

**THROUGH MY EYES**  
series editor Lyn White

# Malini

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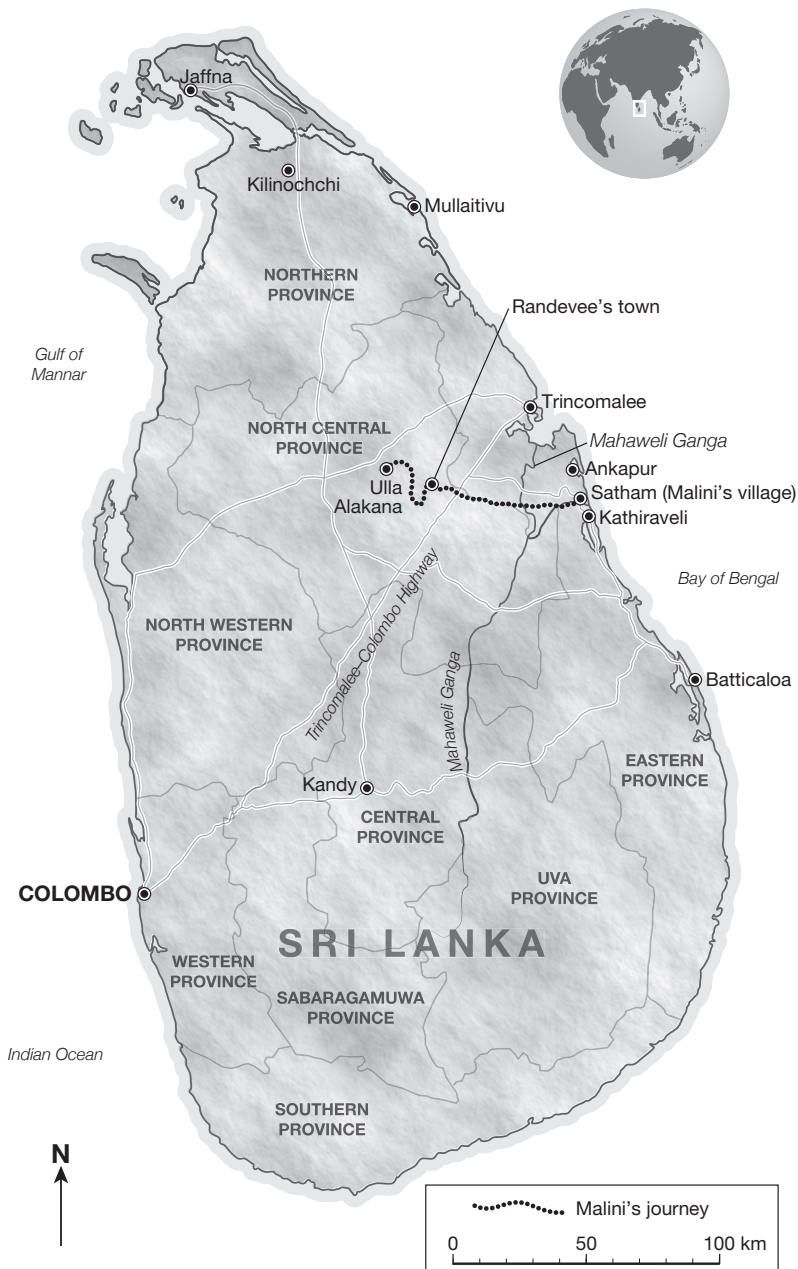
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To the people of Sri Lanka, with humility







# Chapter 1



**Malini watched the Tamil Tiger** commander intently.

She was standing with the other students under the six hemlocks that had been planted by the British half a century earlier.

The commander, dressed in his tiger-stripe uniform and peaked cap, had come to the school and told Malini's father, the principal, that he wished to address all of the students – twenty-two boys, one hundred and twenty-eight girls. It was a request that could not be refused: the Tiger commander was accompanied by ten armed soldiers.

‘This year,’ the commander said, ‘the war will be won. The soldier-martyrs of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam will tear the hearts from the chests of our enemies. In fire and blood, our homeland will be born. And you will play your part.’ He extended his hand towards a group of six boys standing together under one of the hemlocks, the youngest, Malini knew, just eleven years old.

‘Come to me,’ he said to the group of boys, then added, with an odd sort of courtesy, ‘Thagavaseithu, please.’

After some hesitation, the six boys walked to the front of the gathering and lined up beside the commander. He only ever took six boys at any one time.

Malini closed her eyes and offered a brief, silent prayer to Shiva. She had seen this a dozen times before.

Malini’s father looked away to the left, above the trees. His face was a mask of grief. The other teachers – ten of them, standing behind him – looked at the ground to disguise their emotions. The girls among the assembled students, a few of them, uttered little cries of dismay. The boys remained impassive.

Beside the commander was a stack of automatic rifles standing upright with their stocks on the ground and the barrels resting together, like the structure of a tent. The commander took up the rifles, two at a time, and handed one to each of the boys who had come forward. The boys accepted the rifles shyly.

The commander said, ‘Raise your guns.’

The boys lifted their rifles above their heads.

The commander said, ‘Death to the enemies of Tamil Eelam.’

The boys murmured, ‘Death to the enemies of Tamil Eelam.’

‘Louder!’ said the commander.

The boys cried out, ‘Death to the enemies of Tamil Eelam!’

Then the commander said, ‘Go back to your homes.

Say farewell to your father. Say farewell to your mother. A soldier will accompany you.'

The boys were smiling, perhaps because they thought it best to appear happy about being conscripted. Tears ran down the cheeks of the youngest boy, but he still attempted to smile.

Before the boys left, each with a soldier to watch him, Malini's father embraced them and kissed the tips of his fingers, then touched their foreheads.

Tears found a path down Malini's face. She would never see these boys again. They would fight the enemy, and they would die. Ghanan, Nalanan, Agilan, Cholla, Mihuthan, Nithi. In her heart, Malini said goodbye to each.



Malini's town of Satham lay among green fields on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka, close to where the blue waters of the Indian Ocean formed the vast Bay of Bengal. The city of Trincomalee reached out to Koddigar Bay fifty kilometres further north, while to the south, nearer than Trincomalee, the town of Kathiraveli sat just off the highway to Batticaloa.

Satham was big enough to have both a primary school and the high school that Malini attended. At age fourteen, she was in the ninth year of her education.

Satham was a Tamil town, one of many on this part of the coast. The Tamil people made up only twelve per cent of the island's population and they sought security by keeping close. This had never been more important

than in this time of civil war, when the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhalese were engaged in a fight to the death. Malini wondered if it was really true that all Tamils and all Sinhalese were enemies. Her father had told her that, for centuries, Tamils and Sinhalese had got along. It was only in the last sixty years that Tamils had felt so persecuted in their own land.

Malini knew the history of her country well. Once a Portuguese colony, then a British colony, Sri Lanka had barely known true independence in modern times up until 1948. The British soldiers marched down to the docks that year and boarded ships for England, leaving behind a nation of Tamils and Sinhalese anxious to preserve their identities in what was, in many ways, a brand new land. The new Sri Lanka was a democracy with one parliament, a vast patchwork of customs and two major religious faiths: Hinduism (the Tamil faith) and Buddhism (the Sinhalese faith). More than ever in the past, Tamils felt threatened by the majority Sinhalese. More than ever, the Sinhalese majority made the Tamil people feel as if Sri Lanka was not their home.

In the north of the island, where Tamils were in the majority, an army was formed in 1976, the LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam. This new army had one aim: to create in the north and east of the island a Tamil homeland. And so in 1983, the war had begun, and the bloodshed was frightening.

Malini thought of Satham as paradise. The soil in the fields surrounding the town was so rich that people

said you could throw a plum stone over your shoulder in the evening and find a fully grown tree in the morning. An exaggeration, of course, but it was true that the rice fields that stretched towards the hills in the west produced an abundant crop each year. Winds from the south-east brought in the monsoons from the Indian Ocean, filling hundreds of small streams, which in turn filled the many lakes that fed the rice fields. Even the weather was better in Malini's town than elsewhere on the eastern coast. In the hottest months of the year, from April to June, a cool breeze came off the ocean each evening and made the nights more bearable.

That afternoon, Malini collected her little sister from the primary school and they walked home together as they always did, not a long walk but a sad one. Malini told Banni about what had happened at school and Banni plagued her with questions she couldn't answer: *Would the boys who were conscripted today come home when the war was over? What would happen to their schooling? Would they still practise maths and history and all those things while they were fighting?* It was Banni's habit to come up with questions of this sort whenever the LTTE came to Malini's school for recruits, and usually Malini answered by saying, 'Yes...no...maybe...I don't know,' but today she simply stayed silent. A sense of a disaster waiting to unfold had settled on her heart. She had never before seen such undisguised grief on her father's face. He had always hidden his true feelings. She wanted to talk to her father and ask him if he knew something that she didn't know about the direction the war was taking.

What she really wanted was some reassurance, but she doubted that her father would have anything of that sort to offer her.

Malini's house was a three-bedroom bungalow built by the British ages ago as a residence for the school's principal. Malini's mother, who took her Tamil responsibilities more seriously than her husband and daughters, had set up no fewer than three shrines honouring twenty household gods – twenty out of the thousands worshipped by Hindus – and had draped half of the walls in the house with tapestries from Madras showing many of the heroes of Hindu sacred literature. All the same, the house kept its English character, with its fireplace and mantelpiece and its parlour off the kitchen.

Malini's room – and this was where she was now waiting for her father's return from the school, waiting and reading, restlessly, for the third time, an English novel by Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* – was far less gaudy than Banni's, which was decorated with posters of pop stars and pictures of the characters from Tamil soap operas. Malini's walls were covered with posters of famous writers purchased online from a shop in Bombay – Tamil writers, English writers, American writers, Sinhalese writers. Also a big poster of the periodic table of elements, and another with the title *The Eleven Most Beautiful Maths Equations*. None of the pop stars that adorned Banni's room. Malini also kept a small, personal shrine to Shiva in her room, with little plates of rice placed at the God's feet as offerings. When

she refreshed the plates, she never asked any favours for herself, only for those suffering in the war. Her first task when she arrived home – before she picked up *Wuthering Heights* – was to ask Shiva to watch over the boys who been taken from the school that morning.

She heard her father enter the house. She stopped reading and waited for him to drink the fruit juice her mother would have ready for him, then gave him further time to kiss Banni, who would be in front of the television, then sit at his desk in his study and enjoy a little rest. Ten minutes after his arrival home, Malini went to the study door, knocked, and asked permission to enter.

She first kissed her appa on the cheek, then, with a comb from her pocket, made his long, greying locks neat. It was an affectionate ritual between them, this combing of her father's hair. She would also straighten his tie before school in the morning, and make sure that the tip of a white handkerchief protruded from his coat pocket, in the English fashion. Neat hair, a straight tie, and a handkerchief in the pocket were things that Malini's amma barely noticed. She reserved her adjustments to her husband's appearance for those sacred days of the Hindu calendar when he dressed in traditional Tamil costume – pattu vetty, a long silk cloth worn like a sarong and tied at the waist.

Malini said, 'Appa, is it true that LTTE will win the war this year?'

'No,' he said, 'it is not true. Not in 2008.'

'Next year?'

‘No, Daughter, not this year, not next year. But if you ask me whether LTTE will lose the war this year, my answer will be different.’

‘Will the Tigers lose the war this year?’

‘Yes, Daughter. The government troops have entered the stronghold of the Tigers in the north. The Sri Lankan Army are fighting total war now. They do not care how many civilians they kill. They are more fanatical than the Tigers. But as the Tigers lose more of their stronghold in the north, they will become like madmen. These are our brothers and sisters in the faith and I pity them with all my heart. They are doomed.’

He took Malini’s hand. ‘They will lose. And it will be horrible. It will be horrible.’