

An extract from “Wave” – A Memoir of Life after the Tsunami Sonali Deraniyagala

It was then she saw the wave. “Oh my God, the sea’s coming in.” That’s what she said. I looked behind me. It didn’t seem that remarkable. Or alarming. It was only the white curl of a big wave. But you couldn’t usually see breaking waves from our room. You hardly noticed the ocean at all. It was just a glint of blue above that wide spread of sand that sloped sharply down to the water. Now the froth of a wave had scaled up this slope and was nearing the tall conifers that were halfway between our room and the water’s edge, incongruous those trees in this landscape of brittle thorny scrub. This was peculiar. I called out to Steve in the bathroom. “Come out, Steve, I want to show you something odd.” I didn’t want him to miss this. I wanted him to come out quick before all this foam dissolved. “In a minute,” Steve muttered, with no intention of rushing out. Then there was more white froth. And more. Vik was sitting by the back door reading the first page of *The Hobbit*. I told him to shut that door. It was a glass door with four panels, and he closed each one, then came across the room and stood by me. He didn’t say anything, he didn’t ask me what was going on. The foam turned into waves. Waves leaping over the ridge where the beach ended. This was not normal. The sea never came this far in. Waves not receding or dissolving. Closer now. Brown and gray. Brown or gray. Waves rushing past the conifers and coming closer to our room. All these waves now, charging, churning. Suddenly furious. Suddenly menacing. “Steve, you’ve got to come out. Now.” Steve ran out of the bathroom, tying his sarong. He looked outside. We didn’t speak. I grabbed Vik and Malli, and we all ran out the front door. I was ahead of Steve. I held the boys each by the hand. “Give me one of them. Give me one of them,” Steve shouted, reaching out. But I didn’t. That would have slowed us down. We had no time. We had to be fast. I knew that. But I didn’t know what I was fleeing from.

I didn't stop for my parents. I didn't stop to knock on the door of my parents' room, which was next to ours, on the right as we ran out. I didn't shout to warn them. I didn't bang on their door and call them out. As I ran past, for a splintered second, I wondered if I should. But I couldn't stop. It will stall us. We must keep running. I held the boys tight by their hands. We have to get out.

We fled towards the driveway at the front of the hotel. The boys ran as fast as I did. They didn't stumble or fall. They were barefoot, but they didn't slow down because stones or thorns were hurting them. They didn't say a word. Our feet were loud, though. I could hear them, slamming the ground. Ahead of us a jeep was moving, fast. Now it stopped. A safari jeep with open back and sides and a brown canvas hood. This jeep was waiting for us. We ran up to it. I flung Vikram into the back, and he landed face down on the green corrugated-metal floor. Steve jumped in and picked him up. We were all inside now. Steve had Vik on his lap, I sat across from them with Mail on mine. A man was driving the jeep. I didn't know who he was.

Now I looked around me and nothing was unusual. No frothing waters here, only the hotel. It was all as it should be. The long rows of rooms with clay-tiled roofs, the terra-cotta floors of the open corridors, the dusty, orange-brown gravel driveway thick with wild cactus on both sides. All there. The waves must have receded, I thought.

I hadn't seen Orlantha run with us, but she must have done. She was in the jeep. Her parents had rushed out of their rooms as we came out of ours, and now her father, Anton, was with us too. Orlantha's mother, Beulah, was hoisting herself into the jeep and the driver revved the engine. The jeep jerked forward and she lost her grip, fell off. The driver didn't see this. I told him to stop, I kept yelling to him that she had fallen out. But he kept going. Beulah lay on the driveway and looked up at us as we pulled away. She half-smiled, in confusion it seemed. Anton leaned out the back to reach Beulah and drag her up. When he couldn't, he jumped out. They were both lying on the gravel now, but I didn't call out to the driver to wait for them. He was driving very fast. He's right, I thought, we have to keep moving. Soon we will be away from the hotel. We were leaving my parents behind. I panicked now. If

I had screamed at their door as we ran out, they could have run with us. “We didn’t get Aachchi and seeya,” I yelled to Steve. This made Vikram cry. Steve held on to him, clasping him to his chest. “Aachchi and seeya will be okay, they will come later, they will come,” Steve said. Vik stopped crying and snuggled into Steve. I was thankful for Steve’s words, I was reassured. Steve is right. There are no waves now. Ma and Da, they will walk out of their room. We will get out of here first, and they’ll join us. I had an image of my father walking out of the hotel, there were puddles everywhere, he had his trousers rolled up. I’ll ring Ma on her mobile as soon as I get to a phone, I thought. We were nearing the end of the hotel driveway. We were about to turn left onto the dirt track that runs by the lagoon. Steve stared at the road ahead of us. He kept banging his heel on the floor of the jeep. Hurry up, get a move on. The jeep was in water then. Suddenly, all this water inside the jeep. Water sloshing over our knees. Where did this water come from? I didn’t see those waves get to us. This water must have burst out from beneath the ground. What is happening? The jeep moved forward slowly. I could hear its engine straining, snarling. We can drive through this water, I thought. We were tilting from side. The water rising now, filling the jeep. It came up to our chests. Steve and I lifted the boys as high as we could. Steve held Vik, I had Mal. Their faces above the water, the tops of their heads pressing against the jeep’s canvas hood, our hands tight under their armpits. The jeep rocked. It was floating, the wheels no longer gripping the ground. We kept steadying ourselves on the seats. No one spoke. No one uttered a sound. Then I saw Steve’s face. I’d never seen him like that before. A sudden look of terror, eyes wide open, mouth agape. He saw something behind me that I couldn’t see. I didn’t have time to turn around and look. Because it turned over. The jeep turned over. On my side. Pain. That was all I could feel. Where am I? Something was crushing my chest. I am trapped under the jeep, I thought, I am being flattened by it. I tried to push it away, I wanted to wriggle out. But it was too heavy, whatever was on me, the pain unrelenting in my chest. I wasn’t stuck under anything. I was moving, I could tell now. My body was curled up, I was spinning fast. Am I underwater? It didn’t feel like water, but it has to be, I thought. I was being dragged along, and my body was whipping backwards and forwards. I couldn’t stop myself. When at times my eyes opened, I couldn’t see water. Smoky and gray.