

The Daughter of Jaffna

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It was an odd sized casket, too small for a man, too big for a child. A flag was draped over it, a smallish one. It was carried by four men in uniform, though it was hard to tell for sure from a distance what uniform it was, or even if they were all men. There wasn't room for the usual six pallbearers due to the small size of the casket since it would have made for a comical service to have all six jammed together, shoulder-to-shoulder, crowding around an under-sized coffin. So the extra pallbearers were in the ranks of many others in uniform standing beside a small open grave. The officiant wore a robe instead of a uniform and must have said something because there was a long silence, then a burst of laughter.

It was not one of joy, though. Far from that. It was a hair-raising laugh of sorrow and grief. A laugh that was followed by a deep, long wail. Jayanthi, a small sized woman, in her early 50s, sat on the ground next to the casket. Her hair was ruffled and her body frail from despair. In the casket lay the lifeless, mutilated body of her 19-year-old daughter, Usha. Her young face, once beautiful with dark silky hair and round ebony eyes was now beyond recognition. Naveen, her brother stood staring at her body, motionless and expressionless, one hand on his mother's shoulder.

“Why?” was the only word that come out of Jayanthi's mouth as she stroked her lifeless daughter's head.

The year was 1991. It had been eight years since the insurgency had started. The Freedom Army were at the peak of fighting. They had made appreciable gain in territory in the region of Jaffna where they were born. Crucial to their advancement were the support of the youth, young and restless men and women alike, who were victims of discrimination and abuse owing to their ethnicity. They were impressionable, fiery and all they wanted was change. A change for the better. A change for their generation and for the generations to come. They didn't care if the world called them terrorists. In their hearts, they were fighters of freedom in a struggle to liberate their lands from the fists of discrimination and persecution. Death was but an inevitable destiny the moment

they wore the cyanide capsules around their necks and held the AK-47s in their hands. They learnt to embrace and welcome it, more so for those who signed up for the Freedom Sparrows.

Usha was one of them. She had become a Sparrow out of her own will. The moment she left home one fine Sunday morning after a breakfast of *puttu* and coconut sambol, telling her mother that she would be away for a week for a study trip, she knew she was not coming back. And she knew she was giving her life up for the cause. Jayanthi stared at the photo of her late husband that hung carelessly on the wall one evening, two weeks after she had found out that Usha had joined the Freedom Army without her knowledge. A white jasmine garland was placed around his photo and three incense sticks stood straight, burning in front of it. He was looking straight at her from above, with a broad smile, just the way he used to for 15 years before he left and never came back.

“It’s all because of you,” she said and turned away.

And yes it was. Peter Rajaratnam was a nationalist. He was involved in political movements ever since his college days, fighting for equal rights and an end to discrimination of his people. He never stopped his activism even after marriage. Jayanthi knew nothing of it before she married Peter.

All her father had told her was that she was going to get married to a fine, young gentleman who was a teacher. “You’re 22 now. It’s time for you to get married and have a family,” said Jayanthi’s father one evening, as he sat in his rocking chair, exhaling thick, grey smoke from his maple wood pipe. “There’s this young man who’s a teacher. I know the family well. I’ve decided you should marry him.”

Jayanthi nodded in agreement. She met her would-be husband once before the wedding day and before she knew it, she was at the local church standing next to a tall, lanky man with curly, black hair and a thick moustache, exchanging matrimonial vows. He turned out to be a gem of a man, someone whom she had always dreamt of marrying except for his obsession with

nationalism and politics. They lived in a small single storey house in the capital city of Colombo where Peter was a youth leader and activist fighting for the Tamil community.

“Stop doing this already, please. For the sake of your two-year-old daughter. If something happens to you, what will happen to us?” Jayanthi pleaded as she held a milk bottle to Usha’s mouth one evening. The two-year-old toddler lay quiet in Jayanthi’s arms, in her own happy world, oblivious to her surroundings.

“Look at the situation of our people. Our young boys and girls are denied public education. We are denied jobs and opportunities. Many are on the streets suffering,” Peter said.

“But what can you do? What difference are you going to make?” she asked him.

Peter looked straight into her eyes, “If everyone thinks like you, nobody will fight for our rights and we’ll continue to be trampled upon for generations to come. Someone has to go out there and fight, no? Why shouldn’t it be me?”

Usha grew up her father’s girl. Naveen was born three years after Usha and he was amma’s boy. Usha was fascinated by her dad’s activism. He would carry her in his arms while he gave his fiery speeches on makeshift wooden stages in front of scores of people.

“Why are you doing this, appa?” she asked Peter one day. She was 9 at the time.

“So that you and your brother will have a good life. So that you’ll be treated the same way as your other friends. So that you wouldn’t have to suffer like people of me and your mother’s generation.”

Everything shattered in 1983. Peter lost his job as a teacher in the government school he was working in. “I’m afraid it’s because you’re Tamil.” That was the only explanation that the administrator of the school could offer him. Warm tears fell down his cheeks as he told his students that he would not be teaching them anymore. They kept asking him why but he could offer no explanation. They were too young to understand. They were all his children. Regardless of race. Regardless of ethnicity. Regardless of religion. Regardless of language. But not everyone thought like him. Peter walked out of the school compound that evening with a fire burning inside of him. The Freedom Army began their official struggle that year when they ambushed an army convoy in the jungles in the north of the country. The government was enraged. They were out to get the members of the Freedom Army and their supporters and sympathisers.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back shortly. I’m just going into town to see the boys. Pack all the stuff and get ready. We leave for Jaffna tonight” were Peter’s last words to Jayanthi. He left in a hurry on his Royal Enfield motorbike that evening little knowing that he would return home lying in a casket. Peter was a victim of what came to be known as the Black Riots, an incident where numerous Tamil lives alongside Peter’s were lost.

Usha wept like she had never before when she saw Peter’s body draped in the white cloth lying lifeless in the casket which was placed in the living area of the house. That day would change her life. She overheard a conversation that she shouldn’t have heard. Or maybe one that she was destined to hear. Jayanthi had pulled Dileep, Peter’s loyal comrade, aside into the kitchen before the funeral began. She had demanded to know how her husband had died. “He was made to strip naked. He was humiliated and beaten to death in the middle of the street.” Those were the words that changed Usha’s life. Those were the words that ignited the flame of revenge in her heart. She had decided that she would seek retribution at any cost for the death of her one and only hero, her father. She was 11 years old.

That morning couldn’t have been more beautiful. Usha got out of bed before dawn. She had spent the night staring at the thatched ceiling, hearing the gentle whispering of the night breeze through her window. She had not had a wink of sleep. She washed herself in the ice-cold water at the well, put on her clothes and went to the front of the hut. It stood on a little hill with lush greenery on either side in the outskirts of Colombo. Trees and shrubs stood out like mushrooms,

standing still whilst being bathed by the morning dew. Usha sat on the concrete footstep in front of the hut and looked into the distance. She made it just in time for sunrise. There was pin drop silence except for the gentle rhythmic sounds of the crickets and insects, and the occasional chirp of small birds. She gazed at the sky. She could see Peter's face in the clouds. "This is for you, appa," she whispered. As the brilliant magenta sun peeked at her in the horizon, she admired its stunning beauty. The first sabres of light cut through the dark, turquoise sky. This was the first time she had realised how beautiful sunrise was.

"It's time to go." The deep voice of a man broke the silence.

Usha jumped, startled by the sudden presence of a stout, balding figure behind her. She nodded and stood up. She followed the man into the hut. It was small. It had a common living area, a tiny kitchen with a makeshift gas stove and two rooms. More of compartments than rooms actually. Two single beds lay at the corner of each room. Usha's body had become numb to the hardness of the bed. Her two excruciating years in the dense jungles of Jaffna had hardened every bone, tendon and muscle in her body to the core. She followed the man into his room. Everything was plain but neat and tidy except for the wooden work table at the end, opposite the bed.

"Put your clothes on. And this underneath," he said.

She followed his instructions, not saying a word. She went to her room and closed the door. Ten minutes later, she came out, wearing a loose, black *salwar kameez* top and white pants underneath. On top of that, she wore a dark blue sweater. She walked up to the man who was waiting for her outside her room door. She looked down at the floor and her face bore no expression.

"Remember this, Usha," he said as he put his palm on her head. "This is for the thousands of our people who weep at the hands of their persecutors. What you're about to do is going to change the world." He cupped her face and lifted it up so that her eyes would meet his. "You are the beloved daughter of Jaffna and you bear upon your shoulders the blood and tears of our people."

All she did was nod. She didn't know if she was dreaming or if it was actually happening. It all seemed like an illusion. The both of them got on the small TVS-50 motorbike, with Usha riding pillion. "Be careful," the man said as he kickstarted the old, ragged bike and was about to move.

Usha remained silent as they passed through the same roads for the final time. She had been all too familiar with the roads and the scenery they would pass by. They had rehearsed every second day over the course of the fortnight. Despite the routine, this journey felt different. Usha felt like a sponge, sucking in all the emotions, feelings and presence of each and every one around her. She saw the same old man who sold his vegetables at the cart by the road, bargaining with a middle-aged woman in a saree over the price of a bag of tapioca. The same two boys and three girls, who walked, books under their arms, happy and carefree awaiting the beginnings of a new day. She was like one of them two years ago. She looked into the eyes of the same hunched old lady standing under the tattered roof of the old bus-stop waiting for her ride.

The old roads slowly snaked into new, tarred roads. The lush greenery transmogrified into concrete buildings. They were entering the city. It took exactly half an hour, like the previous seven times they had been on the journey. The man stopped the bike at the same spot. Usha looked up at the magnificent building for a moment. It was one of the iconic landmarks of Colombo at the time, semi-circular in shape and dark green in colour. It was bustling with the rush hour crowd. She felt the world moving in slow motion. She was jerked out of her illusion when the man turned around and tapped her shoulder. She didn't realise she had been seated on the stationary bike for a good two minutes staring at the building. She got off the bike and looked straight at the man.

"You ok?" he asked. She didn't know for sure, but she nodded subconsciously. She held his gaze. The man nodded and blinked his eyes, saying nothing. A nod and a blink that only both of them, in the entire crowd of hundreds, understood.

Usha turned around and walked towards the station. She was on auto-pilot mode. It was as if her mind was detached from her body. Her limbs had been programmed to the routine. She walked into the building. It looked massive to her. People of all genders and ages walked in and

out. Some looked hurriedly at their watches, some carried suitcases, some carried briefcases, some carried bag packs, some carried morning grocery bags, some carried nothing at all. She looked at them. At their faces. At their eyes. Some looked back and smiled. Some looked back and stared. Others never caught her gaze, too preoccupied with trying to make it on time to wherever it was that they were going.

She looked for the main row of benches just underneath the big clock in the centre of the building. The buses were parked on both sides of the building in their respective slots, waiting to leave. She snaked her way through the swarm of people. Just as she was about to reach the bench, a young girl dressed in school uniform nudged her shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said to Usha as she smiled. *Oh, how beautiful she looks,* Usha thought to herself. Her heart felt heavy, not from the load she was carrying on her chest but from something else, something deeper. She felt a knot build up in her throat. A warm tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm truly very sorry," Usha muttered, as she looked at the little girl who was now some distance away heading towards her bus. She could only hope and pray the little girl would leave the building in the next few minutes.

She found her spot on the centre bench, underneath the clock. It showed 7.27 a.m. Three more minutes to go. She hoped no one would come and sit next to her. She saw her father in front of her eyes. He smiled at her. "This is for you, appa," she said once again. *But is this what he really would have wanted of me?* She saw his face and his vibrant smile fade into nothingness. *Would he really have approved of what I was about to do?*

DING, DONG, DING, DONG, DING, DONG... The clock above her rang. It was 7.30 a.m. on the dot. She knew the instructions well. "The moment the clock rings, put your hand into the jacket and flip the switch." It was too late. For better, or for worse all she could do was to hope that what she was about to do was for the betterment of her people. So that they would stop suffering. And her father could rest in peace. She carefully put her right hand into the left underside of her jacket. She felt the small switch beneath. She felt her heart pounding through her throat and the weight of the jacket over her chest. She gripped the switch which was by now wet with sweat and pulled the trigger. In the blink of an eye, everything went black.

Naveen heard the whirring engines of the convoy from a distance. The three black four-wheel drives stopped 10 metres away from the burial site. Jayanthi didn't even notice the sound. Her eyes, red and swollen by now were fixated on the body of her beloved child. Two lanky young men got out of each of the front and back vehicles, AK-47s in hand. Soon after, the back door of the middle vehicle opened. A dark figure emerged. He was around 5'8", dark skinned, burly with a thick face and a menacing moustache. Naveen knew him immediately. The well-known Veerasingam, military commander of the Freedom Army.

This was the first time Naveen had seen him in person. He had heard a lot of him. He was dressed in a well-ironed green combat outfit with a matching belt wrapped tightly around his paunch. He was not carrying any firearms. The man's heavy boots clicked heavily on the muddy surface as he approached Naveen and his mother. Naveen tapped his mother's shoulder. Jayanthi looked up at him and then to her left. Only then had she realised the presence of the stout figure by her side. She stood up and wiped her eyes with the *pallu* of her saree. Veera looked down at Usha's mangled body. He knelt down and touched the casket for a few moments, closing his eyes. Naveen wasn't sure if he was actually mourning his sister's loss or if he was silently content at her death. At the destruction she had caused at the central bus terminal. At the lives she had taken. And at the fact that she had brought the government to its feet once again.

Veera stood up and walked towards Jayanthi who was still holding her *pallu* underneath her sniffly nose. He put his hands together in a sign of respect. "Your daughter is a hero. She's a martyr. Her life has not gone in vain. It is for the thousands of our people."

Jayanthi would have shot him in the face if she had had a gun with her at that very moment. *My daughter, a martyr? What the hell are you talking about? She wasted her life for nothing. What difference did she make?* Jayanthi thought to herself. She remained silent. She was not in the mood to argue. Besides, she was too tired. She was fed up. She had argued and argued and argued all her life. Trying to prevent the deaths of her husband and now her daughter. Trying to question the rationality of the ideology that they had so firmly held on to. But it was all to no avail. The both of them had left home alive and walking and returned lifeless in caskets.

“May I talk to you for a moment, son?” Veera turned his attention to Naveen who stood by his mother, staring at the ground. He placed his thick, meaty hand on Naveen’s shoulder and brought him aside, away from his bodyguards, the casket and his grieving mother. Naveen felt the rough creases of Veera’s palm from underneath his shirt, a reflection of the years of holding onto hard metal and clawing through mud and dirt in the jungle. They made their way to a spot underneath a large Palmyrah tree.

“Your sister was a great woman. She was a warrior,” he said as he looked at Naveen. “She signed up into the Freedom Sparrows out of her own will.” There was a silence. Naveen knew what was coming. “Do you see the suffering of our people around you?” asked Veera.

Naveen nodded. Of course, he saw it. He and his family were victims of it too.

“Don’t you think we should have a separate state, a state where we could live equally. Without persecution. Without having to suffer under iron fists. A kingdom where all of us are kings.”

Naveen remained silent. He stared at the wet soil underneath his feet.

“That is my dream. Not mine alone but the dream of all our people.” Veera paused for a moment. “The Freedom Army needs people like you. We need intelligent, young men like you to achieve our dream of an independent state. We need people like you to carry on our dynasty of great leaders. Would you consider joining us?”

“Never.”

Enough was enough. The volcano within him had started to erupt. Naveen couldn’t take it anymore. He needed to let it all out. Naveen was the complete opposite of Usha. He was a reflection of his mother. He looked up to his father but not to his obsession for activism and

politics. None of those had brushed onto him as much as it had onto Usha. He understood the struggle for freedom but didn't see the logic in the use of violence.

“You're a selfish man,” said Naveen. “You and your people made my sister do this to serve your own purposes.”

Veera creased his thick brows. No one had ever spoken to him in such a blatant manner. He was used to everyone being his subordinates, trembling with fear in his presence and nodding to whatever he said.

“But she joined the suicide brigade out of her own will. Nobody forced her,” said Veera, not showing the slightest tinge of anger or egoism.

“You people tricked her into it. I know you washed her brain by saying that what she was doing was for the greater good of the people, that she was going to liberate her people and free them from persecution. Nonsense like that. But what has she done? She has killed 50 innocent lives. And 5 children!” Naveen looked Veera in the eye. “Do you think this violence.... suicide bombings... killing of innocent lives will get you what you seek?” asked Naveen.

“Why not?” replied Veera.

“You people do this because you are cowards. What did those innocent people do to you? If you really want to make a change, stand up like a man and go and talk to the government! Negotiate the terms in their faces. Don't poke them in their backs and run away!” Naveen's eyes were red with rage. “You know what my dream is? Of course I want a state where we are treated equally and where we are not persecuted. But above all, I wish for an end to war. An end to murder and killing. I wish for peace.”

Veera looked straight at the young man and smiled. “Do you think I like to kill people?” he asked Naveen. “You think I’m this heartless beast who just likes going around slaughtering people, right? I too dream of peace and an end to violence. We have tried everything we could but now we just have no other choice. Our hands are tied.”

Naveen looked at Veera, his eyes still filled with rage. He couldn’t accept his explanation.

“You’re too young to understand, son. I know the pain of grief. It can cloud your judgement sometimes,” said Veera. He knew this was not the right time to talk. He placed his hand on Naveen’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for the loss of your sister.”

Naveen clenched his teeth. He knew this was the right time. He hadn’t done anything like this before but he couldn’t hold it any longer. He didn’t know how he was going to do it but he knew he had to. He had a brief window of two seconds. He neither had the time to mentally rehearse nor the time to even think. He reached for the knife he had placed underneath his shirt, sandwiched between his back and his trousers, and the rest was taken over by adrenaline. It all happened so fast. The next thing he knew was that he had stuck the knife in Veera’s neck and thick, warm blood was gushing out through his mouth. As Veera hit the ground, Naveen heard the loud crackers of continuous semi-automatic fire ring violently in his eardrums. He looked up. Four lanky men were pointing their AK-47s at him. Bright flashes came out of their muzzles towards him but this time he couldn’t hear the crackers. Everything began to move in slow motion. He saw his distraught mother with her mouth gaping stand up, not knowing what was happening or what to do. The flashes continued. He felt warm, dart-like insertions lodge themselves into his chest and stomach. The warmth soon turned into heat. His entire chest and stomach began to burn. He felt he was about to explode. He looked down. The white cotton shirt he had been wearing had turned crimson. It was riddled with more than two dozen holes. Naveen felt nauseous. He felt the insides of his stomach make its way up his throat. The entire world around him began to spin and his knees began to feel weak. He let out a thick gurgle of blood from his mouth, looked at his mother’s face one last time and closed his eyes.

The grave wasn’t ready until sunset, so the whole event was rushed and disorganized, except for the very last part. The grave was a massive affair, more of a crater than a grave, and it

took until dark to roll the casket down to the bottom. If any prayers were said, they couldn't be heard over the dull thudding of the clods raining down on the casket far below. It was an odd sized casket, too big for a man, too small for a dream, but just right for a dynasty.