

## The Boy Who Fell Into the Water & Lived by Pavithra Mehta

□The only way to get to the island village of Sothikuppam is by boat. The current in these parts is treacherously strong and the sun beats down in sheets of heat. About 2000 people live in this village. 125 died in the recent tsunami. Twenty-six of them were children. There is no bridge connecting the village to the mainland, only a jetty that wanders partway into the water and stops. When some of the children saw the water rushing in they'd run to the far end of the island towards the backwaters and onto the wooden jetty in terror, hoping perhaps to make it to the safety of the other shore. When the second wave struck it took them all with it. Almost all.

□Most homes in Sothikuppam are sheltered from the beach. Around fifty huts built on the sea-facing shore were washed away by the tidal waves, but no lives were lost on that side. If the children had only stayed in their homes, they might have been alive today. Just yesterday the Collector of Cuddalore visited this village. Promised its people to sanction funds for a tardy bridge.

□We step off the boat onto the jetty. As we walk towards firm ground you cannot help but notice how there is nothing -- absolutely nothing to hold onto. On either side the green waters gently lap, innocent of memory. It is a seven minute walk from the shore to where a medical team is holding an eye camp. Along the way we meet a small group engaged in lashing poles together, topping them with rippled plastic sheets. Temporary housing sponsored by one of the many nonprofits working in this district. Dominic the enthusiastic, warm hearted local District Blindness Prevention Officer insists on introducing me to everyone we meet as Madame Pavithra, International Film Director (he pronounces it "Fill-im". Initially I protest but this has no effect, so in the end I put my palms together with a shrug and smile, half-amused half-apologetic. I have not brought my camera. It is better to go emptyhanded the first time. When they see a camera people tend to think you come from the news channels, and then you start to hear only one kind of story.

□The primary school where the eye camp is being set up is on lunch break. There is a swarm of knee-high humanity around our arrival. The girls wear indigo blue skirts with white blouses, the boys are in khaki shorts and white shirts. Each of them is holding a tin plate waiting to be served their free government-sponsored midday meal. One child comes to stand directly under me. She is wearing two pigtails that stick straight out of the sides of her small head. On her face a huge smile, there is a charming gap between her two front teeth.

□"What's your name?" I ask. Her grin widens but she says nothing. "What grade are you in? She hops on one foot and shoots me a mischievous look out of the corner of one eye. "What, you won't speak to me?" And then without thinking, I say, "Don't you know how to talk?"

□ "No. Jayshree's mute. She can't talk at all."

□ A chorus of little voices. Arm in arm these little girls, Jayshree's classmates crowd around educating me out of my insensitive ignorance. Jayshree takes hold of my hand. I feel at once chastened and forgiven.

□ Unprompted the children start to speak all at once, spilling stories from their lives since that December 26th morning. They do not seem scared or shocked or even particularly sad. They are still so young. "There's another tsunami coming on January 26th," says one child with a knowing air, "So many people are packing to leave now."

□ "Are you leaving?"

□ "No. My parents say we will stay. My mother is the schoolmistress here." She says this with such shining pride in her voice I am obliged to be suitably impressed.

□ "My name is Poovizhli," volunteers one little girl. "I'm Kausalya," says another sweetfaced child. "Kausalya can't read," chips in a classmate. "Oh and you're the Big Genius," says sweetfaced Kausalya not-so-sweetly sticking a small tongue out at her detractor.

□ "He fell into the water." This nonsequiteur from the Big Genius startles me a little.

□ I look over at the boy he is pointing to in front of me. A small and skinny lad. He is nine years old but looks about six. His air of lounging indifference makes me smile. There is something spectacularly nonchalant about this little fellow, who is evidently a hero among his peers. He is not in the least bit thrown by my scrutiny. When he speaks it is in short, clipped sentences. I am seated on the ground, he is leaning against a wall, his thin legs crossed at the ankle, his hands in his pockets.

□ "You fell into the water?"

□ "Yes."

□ "And then what happened?"

□ "The waves pushed me past a boat, I caught hold of a rope and hung on. Then I pulled myself up into the boat."

□ "Then what happened?"

□ "Then I sat there for awhile, didn't know what to do."

□ "Then?"

□ "Then I think I closed my eyes and fell asleep."

□ "You fell asleep?"

□ "I fell asleep."

□ "Then?"

□ "Then after about an hour the boat was close to the shore, so I got home."

□ "And that's all?"

□ "That's all."

□ "You weren't scared?"

□ "No."

□ "No?"

□ "I was a little scared. So I just kept saying God's name."

□ "What's your name?"

□ "Vignesh- but people don't call me that at home."

□ "What do they call you at home?"

□ "Pavi. Sometimes they call me Pavithra."

□ "Really?"

□ "Yeah. Many people on this island are called Pavithra."

□ "Why?"

□ "Just because."

□ I look up at this little guy to see if he's pulling a fast one on me. But no. He's serious.

□ "So what's my name?" I ask him.

□ "I don't know."

□ "What do you think it might be?"

□ "Aishwarya." The name of a popular actress. Now he's really teasing me.

□ They try out a few more names and then I let them off the hook.

□ "My name's Pavithra. People call me Pavi."

□ "Really?"

□ "Really."

□ Vignesh/Pavi smiles at me. A bond has been established.

□ It's time to head to the eye camp. I put out a hand to be helped up. Vignesh/Pavi

looks at for a second and then shakes it briskly.

□ "Hey -- help me up you."

□ "Oh."

□He motions to a grinning sidekick to assist, together they pull me to my feet. Such strong kids.

□Inside and out.

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□The woman in the schoolyard, Sharadha, has a sharp featured, sad face. Her husband is a fisherman in the Middle East. She talks to him on the island phone every week. Their home was washed away. She's living with relatives now, her two children are on the mainland living with their grandparents. "Do you have enough food?"

□"Yes. They gave us supplies."

□"What about clothes?"

□She makes a face. "They brought us such worthless clothes. We don't wear things like that. We're poor but even so we buy good quality clothes. The women here wear saris that cost Rs 300-400. Nylex sarees. Not cheap cotton ones. That's the kind of people we are."

□I swallow a smile. I am sitting there in a cheap cotton sari. My favorite kind. I wonder what kind of people that makes me.

□\*\*\*\*\*

□Dominic has set up lunch for us at the house opposite the school.

□The doorways are low and we stoop to enter. Inside they've laid out mats for us to sit on. Packets of lemon, tomato and yogurt rice with lime pickle arrive neatly packed in newsprint tied up with twine. Whose house is this I ask. No one answers. A thin woman from the small open yard in the back enters, hollows in her cheeks, her eyes very wide. "Is this your house?"

□"Yes," she says, "My daughter died."

□She says it very fast, pointing at the same time to a framed photograph of a little girl. Nirmala it says across the bottom.

□Born November 14th 1993. Died December 26th 2004.

□Nirmala is wearing a frock, and her face is freshly powdered. On top of her head is perched a small strand of orange flowers. She is not smiling, her small face has the serious semi-sowl of those unused to being posed for photographs.

□Over lunch I learn that she was the brightest and liveliest of three children. The photograph was taken at a school dance programme that she'd participated in.

□When the waters came she ran with the other children to the jetty. Her mother had been inside and before she knew what had happened her child was gone.

□Nirmala has an older sister who's 15. Seethalakshmi who cannot hear or talk. She hovers in the doorway smiling shyly at us. They have a younger brother as well who gazes briefly our way before scampering out of sight.

□"Let me show you the photographs," says the mother eagerly. She disappears into a small room on the side and soon comes out again with a small sheaf of photos.

□I flip through them. They are all, every single one, the same as the picture on the wall.

□ "She's beautiful," I say.

□"Yes," says the mother eagerly...and then in a slightly abashed

□tone, "There's only that one picture over and over again."

□"It's a beautiful picture."

□"Yes."

□She wants us to stay a couple of days. I wish we could but it is time to head back. I wish I knew what to say.

□ "We will be thinking of you and your family."

□ Her palms fly together as she nods.

□ "Come back someday."

□ "I will."

□We walk back to the jetty waiting for the boat to come in. I sit in the shade of a thatched roof on the sand and look out over the explanationless water.

□Such quietness inside.