

The Chief Inspector's Daughter

A S T O R Y

by *Hasanthika Sirisena*



Hasanthika Sirisena was born in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and grew up in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Her work has appeared in several literary reviews. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and this year attended the Sewanee Writers Conference as a Georges and Anne Borchardt Scholarship recipient. Sirisena teaches creative writing at the City College of New York and at the Gotham Writers' Workshop.

A BEGGAR recently discovered the bodies of four men and one woman in an SUV abandoned on the border of Colombo 8. The corpses' heads and hands were missing so that the victims could not be quickly identified. *Sri Lanka Daily* added, disapprovingly, that the woman had been posed in a provocative way, as if the body of a headless, handless woman could lure a man to sexual misdeeds. A rumor quickly spread: the victims were Tamils executed by the Sri Lankan army. We know, though few of us admit, our soldiers do such things. But I know, this time, we are all of us wrong.

I am drawn to these victims because I was there the night they were killed. Forsythia Lane where the SUV was found is one of the safer parts of the city. The lane is off the main street and is unpaved, nothing more than a pitted and potholed dirt road. With the recent bombings, it is one of the few places a seemingly empty parked car can remain unnoticed. And this is where my boyfriend and I drive when we want to make love.

We are both medical students at the University of Colombo and are still young, only nineteen. We both live at home. My father's servant, Saroja, lives in a small

room beside our kitchen; she sees and hears everything. There is no way for me to arrange for Siva to come to my house. But even if I were able to arrange it, I love my father and do not want to disrespect him in his home.

Instead, we pull the car to a stop under a large nag champa tree, the most romantic place on the lane. The yellow flowers shimmer and quiver in the night. Occasionally the breeze shears the blossoms from their stems, and a tumult of petals surrounds us. In those moments I'm reminded of a gift my American-born cousin gave me. A snow globe, she called it.

Siva and I were there under that tree the night of the murders. We were in the backseat of his father's car when Siva noticed headlights approaching. As the blades of light swept over Siva's back, the air went out of him, and his body rested heavy on top of mine. I nudged him away, propped myself on my elbows, and peered out the window in time to see an SUV and another smaller car pass.

After the cars were gone, Siva became reanimated, as if a switch had flipped, and scrambled into the driver's seat. He backed down the lane without waiting for me to crawl into the passenger seat.

These victims, they cannot be completely innocent, no? If the killers were out solely to cause trouble and hurt Tamils, why had they not come to our car? Siva is a Tamil. They would have hurt him also, and me for being with him. But I do not say any of this. Since that night, Siva's behavior toward me has changed, and I know what he thinks: I am Sinhalese and I cannot be completely trusted.

THE AUTOPSY ROOM at the university medical school has little more than a sputtering air conditioner to cool it. With the ten students that make up my class, as well as our lecturer, the room has become unbearably hot. I arrive a little late so that I don't have to go too far inside and can face the window. When the heat and the smell of the corpse become too much, I stare out over the tops of the king coconut palms and imagine the ocean somewhere in the distance.

The room is tiled from floor to ceiling. The tiles are aged and cracked; the grout is covered by a rust-colored mold. On an especially humid day condensation forms, and the walls appear to bleed. Reddish brown stains spread across the tiles. The room frightens some of the hospital workers, who make quite a racket whenever they are told to go inside. They say the stains are the blood of the dead. Others say the room is possessed by the *yakka*.

Today we are autopsying a young woman. I look over at Siva. He is standing at the other end of the room, concentrating on what our lecturer is saying. I try to smile, but he pretends to be concerned about a fly buzzing near his face. He refuses

to look in my direction. This is not unusual for him. He is a very good student, grateful for the opportunity to go to school and very serious about his studies. After lecture I try to make my way to him, but he is walking too far ahead.

It's only later that afternoon, as I'm waiting for the bus, that I see him studying with another student at the corner Barista. Siva has his laptop out and is typing; his friend Ibrahim is reading the newspaper. We don't sit for our exams for another month, but Siva began studying at the start of the term; he studies every moment he can. I go in and slide into the booth next to him. Siva puts his arm around me and pulls me to him. His friend smirks as he watches us.

"Shouldn't you be studying also?" I ask Ibrahim.

He points to an article in the papers about the murders on Forsythia Lane. "My uncle and brother have a theory," he says to Siva. "This is a police killing." He brings his hand to his throat and makes a slicing motion. "My uncle says this is what the police do to you when you cross them." He looks at me slyly.

Siva purses his lips. "Your uncle talks nonsense, men." Ibrahim starts to protest, but Siva waves dismissively. "Go get another cup of coffee." Ibrahim seems reluctant at first but finally gets up and leaves.

I nestle into Siva. He is big, built thick and muscular. I am tall and strong, not one of the petite, slender girls—the pretty girls, they are called—so revered by Sri Lankans. But when I am next to Siva I feel fragile. He could crush my ribs with one firm squeeze.

The talk of the murders has reminded Siva of something. He tells me a white Peugeot had driven slowly by his parents' house yesterday. The same car returned and parked across the street for half the day.

Sri Lanka is a paranoid country. Twenty years of civil war makes us jump at our own shadows. Everyone has stories like Siva's. Stories of cars and vans that come in the day or in the middle of the night. He sees the disbelief in my expression.

"Sonali, we were there, at the place where they found the SUV. My father's car was there." I nod, but I do not want to urge him to think of that night. I do not want him to focus on the deaths of those people. "When those cars passed, maybe they could have belonged to the killers, no? Maybe they took down my father's license plate number."

I pull away from Siva and study the side of his face. "Those cars could have belonged to anyone. Maybe others have caught on, and they drive there for the same reasons we do." I try to give him a coy look, but he is staring into the screen of his laptop. "I will put a conversation to my father."

"No." Siva responds too quickly. "Tell your father nothing. He is unable to do anything."

“Of course he will do something. You do not have to worry about him finding out why we were there. I’ll tell him a good story.” Siva has pulled me tighter to him, but he is still not looking at me. Instead, he is hitting the escape key of his laptop, as if there is something wrong. “He will help anyone I ask him to help.” I am sure of this, and I will Siva to have confidence in my ability with my father.

But he has gone pale, and I realize he is truly frightened. “Say nothing,” he begs. “I am probably wrong about the car. It’s nothing.”

We speak English to each other because I do not know Tamil, and he does not speak Sinhala unless he must. There are other things that divide us—different gods, different history—but Siva and I also have at least one thing in common. I want to urge him to find somewhere else we can drive to. I want nothing more than to ease the burning I feel whenever I am near him. The pure physical need that overcomes me too often these days. But Siva slams his laptop shut and lets go of me. Unsure of what else to do, I straighten my shirt and run the palm of my hand over my hair. Siva packs away his computer.

WHEN I RETURN HOME, I open the front door and nearly step on a dead koi. There is a small fishpond near the veranda. The fish occasionally leap from the pond onto the porch. One of my father’s dogs must have nudged it over to the entryway. I know there is a reasonable explanation, but after my conversation with Siva, I am disconcerted by what seems to me an omen.

I call the servant, Saroja. “*Mokuda, annay?*” I ask. I try too hard to keep my voice from trembling. When Saroja sees the fish, she brings her hand up to the side of her face; her mouth forms an *O*. Her expression makes her look not unlike the dead fish. But as soon as this image comes to me, I feel sorry for conjuring it. Saroja is Tamil, and I have tried of late, since falling in love with Siva, to be careful how I think of Tamils. I tell her to bring a broom and a page of an old newspaper. She must hurry. My father will be back soon, and if he sees this he will be angry.

When my father returns from work, he is in a foul mood. He is the chief inspector at the Colombo 13, Kotahena, police station. He comes from a family of police officers. His grandfather was a constable in Panadura; his father was part of the team who investigated the assassination of Bandaranaike. My father is proud of his job, though it is at times dangerous. He has received death threats and even thought of retiring when my mother was ill, for her sake. But since her death he has only worked harder.

My father is tall and slim with dark skin the color of treacle. He is handsome; there are many women who come to the house with presents for him. Relatives have

mentioned to him he should remarry. But even when my mother was alive, he kept to himself, talking little. He does not seem to miss her now. I have replaced her, and I am all that he needs.

He knows, since I am his only child, that I will take care of him as he grows old. This is why he tolerates my relationship with Siva. He does not hate the Tamils and even argues they should keep Jaffna. But he also voted for the JHU and believes in the need to preserve the Sinhalese race. Because of me, he is friendly to Siva and his family. He sends Saroja to their house in a rickshaw carrying king coconuts or durian or *rambato*, if the fruit is in season.

My father is sitting on the veranda nursing his arrack and reading this morning's *Sri Lanka Daily*. He is so engrossed he barely notices when I offer him a plate of short eats. I look over his shoulder. I see he is reading an article about what the press has now dubbed the "SUV murders." The woman has been identified; it turns out she lived in Kotahena. I ask my father if he knows her. He shakes his head. Then I ask him if he has heard anything about the crime, anything particular about the bodies.

He talks to me often about his work, especially now that my mother is gone. But he peers into his tumbler as if he has spotted a bug. He asks me why I'm curious.

I try to laugh and make light of my inquiry. "I have an interest in dead bodies. I'm interested in pathology."

"Pathology," he scoffs. "This is not a job for women."

"I don't want to be any old lady doctor, patching scraped knees and easing stomach upsets. Pathology interests me. There are so many things that happen to the body after death. So many things you can tell about how someone lived." I know better than to speak with him when he is in one of his moods, but I'm carried away. "And also the possibility of helping to solve mysteries." I realize as soon as I say this that I have misspoken.

He laughs. "You are very young, no? Not even twenty." He picks out a meat patty from the plate of pastries. "Last week a man died after someone threw lye in his face. It is the boss of the restaurant he works at. No mystery. Three days ago a mother arrived at the station claiming her three-year-old son is being buggered. It is the stepfather. No mystery. When a husband is murdered, we arrest the wife. When a son is murdered, we arrest the father. There are no mysteries. There is nothing to solve." He finishes the patty and wipes his hand on a serviette. "You, *duva*, do not have the stomach for these things. Some women, yes. A woman who has lived a hard life. But not you."

He thrusts his tumbler toward me and asks me to refill it. When I lean forward to take the empty glass, he touches my forearm and looks up at me. He slurs a little

as he speaks. "You are all that I have. You must do as I say." He pauses. "A girl like you should aspire to something noble. Working with children. Children will love you," he persists gently.

After dinner, after my father has gone to bed, I take the newspaper and find the article. The woman, the paper claims, was a known prostitute and petty criminal, frequently arrested. I wonder if my father is telling the truth when he says he doesn't know her.

SIVA CALLS IN THE MORNING. He is crying. His brother was copped the night before and is still being held at the police station. He wants me to ask my father for help. But before I can ring the Kotahena station, Siva phones and tells me his brother was released and is back home.

I try to call him later, but nobody, not even a servant, answers. Siva's family is rich, and they have a house in the Cinnamon Gardens, the wealthiest part of town. Even though it is hard now to find servants, his family has enough money to pay well. They have a cook and a gardener and even an ayah for Siva's youngest brother. There is always someone at his home, and I begin to worry. Why will no one pick up?

I don't see Siva again until the next morning. He is in a far corner of the university library. When I express my concern for him, he tells me what happened.

The family's cook had gone to the market in the late afternoon. As he made his way back home, two men on a motorbike tried to kill him. One of the men had held a cricket bat out as they passed, coming up from behind, riding at a high speed. The cook's legs were shattered, and he might never walk again.

"Someone wants to destroy my family," Siva whispers. The white Peugeot, his brother's arrest, and now this. I want to remind him this is how things are here. If we hadn't been on Forsythia Lane, all these things could have happened anyway. Then Siva would have searched for any omen or any superstition. Now Forsythia Lane is the most convenient explanation for something that has no reason.

But I don't say any of this. I do the only thing I can. I tell Siva that I will ask my father to place a call to the Colombo 7 police station. He will talk to the chief inspector there.

Siva scowls. I can see the muscles in his jaw clench. I try to hold his hand, but he shrugs me off. "How is it you do not know?" He asks this question again and again without blinking or looking away.

I stare through the stacks of old books, mildewed and rotting in the heat. "Know what?"

Siva flips open his laptop and types my father's name. He begins to read from a website.

Abdul Azeez lost use of his hands and arms after being hung by his wrists for forty-eight hours. Nihal Jayewardene disappeared. Last seen at the Kotahena station. Lakshmi Fernando gang-raped by three policemen at the Kotahena station house. Priya Jeganathan burned with a cigarette on her face, arms, and genitals.

Siva is about to go on, but I reach over and close the laptop. As I walk away, I teeter like I'm drunk. He does not call to me or come after me. I step out into the sun and am grateful for the scorching heat, so strong it makes me forget, for a moment.

MUSLIM/SINHALA/TAMIL/BURGHER. UNP/LTTE/JVP/JHU/TNA. Royal/Thomian. There are too many choices. But, still, they demand that I choose.

I am not a fool. I have heard the rumors about my father. It is impossible not to. But I know without asking how he explains what he has done. The rumors are all half-truths and exaggerations by people who do not know how it is here. These people lead hard, desperate lives. They are brutal, and my father must talk and act using that same brutal language. This is the only way we can all be protected.

But I have never needed any explanations. I have never spent any time, until now, wondering what my father is capable of.

I DO NOT GO HOME. Instead, I wander the streets and then take a bus to Forsythia Lane. It is early evening and still light by the time I reach it, about seven o'clock.

I do not know what it is like for Siva, though I've tried to imagine. He told me once that swinging his legs out of bed, planting his feet on the clay floor beneath him, was not simply a physical act. It was a mental act, one propelled by urgency and single-mindedness. If he thought too hard, he would never leave his room. And every day something, sometimes something very small, nothing more than a loose word, made getting up the next day another nearly insurmountable obstacle.

No, I do not know what it is like to be that afraid.

From above me comes a piercing shriek, and the trees explode in a flurry of ripped leaves and broken branches: two mongooses fighting. Ahead of me a polecat noses through garbage left in the bushes. I consider turning around, but suddenly it seems important to move forward, to find what I've come here to see.

I approach the nag champa where Siva and I come. As I stand underneath, remembering our times here together, a man steps out from behind. In the remaining light, I can see he is old and stooped, with nothing but a tattered sarong to cover his body. Thick white hair, coiled like tiny watch springs, extends from his chest across his stomach. "*Machee*, my children are dying," he hisses as he moves toward me, his palm extended. "My wife is dying." He smells of *kassippu*, the moonshine

only the poor drink, and he speaks in heavily accented Sinhala, the way a Tamil might. His next words are all in Tamil, and I do not understand what he is saying.

Has he been living here all the time? Did he see Siva's car when we came here together? Did he watch us? Even though he smells as if he is drunk, his eyes are bright and alert, and he is studying me. He leans his weight on an old broom handle when he walks, but he can't mask his natural agility. It occurs to me he isn't really a beggar, but I still give him something.

I should turn back now. If I am hurt, people will have no sympathy for me. They will say I deserve it for coming here alone. They will say that because I am a chief inspector's daughter I believe I am untouchable, invincible. But this is not how I am. I am here only because I love Siva and my father, and I feel that there is something here, some proof that we are, all of us, innocent.

I walk down the lane without looking back. If I turn I will see the beggar standing straight, peering at me as I walk away. He will suddenly look younger and stronger. Once I've seen his true self, he will not allow me to leave. I walk on, aware now only of pushing my body forward, even as the lane grows dark.

I reach the cul-de-sac where the SUV was found. I expect something—markers, colored tape—but I see nothing to indicate a crime has taken place. Only a long wall that protects a derelict building and a cluster of aging forsythia bushes. It is dark now, but my eyes have grown accustomed. I can make out the form of things, but the ground around me is vast and regular and black. There is the warm breeze and the scent of jasmine. In the distance I hear the steady hum of motors and look behind me to see the headlights of two motorbikes approaching.

The bikes stop, and two men dismount. Though it is dusk, there is still enough light that I can make out their uniforms. One holds a torch, and they both have their hands to their waists. They are both gripping their batons; I know this without having to see. "Madame, what are you doing here?"

One of the constables moves quickly; he grips me by the arm. He digs his fingers into my flesh and pulls me close enough to him that I can smell the betel on his breath. I glimpse, for a moment, his stained, rotting teeth. The other holds the torch in my face so I am blinded.

But when I try to put my hand up to block the light, he exhales rapidly, a sound like air being let out of a tire. The man who is holding me moves away. He is being pushed back.

"Sonali," the man with the torch whispers. "Sonali, what is this?" He lowers the beam enough so that I can see his face. "Do you recognize me? Preshan." I nod. I have seen him before; he works for my father. Since I was a little girl, he has helped

me find my father whenever I stopped by the station. He has even come to my house when my mother was sick.

The other constable is staring at his partner. "You know this person?"

"It's Sonali Gajaweera. Chief Inspector Gajaweera's daughter." The other constable looks at me, his mouth open. "What are you doing here?" he asks. This is not a demand but more a question of wonder.

I am emboldened by his meekness. "What are *you* doing here?" I ask him. "You are far from Kotahena." Anger flashes across his face, and he steps toward me. But Preshan is faster; he puts a protective arm around my shoulders and guides me toward the bikes. When I look back at Preshan's partner, he has his hands on his hips, and he is staring at the sky. When he approaches us, I can tell he wants to speak with Preshan, alone, but Preshan refuses to acknowledge him. "Leave us. I will take her home," he says.

Preshan watches as his partner's bike disappears down the lane. He turns to me. "What are you doing here, Sonali? It is not good for a girl to be out at night alone." Preshan's tone is soft, almost conciliatory. "Some people were murdered here."

"I know," I reply.

"Why are you here?" he presses.

I want to tell him about Siva, about how his family is being harassed. How Siva believes, how I believe, it is because of what we saw that night. How my father avoided speaking to me of the murders. Why would Preshan be here unless my father were involved? And if his men are involved, why would he not just tell me this when I had asked earlier? "Why are you here?" I whisper.

"We saw you walking up the lane alone."

I imagine the people in that report. Was it Preshan who burned that woman with the cigarette? Was it his colleagues who raped that woman? Where was my father for all of this? Or is it all lies? I cannot tell anymore. "They say those men were murdered by the police."

"They?" Preshan scoffs. "They also say it is a military murder. They say it is a gang murder. Or schoolboys on drugs. They will soon say it is you, Sonali, if I do not take you home." He is about to walk to his bike when, suddenly, he swings the beam of light onto my face. I wince and try to look away. "What *are* you asking?" he demands.

I stand there, quietly. He sighs. "I will let your father know about your theories. Perhaps if he's in a good mood, he will share with you the truth."

He tells me to get on the back of his bike. I put my arms around his waist. As he starts slowly down the lane, I grip him tightly, pressing my body to his.

MY FATHER OPENS his wallet and gives Saroja a few rupee notes. I am standing to the side, next to the dining room table; he has refused to look at me since he and Preshan talked in the kitchen. Go to the market, he tells Saroja. Stay away for a little while, he adds. Saroja is reluctant to leave, but she is also afraid. My father and I stand quietly, both of us waiting until we hear Saroja dragging closed the metal gate that leads to the street.

When she is gone, my father slaps me. I have to brace myself against the table to keep from stumbling.

But he doesn't appear angry, only concerned. "Are you mad?" he asks. "Are you ill? You are walking in the street at night like a whore? Talking nonsense."

My cheek stings, and the pain makes me giddy. "I was there the night those men were murdered, *thatha*. You need to tell your men that."

My father's lips tremble; his eyes narrow. Then his expression quickly returns to that of concern. "You're ill, *duva*," he coos and makes as if to check my forehead for a temperature. "Let me help you, darling."

"Siva and I were there the night of the murders." My father looks confused. "You have heard his father's car was seen there, no? You were told the car was parked on the lane."

"What are you babbling?"

"But did you know *both* of us were there? Did your spies tell you that?"

"You are not feeling well. Come upstairs—"

"That was why his father's car was there. We were there so we could be together, *thatha*." I take a deep breath. "You can leave his family alone now. You do not have to hurt them because they know nothing. We saw nothing."

My father is looking from my face to the floor and back again; his mouth is moving but no sound comes. "All rubbish," he finally mutters.

"The murdered woman was from Kotahena. A known prostitute, the papers call her. Arrested frequently. How could you not have heard of her?"

"How is it that you think I've met every prostitute in Kotahena?"

"A known prostitute? Your men are investigating? Why, *thatha*? Colombo 8 cannot handle this case on their own?"

My father shakes his head. "I do not know what you mean. Who are *my* men?"

"Don't lie," I say this as calmly as I can manage. My father steps back, startled. "Why do you continue to lie? I recognized him. I recognized Preshan. I know he works for you." I pause long enough to catch my breath. "All the time you have lied, about everything."

He pushes me but not hard. It is a feeble attempt by someone who is angry but cannot do any harm, a schoolboy reacting to a taunt. I grip the edge of the table.

My father is standing, breathing hard, his head bowed. He is a guilty man. Or perhaps it is I who am the guilty one. "I know what you do," I say. My voice wavers and sticks to the back of my throat. "I've known for a long time," I croak, "all you have done to people." I let go of the table. I'm breathing hard, and I need a few seconds to catch my breath. "Siva says the police are harassing his family. If you are hurting him, if you are hurting Siva or his family, I will leave you." My father's eyes widen; he blanches. He is not angry now or concerned but scared. "You can die here alone. As you should."

This time he pushes me hard enough that I lose my balance. I do not black out when my head strikes the floor. I hear the impact of my skull, but it does not sound as if it is coming from me. It is instead as if a bomb has ripped through my house. I curl up, tight, more from the pain than because I am afraid my father will hurt me. He leans over and whispers my name; he nudges me. I cannot respond or think because of the pain. After a little while, I hear him walk away.

I AM STILL on the floor, my arms over my head, when Saroja and Siva arrive. Saroja cradles my head in her lap.

I ask them where my father is, but Siva ignores my question. Instead he tells me, if I can move we need to go to the hospital. I try to stand on my own but feel dizzy as soon as I take my first step. I have to lean against Siva. We walk slowly to the street, and Saroja hails a three-wheeler.

Again, I ask about my father. Siva explains that neither he nor Saroja has seen or spoken to him. After my father told her to go, Saroja had taken a three-wheeler to Siva's. When they arrived at my house, my father's car was gone. They found me on the floor, unconscious.

At the emergency room, a lady doctor tends to me. She tells me I should stay the night. I have a concussion, and they want to make sure there is no more serious injury.

After she's left, Siva stays at my bedside. He brushes my hair from my face and mops at my bruised face with a damp towel. Next to me a woman is screaming in Tamil, and I ask what she is saying. But he says not to worry.

As I look up at Siva, I wonder how long he has harbored this knowledge of my father. Has he always looked at me and wondered? Does he ask himself what I am capable of? I whisper to him that he should leave. He doesn't understand at first. He tells me Saroja called my aunt, and she will be here soon. I repeat myself, louder. I want him to go.

The pain is a screeching inside my head. The sound obliterates all my emotions and thoughts, and I can only close my eyes against it.

When I open my eyes again, I want you, Siva, not to be here.

When I awake, it is morning. My aunt is standing over me. The lady doctor is next to her. My aunt smiles and strokes the side of my cheek while the doctor explains how well I'm doing. But I'm not listening. Instead I'm searching the room, but Siva is gone.

TWO WEEKS AGO the inspector general released the identities of the murdered men: four Muslims who worked in the tea trade. A new rumor started to circulate: corrupt government officials had them executed. A few days later *Sri Lanka Daily* reported that two customs agents had been arrested. The murders were retaliation against a planter who refused to be extorted. The prostitute from Kotahena was, most likely, only a lure. An innocent bystander.

Next to the article were three photographs of the inspectors who worked on the case. I recognized all three: the Forsythia Lane beggar, Preshan, and Preshan's partner. The article also explained that Preshan had recently been promoted to his new post from the Kotahena department. This was his first major case.

I have not seen my father since that night. I live with my aunt now, my mother's sister, in Panadura, and I take the bus to school. My father does not speak to me, and I do not ask. I am aware that he sends money for me through Saroja.

I see Siva in the halls at university, but I always duck away before he can stop me. Finally he waits for me outside my classroom. He tries to explain how sorry he is. What to do, I tell him. I will never know what it is like to be afraid the way he is afraid, and he will never understand why I lived as long as I did with my father. He seems shocked at first that I would be so direct with him, and then he looks at me helplessly. I think of what the Lord Buddha has told us: when you see a drowning man, you should not help him. I have never understood this until now. It is too hard, in this moment, to reach for Siva and pull him to me. I am not strong, and it is better, much easier, to let him go. So I say the truth.

There is nothing we can do for each other; there is nothing more to say. **N**