

“Every city is our hometown,  
everyone is our parent.”

## Chapter 1 – Strasbourg

October 2003

For a long time I searched his name on lobby mailboxes. One after the other, starting from the top. I was troubled by this long-awaited prospect, unexpected meeting.

It was in Strasbourg, more precisely the western suburbs. So difficult to find one's place in this belt where buildings are linked by a hexagonal honeycomb structure. The one I was looking for was lodged there, like other migrants, where social mix is obviously failing. A sort of colonial area, on the fringe, which links these new inhabitants to the history of France and Europe. It is always the habitat that constructs the racist cliché. Wherever one is, the neighborhood is chasing its tenant to stick to a xenophobic label: Attention risk! to Maghrebian or Collective danger! to Asian. The man lived in the 3rd high-rise. The building's lobby was sinking into darkness, perhaps usual darkness. A guy came dancing out of nowhere, in jogging clothes, dark glasses and a tipped cap, totally uninterested in my greetings, neither what I could do there. Was it glasses that made him blind? He appeared and disappeared, as one probably sees here, in the death of the heart, to fall back on a more or less fake community. And it was with the help of a torch and contortions that I managed to read the Tamil name on the

mailbox: Poninbalham Sandana, flat N°205. As the elevator broke down, I slowly climbed stairs, avoiding slipping on cans. Corridor graffiti, rather nice, followed one another from the ground floor to the height in an endless frieze of anaphora: Fuck State, Fuck Cops, Fuck Firms, Fuck Carrefour, Fuck School, Fuck Chirac, Fuck Le Pen and curiously, Fuck Me, Fuck You! And it continued on the upper floors with a string of first names. I had waited a short while before ringing at number 205.

All this had taken almost two years of research in Sri Lanka to end here in Alsace early October 2003. Having arrived at Roissy airport under the rain a few hours earlier, I had driven all day, rediscovering pleasure of shifting gears and listening to classical music on the radio. When you are used to drive a car in Asia especially in Colombo, you find European roads very silent and monotonous. The sound of the windshield wiper was rhythm of music, and kilometers were flying by. The peremptory voice of the GPS regularly brought me out of my reverie. It was Fauré's Requiem that rekindled in me this joy that was slowly beading as if announcing a beautiful end, a happy story, an aspiration to a definitive happiness. A few days earlier, OFPRA<sup>1</sup> had had no difficulty in communicating to me the coordinates of someone I had never seen before, except in a photo: Sandana, Sandana Poninbalham! This name, which sounds like a percussion, can be translated by the Impetuous Man, alias Shiva for Hinduists. The first secretary at the French Embassy in Colombo had given me his address with a radiant smile: "You see, your director of the French Alliance<sup>2</sup> in Jaffna is not dead. I found him, your Sandana! He lives with his daughter in Strasbourg, in the "Haute Pierre" district! It must

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<sup>1</sup> Office for refugees protection

<sup>2</sup> Cultural Institution where you can learn french

be quite a change from the French Alliance in Jaffna! ". The French Alliance: a great and beautiful promise made in the 19th century to the cultures of the world to embrace philosophy of the Enlightenment<sup>3</sup>. But for Jaffna, a Tamil territory, it was war that extinguished lights and devastated Alliance. And Sandana, still alive.

In Sri Lanka, I had come to know him. Although he had disappeared, Sandana Poninbalham had become omnipresent, through his mail, stories he had written, photos and the survivors words. War always leaves its mark, even in conflicts that are closed to the media. A photo booth remained in my memory. Sandana was Omar Sharif, or rather Doctor Zhivago, with luminous eyes, a gentle smile on a manly face. I was struck with admiration. Of course we owed him a debt of gratitude! First of all, we owed him a solidarity between colleagues and people in charge of French Alliance, and then the one that culture, French culture, owes him. To find him in France during this period of cease-fire and after all atrocities that could be counted in the tens of thousands: dead on the battlefields, missing, murdered, mutilated - for me, it was to bring meaning to this lull in the war. And then to finally see him, to hear him, to smile at him, for the first time. Maybe kiss him.

As I climbed stairs, doubt that had been nagging me, surfaced. And for him! What interest finally has this meeting? To bring him excuses? "Hello Sandana, we did receive your S-O-S as the head of the French Alliance in Jaffna. But, sorry! When government forces took the city, we could not do anything to save you. Today, we are ready to help you and resume contact! "Ridiculous, naive, intrusive, was I going too far? What's the point? For me, yes, I was taking care of my ego: "I found

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<sup>3</sup> philosophical movement in Western Europe

Sandana, he is not dead!"And to do what? To explain to him our objective, the reopening of the French Alliance? A further token of peace? But nobody could prevent the war yesterday! So why reopen it today? After all these years, why should it still be of interest to him? He, who has lived in fear, perhaps still now or tomorrow. To make him relive these dramas? The raids on Jaffna, pogroms, fires of the paramilitary militias, government army bombings and also the diktats of LTTE ultras? To imagine the possibility of a bright future with this in mind? All of this suddenly seemed precipitous and completely ridiculous to me.

Discovering Sandana, what could I say to him? What could I bring him? Why would I want to catch up with him so badly? Tell him about the ceasefire and the possible return to Jaffna? About my esteem for him? About the respect for his work at Alliance? About his writing that moves me with its delicate narratives and its empathy for its characters? Or more frankly, to confess a disturbing admiration for him!

Sandana Poninbalham had survived the war. He was in peace now with his daughter in France. What else could I do?

I was about to go back down the stairs when footsteps and noise were heard in the building. The 205 front door opened, letting in a trickle of light.

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