

**Notes From a Cross-Cultural Summer**  
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*Sri Lanka, July 2019*

TERROR

choking in a chalk-green dining room in the heart of a naval base. My mother's friends laugh around the table and my sister asks for more mushroom curry and all I can think about are the four sailors standing in the eighteen inches of space between the back of my chair and the wall. They pollute my peripheral vision, ladling out rice and dhal and lagoon fish, and I'm not sure how many people I'd have to fight, if I needed to fight my way out of here. I'm not sure if I could. My mother's friend the lawyer says *darling you're so quiet, not like usual*, and my mother the other lawyer births a cover story, and I'm sure that the only thing anyone can see in my face are the sickly whites of my eyes. I'm in a landlocked naval base two hundred miles from my hometown and all the people who know my signals are oceans away, scattered across four continents. I eat and say *thank you* and keep my food down and I know there are unknown men in the corner of every room, but they're soldiers, so I can't even track their footsteps.

humiliation

getting out of the car in the middle of the naval base, in the shorts I bought at Walmart last spring, and hearing my mother ask her friend, right after she asks *how was the drive*, if she should put a skirt on me. I shudder in the dry zone sunlight, drowning in all the ways the question guts me – to be treated like a child again, to have garments *put on me*, to not have a choice. To be punished, for the millionth time in twenty-two years, for being a woman with legs. I think of lounging on a college football field in these same shorts, boots in the air, laughing with my American best friend in the balmy Illinois sun. The Ethiopian boys ask if I've eaten yet and my Nepali neighbour compliments my outfit and I am *so safe*. Now, on the other side of the world in dry zone still-not-demilitarized Sri Lanka, I am a powerless prey animal in a way I've forgotten how to be. Through the back windows of my father's Subaru I watch Tamil girls cycling home from class, in groups of four, in ankle-length skirts. Some part of me knows that they had it worse in the war, for years and years, between the Tigers and the soldiers and the terror everywhere, mothers and aunts and sisters and daughters. I know they've seen things I can't ever imagine, living safe in the Sinhala hills with my passport held at the ready. But at this particular moment I do not care, because what concerns me is my own particular war with a terror that belongs to everyone<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> \*Between 1983 and 2009 Sri Lanka experienced a brutal civil war, fought primarily between the government and the terrorist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tigers) who claimed to represent the interests of the

## FURY

running out of allergy meds on a palmyrah-dirt road in the middle of nowhere north, and instead of going to a pharmacy my mother's friend the retired navy man says he'll take me to the hospital back at the base. I say *NO I DON'T WANT TO* more clearly than I've said anything all summer; I've itched myself raw for days but if a strange man touches me right now I'll climb out of my skin. But I'm overruled. *Be reasonable*. I turn to the window and set my jaw so hard that my teeth shift, because I cannot *be reasonable*, not about this, and my other life, my TitleNine, TimesUp, HashtagMeToo life, has taught me that I *shouldn't have to be*. The navy doctor wears athletic shorts and he is the kind of stocky that I absolutely cannot fight and when he prods at the rash on my thigh I'm *SO ANGRY*, but my mother is in the room with the navy man and he's chatting jovially to the doctor with his legs sprawling about and I stare at nothing and stay very still until it's over. I leave with three sachets of pills and I don't speak to my parents and I know they're *just trying to help me feel better* and I know nothing can feel better if I can't control who touches my body.

That night I dream of The Bastard, the first man who touched in a way he wasn't supposed to touch me, the one who spoiled it all. He's in my grandmother's house, where he used to be a servant, but he has a wife now, has a child now, he looks healthy and wealthy in a way I was promised he'd never be. He walks towards me and I wake up and I wonder if it's true, if he has a son and daughter, if he's done to them what he did to me, if they'll grow up like him, like me, if they're all the same in the end.

## resignation

climbing into a truck on an island fifteen miles off the coast and realizing that the navy man brought along a pet officer who is now sitting beside me on the bench. He's in civvies and he's ten years my senior and I think he's watching me, because after three days among men like him I think every single one of them is watching me. But I sit with my spine straight and my trainers braced and I don't accept his help when I climb in and out of the truck and I stand wide-legged, feet pointed outwards, like all the sailors, like all the men. I only speak to ask questions in English about the war and the forces and the land, and I don't smile, and everything I do adds up to one broadcast: *I am not your typical woman*. My parents call me *baba* in front of every stranger I meet; it means *child* and it means no one here is thinking of me as *woman* except when it suits them. But I'll take what I can get. And I get to see the wild, wasted ponies who roam the Isle of Delft and the kind of vast, unimaginable wilderness for which my country is famous, the land I miss so desperately from tame, suburban America. And the whole performance is a little like wearing my black-leather-jacket-and-slacks armour to report on American campaign rallies, like sitting in a Midwestern coffee shop with a venti caramel mocha and a hangover, like wearing my

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ethnic Tamil minority in the north of the country. Extreme human rights were committed by both forces. This author belongs to the ethnic Sinhalese majority, which resides mostly in the central, southern and western regions of the country.

college hoodie to airports all across the world. Just another version of *I have every right to be here looking like this and to not be touched by you.*

### Fighting Back

putting on a life-jacket and climbing onto a gunboat deck for the hour-long voyage to the mainland. My parents doze in the cabin. The navy man climbs out with me and I lock my knees and look out to sea and think *you can fuck right off* at the blue-uniformed men behind me, the officer and the gunner and the mechanical engineer. Every lesson I learned being brown in white suburbia, every weapon I wielded as a girl in South Asia, it's time to use them all, empty the arsenal of head-high-glare-in-my-eyes-here's-my-lphone-I-speak-English that's kept me alive. I ask boy-man questions about radar and engines and boats and meanwhile the world becomes burning midday sun and sea spray and roaring noise. And I'm still here, on the deck of a gunboat surrounded by men and the boat speeds past island after island and I keep looking into the horizon long after I've stopped being able to see anything. *I am not your typical woman. You can fuck right off. I have every right to be here looking like this and to not be touched by you.*

### SOLID GROUND

leaving behind the vast empty northwest, the last drive through the threats of open lagoon and open sea full of tsunami memories. The ecosystems morph from dry palmyrah horizons to green scrubby brush to bursting verdant jungle to lit-up hills where the roads bustle with traffic and there are no soldiers. Solid ground is a fenced-in garden, trees to lose myself in and guard dogs ready to maim. Solid ground is my own WiFi connection and my best friend's voice on the line as we break down the old world and rebuild a new one in 21<sup>st</sup> century college-girl language. Solid ground is going online and buying books about assault and violence and South Asian women and what really happened in the war because I know now that for me this will always be *the* problem, the one I have to solve if I want to be happy here.

### Escape Plan

a pipe dream, because men are men are men, and the first time someone said the words *sexual assault* to me it was in America, where I'd finally been able to wear shorts to the supermarket on a eighty-degree day. I know the statistics are true and I remember the month where my friends became statistics - one in five, four in twenty - and I was afraid to meet people for coffee, afraid of more revelations and confessions and metoometoometoo. But I also wait for the plane ticket, the visa, the moment of liftoff, because I know that there are places where change comes quicker. Places where the things I feel are relevant, where we know that this *terrorfuryfightingback* doesn't really leave and I'm not expected to pretend that it did. Places where my body is a little more my own.

So I pack shorts for showing off the muscles in my legs and hoodies in which to hide my body and beanies for hiding my hair and the kind of kajal that makes me look Bollywood and Converse for stomping and heeled boots for strutting and I wait for liftoff, I wait for the moment when my body belongs to me again. Somewhere, hundreds of thousands of somewheres, there are women living between men and soldier-men, women marrying their daughters off at fourteen so they won't be raped, women for whom an ankle-length skirt is not restriction but protection, women who will do both of the above and everything else and still be raped anyway because men are men are men. But for now I escape, to other places where my body belongs to me, to learn how to help, how to survive long enough to help. And I will hate myself and forgive myself and then keep moving, because my body is mine to protect and I am done with letting anyone question that.

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*Amsterdam, The Netherlands, September 2019*

#### THE FUTURE

I am standing at the Molukkenstraat bus stop in Amsterdam-East, waiting for the 22 Station Sloterdijk that runs closest to my apartment. It's 11:02pm and I'm alone. I've lived in Amsterdam for thirty days but this is the first time I've left the apartment after dark, taken public transport after dark, been to this neighbourhood after dark. I've just been to my first ever krav maga lesson. I am one giant bruise, because I've spent an hour sparring with three six-foot tall white men who knew ninety-five ways to put someone on the ground. But I hold my own. I do not freeze. I do not let terror take the best of me. I read Dutch feminist novels on my phone and when I think the bus isn't coming I send voicenotes to my friends until it roars into view. There are men at the bus stop and men on the bus and there are no other women but the men do not look at me and I do not look at them but for the first time in my life I am sure I'd have a chance. At my stop I break into a sprint through the apartment complex, skimming over flagstones, backpack bumping. It is 11.13PM and I am jubilant. My body is not something to hide. My body is not something on display. My body is powerful, my body is in my control, my body is mine. I remember terror. I remember its mutations. I will never not remember. But this is new. This is something else. This is power. *If every woman knew she was allowed to fight. We have lost years, we have lost centuries, and when I think about it I am still angry, I am still incandescent with rage, but this can be one answer. We each have our answers. We each have our many million ways to say I have every right to be here looking like this and to not be touched by you.*