

## **The Scent of Home**

By Harshanee Patel

The first time I saw my father cry was also the same night we crossed an ocean.

It was 1989 in Sri Lanka; bombs were exploding all over. Curfews kept us home for days. The news showed horrific images of casualties, and the sounds of machine-gun fire slowly became a familiar soundtrack. While I was too young to understand the magnitude of the insurrection, five-year-old me was elated that I could sleep in rather than catch the 6:30 AM school van. But tension lingered in my mother's eyes, and my father moved through the house with quiet urgency. My parents never intended to leave Sri Lanka, but as the violence crept closer, they decided to leave the only home we had ever known.

We lived in a multigenerational home with my grandparents and uncle's family. Our lives were stitched together through shared hallways, a large courtyard, and daily routines. My parents kept the move a secret, even from my younger brother and me, and especially from those outside our family. They were afraid that more people knowing would jeopardize our safe departure. Still, there were clues everywhere. My parents bought sweaters and winter jackets to pack along with our other belongings - strange purchases for the sticky Sri Lankan heat I knew. Finally, they told us we were moving to Kandy, a colder city in the mountains a few hours away. It made sense. After all, my mom did wear a sweater in Colombo when it rained.

The night we left home, our suitcases were stuffed into a van. I tried to comfort my grandmother. "Don't worry," I said. "We're going to Kandy. You can visit us soon." That was the first time I saw my father cry. He was hunched over, his face buried in his hands. He bent down to touch his parents' feet for their blessing before embracing them one final time to say goodbye. Overwhelmed by my father's grief, tears streamed down my face uncontrollably.

The van door slid shut behind us, and it felt as though something closed behind us too. Our grandparents and cousins - the life we knew - all disappeared on the other side of that metal door. I rested my head on my father's chest and went in and out of sleep. Along the way, someone cracked open a window, and the Colombo air drifted in. It was salty, humid, and thick with diesel fumes - it was the scent of home. I drifted back to sleep, not realizing it would be eight years before I smelled it again.

When the van finally stopped, I woke up confused and stepped out. Then my parents told us the truth: we were at the airport, we were leaving for Canada, and we did not know when we would return. I didn't understand where Canada was, only that it was where another uncle and his family lived, where apples could be eaten every day, and where something very cold called "snow" existed. As we walked through the airport doors, it felt as though we were moving through a tunnel between two worlds.

Everything at the airport felt strange to me. While waiting at the gate, I saw something that stunned me: a woman casually smoking a cigarette. I tugged at my father's pant leg and pointed her out. I had seen men smoke before, but never a woman.

Boarding the plane felt like stepping into a sleek, beige train car with giant metal wings. It was the first time any of us had been on an airplane. When the flight attendants served tea and coffee, I proudly asked for tea. In Sri Lanka, children drank rich, oversweetened, creamy tea at all hours. The airplane tea tasted thin and unfamiliar. Disappointed, I pushed it aside and settled my head against my dad's arm and went to sleep.

The rest of the journey was a blur. What I do remember is walking out of the Toronto airport into a new world. We saw our uncle and aunt waiting for us past the gates. Walking to my uncle's car that mid-April morning, I remember the air smelled different: cold, crisp, and startlingly clean. As my uncle drove us to their home in London, Ontario, I noticed something strange: the trees were bare. I asked my uncle what had happened to all the leaves. He jokingly told me Canadians removed them one by one before winter and would stick them back on the trees in spring. I believed him completely, wondering how exhausting that must be.

In the weeks that followed, we slowly settled into our new lives in the West. My brother and I started school where the language and customs were different, but for the first time we went every single day. There were no television reels of casualties or machine gun fire echoing through the house. Instead, it was sitcoms and soaps. My mother's eyes carried a quiet determination as she began to build a new life for us, while my father moved through the house with a lightness I had long missed in him. The scent of home slowly became fresh-cut grass in early May, and earthy, damp leaves in autumn.

My parents worked tirelessly to build a new life in Canada. Only as an adult did I fully understand what my father's tears meant that night. He was not only saying goodbye to his parents and his home, but stepping through a doorway he could never return through in the same way again. My brother and I climbed into that van believing we were moving a few hours away to Kandy. Instead, my parents carried us across an ocean into a life shaped not by fear, curfews, and violence, but by safety, possibility, and peace. They closed the door on the world they had loved so that their children could thrive in another.