*CHAPTER NINE*

# DISTANCES

**SRI LANKA IS A SMALL ISLAND.** But the distances people live from one another—the psychological distances, the distances between understanding and misunderstanding—are vast.

Jayakumar Thangavelu, the senior police official, once took the time to explain an important point about the past—the past as defined by before and after the spread of institutional violence, his past, the past of the 1970s and 1980s. We were discussing "the mentality."

Thangavelu said, "Yes, there were cases of torture in the past, but mainly because people were not aware of their rights. So they thought torture was something accepted by law. Now, people are more aware, so more cases are being reported. But before, unless someone was badly injured people thought it a way of life—a minor injury, they thought, 'O. K., it's nothing serious to be reported.' People thought it was somehow legal to be tortured."

Somehow legal—somehow. This word is so often a signal, a warning that things have not been properly thought through, that there is a soft spot in the logic, and that there is some distance to cross.

**WHEN I FIRST MET** Chitral Perera, it was a hot, bright morning in Panadura. Shanthi had brought me on an early bus crowded with passengers and suitcases and boxes of produce. Chitral ran the human rights group where Shanthi worked several days a week. It was called Janasansadaya, which translates as People's Forum. I liked the name. Forum: a public space, a civic space.

Chitral paused a moment to let this sink in. I was still a stranger. He did not yet know where the conversation might go. Then he said, "People start from the assumption that ordinary Sri Lankans don't know their rights. I wouldn't accept this notion. You find always that people have a strong sense of their rights and of justice. Maybe they don't know where it comes from—what law, the constitution, the U. N.—but the awareness of basic rights is there."

In a village once, Chitral organized an "awareness program," as he called it, and brought several lawyers with him to teach villagers about the penal code, laws covering bail, and other such subjects. The occasion proved a turning point in his thinking and seems to have helped define his work at Janasansadaya.

"A man got up, slightly drunk, and said, 'What's the point? This isn't how the law actually works. What does the penal code mean to us?' The lawyer was annoyed, but I noticed that the rest of the audience agreed with the man. I changed the discussion. I said, 'Tell us what you mean.' And it was then I discovered: People know all about injustice, right and wrong, courts and lawyers. The awareness is there. The question was power. There was an attitude inculcated in people: You cannot challenge the system. After this, the first thing I would say in the villages was, 'No, there is something you can do. You are powerful.'"

**CHITRAL WAS SIXTY-THREE** when I met him—a youngish, vigorous sixty-three with bushy hair, an animated face, and a quick, almost urgent manner, beneath which I could see a certain abiding calm. There was nothing in his background to suggest that he would spend these years of his life going from village to village in a van, sometimes with a lawyer, to hear the stories of victims, and begin the process that would put them before a judge, properly represented and prepared to challenge the system they had learned to fear. But this was Chitral's work. And it made him something unusual for a Sri Lankan: It made him something other than a victim, just as he was showing those whose cases he took how to be something other than what they had been taught they were.

He was born into an affluent family and raised in Panadura, in a house not far from where he would one day return and open the office where we sat and talked. At eighteen he became a teacher's assistant and shipped out for six months to a town twenty kilometers from the old

capital—"upcountry Kandy," as Chitral put it. The experience changed him—or began the process of change that would one day lead him back to Panadura.

Chitral said, "The life up there was the best experience. I lived in a rented house with other government officials, slept on a crude folding bed—a *booru*, we call it, which means 'donkey bed.' In the evenings we gathered with a bottle of *arrack*"—this is the strong drink many Sri Lankans favor, distilled from coconuts—"and talked about local history and culture. Weekends I didn't come home. There were always events—paddy-harvesting rituals, an exorcism ceremony called a *thovil*.

"It was then I began to hear stories like the one I told you, and it's these I remember most, not what I read in books. I learned to master things. And I learned that the hierarchy can be challenged and, in fact, must be challenged. I learned that people have challenged it in all sorts of ways throughout history."

The eighteen-year-old trainee then attended teacher's college in Maharagama, just outside Colombo, and his first appointments followed: a year in Dondra, on the southern tip of the island, five in Benthara, in the Galle District. In Benthara things began to change again: It was there Chitral began working for the teachers' union. By 1971 a New Left party had formed, the J. V. P., and that year launched its first insurrection. Chitral was also "a kind of" member, as he put it—but "not too pleased with it."

The insurrection brought a wave of arrests, and union work became dangerous, but Chitral continued with it as teaching colleagues faded quietly away. By 1975 he was working full-time for the union. In time he was agitating for the release of detained unionists on the ground that they were political prisoners, not terrorists or insurrectionists. In time, also, Chitral rose to become the union's general secretary. He began meeting prominent civil society leaders, journalists, and church activists, and within two years the movement he helped form had most political prisoners out of jail, even if they were still "interdicted"—that is, banned from their workplaces.

Chitral was growing the union—by 1980 it would have forty-five thousand members, a tenfold increase in a little more than a decade. In July of that year there was a general strike, as a result of which fifty

thousand to sixty thousand government employees were locked out and a few were dismissed. Life had changed again: Chitral was among the few.

"No job," he said, laughing at what must then have been no laughing matter. "So I tried various things. I tried to start an underground movement. That failed—people weren't really committed. I raised ornamental fish. I managed several hotels. I became a *sous-chef.* Then journalism—for seven years. I wrote for *Attha*, which means "truth," same as *Pravda*."

Chitral laughed again. I sensed that he hadn't wanted to embark on this tale, but he had gradually entered into it.

"But you find not only 'the truth.' It's 'the truth but not only the truth.' That should've been our slogan."

There were travels: Bosnia, the Ukraine, Lithuania, the Soviet Union in its final throes. When the last collapsed, it was the beginning of the end for *Attha*, and so for Chitral's years as a journalist.

He said, "At the time there was an N. G. O. called M. D. D. R., Movement for the Defense of Democratic Rights. I was put in charge of training. It was then I began going to villages to teach people about legal rights and a variety of other basic things—land disputes, family disputes, how to make a complaint. I had a training program called 'law to the village.' And that was my entry into human rights."

There was a little more teaching to be done. In 1990, under pressure from civil society groups and the International Labor Organisation, the U. N. agency based in Geneva, Chitral was reinstated in his profession. He went back—not altogether eagerly so far as I could make out, but primarily to protect his pension. And in the decade he had been away, Sri Lanka's school system had gone the way of most other institutions. There wasn't much to go back to.

"Everything had deteriorated—discipline, standards of teaching. What struck me most was the lack of respect. Teachers and students, teachers and principals, students and principals—all of these relationships had changed. Principals and teachers started accusing one another: 'This one has personal connections. This one shouldn't be here.' And so on. Students, parents, teachers—all knew about these arguments. And I think it was the reason for the lack of respect. Some teachers didn't have even

basic qualifications. Some couldn't teach or control even a fifth-grade class. Most education officers and principals were appointed totally according to political connections."

Chitral lasted two years. In 1992 he left the system for good and founded Janasansadaya, the N. G. O. that operated from a couple of small rooms down a dirt pathway in Panadura.

**THE BUS FROM COLOMBO** to Panadura runs along a single thoroughfare, the first part of which is Galle Face Road as it leads south from the green. As you leave the city the houses and shops thin out, until finally you are looking out at wooden shacks—some of which are illegal structures—and roadside hawkers selling vegetables and fish in the open air. For part of the journey the ocean comes into view.

Then the shops grow dense again, shops selling cars and furniture and office equipment, and the houses are again substantial. This is Panadura—a large, populous town, not so far from Colombo but an hour's commute on the bus because of the traffic.

We get off, Shanthi and I, in the center of town, opposite a large police station. There is a tree-lined lane next to it, and this we follow past a primary school and then a sports club. The school sounds as if it is about to burst its walls with the vitality of the students shouting a thousand different shouts within. The club, by contrast, is silent and perhaps not much used: The grounds are unswept, and in all my trips to see Chitral, I never saw anyone on them.

At the end of the lane an old stone church, Anglican, stands in the sun on a well-kept patch of land. Beyond it I can glimpse the sea. We pass the churchyard, full of old headstones, and then turn down the pathway leading to Janasansadaya's offices. The path runs along the back side of the primary school we just passed. The cacophony of children's voices turns out to be a constant in Chitral's small, concrete-floored rooms.

That first morning Chitral spoke several times of titles. He still remembered how he was greeted on his first day as a teacher's assistant forty-five years earlier: "Hello, Mr. Perera. Come this way, please." He had never before been a "mister." During the days that followed in "upcountry Kandy" he was late to school often. His habit was to climb over the school fence and sneak into his classroom, until the principal

spotted him one morning and said, "Good morning, Mr. Perera."

The moment taught him something about what it meant to treat others with respect, to acknowledge their dignity. There was something of the public self realized in that moment, it seemed to me afterward as I read my notes. "I was never late again after that," Chitral said, "and I learned to teach by way of personal example."

Later in that first morning's conversation Chitral came back to the matter of "mister." It seemed to be a preoccupation—containing some thought he was eager to convey to me.

He said, "People used to be accustomed to addressing others, seniors and juniors, as 'Mister.' Then it changed to 'Sir' for those senior. They demanded it. In Sinhala it had been 'Mahatthaya,' the equivalent of 'Mister,' and then for those senior it became 'Sir,' just as in English. Now if you use 'Mahatthaya' they get angry."

"What explains this?" I was curious. The point seemed to go straight to the question of "the edifice within."

"I don't know. I've always made sure no one calls me 'Sir,' but it's very difficult to break these habits in others. Guards at the gate, the peons"—he meant the office assistants—"clerks, they all use 'Sir.'"

Chitral paused, and I let the silence remain, hoping he would continue without prodding in the direction he chose.

He said finally, " 'Sir.' It is a device for maintaining the idea of hierarchy. Earlier, no one needed to demand respect because they were certain they had earned it. Once the system of political appointments came in, people at the top knew they didn't deserve to be there."

It was an eighteen-year-old who had first seen, in the hills outside of Kandy, that hierarchy has to be challenged. And now this was the essential intent at Janasansadaya, beneath all the training and the projects and cases taken up. It was to build a new kind of public space—a public space within.

Chitral started with what he had learned at the M. D. D. R., the human rights organization he joined after his newspapering years ended:

Janasansadaya would empower people. But this became something to build other things upon.

He said, "The second point, after empowerment, is, we must give people solutions. You need to provide practical answers. The third point, at least for human rights activists, we'll teach them parts of the law. We raise awareness, connecting common notions of justice—the stories and legends and so forth—with modern concepts. This is not for everyone. The majority are told, 'What you say is right. We'll join you in your fight for rights.' It's not necessary to educate everybody in all the complexities of the law."

We talked for a long time, and there would be other such conversations, and then, when we grew to know one another and I understood the work he was doing, I could pose questions out of thin air, *à propos* of nothing.

"Chitral," I once asked, "the other day you used the word 'revolution' to describe what you are working toward. What did you mean?"

Chitral's reply was long. He said, "What changed first was the idea of third-party intervention—the belief that someone else had to be there. 'You have to accept what we tell you. You cannot do anything on your own.' This was the old notion. This is hierarchy. If you want to go to the police station you must go with a politician, or at least a 'henchman.'

"For example, if an ordinary person walks into a police station he will be insulted—rubbished or ignored. It's the same at a government office. If you go alone the likelihood is that you won't get done what you went for. If you go with a 'henchman' you might. So people get used to believing it is the only way. When people first began to come here they sometimes brought a 'henchman.'"

As he spoke, Chitral started drawing pyramids on a piece of paper, then tracing and retracing them until they became nearly shapeless scribble.

He continued his explanation, "For a long time this has disempowered people. It was a purposeful effort to distance people, done in an entirely organized way. The British needed middlemen—they had a language problem. But even during the kingdom, there was an enormous distance between subjects and kings. Even then, headmen were middlemen.

"Post-independence, the government took advantage of this and prolonged it. And now it is intensified. Now it's forcing the issue of powerlessness. Awareness is forcing the issue."

At this, Chitral turned the pyramids he had drawn toward me.

"Here's the judicial system: judges up here at the top, ordinary people down here, the police, the lawyers, the doctors, the attorney-general's department all in the middle. Our revolution is telling people they don't need anyone in the middle to intervene for them. Access to justice is an inherent right. The revolution is to break the mentality you see in the pyramid."

**AS OUR CONVERSATIONS** continued, Chitral forced me to think—as he must have thought once—about the nature of change: of what it is made, how it is made, and where it comes from. It is almost a necessity to consider this subject in Sri Lanka today. Meeting Chitral reminded me of this. There could be small change or large, but in some cases the two could not be separated: The latter in these cases, large change, consisted of innumerable instances of the former, small changes, and could be made of nothing else.

Chitral said, "Let me tell you about something we are doing. There is something called a 'police message,' requiring someone to report for an inquiry. They date back to the British. They are forms: They say, 'To,' 'From,' 'Date,' 'Message.' They're usually full of abbreviations. They're often illegible. What happens normally is that people are frightened. They run to the police and plead. 'Please, sir, please explain this to me.'

"We tell people, 'Don't go to ask.' We help them write to the inspector-general of police and request an explanation. 'Please advise me as to what this says.' At least for people living close by us, there is a clear change. Now messages are either written clearly or they are typed and sent by registered post.

"Another example. Again, a letter arrives from the police. 'Attend this inquiry,' it says. But it comes after the date of the inquiry. We say, 'Write, provide dates and times, explain, inform.' This year we've had seventy-five people in these kinds of situations—counting families, a hundred and fifty altogether. If we can start with this small group and change attitudes, they are empowered and they can go back to their villages

and tell others. And they do. We always ask when someone comes, 'How do you know of us?' We've now got cases from two hundred kilometers away."

Small changes—impossibly, grindingly small changes. But Chitral was talking about very large changes, too—a change in consciousness, a change in the nature of public space in Sri Lanka and who is able to occupy it. And another change: the extension of order to ordinary people. Are these changes insignificant? More to the point, will Sri Lanka change in any other fashion?

The nature of change varies in human history. Sometimes it is very sudden, as when a war is won or lost, or a key election tips one way and not the other. Change of this kind is dramatic but not always especially deep. Another kind of change involves no signal event. It is slow, it is extended. Sometimes it requires a generation or more. There is not much glory in it. There is no sudden declaration of victory. But this kind of change involves a change in direction, a break with the past, a new way of thinking. It runs very deep. Sometimes it is the way history is made. Fernand Braudel, the great French historian of the Mediterranean world, counted time in terms of various cycles—that of an individual life, that of generations, that of a civilization—and I suspect the thought was in part related to the nature of change and history as I have described it.

Chitral had made a choice in these matters.

**WHAT IS IT THAT NEEDS** to change most in Sri Lanka?"

I once put this question to K. M. de Silva, one of Sri Lanka's most noted historians. His reply was immediate.

He said, "They should inscribe on every wall in the country the Bismarckian proposition that politics is the art of the possible, not the yearning for the impossible."

To stop dreaming, de Silva seemed to say—to leave behind the old nostalgia, the yearning for Sinhalese greatness, the dream of oneness, the dream of undisturbed separateness in a green garden away from the world. This was what de Silva, after all his years of thinking and writing about Sri Lanka's past, thought had to change.

Much later, as I studied the notes from all my conversations, I considered this point in connection with Chitral. What was it that distinguished this man? It seemed partly to rest upon de Silva's point. Chitral did not dream—not, at least, in the way the old scholar of his own country meant it. Chitral had had his own dreams once—back in his J. V. P. days, and later when he had tried to start a "movement." But he no longer dreamed these dreams, either. There was no nostalgia left in him, if he had ever had any, no sentiment, and no regret. Nor had he gone silent.

No nostalgia, no regret, no silence. Instead there was a certain hardness in Chitral's character—hardness being not at all the same as insensitivity but, rather, sentimentality's opposite, intolerant of nostalgia, dreams, and yearning. Hardness of this kind is, in the end, evidence of great sensitivity. Over time it has come to seem essential equipment for Sri Lankans—at least for those determined to be something other than victims.

There is something else Chitral prompted me to consider as he took his place in my notebooks among all the other voices I had recorded. This is the question of distance. In his own life Chitral had made it his business to bridge some of the distances that had grown over a long time among Sri Lankans. One could say it was his work, which may be why he sometimes seemed most at home while driving in a van to some far-off village. But here I mean distance of another kind, distance with a certain moral dimension.

At what distance should one stand in a society as near to failure as Sri Lanka? Where should one place oneself? Should one work outside of all the institutional frameworks, achieving some hard-won self-sufficiency and a measure of freedom from the entrenched dependencies of Sri Lankan life? In other words, escape the trap? Should one work for change from within, alternatively?

These are not questions for Sri Lankans alone. Many people in many different places ask them, or ought to ask them, or contrive in one way or another to avoid asking them. For Sri Lankans they are simply more urgent, these questions, for the self-evident reason that Sri Lanka is in a more urgent condition: The hour is late. People know this. So it is part of being an educated, aware Sri Lankan to pose the question of one's distance, one's chosen position in relation to the whole, and it is for this reason I address the matter here.

Many people prompted me to consider the question of distance in this way. Saminda did. So did some of the other judges I met—Wijetunge, for example. Shanthi did. In his way Thangavelu, the police official, did, too.

There were numerous others, well-meaning people, people in possession of the facts, we might say, people quite aware of Sri Lanka's urgent needs. Often these turned out to be people who refused to discuss their views with someone who would record them for fear of losing something or other: a job, a standing, a political connection, a social recognition, a place in that network of relationships by which we suspend ourselves in our societies. These last were, we can say, people who stood as negative examples because they got the distance question wrong, especially if they happened to be journalists, or lawyers, or both—professions in which articulating the truth is among one's basic obligations.

It was Chitral, most of all, who prompted me to try to understand Sri Lankans by way of the question of distance. And as I got to know him he showed me something unexpected. In his own life he had chosen, after all his years of teaching, to stand outside the institution he had first worked within. But he showed me as we got to know one another that the question of proximity—"outside" or "inside"—was not the important one: indeed, it hardly mattered whether one asked it.

The questions Chitral had asked were far simpler. What needs to be done that I can do? Am I willing to do it? If I am, how best is it done? Again, it is not just Sri Lankans who might do well to ask these questions. It would be unfair to single them out in such a way. We all face occasions when we ought to ask them. Perhaps what distinguished Chitral most is that he did.

*CHAPTER TEN*

# GALLE

**ALWAYS THE PROJECT** for Chitral was to change minds. This, too, seemed to distinguish him among the Sri Lankans I met. I have called it several things—the edifice within, the structure of consciousness—and others had names for it: the mentality, and so on. A few recognized it as the site of authentic change. And fewer considered first the minds of ordinary people, those "below." Change the minds of those below, and they will change the minds of others like them. And then the minds of those above will be forced to change, and Sri Lanka can become something other than what it has become. This was Chitral's thinking, the revolution he was looking for.

In Panadura there was a steady stream of visitors: ex-detainees who had been tortured, the wives and husbands and siblings of victims—victims alive, victims dead—and then children. A child would be traumatized by what had happened to the father. There were cases in which the police forced the wife and children of a detainee to watch as the husband and father was beaten. There were other cases involving the child directly: A teacher or a principal had abused the child in school, or there had been abuse while in police custody.

Man, woman, child, it was invariably the same: Someone "above" had abused someone "below."

Often after a case of abuse, the police would then say, "Don't complain and we won't press the charge against you." Or the lawyer assigned took the fee but failed to represent the client: Instead he effectively represented the police and the court to the client. Or the defendant's lawyer receives threatening telephone calls. Or the victim is offered bribes

and threatened with more torture if he does not accept them. Or the judge openly discourages the lawyer from pursuing the case. Or the judge reviews photographic evidence of torture and rules, "minor injuries," and a doctor supports the ruling. Or the judge rules, "You were caught stealing. You deserved torture." Or the lawyer, judge, and a doctor conspire to force the defendant to plead guilty.

Shanthi had said once, "There are factual cases of all this."

The cases involving children were the worst, the saddest, the most tragic. Lives were damaged or destroyed even before they had been lived. Lives without promise lay ahead, at least when they first arrived at Janasansadaya or the other organizations I visited, and Janasansadaya and the other places were not in the business of working miracles. Sometimes you could see the scars: a child could no longer hear, or the eyes were damaged, or there were permanent welts on an arm or a leg. But it was the marks inside the children that were the most painful to see: the flat affect, the inability to focus, the helpless clinging to the mother, the deadness within.

Chitral, with Shanthi's help and the help of others in the office, kept good statistics.

"How many cases are you getting now?" I once asked.

It was a hot day in September. We were sitting, as usual, on the opposite sides of his messy desk. The babble of the schoolchildren next door seemed to suffuse the office, though no one ever bothered to mention it.

"So far this year, for the first nine months, we've received two hundred and forty-seven complaints. Of these, a hundred and forty-one involved the misuse of police power."

These were curious numbers. A small office in a suburb of Colombo, an organization few had ever heard of, and there are almost two hundred and fifty new complaints on the books. It was a tiny number if you considered it the measure of a national problem, but it was plainly more a matter of an iceberg's tip.

I considered Thangavelu's figures, the official figures: For the first half of the year, the police had recorded fourteen cases involving the police and fundamental rights: two dismissed, twelve pending. Chitral alone had ten times as many cases involving the police in a slightly longer period. Nobody knows the true extent of the problem. Police abuse in Sri Lanka, a problem everyone knows about, remains unmapped territory.

Chitral said, "Ninety percent of people with experience of the police are assaulted: This is known. I doubt ten percent complain. We have nearly a hundred and fifty cases this year and we've hardly begun."

I would eventually meet some of these cases. But first I was to travel in the south, to Galle and the towns around it. Shanthi and I would go together, this time in a hired car.

Before we left, Chitral showed me a video of a man in a hospital bed. It was twelve minutes long and had been shot a couple of months earlier at a teaching hospital near Galle. There was the patient, and a physician, a forensic specialist, reviewing the patient's condition and reciting the symptoms for the video. There were many: Lesions on his leg caused by a steel rod; bruises on his torso caused by a wooden pole; handcuff marks. The ankles were swollen and discolored. This indicated damage beneath the skin tissue, the physician explained conscientiously into the camera. And there were extensive internal injuries.

The victim's name was Hevamarambage Premalal. He was thirty-two, married with three children. A relative had been murdered a year or so earlier, and there had been no investigation. In time it came to light in Wanduramba, Premalal's village, that the police may have had a hand in the killing. It was then that Premalal stepped forward: He filed a complaint stating that the police had taken no action.

The police arrived at his home between 1:30 and 2:00 a.m. one night soon after Premalal had filed the complaint. The beating began before they had even reached the police station.

Later, when Premalal regained consciousness, he was already in the hospital—handcuffed to the bed, under remand, with no idea of the charges. I was to meet him in Galle, and I would meet the examining physician, too.

sensitive to the matter of distance by this time. Premalal would come in, sit down opposite, and talk to me as if I were, indeed, somehow "in charge." We would speak from "above" and "below," not "across."

Still, I left it as it was and said nothing to Kanthi. I was the visitor. I was the writer. I had to take my notes. Seating me at the desk was a gesture of consideration. No one else seemed to notice the "above" and "below" of it. This reminded me: The edifice within is difficult to dismantle, in part because it is unconscious. Almost nobody even thinks about it. Even when they understand it and determine to dismantle it they cannot see it in their own ways of doing things. I thought of Chitral and his stories of "mister" and "sir." It is hard to break these habits, he had said.

When Premalal came in I recognized him from the video Chitral had shown me. He was thin. He had the same flat affect—a stunned, passively confused look—as I had already seen in others. His wife was with him. Both were good-looking, with fine features. They were poised, despite all they had been through and the legal maze they had entered. Somehow—I did not know how—Premalal seemed at home in public space.

I knew the outline of Premalal's story, but we began by filling in the details.

He was a day laborer at a tea plantation and lived in the village called Wanduramba, about fifteen kilometers from Galle. He dug ditches and earned two hundred to two hundred and fifty rupees a day—about two to two and a half American dollars.

"Now I can't work," Premalal said. "My knees and the side of my left leg are still in pain. My parents help me, but of course it's a strain."

"Will you work again? Do you expect to?"

"I don't think so. Even sitting in a chair is difficult. I'm hoping to do some kind of small business. I don't really know. I'm still taking treatment."

It was October of 2006 when Premalal and I met. The incident with the police had taken place the previous July. And life had been uncertain ever since. It had probably changed for good.

The man killed, the murder victim whose death had got Premalal involved with the courts and the police, turned out to be his brother-in-law, Sunil, his wife's sibling. Premalal never found out why Sunil was killed. "I don't know who killed him, either. I complained to the Criminal Investigations Department simply because the police weren't doing anything to find out."

When the police came for him that night in July, the night Premalal became a victim, he recognized them as he opened the door. One was in uniform and had a gun—Police Constable Lasantha. Another was a sergeant, Sgt. Samaranayake.

Premalal gave a long account of what happened that night and in the days that followed. I let him speak without interrupting, even when there were parts of his story I was not clear about. This is some of it:

"Outside the house, Sgt. Samaranayake punched me in the mouth. I asked, 'Why are you taking me in?' and they said, 'To record your statement.' Sgt. Samaranayake then hit me on the spine with a wooden pole.

"On the way to the police station I was taken first to sign various documents at a place where they keep patrol log books. Once we were at the station I was told to remove my shirt. They handcuffed me and fixed the handcuffs to the ceiling of a cell. Sgt. Samaranayake then took his pole and started hitting me again on the back. He hit me until the pole broke. With the bit remaining he hit me on the head. My skull fractured and I started to bleed.

"Sgt. Samaranayake collected the pieces of wood and took them into the next room. Through the doorway I saw him drinking *arrack*. Then he came back with a steel pole. By this time my sarong had fallen off. I was shouting, so he took the sarong and tied it round my mouth.

While he hit me with the steel pole, they all kept shouting at me, 'Did you see Sunil's murder? The same thing will happen to you.'

"After assaulting my back he started on my stomach, and then I lost consciousness. When I came to, my head was in the station's latrine. I shouted for water. Lasantha brought water, I drank it, but I vomited immediately.

"In the morning a policeman named Nimal Ranjit came to my cell, and I told him I was in pain. He rushed out and told Sgt. Samaranayake and the others. They dragged me outside and bathed me. They gave me a big coconut"—a king coconut, a common drink in Sri Lanka, consumed straight from the shell. "Then they brought a stretcher and put me in a jeep to take me to a hospital nearby. I heard Sgt. Samaranayake say, 'Don't take the main road—it leads past another police station. Take a by-road.' Nimal Ranjit said to me, 'At the hospital, tell them some villagers assaulted you. We'll give you five thousand rupees and get you some medicine, too.'

"But as I was being admitted I told the lady doctor"—this must have been the admitting physician—"that the police had assaulted me. Then they admitted me. When my family came, I told them the same thing. After that, I'm not aware of what happened."

Premalal stopped. I asked him, "Were you afraid? Afraid of telling the truth?"

"Yes."

"Why did you tell the story, then?"

"It was the true story. The villagers didn't hit me."

"Were you aware then of police abuse?"

"Not really. I was making a living. I hadn't really thought about it."

**FOR TEN DAYS THE DOCTORS** could give no assurance that Premalal would survive. He lived on saline solution, oxygen, and blood transfusions. He went on dialysis while the doctors monitored his kidneys. Eventually there was a successful surgery.

Then the police came again.

"On July 21st, the O. I. C. from Wanduramba"—the officer in charge at the village station—"came to visit. He told me to withdraw from the case I planned to file against the police. He said, 'It's really money you want. Come see me.' I was discharged on the 29th and told to return to the clinic every week."

There were other remarkable things about Premalal's story. It was very local in character, for instance. Premalal knew most of the police officers, and they him. He had used their names all through his account—it was always "Sgt. Samaranayake," I could not help noticing. So there was the familiarity of village life. But then Premalal had stepped into public space when he complained about the inaction of the police in Wanduramba. After that, no amount of familiarity would save him. Abuse, even abuse of a savage character, does not depend upon people being strangers to one another.

There was the paperwork. Here was Premalal, about to be beaten unconscious, and the police take the trouble to stop along the way to make sure he signs the proper documents. "Why are you taking me in?" "To get a statement." It is a kind of obsession in Sri Lanka, this matter of documents, procedures, and the legalities used to mask illegalities. It is fine to beat someone—"You deserved to be tortured"—but one must get the paperwork done first.

There was also the sadistic character of the torture. It was not about getting information or getting questions answered or preventing some imminent calamity. It was about inflicting pain, pain that would be forever remembered, pain inflicted to the maximum possible: until the wooden pole broke across Premalal's back, until a scar within had been etched, a scar of fear, until Premalal lost consciousness. The drinking also betrayed the pathology of this kind of torture—its psychological complexity for the victimizer as well as the victim.

Premalal had decided to refuse a settlement before he had met Chitral or "the foreign lady," before he had decided to file a case with Janasansadaya's help—this I noticed, too. It seemed the most important point. Premalal had an idea of autonomy, an awareness of himself in the world that was not shaped by "the mentality." He had made a decision to step out beyond the totalizing mechanisms of the system. Then he paid for his decision. Perhaps this was out of ignorance of how things worked, as he suggested. But in the end he made another, larger decision: He would pay the price. There was no stepping back from the advance he had made into the no-man's land of public space.

**I AM TO BUY LUNCH** for those I am meeting: for Premalal and his wife and for some others waiting along the benches to see me. Kanthi seems to have promised this.

She is clear-skinned and has a bright smile. She dresses in a sari and wears gold jewelry. Kanthi is extremely organized—this I noticed as I conversed with Premalal.

Now she would like three hundred rupees to cover the lunches. Kanthi had not mentioned this earlier, but the silent communication between us is perfectly plain as I hand her a note of a thousand rupees: It is little to me, it is much to them.

Lunch would arrive in containers carried in plastic bags. As we waited, I asked Kanthi about her routine. Why Galle? I asked. Why did she have an office so far in the south, where things were supposed to be more orderly, where the tourists came and were not supposed to see this side of Sri Lanka?

"I don't know why. It's something I've noticed, too. There are loads of cases. I don't know if the police are especially brutal here."

"How many cases are we talking about?"

"Every day there are new cases. I can't really say how many we have. Sometimes there are three or four a day. Sometimes one, sometimes more."

Three cases a day would mean the Organisation for the Defense of Human Rights, a large name in a small lane in a provincial city, painted on a bedsheet and tacked above the entrance of a modest house—this number matched the police records for the first half of the year, the fourteen cases recorded in Thangavelu's files, in less than a week.

I said, "You're talking about hundreds of cases a year, then. All to do with human rights."

"About a hundred and fifty. These are new cases. The old ones have to come back ten to fifteen times because there are new details in their cases. New arrests. People are tortured again after the case begins. New charges are fabricated."

"Again, why so many?" I was still puzzled.

"The south, somehow, is more prone to violence," Kanthi replied.

Then she said, "Me, I'm not a victim. But I intervened in the Malkanthi case, the case I'll introduce you to this afternoon, and I had threats afterward. I once attended the Human Rights Commission in Matara regarding another case, and the police there began insulting me and the work we do. Afterward, they came to ask us to withdraw the case. I got a little scared on that occasion. I 'phoned Chitral immediately."

"That was the only time you were afraid, Kanthi?"

"We have links with people—people like Chitral. We can gather two hundred people whenever we want. No problem."

**K. P. MALKANTHI IS FORTY-TWO**, a poor woman, obviously poor, with bad teeth and a worn sari. She looks as if she is perennially exhausted: She looks, perhaps, sixty or so. But she is able to smile.

"Let's all speak," I say, trying to make Mrs. Malkanthi comfortable. At this she smiles. And she would smile, now and again, as we talked.

P. W. Pushpakumara, Malkanthi's son, is sixteen. He wears a T-shirt with "William Sport" written across the chest, the sort of thing a teenager would wear the world over. But P. W., as I will call him, seems to have had all his smiles knocked out of him. He has flat affect. He is missing an eye—the consequence not of abuse but of an illness. He is wary. And he clings almost desperately to his mother.

"This is corporal punishment in school," Shanthi, who has been helping to translate, tells me. It is a bit like an announcement, an introduction. She had wanted me especially to hear about this case. "We've come to conclude the schools are as bad or worse than the police stations."

I remember something Chitral had said when he was recounting his last years as a teacher—again, the "mister" to "mister" exchanges becoming "mister" to "sir" exchanges. A piece of the psychology I was trying to understand suddenly fell into place. Schools, police stations, hospitals, government offices: It made no difference. There would be stories like the one I was about to hear involving any institution within which authority was projected. And the stories had multiplied in the course of Sri Lanka's "politicization," which put people in positions of authority that everyone, including the person himself or herself, knew were not deserved. This

This lady: Kanthi.

Mrs. Malkanthi continued, "I can't remember the documents, but I suspected they were something bad. So I visited the regional director of education. He chased me from his office. I went to see the principal. She chased me, too. She wanted only his father. The principal also refused to let the boy back in school. As a result, he has lost a year and a half of his education."

Shanthi, who had continued to interpret for me, interrupted. "This is a complicated story," she said to me quietly.

I had begun to notice this about the narratives I was hearing: Those telling the story often did not seem to distinguish between useful detail and detail without meaning. Their stories came out in a kind of unchecked flood, without discrimination. The same was also true of chronology: Things got mixed up. When had Mrs. Malkanthi come to see the human rights people—before or after going to the regional director and the principal? When had she begun worrying about the documents and taken action?

I let the confusion go. Victims and the relations of victims seem to have an impaired sense of time: This happened, then that happened, but before this, something else happened, and before something else, something else again. Sometimes, when the order of things seemed obvious, or when it did not seem especially important, I would say nothing. On other occasions I let the story be told and then went back to ask about the order events had occurred. In some cases, a completely different story would then emerge.

I did not conclude that the victims, or whomever was talking, was simply a bad storyteller, or was too simple to get the narrative straight. It always seemed to me another piece of evidence reflecting the degree of trauma, the degree to which they had been consumed by fear. Those talking seemed to re-enter the time of their suffering, and to recount it meant letting it tumble out—all at once, as it were. A person perfectly capable of conversing in the present lost all capacity to differentiate among events or make order of them once the moment of trauma was re-engaged.

This was Mrs. Malkanthi, to some small extent, though she was not the most extreme case of the problem I had seen.

She said, "I urged the regional educational director to insure my son goes back. Eventually he accompanied the boy and told him to give the principal betel leaves. But the principal threw them away. 'Give the betel leaves again,' the educational director said. But the principal threw them away again. As result, my son went back to school only one day.

"Later I explained to the educational director, and he said my son had been suspended because he wrote a letter to a girl. It was then we went to the Supreme Court with a fundamental rights case.

"Exactly a year later one of my younger sons, a seven-year-old, was assaulted by his teacher and suspended for five months for failing to meditate properly. Then we went to the Supreme Court with both cases. Eventually both boys were found new schools. But the court did not see fit to take action against the assaulting."

"These cases are now closed?"

"There's now a human rights inquiry going on," Mrs. Malkanthi said.

Shanthi, who seemed to know Mrs. Malkanthi well, said at this point, "This woman is fearless and insists on confronting officials. She's unafraid of authority. That's why the principal asked only for the father. He doesn't think too far. He'll do anything people say."

I turned to P. W., who had remained silent through all of this. "This happened a lot in the old school, it seems. Do you know why?"

P. W. smiled faintly for the first and last time. "I told tales against a classmate."

"What about your hearing?" I pointed to his right ear, the one that had been damaged.

"I had treatment in a hospital."

Apart from the human rights inquiry, Mrs. Malkanthi had become part of something else Chitral was doing through Janasansadaya. He had organized street demonstrations in Colombo and Galle—small affairs in very public locations—so that ordinary people would see them. It was another tactic for dispelling the fear of authority and for multiplying awareness, and the mother had taken part.

"This is something new in Sri Lanka," I said.

Mrs. Malkanthi laughed.

"I distributed leaflets. I sold some booklets. I held up banners."

She seemed to consider these acts altogether a great wonder.

"All this makes you feel better."

"It does, yes."

Do you think Sri Lanka is changing?" I aimed the question somewhere between Mrs. Malkanthi and her son.

"Change has to do with these sorts of problems," P. W. said quietly.

Shanthi asked, I sensed for my benefit, "'These sorts of problems?' Are they getting better or worse?"

Mrs. Malkanthi answered immediately, and with a certain rigorous confidence.

"Worse."

**IN A BOOK CALLED** *The Decent Society*, Avishai Margalit asks what one is. What is a decent society, the Israeli scholar, who teaches philosophy in Jerusalem, wonders at the beginning of his 1996 work.

The decent society is one that does not humiliate, Margalit asserts. Then he elaborates:

The decent society is one whose institutions do not humiliate people. I distinguish between a decent society and a civilized one. A civilized

society is one whose members do not humiliate one another, while a decent society is one in which the institutions do not humiliate people.

It is interesting, if not very time-consuming, to consider Margalit's thought in relation to Sri Lanka. By his definition, Sri Lanka is neither decent nor civilized. One may at least wonder whether it is possible for a Sri Lankan, any Sri Lankan, to get through a single day without suffering some form of humiliation. For the vast majority of ordinary Sri Lankans, for those "below," the Premalal's and Mrs. Malkanthi's and the millions like them, daily humiliations are more or less ceaseless. Humiliation is the very substance of their lives. And when they refuse to be humiliated, their humiliation can become acute, violent, and sometimes fatal.

But Margalit formed his definitions at least partly in response to the fate of Palestinians. Clifford Perera is a doctor and a Sri Lankan. He had his own definition, and it had to do with the society around him, the society he had been born into, the society in which he tried to practice his profession with nothing more than ordinary integrity.

"Every civilized society has a proper medical-legal system, Clifford said. "One of its main functions is to investigate death."

Clifford had a quick mind, and, coming early in our conversation, the thought eluded me. Death reports as a measure of civility: What could he mean?

"Unless we have such a system, a society can go into a vertical situation, " he explained.

"'A vertical situation?'"

"You're losing law and order, the smooth functioning of society. We've had this. Nobody knows how your next-door neighbor died. Nobody wants to inquire. Nobody wants to investigate."

A vertical situation, then: a downward spiral.

**LATE IN THE AFTERNOON**, after we had finished meeting people at Kanthi's office, Shanthi and I drove to Karapitiya. The road wound through many neighborhoods of Galle, then through fields and small settlements. It narrowed, the grasses on either side grew tall, and for a few moments

we got lost. Then we came to Karapitiya, and the hospital district. As the only teaching hospital in the southern part of the island—one of six nationwide—it was a large complex. The street opposite the main wards was dense with vendors: fruit vendors, sellers of juice and water and candies and small gifts. These were for the families of patients, and they seemed to do a brisk business.

Clifford's office was in a separate building on the hospital grounds. You could say it was tiny or you could say it was vast, depending upon what Clifford decided to show you. The room where we sat was not much more than a cubicle, with a desk and a couple of chairs. Down a hall beside it, there was room after room filled with laboratory equipment, examining tables, and shelves containing human remains: parts of skeletons, attached bones, skulls, bits of clothing, shoes, odd belongings.

Clifford was a J. M. O., in Sri Lankan legal parlance—a judicial medical officer. This meant his expertise was forensics, the specialty that had brought him to Premalal's hospital room. There is a clinical aspect to this work, and also an aspect that had to do with pathology. "The living and the dead," Clifford said with a mordant smile.

He was young, energetic, often witty—none of these a quality ordinarily associated with so somber a specialization. He was also acutely insightful. Clifford had come into his position at an important moment. He had earned his medical degree in 1994, not long after the wave of murders and disappearances that had followed the second insurrection. The experience seems to have marked him. He became a J. M. O. three years later, and in his years since he had acquired a deep understanding of Sri Lanka and, we might say, the pathology that surpasses all others—that is, the national pathology.

Clifford leapt from subject to subject in our conversation. Sometimes I did not know why we had left off talking about one thing and begun talking about another. He made unlikely connections—invisible connections. Only later, looking at my notes, would I understand that he had been giving me as full a picture as he could of a single, complex phenomenon.

*À propos* of nothing he said, "I was in Melbourne at the time of the *tsunami*. I called my office. They said, 'Don't come. There's no work for us.' This was the position of the government: 'Just clean up, bury the

bodies.' Only when foreign pressure came to identify the foreigners did they realize that what they did was wrong. Now they've agreed they made a mistake. But they don't learn. It's my belief that if we had another *tsunami* tomorrow the same thing would happen. Forensics are not important."

When I met Clifford, it was shortly after the murders of seventeen local employees of Action Contre la Faim, the French group that provides food aid, in the northeast of the island. Clifford was involved in the investigation and was leaving shortly to arrange for the bodies to be exhumed and shipped to Colombo.

"When transferring bodies you use body bags. We don't have body bags in the state medical stores. So we have to plead with the international organizations. We had a notice in the Sunday newspapers—perhaps you saw it. In this heat, with these delays, we put every body into at least three body bags. I need fifty before I go, and I don't have a single one. It's a seven- or eight-hour journey to Colombo and we have no refrigeration trucks. We've requested them. Nothing."

A narrative of carelessness was emerging—a narrative of another kind of abuse: the abuse of the past, the abuse of the record. I began to see the connection between medical reports and civility.

Clifford spoke in staccato phrases, one after another. They seemed to reflect the rhythm of a very fast mind. When we turned to torture victims, people such as Premalal, he started talking about the forms he had to fill out for each case. Again, I was not sure why.

He said, "We're expected to document our findings—the severity of the injuries, the weapons used, the timing. We have a standard form—a medico-legal form, it's called. These forms are at least twenty-five years old. They were designed by a J. M. O. who retired sixteen years ago. If you have a traffic accident, the form is good enough. But if you have a torture victim, it isn't. Sometimes there are more than a hundred injuries in these cases. The space provided to describe these injuries is two lines. Sometimes we don't see these cases until a week or a month after the incident. This is crucial information for the lawyers. But there is no place on the form to specify the timing—when something happened."

"But it's only a form."

"This is the final version of events that is accepted by the courts. That means it's not only a form. It's a big problem."

Are you saying it's a purposeful problem?"

Clifford hesitated, glancing at the ceiling. Then, his eyes leveling at me again: "The form is used to limit allegations of torture. Sometimes. To limit the available medical evidence. Sometimes. So we've adopted a different method. We call it 'free-style.' We go to our computer, we write our findings in full, sign it, and submit it. But the courts are the final deciders. It could be that it is not enough—it is not accepted. Sometimes."

Clifford decided then to take me on a tour of his laboratories. They were down long, factory-like corridors behind heavy sliding doors, like the doors in warehouses. The lighting was terrible—single bulbs hanging here and there, giving off a faint, yellowish glow, and occasionally some weak fluorescent tubes. The dim light illuminated ancient, decrepit equipment covered with decades of chemical stains.

It was in the dank and dark of the labs that I began to realize what Clifford was trying to show me in his stories of body bags, hasty burials, and bureaucratic forms. We were not talking simply about an inefficient system, or a disorganized society, or this or that problem having to do with the misuse of standard procedures or the absence of identifications and autopsies. Clifford was showing me the practical consequences of a psychology. He was showing me what it actually meant on the ground, day in and day out, when a society had no habit of caring for most of its own people, no habit of looking at itself, no habit of making sure it understood its own workings, and certainly no habit of recording and remembering the fate of most individuals. This was the connection he made between civility and the management of an individual death.

A careless society, which means an indecent society, an uncivil society: Clifford sat at the peculiar point where this was revealed in matters of torture and death.

**AT ONE POINT, CLIFFORD RECALLED** the tradition that had begun in the 1870s, when doctors and lawyers had been drawn from the same social strata and shared a common notion of their responsibilities. The system as it is today can be understood, at least partly, as a corruption of this bygone, paternalistic ethos.

Clifford said, "You alter the injuries recorded in the documentation—they don't match what is there in front of you. You can misinterpret. You can classify in a different manner. You can give your own reasons—your own surmise. Based on these observations you can come up with your conclusions: timing, circumstances, weapons.

"These things happen. It's a problem, but not everywhere. It's mostly in district or base hospitals—the lowest on the chain. You see influence from lawyers or government attorneys against the litigant. They'll do it in a very friendly manner. It's known only to you."

You: the doctor working with lawyers and the courts, the doctor who earns part of his living from these sorts of cases and needs the connections to keep the cases coming.

At his peculiar intersection in Sri Lankan life, Clifford seemed to see things few others ever glimpsed. He seemed to understand Sri Lanka as an organism—a network, to borrow Shanthi's word again. And he seemed to conclude that to alter such a society can often look impossible.

He said, "I find it difficult to make change because I know the problems are connected with other problems and concern the authorities. I can't confront this. I have no way of influencing."

I disagreed with Clifford on this point. I reminded him of the video Chitral had shown me, the one recording his examination in Premalal's hospital room. One can sometimes change things in a circumstance such as Sri Lanka's simply by forcing them to work as they are supposed to work. The Premalal case was a good example. Clifford was one of thirty-five J. M. O.'s in all of Sri Lanka. And he had broken, or played his part in breaking, the chain of collusion for Premalal. His report on Premalal's injuries had changed things—arguably even Premalal's life and the lives of those around him. Sometimes change is so small we cannot see it, even when we are the agents of the change.

Clifford seemed to switch perspectives at his point. He spoke not for himself—perhaps out of modesty, perhaps because he did not accept my point—but for his profession.

He said, in his clipped, almost glib manner, "The best option is to ignore these problems. You either function in a low key or you leave. These alternatives are there for some professions, like doctors, for good or bad."

**DUSK WAS APPROACHING,** and the light in Clifford's office was attracting mosquitoes. I suggested we sit on the verandah, where I could smoke.

Outside, Clifford seemed to change again. He seemed to leave behind, if only for a few minutes, the intensity he brought to all the minute details of a J. M. O.'s job.

He said, "When you go a hundred or a hundred and fifty kilometers from Colombo, you see rice paddies, you see tea and tea pluckers. A friend once asked me as we drove through this kind of countryside, 'What if we educated them? The farmer will no longer farm, the women will no longer pluck. We don't want this. We want them to be there. We want our beautiful scenery.'"

Clifford let the thought linger between us for a moment. Then: "We're producing enough professionals, it's true. But still there is a lot of underdevelopment in the rural areas. In the north and east, sometimes there is no doctor for two hundred to five hundred kilometers."

It was odd, given all we had talked about, that only at this moment did Clifford seem to betray a subtle bitterness. Perhaps it was the failing light, the end of another hectic day, the quiet of the evening approaching as we sat on his verandah.

"There's a deep division among us," he said, breaking a silence that had settled among the three of us. "We want a certain number of people at the top—a certain number of people to lead—and we don't seem to want any more than that."