

OBSERVATIONS ON CIVIL WARS:

## PRISONERS OF WAR

*The lure of gunfire and the enemy within.*

By SCOTT ANDERSON

I've never known precisely what to call it, but this is how it begins: heat, thick tropical heat, still air that smells of sweat and paddy water, and Athuma being led into the hut, the afternoon sun behind her so that she is only a silhouette against the hard light. She moves toward me, emerges from shadow, and I see her, always as if for the first time, a slender woman with long black hair, a floral-print sarong, and that is where I stop it -- I've become quite good at stopping it there. But if I am not vigilant, the scene continues. Athuma is in the wicker chair, just four feet away, and then she leans toward me, looks into my eyes -- hers are brown with flecks of yellow -- and is about to speak, and if I am not vigilant, I hear her voice again.

What I can say is that this remembrance comes when it wants to. I can be content or unhappy, on a crowded street or standing alone, I can be anywhere at any time, and I will suddenly be returned to that hut, all the sounds and smells and tastes there waiting for me, the black silhouette of Athuma fixed in my eye like a sunspot, and until I close off the vision there is the peculiar feeling that I am being asked to try again to save Athuma, that the events of that day ten years ago have yet to be lived.

The sensation comes on this night, the second of November 1995. I am in Chechnya, standing in the courtyard of a house, trying to count off the artillery against the sky. Normally, this is not difficult -- you see the flash and count off, five seconds to a mile, until you hear the blast -- but on this night so many shells fall their flashes are like sheet lightning against the low clouds, the roar rolling over the land, a steady white noise of war.

But I am patient when it comes to such things, and I wait for my moment. I spot three quick, nearly

overlapping, pulses of light streak out along the base of the clouds, and I begin to count. I count for a long time, so long I imagine I've missed the moment, but at fifty-five seconds I hear it: three soft knocks, little more than taps amid the avalanche of sound.

Fifty-five seconds. Eleven miles. They are shelling Bamut again. It is a small village up in the mountains, a place I think about so much I no longer even refer to it by name. They have shelled it every night I have been in Chechnya -- just a few dozen rounds some nights, several hundred on others. The shelling has never been as heavy as tonight.

As I have done many times these past few days, I travel the path to the village in my mind. Not eleven miles by road, more like thirty-five. The paved road cuts across the broad plain until it climbs into the foothills. After a time, a narrow dirt track appears, and it leads across the river and into the mountains. At some unmarked spot on this track, perhaps an hour or so past the river, neutral ground is left and the war zone begins. One is then quite close to the village, maybe just another half hour, but there are mines sometimes, and sometimes the helicopter gunships sneak in over the hills to destroy whatever they find.

The road ends at the village. It is built along the exposed flank of a mountain valley, and the Russians are on the surrounding heights with their tanks and artillery batteries. The way in is also the only way out, but any decision to leave is up to the rebels, and they do not trust outsiders. Since this war began eleven months ago, a number of people have vanished in the village, and there are stories of torture, that some of those missing were buried alive. I have been frightened of the place since I first heard of it. On this night, its name sounds like death to me.

I am both astonished and appalled by what is about to happen. I have come to Chechnya to look for a middle-aged American man who disappeared here seven months ago. He was last seen alive in the village. I did not know this man, and he is dead, of course, but there is a part of me that has not accepted this, that holds to the fantastic notion that he is still alive and I might save him, and in the morning I will go to the village in hopes of finding him.

But this is nothing; who cares if I choose to do something stupid? What is appalling is that I have maneuvered four others into sharing my journey, and on this night, I can no longer ignore the fact that I have done this simply because I need them, each of them, that in the very simple moral equation between my needs and the safety of others, I have chosen myself. Not that this changes much; even now, I feel incapable of stopping what I have engineered.

If I wanted to keep things simple, I would say that this is a story about war, about modern war and the way it is fought. Or I would say that this is a story about obsession, the dangerous lure of faith and hope. What would be harder for me to explain is that this is also a story about truth. Not the truth of the mind -- rational, intellectual, able to make order out of chaos -- but emotional truth, what is known before the mind takes over, what seeps in when the mind relaxes, the truth your heart believes.

Rationally, I know I did not kill Athuma. I was in a difficult situation, and I did what I could under the circumstances to save her. I remind myself of this often. The few people to whom I've told the story reassure me of this.

But there is something about that day I have never told anyone. Before Athuma was led into the hut, I believed I was the one they meant to kill. When the vision comes and I am sent back to that afternoon, my very first sensation upon seeing Athuma is relief, a profound relief, because it is only then I understand that I am to live, that it is she who is about to die. And in that moment, there is the blossoming of my own private truth. Emotional, irrational -- to anyone else, perhaps absurd -- but whenever I see Athuma's silhouette, I believe that she is coming forward to die in my place, that once again I am being called upon to play a part in her murder.

I don't wish to make too much of this. What happened to me is nothing compared with what happens to other people in war. And, of course, what happened to me is nothing compared with what happened to Athuma.

Yet the events in that hut carved a neat division in my life. Before I was one way, and afterward I was another. And just as my life before made it inevitable that one day I would come face-to-face with Athuma -- some Athuma -- so after her it was inevitable that one day I would come to this night in Chechnya.

I first went to war because I thought it would be exciting -- and I was right. It is the most exciting thing I have ever experienced, a level of excitement so overwhelming as to be impossible to prepare for, impossible to ever forget.

This attraction is not something to be discussed in polite company, of course. Yet I know I am hardly alone in my reaction. For a great number of people, and perhaps especially for those who traditionally have been called upon to wage it -- young men -- war has always been an object of intense fascination, viewed as life's ultimate test, its most awful thrill. Of all the easy, comfortable aphorisms that have ever been coined about war -- that it is hell, that it tries men's souls -- I suspect the odd utterance of General Robert E. Lee, made at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, may come closest to capturing the complicated emotions of those who have actually experienced it. "It is well that war is so terrible," Lee said, gazing over a valley where thousands of soldiers would soon die, "or we should grow too fond of it."

But if the guilty attraction endures, it now comes with a heavier price. This is because the modern war zone bears little resemblance to that of 130, or even 50, years ago. What were once the traditional inhabitants of a battlefield -- soldiers, or journalists like myself -- today represent only a tiny minority, their numbers overwhelmed by the purely innocent, the civilians who find themselves trapped in war's grip. On this modern battlefield, comparisons to the Fredericksburgs and Waterloos and Guadalcanals of history -- ritualized slaughters between opposing armies -- are largely useless. For a true comparison, one must reach back to man at his most primitive, to the time when barbarous hordes swept over the countryside laying waste to everything and everyone in their path, when a "battlefield" was defined simply by the presence of victims.

A few simple statistics illustrate this regression. In the American Civil War, civilian casualties were so low that no one even bothered to count them. From 1900 to 1950, civilians constituted roughly 50 percent of all war-related casualties. By the 1960s, civilians represented 63 percent of all casualties, and by the 1980s, the figure was 74 percent. For every "conventional war," such as Operation Desert Storm, that pushes the percentage down a fraction, there is a Bosnia or a Rwanda that sends it ever upward. The world has seen many of these wars. Since 1980, according to World Military and Social Expenditures, a periodic compendium, 73 wars have raged around the globe. "War," of course, is a relative term. According to human rights groups, last year alone there were 22 "high intensity conflicts" (defined as 1,000 or more deaths), 39 "low intensity conflicts," and 40 "serious disputes." The 250-odd wars of this century have taken a collective toll

of 110 million lives. There are those who say that the truest mark of the last hundred years is not industrialism, or the rise of America, or the moon landing, or the computer, but the waging of war -- that war is the greatest art form of our century. Human ingenuity, it appears, has perfected the technologies of death and, like a kid with a new slingshot, cannot help but find targets everywhere.

The result is that today's "hallowed ground" is not at all like the pastoral valley Robert E. Lee gazed upon at Fredericksburg, is barren of the trappings of heroic folly that can be immortalized by poets and painters. Instead, this hallowed ground is a ditch or a filthy alley or a cluster of burned homes, and it is inordinately populated by the elderly, by mothers and their children, by those not quick enough to escape.

To be sure, there are the lucky few who are able to traverse this landscape with a degree of physical immunity (journalists, most obviously, but also soldiers and guerrillas now that most "battle" means the risk-free killing of the defenseless rather than fighting other combatants), but even they cannot arrange an immunity for the soul. If for them war still holds an excitement, it is an excitement that the healthy conscience recognizes as obscene. And if war can still be viewed as life's greatest challenge, it is now less a test of any concept of courage or manhood than of simple human resiliency.

As a child, I always thought of war as something that would eventually find me. The youngest son of an American foreign-aid officer, I was raised in the East Asian nations of South Korea and Taiwan, briefly in Indonesia -- "frontline states," as they were called in the 1960s, in the global military crusade against Communism. Although culturally very different, there was a certain continuity to these places: in each, the people lived in thrall of a venal American-allied dictatorship, soldiers ruled the streets under martial law or state-of-siege decrees, and the long-awaited Red invasion, we were constantly told, could come at any moment. In South Korea, soldiers rounded up and imprisoned student demonstrators, then labeled them Communist provocateurs. The entrance to my elementary school in Taiwan was guarded by an enormous anti-aircraft gun, two soldiers constantly scanning the skies with binoculars for some sign of the marauding Red Chinese. Every October 10 -- Double-Ten Day -- Chiang Kai-Shek amassed tens of thousands of his troops in Taipei's central square and exhorted them to war, crying, "Back to the Mainland!" as cheers rang and artillery sounded.

This spirit of war was all around me. My father had fought in World War II, had been an eyewitness to the attack on Pearl Harbor. My godfather was an Air Force major. As the Vietnam War escalated in the late '60s, our small American enclave in the hills above Taipei became home to the families of army officers

fighting there, their children my new playmates. When I was seven, the first G.I. I knew, George, gave my brother and me green berets from Saigon and took us to the Taipei zoo -- this was on his last R&R visit before he was killed in the Mekong Delta.

War, then, came to seem like a natural phenomenon to me, a cyclical storm always massing on the near horizon. Eventually, I was sure, the right conditions would develop, the winds would shift, and war would come to where I was. Because this was in the natural order of things, I was not frightened; if anything, I awaited it with impatience. I looked forward to Double-Ten Day the way other children did Christmas, and each time I watched Chiang Kai-Shek raise an enfeebled fist in the air and squawk his call to battle, I felt a shivering thrill and thought to myself, "This time he means it, this time it's really going to happen."

But as fate would have it, war never did come to me. Instead, I had to go find it. I was twenty-four and it was August of 1983.

For five months, a girlfriend and I had traveled through Europe, hitchhiking and back-packing, slowly going through the money we had saved from a year of working in restaurants. In Athens, we were down to \$300 and our return tickets to the United States. Neither of us wanted to go home yet, but we differed on how best to forestall it. She was leaning toward picking grapes in Italy or hanging out on a kibbutz in Israel. I was leaning toward Beirut.

Beirut had been in the news a lot that year. Since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon the previous summer, the city had sunk ever deeper into chaos, a free-fire zone for a bewildering array of armies and private militias. Four Western nations -- the United States, Britain, France, and Italy -- had sent in troops, the Multinational Peacekeeping Force, to restore order, and now they were being attacked as well; by August, the American Embassy had been torn in half by a car bomb that killed sixty-three, and a dozen-odd Marines had been killed or wounded at their isolated outposts around the city.

I'd heard vague stories about how news agencies and wire services were always looking for "stringers" in dangerous, newsworthy places, and Beirut seemed to fit the bill. Just what "stringing" entailed, I hadn't a clue, but I managed to convince my girlfriend otherwise.

From the moment we stepped off the plane at Beirut airport and I saw the shell-pocked terminal building, the ring of tanks and armored personnel cars, the soldiers holding back a huge throng of civilians desperate to find some way, any way, out of the city, I felt I was in a familiar place, the place of my childhood visions.

And, I must admit, it was just as thrilling as I always imagined it would be. At night, I lay in bed and

listened to the crack of sniper fire and the peculiar feline scream of Katyusha rockets, the low rumble of artillery from the battles taking place in the Chouf foothills some fifteen miles away. By day, I was a tourist of war. Most mornings, I would leave the relative safety of our hotel on Rue Hamra, a main commercial street of West Beirut, and walk the mile down to the shattered old city center around Martyrs Square, inch my way as close as possible to the firefights that periodically sprang up along the Green Line, the no-man's-land separating Muslim West Beirut from the Christian East. Walking the ruined streets, past buildings that had been blasted so many times they resembled melting houses of wax, hearing the occasional gunshot echo from some unseen sniper, I felt exquisitely alive. It was as if I had supernatural powers: I heard the slightest sound from blocks away, my vision seemed telescopic, I could isolate the faintest scents in the air. And through it all came a strange, ethereal quality, a sense that I wasn't really there but viewing everything from a remove, through a lens; and this quality rendered pedestrian issues -- of self-preservation, of what was bravery and what was stupidity -- moot. I was invisible, invulnerable; a bullet could not find me.

I could justify my tourism, of course: I was looking for a job. As I made the rounds of the different news bureaus, I was greeted with puzzlement, mixed, I imagine, with contempt -- the same contempt I would later feel when meeting dilettantes in war zones. Some journalists urged me to leave Beirut. Others were quietly encouraging. The level of violence was not yet to a point where they needed another hand, but I was to check back if something big happened.

I had been swept up in the madness of the place, but my girlfriend had not. To her, Beirut was just an ever-unfolding tragedy. The sight of the amputees hobbling along the waterfront promenade, the white fear in the faces of the young Marines guarding the new American Embassy saddened her to tears, and after a few days she stopped accompanying me on my walks, would stay in the hotel reading books and writing letters.

One day, a firefight that had started down at the Green Line in the early morning gradually moved up the hill toward us; by noon, I estimated it to be about a half-mile away, the concussions causing the hotel room to shake. I had learned to temper my enthusiasm around my girlfriend -- it disgusted her -- and for an hour or so I pretended to read, trying to invent a plausible excuse to go outside.

"I think I'll check in with Reuters," I said, tossing my book aside. "Want to come?"

She looked up from her letter writing. She was not the least bit fooled. "Go ahead."

With guilty pleasure, I left the hotel and started down Rue Hamra, which was oddly deserted, in the direction of the shooting. When I came to Clemenceau Place, I stopped.

The small park had once been beautiful but had long ago been destroyed, most of its trees shorn to stumps by shellfire. I had walked through Clemenceau Place many times on my wanderings to the old city center, another half-mile on, and there were usually vendors and children, old men lolling on the grass. On this day there was no one.

The gunfire sounded very close, and I studied the buildings on the far side of the park for snipers. For the first time since arriving in Beirut, I felt a glimmer of dread, made stronger somehow by the bright sunlight and heavy stillness of the leaves in the few remaining trees. I decided to go back, but as I turned, I saw an Arab man standing perhaps twenty feet away. I was startled that I hadn't noticed him before. He wore a long white robe, appeared to be about forty, and he, too, was staring across the park, as if waiting for some sign.

I don't know who stepped first, but without words passing, we started through the park together. We walked at the same speed, separated by some twenty feet, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the white of his robe, and it encouraged me.

We had gone only a very short distance, maybe thirty paces, when the white of his robe slipped from my vision. I stopped and looked over to him. He was standing still, his head bent forward, and I saw that he was working his lips furiously, licking them, biting them, the way some insane people do. Then he began to walk in a small, tight circle, his left leg kicking out, his right dragging slightly, his lips still moving but producing no sound. After his second or third turn on the walkway, I noticed a small red spot on his robe, over his heart, and I saw how this spot grew each time he turned to face me. After five or six circles, he abruptly sat down on the concrete, the force causing his head to jerk, his legs splayed out before him. With the thumb and forefinger of both hands, he pinched the fabric of his robe on either side of the spreading red spot and pulled it away from his chest, as if it were a stain he did not want to have touch his skin.

I felt rooted to the ground. I knew that I should either go to him or run, get out of Clemenceau Place, but I was incapable of deciding. Then the man fell onto his left side, his hands not breaking his fall, his fingers still clutching the fabric, and I knew he was dead from the way his body settled on the concrete. I turned and walked back the way we had come.

As I returned to the hotel, I tried to find meaning in what had happened. I had just watched a person die, and I knew it had to mean something, but no matter how hard I tried, I simply could not imbue the event with much significance. We had walked together across the park, and a bullet had come, and it had found him and it had not found me, and he had died and I had not. That was all.

It took me some time to realize that this -- the sheer lack of meaning in what had happened -- was the lesson. War's first horror is not that people die for perverse reasons, for a cause, but that they die for no discernible reason at all. They die because they guess wrong. They seek shelter in buildings when they should flee onto open ground, they stay on open ground when they should hide in buildings, they trust in their neighbors when they should fear them, and none of it is knowable -- nothing is revealed as foolish or wrong or naive -- until it is too late. All that the death in Clemenceau Place meant was that the Arab man should not have attempted to cross the park that afternoon, and it was this very paucity of meaning that stunned me, that I wished not to see.

Others have likened the sound of an artillery bombardment to the sky being ripped apart. I don't know. What I can say is that after a time it no longer even seems like a sound but something animate. It travels through the ground, and you first feel the ache in your knees, then in your upper chest, and before long you can start imagining that it is inside you and will not leave. I wonder if this is why people go mad during bombardments; not the fear of a quick death, of a shell finding you, but the fear of a slow one, the sense that the constant thrumming through your body is inflicting violence from within. And in Chechnya, these thoughts are from eleven miles away, from perfect safety.

The courtyard I am standing in is an expanse of concrete enclosed by an eight-foot brick wall. Along the far wall is a fallow flower bed. I cross the concrete and step onto the bare earth. The vibrations are much softer here, barely noticeable. I lean my back against the wall, soothed by the stillness.

Ryan comes out of the house. I realize by the way he peers around the courtyard that he can't see me in the dark. For a moment I think he will go back inside, but then he sits on the steps, leans onto his knees.

I am not in the mood to deal with Ryan. He is twenty-two -- a kid, really, considering where I have brought him -- and a couple of years ago he left his native Southern California to scratch out an existence teaching English in Moscow. When I offered him \$150 a day to come to Chechnya as my interpreter, he jumped at the chance. He is a good guy, intelligent and sweet-natured, but he left behind a pleasant life in Moscow, a girlfriend he wants to marry, and he has no idea what he has gotten himself into. I have not told him that he was chosen to make this journey simply because no one else would.

I should feel grateful to Ryan, but I don't. Rather, he irritates me. I have attributed this to his talkativeness, his fierce determination to fill every minute of his days with words. When we first arrived

here, I tried to explain that the most important safeguard on a battlefield was to listen, but Ryan has either been unwilling or unable to heed this advice -- and on this matter I have not been patient. Now I tell him to be quiet fifteen or twenty times a day, and the more he talks the less I do.

After some minutes, I step from the flower bed and walk softly across the courtyard. I'm only a few feet away when Ryan jumps, startled by my presence.

"Whoa," he says. "Where were you?"

I don't answer.

He moves over on the step, clearing a space for me, but I remain standing, lean against the stair railing. I feel the ache in my knees again, the vibrations in the metal rail against my shoulder. "They're really blasting the shit out of it, aren't they?" Ryan says.

I don't answer.

"It's never been this bad before. Are they doing air strikes?"

"Tanks and artillery," I reply. "No planes."

I'm quite sure he doesn't like me -- how could he like someone who tells him to shut up twenty times a day? -- but Ryan maintains appearances. More than anything, I think he is impressed by how I watch and listen out here, imagines me to be something of an idiot savant when it comes to gauging danger.

He has no way of realizing that, in fact, I know very little. Even though it is elementary physics, I do not know, for example, if the sounds I hear, which I carefully count off each night, come when the shells are launched or when they explode. I don't know if the count is thrown off by wind or topography. I don't really know if what I am hearing are tank or artillery rounds. And I still imagine that knowing these things could be important, that knowledge alone might somehow keep us safe.

"Do you believe the stories about them burying people alive?" Ryan asks.

"They're rumors," I say.

"I know, but do you think they're true?"

He is apprehensive, of course, as we all are, and it would take very little from me to reassure him, to at least take the edge off.

"How would I know?" I say. "How in the fuck would I know?"

One night six weeks ago, I sat on the back of a houseboat on a Texas lake with the twenty-nine-year-old son of the man I have come to look for. We sat there for many hours, drinking beer and talking -- about women and football and Mexico, only occasionally about his father. At around 4:00 a.m., after a long silence, both of us staring out at the black water, he turned to me.

"I don't want you to go to Chechnya," he said. "It's not worth it. My father's dead. It's not worth someone else getting killed."

The son had recently ended his own four-month search for his father in Chechnya, and over the course of

a few days in Texas we had become close. Now he stared down at the beer can clasped in his hand, then took a gulp from it. "At least promise me you won't do anything crazy."

He was not used to talking to another man in this heartfelt way, and neither was I. I drank from my beer and looked out at the water. "I promise."

In the six weeks since that night, I have offered a number of variations on this promise. To my family and friends, it was that I would be careful, that I would not do anything foolish. To those who knew the details of the story, it was more specific, that I would not attempt to reach the village. I was asked to make this promise so many times that I began to deliver it preemptively -- "well, I'm certainly not going to take any chances" -- reinforcing the point with an incredulous little laugh, as if the very idea was bizarre. And the truth is, before I came here I believed my promises.

"What if they start shelling while we're there?" Ryan asks.

I turn to him. He is looking up at me, moon-faced. This is something I haven't considered. In the time we've been in Chechnya, they have never shelled the village during the day, always at night, and we have planned our journey to be well away before dark. But they've never shelled the village as they are doing tonight, and it finally occurs to me that it might be the prelude to a ground assault.

"Get into a ditch," I say. "If there isn't a ditch, get to a low wall, the closest low wall you see."

I think of telling him more -- of explaining why he should go to a low wall instead of a high one, that if he can see the explosions it means that he is against an exposed wall and needs to get around to the other side -- but I know he won't remember any of it if shells start coming in. I doubt he'll even remember the little I've said, and I have an image of him standing in the middle of a road -- slack-jawed and paralyzed -- as the world around him disappears.

"You have to understand something," I tell him. "You will be on your own. In an artillery attack, everyone is on their own. If you freeze and stay in the open, I won't come out for you, no one will come out for you. It's not like in the movies. Do you understand?"

Ryan nods, but in his eyes I see a hint of bemusement, as if he is trying to be respectful and suitably grave but not really buying any of it. I am reminded of what I must have been like at his age, politely enduring the lectures of the correspondents and photographers in Beirut. I'm sure I had the same reaction, the same expression. At twenty-two, you can't conceive of dying.

But this is a different situation than Beirut -- Ryan is here because I am here, he is following me -- and his expression means quite a bit more. In his eyes, he is saying, "I know you won't leave me out there, I know

you'll come out for me," and that smugness, that juvenile conviction that I will protect him, angers me.

It is then that I understand the deeper source of my irritation with Ryan. I am irritated by how easily and blithely he left his girlfriend, his happy, pauper's life in Moscow, and placed his fate in the hands of someone like me for \$150 a day. I cannot possibly blame him for this -- I would have done the same at his age -- but I am infuriated by his trust in me.

For a long time, I did not learn anything worth knowing by going to war, and then, finally, I did. It happened on a November evening in 1986 in Uganda, maybe an hour before dark, when, glancing out the window of a moving car, I saw an old man, thin and bare-chested, standing in an overgrown field, swinging a machete.

I think what I first noticed was the intensity with which he worked. In Uganda, as everywhere in the tropics, people laboring in the fields pace themselves for the heat, maintain a slow, steady rhythm, but this old man wielded his machete with a passionate energy, arcing it high over his head, swinging it down hard. I asked my driver to stop the car and, from the open window, watched the old man for a few minutes. Then I got out and started across the field toward him.

The grass was very high, almost to my chest, and I remember thinking it odd how uneven the ground was, how it kept crunching under my feet. Hearing my approach, the man stopped his work and watched me. I saw that he was not as old as I had thought, perhaps only forty-five or so, his face and body aged prematurely by peasant life. I couldn't read his expression -- not friendly, not curious, really no expression at all beyond a steady stare. I came to the space he had cleared and saw the two piles he was making -- one of clothing, another of bones -- and I understood then that we were standing in a killing field, that the crunching I'd felt under my feet had been the breaking of human bones.

I had come to Uganda because my older brother, Jon Lee, and I were writing a book together. We had already collaborated on one book, and this time we decided to compile an oral history of modern war by spending a year going from one war zone to the next interviewing soldiers and guerrillas and the civilians caught between them. With a meager advance from a publisher, we packed our bags and set out, to Northern Ireland, to the Sudan, now to Uganda, where one cycle of civil war had recently ended and another had just started.

Beginning a few miles north of the capital of Kampala was the Luwero Triangle, a verdant patch of farmland that had once been home to one million members of the Baganda tribe. Between 1981 and early 1986, it had been the vortex of a civil war that drifted into genocide; the Ugandan military had sealed off the Triangle and tried to erase it from existence, razing

villages, murdering an estimated quarter-million people, and sending the rest into the bush or to concentration camps. When Jon Lee and I arrived in October 1986, the old government was gone, the rebels were in power, and the survivors were starting to return. They came back to a place where nature had reclaimed the fields, where their shattered homes had settled to mud, and in every village they built a memorial to the horror that had been visited on them, a display of the bones and skulls of their fallen.

For several weeks, we made periodic sojourns into the Triangle, interviewing survivors, chronicling the atrocities, watching the harvest of the dead. Everywhere were people carrying bundles of bones on their backs, on their heads, hauling them to communal places, where the remains were laid out with mathematical orderliness -- tibias in one row, spines in another, skulls arrayed in descending order of size. The survivors then walked among these displays, studying first one skull and then another, hoping, it seemed, that they might somehow recognize those that belonged to their own families. It was as if, in their state of suspended shock, they had reverted to what they knew: gathering from the fields, carrying to market, examining the yield.

With Jon Lee up north, tracking the newest cycle of war, I had decided to make one more trip into the Triangle. It was while leaving, heading back to Kampala with another tape collection of atrocities, that I noticed the man in the field with his machete.

There are things about that evening I cannot explain. The man and I never spoke, but I intuitively knew a good deal about him. I knew he had just returned to the Triangle, that the killing field was his land, that he was looking for his family. I began to help him.

This was not easy, because there is nothing mathematical or orderly about a killing field. Amid the weeds, bits of rotted cloth were strewn like garbage, tamped into the earth by the rains, and the bones lay scattered without pattern -- a pelvic bone here, two skulls there. I remember thinking that it was pointless, that we would never be able to find what the farmer was looking for, but then I saw that he had a system. The bones he ignored, just threw them onto the pile. It was the clothes he studied. Each time his slashing revealed a piece of cloth, he would lift it with the tip of his machete and scrutinize it for a familiar pattern before throwing it on the pile and going on.

I found a stick and began to do the same. I would poke at the cloth until it came free from the earth or the bones it encased, then pick it up with the end of the stick and carry it to him. He would stop his labors to look it over, maybe scrape off some dirt to see the pattern, and then he would turn away without a word, and I'd drop the cloth on the pile and go back to my spot.

We went on like that for a long time, maybe thirty or forty minutes. The sun dropped to the tree line,

and the land started to get that heavy gold light that comes to the tropics in the evening. I remember thinking how beautiful it was out there, how peaceful despite what had happened, as if the land were trying to heal itself, and then I realized I wasn't hearing the thrush of the machete anymore, and I straightened out of the tall grass and turned toward the farmer. He was about thirty feet away, standing stock-still and staring at me. A piece of brown and white cloth hung from the tip of his machete, and even from that distance I could see it was part of a woman's dress, that he had found his wife's dress. In his eyes was a hatred deeper than any I had ever felt, a rage without end, and I realized it wasn't passing through me; it wasn't as if I happened to be where his eyes were fixed: the hatred was directed at me, meant for me.

I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything. I didn't go to him, I didn't speak, I, don't think I even looked sad for him. The most I could do was avert my gaze, stare off across the field. Then I turned and went back to the car and told my driver to take me to Kampala. I know I didn't look back, but sometimes I imagine I did, and in this false memory, the farmer is watching me go, the scrap of his wife's dress dangling from his blade, and across the expanse of the sun-struck field I feel the burn of his hatred.

And here, finally, was something worth learning. War is all about hatred, and the hatred between combatants is only the easiest kind. At that moment of discovery, I believe the farmer hated all the world, not just the men who had murdered his family. He hated me for being a witness, hated himself for having survived, hated his wife for dying and leaving him alone. After that evening, I understood that it is impossible to go through a war and not learn how to hate.

Every morning in Chechnya I awaken with a start, instantly alert, and this morning is no different. Out the window, I see the blue-black of dawn. I stare up at the ceiling and listen. Somewhere far off is the sound of a rooster. The shelling has stopped. I think of who will be making the trip today, three of us in this house, two others sleeping a half-mile away. I estimate the time to be 5:00 A.M. We are to leave at 8:00.

I go to the basin and throw water on my face, then walk through the house. All is bathed in the milky wash of first light. I pass Ryan. He is sprawled on the bed, snoring. Nothing interrupts his sleep.

The front room holds a table with four chairs and the narrow cot where Stanley sleeps. He is on his back, perfectly still, his hands folded on his chest. Every time I've seen him asleep he is in this position, as if he doesn't move at all during the night. Stanley is forty-six, ten years older than I am, an American living in Paris. He arrived in Moscow two weeks ago wearing an all-

black outfit -- black hiking boots, black jeans, black shirt, black jacket, black knit cap -- and he has not changed out of it since.

Our first meeting was marked by a certain mutual wariness. I knew Stanley had a reputation for taking chances, a war photographer who liked to get as close as possible to his subject matter, and his manner at that first meeting -- his low-pulse calm, the watchful stare of his eye -- made me wonder if he might get us killed in Chechnya. I knew he was wondering the same thing about me. I think we both saw reflections of ourselves in the other, and this was both good and bad: we could count on the other to watch and listen, to know what to do in a bad situation, but it wasn't like there was going to be safety in numbers on this trip. Whatever affinity exists between us does not translate into a need to share personal information. What we talk about, when we talk, is the wars we have been to and where this one is headed.

Before we got to Chechnya, I had no intention of trying to reach the village, the journey was impossible, insane. But, as often happens in these sorts of situations, there occurred a confluence of events, of coincidences, that began to make it seem possible -- and then, quite quickly, what had seemed merely possible began to feel like destiny. I happened to meet a rebel liaison who said the journey could be arranged, who even wrote out a coded message of introduction for me to present to the village commander. Then I happened to meet Alex, a relief worker with a four-wheel-drive ambulance and a stockpile of medical supplies, who agreed to attempt a "mercy mission" into the village, with us -- Stanley, Ryan, and me -- going along on the pretense of documenting the humanitarian effort. With such an extraordinary convergence of good luck, how could I not go?

Of course, riding this wave of good fortune meant overlooking certain details. The man I was looking for had also gone to the village with an interpreter and rebel credentials. He, too, had gone in an ambulance laden with medical supplies. And he had gone with an insurance factor I could not hope to arrange: two doctors who were known in the village. None of it had helped; the doctors and the interpreter had simply disappeared as well.

As the days here pass, though, it has become increasingly easy to forget all this. A kind of resignation has settled upon us. Events are happening of their own accord, momentum has built to such a degree that there are no longer any decisions to be made. Whether due to destiny or some kind of group psychosis, we are being propelled forward; the time for debate and reason has slipped away.

In the front room of the house, I quietly pull a chair out from the table. It makes a creak when I sit, and I glance over at Stanley. He is a light sleeper, given to

popping up at the slightest sound, but the noise doesn't rouse him.

My notebook is on the table, and I flip through the pages until I find the encoded letter of introduction from the rebel liaison. It's not really a letter but one word written in blue ink on a yellow Post-it note, with a couple of odd, Arabic-looking symbols at the end of the word and three quick dots above it.

It suddenly occurs to me that the code's meaning is unknown to us, that our "safe passage" note to the village commander could actually say something very different, could even be our execution order. In this new light, I study what has been written. Why three dots? Maybe three dots mean "friend" and two mean "foe." Or maybe it's just the reverse. Maybe the liaison meant to make only two, but his hand slipped and left a mark that wasn't supposed to be there. Maybe the dots don't mean anything at all and what I should really be focusing on are the Arabic-looking symbols. I find it both remarkable and humiliating that my future might be decided by a word hastily scrawled on a Post-it note, but there is no choice in the matter and finally I give up.

I turn to a blank page in my notebook and take up my pen.

Many years ago, my brother, far more experienced in war than I, tried to teach me to calculate the risks before going into a battle zone, to arrive at a percentage chance that something bad might happen. "Your cutoff should be 25 percent," Jon Lee had told me. "If it's higher than 25 percent, you don't do it."

It wasn't a true equation, of course -- just hunches and intuition, guesses contrived to look like math -- and I'd never had much faith in my ability to weigh factors properly, but on this morning I try.

I try to imagine the chance that the Russians will attack the road while we're on it and decide on 10 percent each way: 20 percent. I try to imagine the chance that the rebels in the village will think we are spies. Here, at least, there is some empirical evidence to work with; those who have gone to the village and disappeared. I decide on 50 percent.

Seventy percent. I have never done anything anywhere near 70 percent.

I decide these numbers are way too high. I cross them out and start again. Five percent for the drive each way, 30 percent for the village: 40 percent. Still too high. Five percent total for the drive, 25 percent for the village: 30 percent. Out of curiosity, I calculate the odds of being unlucky at Russian roulette -- a little less than 17 percent -- and then decide the whole exercise is a waste of time, that either something will happen or it won't.

But my fatalism wavers. I stare at the two pieces of paper in front of me, the word in blue ink on the Post-it note, my calculations on the page. I turn in the chair and look at Stanley. Even though he is asleep, I am surprised that he cannot feel my stare, that some

unconscious alarm doesn't trigger him awake. I slowly press against the chair back until it creaks. I wait for his eyes to snap open, for him to bolt up in the bed and meet my gaze.

I believe that if Stanley wakes up right now, I will tell him we're not going to do it. I believe I will show him the numbers in my notebook, explain that we might die over what is written on the Post-it note, tell him that it was a crazy idea, that I am frightened. But Stanley doesn't wake up, and I lack the courage to make him.

**A**t some point, I began to take relics with me when going into war zones. It started unconsciously -- a seashell here, a girlfriend's silver earring there -- but my collection steadily grew until it filled a small plastic bag tucked into a corner of my rucksack. I think at first I carried these things because they reminded me of the world outside of war, small and lightweight links to my normal life; it was comforting to fiddle with an old Budweiser bottle cap or a Lion Brand matchbox or a familiar stone bead when I was bored or lost, when I was waiting for something to happen or something to end in a dangerous place.

Gradually, though, I saw that my relics were becoming talismans. I developed the habit of carrying some of them in the left front pocket of my trousers, occasionally replacing them with others from my plastic bag. I knew this was a bad sign, for it meant that I was inventing good luck to keep me safe, that my sense of immunity was gone.

Late one night in mid-January 1987, I lay on a deck chair beside the pool of the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo, the principal city of Sri Lanka, smoking cigarettes and staring up at the fronds of palm trees, thrashing and black against the sky. In my left front pocket was an American bicentennial quarter, the key to an apartment I no longer lived in, and a tiny ant eater figurine made from yellow rubber. Behind my head was a stone seawall against which the Indian Ocean -- turbulent and at high tide -- rhythmically crashed.

The Galle Face, built at the height of the British empire, was a pile of mahogany and rattan, slow-turning fans and ocean breezes, but in 1987 the civil war in Sri Lanka was entering its fourth year and the tourists had long since abandoned "The Pearl of Asia." Now the Galle Face and the other luxury hotels along the Colombo waterfront were virtually shuttered, their lobbies filled with forlorn maids and bellhops and reservation clerks. On afternoons, my brother and I would sit by the Galle Face pool, the only charges for the five uniformed attendants there.

The first time I climbed the seawall and prepared to dive into the ocean the attendants beseeched me to stop. It was dangerous to swim there, they said, there were reefs and sharks, strong currents that could

sweep me out into the shipping lanes. I looked out at the sea. The waves were high, cresting at eight or ten feet, and it was true that no one was in the water. I told the attendants I would be fine and dove in. On that first day, I went out only a short distance, maybe fifty yards, treading water and riding the swells, and when I turned, I saw the five of them in a row behind the seawall, staring at me. I waved and they all waved back.

It became a daily ritual, and each day I went out farther, out to where I could begin to feel the current pulling me away, and where I had to struggle a little harder to get back. And each day the attendants and I exchanged our reassuring waves across the water.

I could not explain to them that I went into the ocean because there I felt in control over what happened to me. At least in the ocean I knew the dangers I faced, and the effort to stay calm, to override the fear of riptides and sharks and deep water, was an act of free will and a measure of power. How could I possibly explain this to the attendants? For them, caught in a country at war, their futures and their children's futures becoming bleaker by the day, such a needless tempting of fate could be viewed only as an absurd extravagance. Better that they regarded me as an unusual athlete or a friendly fool.

Earlier that night, I had set out across the city in a restless search for diversion and had ended up at the former Hyatt hotel. With its vast vacant atrium and ascending tiers of empty rooms, the hotel had the feel of a great mausoleum that no one visited, its gloom deepened by a spirit of desperate optimism. piped Indian pop music -- frenetic and reedy -- rifted on the still air, and at various intervals in the hollow building teams of cleaning women rubbed its marble and gold to a high polish, as if preparing for a party.

There were four customers in the lounge, three Asian businessmen at a table and a white man sitting alone at the bar. He was in his mid-thirties, with short blond hair, and he perked up at the sight of me, as if he had been awaiting my arrival. I sat a few stools away, ordered a beer, and within seconds he was at my elbow, his hand extended.

"New in?" he asked. "Where are you posted?"

His name was James, a thirty-year-old Briton, a mercenary pilot for the Sri Lankan government. It was an open secret that for more than a year the government had employed several dozen mercenaries -- or "contract officers" -- to run their air war against the Tamil Tiger guerrillas, and that it was now in the process of hiring more; James, in Colombo on a five-day R&R, had assumed I was one of the new arrivals. Although a bit disappointed to learn otherwise, he chose to make the best of it; it was not like he was going to find anyone else to talk to that night.

He told me that he flew a helicopter gunship and that his particular beat was the Jaffna lagoon on the

northern tip of the island. It placed him at the center of one of the war's most crucial battlegrounds. The Tigers had held the narrow Jaffna peninsula for over three years and had repelled every army offensive against it, but they had one huge vulnerability: all their supplies, from food to bullets to medicine, had to come in by sea. A vital route was across the ten-mile expanse of the Jaffna lagoon. In the past year, James and his fellow contract officers had turned the lagoon's waters into a shooting gallery.

"Anything that tries to go over," he said, "we kill it."

My meeting James was serendipitous, for ever since arriving in Sri Lanka, my brother and I had tried to devise some way to get to Jaffna. With the army controlling the peninsula neck, we had been told that the only possibility was aboard a Tiger supply boat trying to run the lagoon, but we'd also been told that such a venture would be extremely risky now that the mercenary gunships were killing anyone they saw. After several beers that evening in the old Hyatt, James came up with a plan.

"Here's how we can work it," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. "We'll set up a prearranged time for you to go over and come back, and I'll just stay out of that zone. It would have to be a very small window, of course, but as long as you keep to schedule there shouldn't be any problem."

There was something both touching and ironic about this offer. Watching James's earnest face as he awaited my reaction, I knew that even more than wanting to help me he wanted to protect me. But I also thought of all the things that could go wrong and throw us off schedule -- a flat tire, a flooded boat engine, a long-winded interview in Jaffna -- how the smallest misstep could set into motion a course of events whereby this lonely man in the cavern of a hotel bar would, through no fault of his own, slip down from the clouds to become our destroyer. Well, there's never a shortage of irony in war. As it was, all I could do was thank James for his offer and tell him I would consider it.

But walking back to the Galle Face that night, I had become aware of an odd discomfort in my chest. It was not an entirely new sensation, but on this night I felt it acutely, as one might feel the onset of a flu before it strikes. While lying in the lounge chair beside the darkened pool, staring up at the thrashing palm trees, I realized that I believed I might soon die.

At first, I was tempted to attribute this feeling to my conversation with James, my apprehensions about running the lagoon, but I knew it ran far deeper and had been with me for some time. It was why I had begun to carry talismans, perhaps even why I dove off the seawall to play with fate in the ocean's currents. It had to do with punishment.

I finally understood that I was not merely an observer of war and never had been. I had always been a participant -- by my very presence I had been a participant -- and war will always find a way to punish those who come to know it. I had watched people die. I had walked through killing fields and felt human bones break beneath my feet. I had picked up the skulls of murdered children and rearranged them with an eye to photographic composition. I had cajoled or intimidated or charmed scores of people into revealing their most intimate horrors, and then I had thanked them perfunctorily and walked away. If I was to be punished -- and there were charms in my pocket to forestall this, there was an ocean behind my head to hasten this -- it would be because I deserved it. God knows I deserved to be punished for the things I'd seen.

As it turned out, my brother and I did not attempt the Jaffna lagoon. Instead, we journeyed east, to the marshes and rice paddies along the windward coast, to the Tigers fighting there, to Athuma.

**A**t 7:45 A.M. minutes before we are to set out for the village, I tell Ryan and Stanley that I am going to the town square for cigarettes and slip away from the house. The day has broken cool and the air is clear. By noon, the dust will rise to lie over the town like a shroud, but for now it is still wet with dew, and in the distance the snowcapped Caucasus mountains shine like glass.

In the square, the kiosk women are just setting up for the day, throwing open the wood shutters of their booths or laying out their wares on the sidewalk, blankets wrapped tightly over their shoulders. I buy three packs of Marlboros and push them into my coat pocket.

At one end of the square is a high school and, next to it, a small park, its entrance dominated by peeling portraits of men I do not recognize. I have passed the place often in the past few days, and on this morning I wander inside.

It is a very modest park and suffering from neglect -- the paving stones of its path are shattered, and nothing has been pruned or trimmed in a very long time -- but at its center I come to a massive, marble monument, a small eternal flame burning at the base. It is a memorial to the town's dead from World War II, and in the black stone are chiseled scores of names.

Standing before the flame and the list of war dead, I suddenly find that I am praying. I haven't prayed in twenty-five years and am not really sure anymore how it is done, if I'm supposed to preface it in some way or direct it to some god in particular. In any event, it is a selfish prayer; for the soul of my dead mother, for the safety of my companions and myself on this journey.

I hear laughter behind my back, and I turn to see two schoolgirls sitting on a nearby bench, watching me and giggling. I am embarrassed that they know what I am

doing, that even though I haven't bowed my head or closed my eyes, they know I am praying. I stoop down to pick up a pebble from the path, then leave, finishing the prayer in my mind as I walk. In the left front pocket of my trousers is a fossilized shark's tooth from Florida, the keys to my apartment in New York, and a tiny 1973 two-kopeck coin I found in the gutter of a Moscow street. At the entrance to the park, I slide the pebble into my pocket, one more charm to keep me safe.

In my absence, the ambulance has arrived at the house, and my companions stand in the street, waiting for me. The relief worker, Alex, is a tall, rail-thin Hungarian in his early thirties, an Oxford divinity student, of all things, on leave to perform rescue work in Chechnya. There is something in his quirky, rather dandyish manner -- his vaguely British accent and soft stutter, the long woolen scarf he habitually wears -- that seems both charming and brave in its incongruity with this place. On this morning, he appears to be in high spirits -- clean-shaven and jaunty -- and he bounds over the dirt road to shake my hand.

"Nice weather for it," he says, glancing up at the blue sky, "but I suspect we'll find mud in the mountains." He turns to me, still smiling his crooked smile. "In any event, perhaps we should take a closer look at this note from the liaison. Wouldn't want to walk into a trap of some sort, would we?"

Alex says this without any hint of real concern, and I take the Post-it note from my back pocket. He studies the single word for a moment, his fingers distractedly playing with the frame of his horn-rimmed glasses, then hands it to Aslan.

Aslan reminds me of other young men I have known in other wars, the native "fixer" hired by Western visitors -- journalists, relief workers -- to get them in and out of dangerous places. He is in his mid-twenties, with dark hair, sunglasses, and a black imitation-leather jacket. Others have dressed differently, of course, have been Asian or African or Latin, but what unites them all is a cocky bemusement at our ignorance and bad ideas. Aslan glances quickly at the note and shrugs.

"I don't know what it means. It's in code."

"Nothing for it, then," Alex says, merrily. "We'll just have to go and find out."

And so we set off, the boxes of medical supplies -- gauze bandages, glucose solution, antiseptic wash -- jouncing and sliding in the ambulance bay. We follow the path of my imagination, over the plain, into the foothills, and then there is the dirt track, the river, and we are in the mountains. The day is bright, a blinding light reflecting off the snowcapped peaks to the south, but the small valleys below us are cloaked in morning shadow and fog. We are still on neutral ground, but that doesn't mean much here, and out of habit I watch the valleys, look for a flash of refracted light in a dark recess, a sudden swirl in a fog cloud, for some sign that a trolling

gunship is rising out of the depths to meet us. But there is no flash or swirl, and the only sounds are those of the wind and the grinding of the ambulance engine. We pass no one on the track -- no cars, no homes -- and we do not talk. It is as if each of us is making this journey utterly alone, each in his own private ambulance on a ridgeline at the top of the world.

About an hour after crossing the river, Alex, sitting in the front passenger seat, suddenly points down the hillside. We are skirting a mountain, somewhere near the unmarked frontier between neutral ground and war, and in the pasture below is a haphazard cluster of large, rectangular stones.

"They look like ruins," Alex says excitedly. "Old ruins."

As Aslan continues to steer along the track, the rest of us peer out the windows. It is a strange sight, this jumble of square-edged rocks in the middle of nowhere, but not strange enough to dispel our stupor of silence.

**I**t was a very hot day. The air was still, and thick with the smell of paddy water and sweat, and when Athuma was led into the hut, the sun was behind her so that for a moment she was only a silhouette against hard light. That is how I remember it, how it looks when I return to it.

The day had started off very differently. In fact, it started the way I, as a child, had imagined war would be but war had never been: grand, cinematic. The night before, a messenger had come with our instructions, and at noon Jon Lee and I had walked into the marketplace of the government-held town and two Tiger guerillas had suddenly appeared beside us on their motorcycles, motioning us to get on. There had been a wild, careening ride, down side streets and narrow alleys, dodging army roadblocks and personnel carriers, until finally we burst free from the town and were in the countryside, speeding past farmhouses and rice paddies and palm trees, and my life had never felt so much like an adventure.

The sensation tasted for a time, through the dash across the lagoon in the motorized canoe, through the half-hour drive on the other side, crammed in the back of a battered jeep with a half-dozen Tigers. It ended at an old farmhouse hidden in a grove of trees. It ended the moment I saw Kumarappa.

He was twenty-seven years old, the Tiger commander for the region, with a pistol on his hip, a potbelly, and dark, dead eyes. His young followers -- weighted down by weapons of every kind, ampules of cyanide hanging on leather thongs around their necks -- gathered close to his side, as if posing for a group photo, as if mere proximity, to him bestowed status. And because they were only boys, and because they had been living in the bush, the Tigers could not hide their excitement at our presence; they whispered animatedly to one another, smiled shyly in our direction. But not their

leader. Kumarappa stared without expression, his eyes unblinking, as if we were not really there at all.

The Sri Lankan army was closing in on Kumarappa's group. In the last few days, they had launched a series of lightning assaults in the area, coming ever nearer to the base camp. Just that morning, helicopter gunships had swept in over the lagoon and killed several people caught out in the open. It was now only a matter of time -- probably a very short time -- before the army moved on the old farmhouse amid the rice paddies, and if his boy followers hadn't figured that out yet, it seemed that Kumarappa had; it was dying time, and Kumarappa was already there.

He motioned for us to follow him to the main hut, a long dark room with reed walls and a thatched roof. Four wicker chairs were arranged around a low table, and upon this table a young Tiger placed three bottles of warm orange soda.

Hunched in his chair, his weapon-laden boys gathered behind him, Kumarappa began to talk of death, of the cyanide ampules he and his Tigers would bite into when the final moment came.

"It's a good death. Yeah, it's a good death. Our soldiers do that. It's a very brave death ... I'm not afraid to die, you know?"

He talked of spies, of the spies who were all around him, in the villages, in the rice fields, even coming into the area from other places. They were trained by British intelligence or the Israeli Mossad, maybe even the CIA, and Kumarappa was always uncovering them, getting them to confess, tying them to lampposts and blowing off their heads as examples to others who would betray.

"Sometimes we put them on the lamppost," he said, cradling his bottle of soda. "Sometimes, you know, we have the explosive wire -- just around the body, and then we detonate it. This is our maximum punishment. We do it sometimes. Two or three times we've done it."

And as he spoke, I felt Kumarappa was studying me. I don't know if this was true or merely my imagination, but every time his empty, dead eyes turned in my direction, I became more certain that I was the subtext of his rambling conversation, that in me Kumarappa was deciding if he had found his latest spy.

Once this conviction took hold, it became paralyzing. Even as I tried to meet Kumarappa's stare -- and it is impossible to stare for as long as a madman can -- I knew that the fear was registering on my face, that I looked, in fact, very much like someone with a guilty secret. I felt caught in a deepening trap, fear giving way to a panic I wasn't sure I could suppress. At last, I simply dropped out of the conversation, let Jon Lee take over all the questioning, while I busily scribbled in my notepad, peered up at the thatched ceiling as if in deep concentration, anything to avoid Kumarappa's gaze.

"We can show you one spy that we have caught," I heard Kumarappa say after a time. "Would you like to see a spy?"

It was impossible to not look at him then, and when I did, I saw that he was watching me, the hint of an indulgent smile on his lips. It was the first time he had smiled, and it was the first time in my life I was sure I was about to die.

I don't know how long this belief lasted -- at most a few seconds -- but then I looked down the length of the hut, down the passage that had suddenly formed between the gathered Tigers, and at the far end I saw the silhouette of a woman in the light, a silhouette being led toward us. That is when the belief left me, when I saw I was to live, and this filled me with such relief and gratitude that I felt transported, as if on this broken-down farm in the marshlands a hideous miracle had just occurred.

They sat her across from me, in the empty wicker chair beside Kumarappa. Her name was Athuma. She was thirty-six years old, the wife of a peasant farmer, the mother of seven children. Among the many events that had, no doubt, filled her short life, only the following were now important:

The Sri Lankan army had taken her husband and tortured him until he was a cripple. They had taken her two youngest children and given them to the sister of a Sergeant Dissayanake. And then the army had told Athuma that she could change the situation, that everything would work out, that there would be money for food and the children would be returned if only she gave Sergeant Dissayanake information about Kumarappa and his boy soldiers in the bush. And so, apparently, Athuma had.

But Athuma had not been a good spy -- people who are coerced into it rarely are -- and very quickly, before she was able to report anything of importance, the Tigers had found her and brought her to Kumarappa. That was two days ago. After two days of torture -- revealed in the swelling on her face, her shuffling, lopsided gait as she walked toward us -- Athuma had confessed to everything. There was now just a little more torturing to be done, and then it would be over.

"She knows very well the final decision," Kumarappa said. "She knows we are going to kill her."

And then Athuma began to beg for her life. It began as a soft whisper but gradually rose to a high-pitched chant, a disjointed blend of Tamil and English, and this pleading was not directed at Kumarappa but at us.

"Save me, save me, save me."

It continued for a long time, became a keen on the edge of hysteria. Kumarappa turned in his chair to watch Athuma, appeared both bored and amused as she leaned over the table, looking desperately between Jon Lee and me.

"Save me, save me."

And we tried. Slowly, gingerly, we felt around for some hidden corner in Kumarappa's heart. We went over the circumstances that had led Athuma into being a spy, the fact that she had not told the army anything damaging. We asked what would happen to her children, both the stolen ones and those here with their invalid father, if she were to die.

But Kumarappa, his hands folded over his little potbelly, remained unmoved by any of this. Instead, a suspicious light came into his eyes, and this time there was no ambiguity, no mistaking what it meant; he was asking himself why these two foreign men were trying to rescue this spy.

As if Kumarappa's paranoia were infectious, the mood throughout the room changed. The Tigers who were gathered behind him -- friendly, unsophisticated boys a moment before -- turned suddenly sullen and dark, their faces set hard against us.

"Save me, save me."

Athuma leaned out from her chair toward me, compelled me to look directly into her eyes -- hers were dark brown with flecks of yellow -- and I remember opening my mouth to try one more time, but even while looking into her eyes, I felt the stare of Kumarappa and his boy killers, and I couldn't speak. I turned to Jon Lee, and in the gaze that passed between us was an agreement, an understanding that it was over, that we had tried and could not try anymore.

Athuma understood as well. As quietly as it had begun, her plea ended, and I will always remember the sound of her sitting back in the chair, the creak of the wicker, for it was the moment when all hope left her. I could bring myself to look in her direction only one more time. She was staring down at the table, her matted hair framing her bruised face, and she no longer seemed frightened, only sad and terribly tired. A few minutes later, they took her away, and she again became what she had been at first: a silhouette, limping and hobbled, this time receding, passing out into the light of day.

I was in New Delhi, eleven days later, when I learned of the assault on the farmhouse. The army had come in on gunships at dawn and encircled the area, then methodically worked their way through to the grove of trees, killing everyone they found. The Sri Lankan government was claiming 23 dead Tigers, including Kumarappa, while local residents were claiming nearly 200 dead, mostly civilians, the truth was probably somewhere in between. Indian television ran a video of the aftermath and there was a slow pan of a dozen torn bodies in a row beside the ruins of the main hut. I looked for Kumarappa among the corpses but couldn't find him, only a couple of the boys I had talked to.

Jon Lee had flown on to Europe for a reunion with his wife, and in a week I was to join him in London before we moved on to our next war zone. I had told him I was going to stay in New Delhi for a few days to relax -- maybe go down to Agra to see the Taj Mahal -- but what I really wanted was to be alone. I didn't know how the incident with Athuma had affected him -- we had barely discussed it before parting -- but I believed that he was less bothered by it than I was; my brother was older, tougher, more experienced at war; he surely knew how to handle such things.

For me, it had brought a sense of shame deeper than I had ever thought possible. On an intellectual level, I understood I was not responsible for what I had felt in the hut -- for either the fear or the relief -- but no matter how many times I replayed that afternoon in my mind, told myself it was irrational, I could not be rid of the belief that Athuma and I had somehow traded places, that I hadn't really done all I could have to save her because if she had lived I would not have.

My first two days in New Delhi I didn't leave the hotel room. I ordered food and beer from room service and had it left outside the door, told the maids there was nothing for them to clean or straighten. I watched television, smoked cigarettes, paced, stared out the window at the people passing in the street. I relived being in the Tiger camp and conjured up different scenarios, different endings. I played back the tape of that afternoon, listened to all the places where I should have said something but didn't. Then on the third day came news of the attack on the farmhouse, and I felt better. Now I could distract myself by envisioning how the Tigers died.

I knew Kumarappa hadn't eaten his cyanide; in war, the glory of martyrdom is reserved for children and rubes, those who don't know any better. I envisioned him trying to make a break for it, leaving his boys behind to die, flailing through the rice paddies with his pistol, perhaps getting far enough away to start believing he had made it, that he was safe, before being cut down, and I hoped that his end had not been quick, that Kumarappa had died for a while.

I thought of one boy in particular, Shankar, a sweet-faced twelve-year-old with a beautiful smile and a Chinese sniper rifle, a boy so small he had sat on the lap of another Tiger when we interviewed him. I knew Shankar hadn't eaten his cyanide either. I envisioned him panicked as the soldiers closed on the farmhouse, lying wounded in the grass when the shooting stopped. I envisioned him crying for his mother and for mercy as a soldier approached, and I hoped the soldier had not been swayed, that he had put his gun to Shankar's head and pulled the trigger. What an awful thing, to hope for slow death, for quick murder, but it was these hopes, this hate, that enabled me to finally leave the hotel room and rejoin the life I had watched from my window.

It seemed that the world had changed in my brief absence; of course, it was I who had. Beginning the day I left the New Delhi hotel and continuing over the subsequent years, there was about me a new manner, a kind of taut gentleness. At one time, my pride had not allowed me to walk away from a fight. After Sri Lanka, I never showed anger, defused tense situations with an almost obsequious politeness. At one time, I had enjoyed going into the woods with a .22 rifle and shooting at birds and squirrels. Now I didn't want to kill anything, and even the feel of a gun in my hand was repellent. For a long time, I didn't want to go back to a war zone. When I finally did, it was only to "safe" battlefields -- Belfast, Gaza - places where I was unlikely to look into the face of another Athuma.

There were other changes as well, a quirky, eclectic array. I discovered that I now had to live on the top floor of buildings, with large windows to view my surroundings. I was not comfortable in crowds or dark places. I no longer dreamed when I slept. I overreacted to sharp sounds. I felt nervous when helicopters flew overhead.

I understood that the incident with Athuma was not the cause of these changes but rather the culmination, the last link in all that had come before. I had been traveling a path ever since Beirut -- perhaps ever since I first heard Chiang Kai-Shek's rantings in the central square of Taipei -- and at the old farmhouse in Sri Lanka the path had finally given way beneath me. I understood that it had always been only a matter of time before I met an Athuma.

What did not change was my reticence to talk about these things, about Athuma or anything else that had happened. Instead, I felt a keen desire to not do so, to partition off those memories as something that had no relevance to my new life. For some time, I seldom told new acquaintances I had written books, even more seldom the subject matter. To old friends who were curious about my apparent drift -- why I wasn't working on another book, why I had moved to a seedy apartment in Baltimore, where I knew no one, or, later, why I spent two years doing clerical temp work in Boston -- I offered the blandest of explanations, if any at all. Only to those closest to me could I talk about the farmhouse -- and this only after four or five years had passed, only after I had extracted from them a promise of absolute secrecy. What also did not change were the returnings to that day, the sudden, always unexpected moments when I found myself back in the hut, Athuma coming toward me.

It was not until a number of years after Sri Lanka that I realized there was another force guiding my changed approach to the world. It was an unsettling force, one that I had briefly glimpsed in the New Delhi hotel and imagined to be temporary. Along with whatever other emotion had taken root -- sadness, shame -- now there was also rage, a well of directionless hate. If

I had become a gentler person, it was at least in part because I was fearful of the alternative. I didn't get angry, I didn't fight, because I didn't trust what I would do. I wouldn't get near a gun because I was afraid I might use it. And in seeing this, the odd little set of neuroses I had developed did not seem so eclectic after all; guarding against the rage meant being vigilant and quiet, always in control, forever watching the horizon for signs of danger.

I found safe, discrete targets for my anger. Chief among them were those who advocated war or professed to understand it. In London, I watched leftist students, in sandals and patchouli, demonstrate in support of the Tamil Tigers. In the buildup to Operation Desert Storm, I watched Young Republicans at the University of Iowa conduct a mock trial and execution of Saddam Hussein, listened to them cheer and whoop when "Hussein" was made to kneel on the stage to be "shot" in the head. I listened to pundits and academics opine about why a war was or wasn't a religious conflict, an economic or constitutional one. I did not need to confront leftists, rightists, college professors, or yahoos holding forth in a bar; it was enough to loathe them in silence, and I nurtured this loathing as if it were something precious.

It was in the autumn of 1994, nearly eight years after Sri Lanka, that my brother and I talked about Athuma for the first time. We were sitting on the porch of our sister's home in Connecticut late at night. A week earlier, our mother, who lived in Spain, had arrived to visit me and my sister -- the only two of her five children who lived in the continental United States. She had fallen ill suddenly, too suddenly for my brother, living in Latin America, or my two other sisters in Hawaii to reach Connecticut before she died. Now, the day after our mother's death, Jon Lee wanted to be told everything that had happened, the precise chronology of events in her rapid decline. Her passing had been a painful one, difficult to witness, but for several hours on our sister's porch I calmly, numbly, told Jon Lee all he wanted to know.

"I don't know why we couldn't save her," I kept saying. "It happened so fast, but I don't know why we couldn't save her."

After a time, though, my numbness wore off, replaced with the naked grief that tends to ebb and flow on such occasions, and amid this my sorrow expanded to encompass the other woman we hadn't been able to save, Athuma.

"Did we really do everything we could? Did we really?"

"Yes, we did," Jon Lee insisted. "We did everything we could, and it wasn't enough. We tried, and we couldn't try anymore." He said the right words, but in his eyes I saw that Jon Lee didn't believe them either, that he had remained haunted over the years as well.

And despite what is said, it is not always easier to grieve together. Sometimes it is easier to imagine yourself alone, to believe that others -- stronger, tougher than yourself -- have figured a way out and laid a trail that you might follow. Seeing the sorrows of my brother -- the new one for our mother, the old one for Athuma -- was not an easy thing. Along with tenderness, I also felt an anxious despondency: no one was strong or tough enough to emerge unscathed; there was no trail out.

A few months later, I decided I would return to Sri Lanka. I got the idea from watching television programs about American veterans who were returning to their old battlefields, to Okinawa, to Vietnam. I watched these programs closely, studied the faces of the veterans -- especially those who, earlier in the programs, in their pre-journey interviews, had let their masks slip, had lost their composure in a moment of bad remembrance -- because I wanted to see whether they finally found some measure of reconciliation, of peace, in the happy playfulness of the children in villages they had once fought over. The results seemed mixed at best, but the journeys also appeared to be the only thing these old soldiers could do, and I decided to copy them; I would go to Sri Lanka and find Athuma's children, those who were still alive. I would tell them what had happened, how I had tried. I would apologize.

Instead, someone called to ask if I would go to Chechnya, to follow the trail of a middle-aged American man and his three companions who had disappeared there, and a different image came to mind: this man and his companions somewhere in the Caucasus mountains, captive, despairing, but alive, waiting for death or someone to save them.

And so, perhaps having not truly learned anything yet, I went to Chechnya.

**W**hen a person believes he is about to die at the hands of another, he does not look at all the way one might expect. He does not scream or cry. Rather, he becomes very quiet and lethargic, and his eyes fill with a kind of shattered sadness, as if all he wants to do is sleep. It is only like this with a certain kind of dying, I imagine, the kind where you have been given time to see what is coming, where you have tried to negotiate and reason and have failed.

In the front room of the farmhouse in the village, I see signs of this exhaustion in all my companions: Alex hunched forward on the couch, gazing miserably at the bare concrete floor; Aslan leaning against the wall, his arms wrapped about his middle, staring down at his shoes; Stanley's eyes fixed on the far white wall, distant and puzzled; even Ryan seems chastened, his habitual grin gone, his eyelids heavy. I am reminded of looking into the face of Athuma that last time.

We had been stopped as soon as we reached the outskirts of the village, hustled out of the ambulance and led into the stone farmhouse that was the rebel's command post. They were startled to see us -- the village was closed to civilians, the track in "restricted" -- but at first we were treated more with curiosity than with suspicion; we drank tea and shared cigarettes, the rebels talked animatedly about the war and why they were fighting. It was when the commander arrived that everything changed.

He was in his forties, wearing a black leather jacket and strange, ankle-high boots. He shook each of our hands without smiling, then sat on the edge of the broken-down couch and leaned onto his knees, and in the long silence that ensued he seemed lost in thought, methodically massaging his fingers, staring down at the floor. At last, he sighed and looked up at me.

"You are not supposed to be here. No one is allowed here. How do I know you're not spies?"

The note from the liaison was gone. I had given it to one of the rebels who first stopped us, the one who seemed most senior, and he now made a great show of looking for it, rummaging through the various pockets of his fatigues and turning up nothing.

"I must have given it back to you," he said to me. "You must have it."

He was lying, but I didn't know to what end. Was he protecting us or doing the opposite? It was impossible to know, and there was no time to ponder or watch for clues.

In the absence of the note, the commander began his slow, calm interrogation of us. He asked why we had come, who had sent us, and studied our identity papers as if they were weighty evidence. To his questions we gave the most innocent of answers -- that Alex had come to deliver relief supplies, that I had come to chronicle the mission -- but nothing swayed the commander. Instead, it seemed that everything we said, every insistence of our simple intentions, served only to convict us more, lead us that much closer to a bad end. Everyone in the room knew what was happening -- the rebels who a short time before had given us tea and cigarettes now looked away, refused to make eye contact -- and it was the interminable slowness of our descent, our grinding inability to find an ally or the words that might save us, that finally led us into a crushing apathy, to this place where our strongest remaining desire is simply for the process to end.

And then I find the words that cut through. Or maybe it is not words at all but the way I look unblinkingly, guiltlessly, into the commander's eyes. Or maybe it isn't any of this but only a capricious shift in the executioner's heart -- suddenly we find the interrogation is over and we are free. Still dazed by the speed and mystery of our deliverance, we are led to the ambulance, and the rebels gather around to shake our hands, to slap

us on the back, to wish us a safe journey, as if we are close friends they are sad to see leave.

While driving back through the mountains, I remember the man I had gone to the village to find. I never asked the rebels about him, and for the first time I grasp the colossal scale of my hubris. What had I expected? That I would stumble upon the American and his companions standing at the roadside! That I could go to the village, meet the men who had almost certainly murdered the lost group, and have them confide in me? What had I been thinking?

**D**uring the slow quiet drive away from the village, I am reminded again of what it is about war that has always tormented me, that I have never been able to reconcile. Although it has been proved in front of my eyes a dozen times, I have never truly accepted that what separates the living from the dead is largely a matter of coincidence, of good luck or bad, that in war men and women and children die simply because they do, and that there is no plan or reason to any of it. If a faith has guided me, it has been one of arrogance, the belief that I have power, that I can save, that vigilance will see me through.

Athuma was dead before I saw her, she was dead sitting across from me, and she was dead when I left. There was nothing I could have done to make it turn out differently. There was nothing I could have done to save the American man in the village, and there was nothing I could have done to save myself or my companions -- no note, no talismans, no words. But this impotence is almost too much to bear. It is easier somehow to endure the self-tortures -- of rage, of shame, of hope -- that come with the belief that there is a pattern, that we can shape it.

Perhaps this is because of the greater powerlessness that lies beyond, the inability to ever go back. Returning to Sri Lanka and seeing Athuma's children would not have changed anything. Finding the American man in the village would not have canceled out Athuma in the farmhouse. If the goal is to reconcile, to "get over" what has happened, the self-torture will never end; grace can come only in knowing that the wounds never heal, that they have become a part of you and are to be carried. That you can't atone, that you must stop trying.

About an hour after leaving the village, while skirting a hillside, we come upon a Toyota Land Cruiser stuck in the mud up to the floorboards, its three occupants sitting dejectedly in the grass. It is the only other vehicle we have seen all day, and, following the etiquette of the mountains, Aslan stops the ambulance and starts to fashion a towline from a coil of rope. The rest of us step out to stretch our legs. By coincidence, we have stopped above the same small glade where Alex pointed out the unusual sprawl of stones that morning,

and for several minutes, the four of us stand silently on the edge of the bluff, staring down the hillside at them.

I look to the far side of the road and notice that we are directly below the crest of a flat-topped mountain, a mesa. Most of the slope is dirt, but at the crest is a uniform, six-foot seam of rock, and I see that the square boulders in the pasture below are not old ruins but simply sections of the escarpment that have fallen away. I turn to point this out to my companions, but it is too late; Alex has begun running toward the rocks. I watch him go -- an awkward girlish run, his scarf snapping in the breeze -- and I am seized with a dread that, at first, I cannot identify. I clamber down into the mud, to where Aslan is busy with the towline.

"Is this area mined?"

Aslan looks up and seems to sniff the air, as if I've asked him if it might rain. He shrugs.

I climb back to the edge of the bluff and see that Alex has reached his destination. He is standing atop one of the immense stones, his hands on his hips, and although he surely knows now that his ancient ruins are only fallen boulders, he seems quite pleased with himself, a preening explorer.

I shout down to Alex, tell him to be careful, that there might be mines. Even across the long expanse of pasture, I can see the tension come into his body, and I know the weight that has dropped into his chest, the ringing emptiness that has replaced his thoughts. I watch him gingerly pick his way back up the hill, his shoulders stooped like an old man. I try to remember the way he was just moments ago -- happily running through the meadow grass, exultant upon his rock -- and I am held by the sadness of how he has changed, of how we all change out here.