

Joanna Luloff

{ IN HER WORDS }

I worked in Sri Lanka as a Peace Corps volunteer from 1996 to 1998. I lived in a small village called Baddegama, about thirty kilometers inland from the southwestern coastal city of Galle. It was a quiet place filled with tea estates and rice paddies, and it was hot and languid and peaceful. It was a place where it was easy to forget that there was a civil war devastating a great deal of the rest of the country. Baddegama was a village of majority Sinhalese Buddhists who, when on the rare occasion they spoke about the Tamil minority, simply explained that they didn't live down here anymore. There were, of course, traces of the war that would filter into the town through radio broadcasts and newspaper editorials and the occasional attack on the navy base in Galle. But most of the villagers dismissed the war as something that was happening far away. To assure me of my safety, and to perhaps alleviate a sense of shame at the ongoing violence that was "holding our country back" (something my host father repeated often), for the first six months or so that I lived there the conflict was rarely mentioned in my presence.

I can't pinpoint when, exactly, people's reticence on the subject of the war began to change, but I later found myself in an odd position where strangers wanted to share their stories of the conflict with me. A nurse who cared for my visiting mother when she wound up in a hospital in Kandy brought me to the bed of a Tamil girl and explained the increasing number of suicides among the adolescents of their community. Not suicide bombers, she stressed, but suicides. The government was killing them without firing a bullet. A woman who had fled Colombo for the Middle East after her husband was killed told me that she had lost track of where her home was. The manager of a coastal guest-house blamed the war for the failing tourist industry. My own host family, who had welcomed me, a stranger who spoke a different language, who was raised with a different religion, into their home with so

much warmth and care, would suddenly turn vitriolic when the subject of Tamil independence was raised. A teacher-friend told me once that I was easy to talk to because I was neutral, because I never seemed to get angry about anything. And of course you'll go back home one day, she said, but we all have to keep living here.

I spent a lot of time arguing with this friend. I do get angry, I wanted to tell her. I didn't understand how people who seemed so patient and open and kind to me could feel an unflinching hatred toward more local strangers around them. The aftermath of bus bombings flickered on the television news, and I recognized neighborhoods in Colombo I had seen, now with charred-out windows, and it affected me profoundly. But my friend was right. I did have the luxury of going home one day, and after my service was complete, I did.

It took me a long time to start writing the stories I brought home with me from Sri Lanka. I asked myself a lot of questions. What voices were politically and ethically appropriate for me to take on? What points of view should these stories be told from? Where in these stories was I and the other volunteers and aid workers I met during my time there? When I began writing this book, I crafted individual, discrete stories that stood on their own with complete narrative arcs. But as I moved forward with the narratives, I realized that certain characters refused to stay put, and a conversation among the stories began to take place. It was important for me to try, as best as I could, to offer multiple points of view, political positions, and geographic locations in my book. As I kept writing, there were certain themes that seemed to coalesce around these stories. All of the narratives, in some way, reflect on exile and the feeling that home has become unfamiliar. Some characters are forced into exile, some choose it, but all of them wrestle with the acknowledgment that the home they once had is no longer there.