

The Orphanage

5th October

I am wary about visiting the orphanage. Carole, based in Trincomalee, has told me so many stories. Predominantly, she has told how many such homes are run as private businesses. They are paid by the Government on the basis of headcount – on how many children they house. That can lead to perverse incentives; that can encourage abuse. Not of the children maybe – though perhaps of the children – but to the heart of the system itself. There are two sides to Carole's equation – on one are businesses that want to make money, on the other are the growing ranks of orphans. But there are also many poor families with multiple children, with many mouths to feed. I have heard stories of how orphanage owners and parents may be tempted to collude – to gain for themselves at the cost of a child. Active recruitment is not unknown; deals that are done, cuts that are made, resulting in children, not orphans, being placed in such homes. Of course, this is just a fraction of all, but it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

The orphanage we are going to see is owned by one of our directors. Our whole party assembles, and inevitably I join it. We drive through Batti's darkened streets, past INGOs and broken houses, then turn sharply down a lane. At the end of the lane there is light. The gates are pulled open by a mass of children, clapping and laughing delight.

We park in a courtyard beneath the trees. There is a large dried-mud forecourt with low buildings before us. To one side, an elevated platform on which girls in white suits practise karate. We are engulfed in a swarming sea of children. They pull at our hands, they draw up chairs, they invite us to sit beneath the trees. The girls, I guess, range

in age from five to eighteen or twenty. There are only girls here, and, strange as it seems, there appear to be no adults.

No one is prepared for this; we have come spontaneously and blind. Initially, there is some confusion. Our party is mostly male, and many are Sinhala. There are barriers of language and gender and age. A stand-off is assured.

But a stand-off does not occur, for the girls in their innocence bridge the divide. Driven by natural inquisitiveness, they edge closer towards us, shunting each other to the fore. Small groups encircle each of us, standing before us, asking our names. In turn, I ask them who they are. The first group I meet are six year olds, with smiling faces and pretty dresses, bashful but impulsively drawn. Then I meet with others, with older girls, who point out their sisters and tell of their studies, in awkward and broken English.

But who are they? I want to know how they've come to be here. I want to know their past. But I dare not touch on memories, I dare not open wounds. All I can see is a courtyard of children – eager, happy, laughing children – as one might find, or hope to find, anywhere in the world. Anywhere but here. Here I expected no laughter, no joy.

It is somebody's birthday, and the girls come in and amongst our group offering biscuits and sweets.

The Director appears, and we go to his office. It is a small room dominated by a large glass cabinet, and the cabinet is full of trophies. He points behind us to the opposite wall, where there are countless rows of medals. Hundreds of them. We ask him what they are. These, he tells us, have been won by the girls, for judo, karate, taekwondo. They

have been won at District and national levels. Some have been won abroad. With pride he relays what his girls have achieved. Clean sweeps of medals at competitions, representation on national teams. I glance out of the window. Children are hanging from the bars, staring in on us; children are playing in the courtyard; children are standing on the platform punching at their shadows. It is another world.

Surreal. But it isn't the story I most want to hear. I turn the conversation. What is the history of these girls? That is the story I want to learn.

Steered by the monopoly of my questions, the Director shows us his orphanage, revealing the stories of girls in his care. He says all of the girls who live on this site have been orphaned by conflict, not the Tsunami. From across the District, and from every age, they have come and will stay till adult. They have their lessons in the local school, and in the evenings they learn martial arts. It is good for their confidence; it brings discipline and desire; it gives a shared purpose, a goal.

But what of the trauma, I ask? How does he deal with that? There are no counsellors here, no records of progress, no formal systems of help. That help, he tells us, comes from within: from the older girls supporting the younger, protecting, sharing their pain and their love. Here they stay, and here they transition – from those in need to those who are needed – healing themselves through the sorrow of others, finding love and contentment through loneliness.

The Director helps the girls to find jobs, he has even helped one get married. Only then, once they are secure,

does he feel they are ready to leave. He fights off the intrusion of Government, the do-good ditherings of INGOs. Within the local community he builds another of his own – a community shaped by courage and laughter, a community built of hope.

Of the eighty girls who are here, eight or ten were once child soldiers. He tells of their trauma, their history. He says that one of the girls had been part of a cadre which captured two army deserters. The first they tortured until he was dead. The other they killed by lethal injection, swiftly and painlessly. Why had they chosen such different deaths? Because they needed to learn. They needed to see the extent of the pain a body could take before it gave out. They needed to dissect the other body to find out what was inside, for in finding out how a body works it helped them to heal and to kill.

Above his words, as he tells his account, I hear the laughter of girls in the courtyard playing invisible games. I stand up and go outside.

Outside, in the shadows of darkness, a game of dodge ball is in full swing. Two lines of girls are hurling a ball at a group of others stood in between. Each time one is hit there's a peal of pleasure – pure and delighted, unfeigned. Pathulla is there. And Mutu too. They fling the ball with all their force; it shoots through the dark across the mud; it traps a pair of dancing feet or is caught by a girl on the opposite side.

The game is furious; the enjoyment utter. Everyone is engaged. I thought in my foolishness I would be able to tell which of these girls were once child soldiers. But nothing can tell them apart.

The game ends. Now music starts up, and the girls are dancing, or seated nearby and clapping their hands. The dancing is wild and free; the girls expressing themselves, their emotions, with no self-consciousness, no reserve. They tug at our arms to make us join in, delighting to have us with them. Can it always be like this? How can it always be like this? Is there no corresponding pain? And what happens then, when the pain predominates? How do they function then?

It is time to leave. Again, a sudden bashfulness. An endless, repetitive saying goodbye. Giggles and waves and genuine sadness that we are departing so soon. Groups cluster around the van, as if to prevent our departure. We wind down the windows, we smile and we wave – touching hands, saying goodbye, promising to see them again.

The engine starts. We drive through the gates. Back into Batticaloa and darkness. I turn around in my seat. Behind me I see a thin ray of light – light disrupted by a sea of hands, waving a long farewell.