

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

Chapter 1 – Strasbourg

October 2003

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

It was in Strasbourg, or more precisely, the western suburbs. Nearly impossible 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 the other migrants, where the social mix is still 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 neighbourhood chases its tenant, trying to stick 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 its 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 the glasses that made him blind? He appeared and disappeared, as one used to be probably here, with the death in the heart and ready to fall back on a more or

less fake community. And it was with the help of a torch and contortions; I managed to read the Tamil name on the mailbox: Poninbalham Sandana, Flat N°205. As the elevator had broken down, I slowly climbed the stairs, avoiding the possibility of slipping on cans. Corridor graffiti, rather nice, followed one another from the ground floor to the top 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 waited a short while before ringing at number 205.

All this had taken almost two years of research in Sri Lanka to end up here in Alsace in early October 2003. Having arrived at Roissy airport under the rain a few hours earlier, I drove all day, rediscovering the pleasure of shifting gears and listening to classical music on the radio. When one is used to driving a car in Asia, especially in Colombo, you find European roads very silent and monotonous. The sound of the windshield wiper was the rhythm of music, and kilometres 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 and an aspiration to definitive happiness. A few days earlier, OFPRA¹ had no difficulty communicating to me the coordinates of someone I had never seen before except in a photo: Sandana, Sandana Poninbalham! This name can be translated as the Impetuous Man, alias Shiva for the Hindus. The first secretary at the French Embassy in Colombo gave me his address with a radiant smile: "You see, your director of the French Alliance in Jaffna is not dead. I found him, your Sandana! He lives with his daughter in Strasbourg, in the ‘Haute Pierre’ district! It must be quite a change from the

¹ Office for refugees protection

French Alliance in Jaffna! ". The French Alliance: a great and beautiful promise made in the 19th century to the world's cultures to embrace the philosophy of the Enlightenment. But for Jaffna, a Tamil territory, it was a war that extinguished lights and devastated the Alliance. Yet Sandana is still alive.

In Sri Lanka, I got to know him. Although Sandana Poninbalham had disappeared, he had become omnipresent through his mail, the stories he had written, and the photos and through the survivors' words. War always leaves its mark, even in conflicts that are closed to the media. A photo booth of sorts remained in my memory. Sandana was Omar Sharif, or rather Doctor Zhivago, with his luminous eyes, and 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 solidarity between colleagues and people in charge of *Alliance Française*, and then the one that culture, particularly French culture, owed him. To find him in France during this period of ceasefire—after all the atrocities that could be counted in the tens of thousands: the dead-on battlefields, the missing, murdered and mutilated—for me, it brought meaning to this lull in the war. And it would be so much better then to finally see him, to hear him, to smile at him, and maybe hug him for the first time....

As I climbed the stairs, a doubt that was nagging me surfaced. What about him? What interest would he have for this meeting? To bring him excuses? "Hello Sandana, we *did* receive your S-O-S as the Head of the Alliance Française in Jaffna. But, sorry! When government forces took the city, we could not do anything to save you. But 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 feeding my ego: "I found Sandana, he is not dead!" And to do what? And then what?

Was I to explain to him our objective, the reopening of the *Alliance Française*? 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? As one who has lived in fear, perhaps even till now and tomorrow. To make him relive the drama? The raids in Jaffna, fires of the paramilitary militias, government army bombings, and the diktats of LTTE ultras? How was he to imagine the possibility of a bright future with all this in mind? All this suddenly seemed precipitous and utterly ridiculous to me.

When I will be about to discover Sandana, what could I tell him? What could I bring him? Why would I want to catch up with him so badly? To talk about the cease-fire and the possible return to Jaffna? About the respect I had for his work at Alliance? About his writing that moved 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 has a peaceful life now, with his daughter in France. What else could I do?

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

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