhort me not to waste my energy chasing an arrogant prick when he was right there, waiting. And he was, after all, smarter, funnier, more handsome. And he would always, always treat me right.

I'd tell him to get lost.

And as if he knew the only real way to get through to me was to prove without doubt his far superior intelligence, Suranga finally challenged his nemesis to a battle of wits to be proved by winning the highest scores in all term exams, thus securing the highest academic achievement of the year. That got my attention alright, and I sensed, already, that this was far beyond child's play or some sort of adolescent posture. This was about truth, this was about making me see clearly.

Suranga lost his wager by a few points. He endured the mockery of his schoolmates with candor, but he could barely face me. I wanted to tell him it was just a game, it was just bad luck, but the way his lips had set warned me off platitudes. Suddenly, a chasm had opened between us, and it was one I knew I couldn't cross.

And just like that, there seemed to be no more time for spats over girls or long talks about books. Suranga became a man, an adult stranger.

A few weeks later, Suranga was shot on a rainy evening as he went to lock the gates of their house for the evening. Nobody witnessed the crime, although some described a motorbike speeding away with two men in masks. The police and the ambulance took too long to arrive. He bled to death in the rain as his mother tried to hold back the life slipping through her fingers.

We went to them as soon as the news reached us. The home was suddenly hollow, locked in silence and despair. Only the voices of the little ones could be heard from time to time. They still had language, a sort of buffer from the horror that had enveloped us all. Suranga's mother retreated that day and she never returned.

As if by habit, I went straight to his room. It was still full of that sense of being lived in, full of smell and bustle, and I half expected him to walk in any minute. On his table, his math textbook was turned face down. When I turned it over, it was open to the problem that had defeated him in his test. It was in that moment, when I knew that he was gone, that my childhood ended.

It's been 26 years.

When I finish telling this story, the sun is already turning golden, its rays irradiating the soft blond hair on my lover's forearms. His eyes, so still and blue like the lake that surrounds us, are open, and I know that they receive this gift of memory, even as they answer the curse of history with the only antidote we ever have, love. As I lean into his warm skin, and kiss him, I know that I have lived to be complete, that I have known everything I ever needed to know. That I have been broken and rendered whole, that I have loved and that I love.

But Suranga died at 16 without ever being kissed, without tasting the slow reprieve that time always offers us in the end.

And for that, I am sorry.

I am sorry.

I am so sorry.

APARNA HALPÉ holds a doctorate in English Literature from the University of Toronto and is Professor of English at Centennial College, Toronto. Aparna's poetry has been published in various journals including *Channels*, *The Journal of the English Writer's Cooperative*, *Sri Lanka*, and *Postcolonial Text*. Her scholarly work has been published in *South Asian Diaspora* (Routledge), *Moving Worlds* (Leeds) and *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* (U Alberta Press).