The Day the Water Came  
By Ariele Cohen

Cresenta and I had been married and living in Sri Lanka for just over a year when the water came. Three of our closest friends, ZvonI, Krista and Petia, had arrived in Colombo from Boston to commence a five day road trip around the island. Cresenta, not a planner by nature, had planned everything, including napping under a coconut tree on the beach in Unawatuna, an early morning safari in Yalla, drinking a cool Lion Lager, or perhaps sipping hot tea bundled in sweaters in Bandarawela at the foot of the rolling Lankan hills (it would be a great shock to the system to sweat and burn on the southern coast and then freeze in the tea estates) and finally a river bath in Kithulgala just before buying a perfectly sweet sphere of juggary tapped from the Kithulgala palms.

We planned to drink king coconuts on the side of the road. We would listen to Dylan and have powwows in the sunset, ZvonI in a sarong, all of us barefoot. It was supposed to be a good trip. We were so excited.

But the water came in the morning on December 26th, the morning after we left Colombo to begin our road trip. We had spent the night at Three Fishes, a small bungalow on the beach in Unawatuna bay. Cresenta and I had stayed there many times before. It was our favorite place to stay along the southern coast because it perfectly combined shade and sun. Cresenta could work through mathematical equations, read up on the Theory of Relativity and nap undisturbed under one of Three Fishes’ tall palm trees while I read a novel or the latest fashion magazines sent to me by my sister under the blazing sun. And the cook at Three Fishes always had the best papaya and made a kicking cup of coffee.

That morning Cresenta woke up early, as usual. I found him reading a science book on the porch outside our room. ZvonI, Krista and Petia had also just awoken. We put on our bathing suits and walked the few meters along the sand to the sea. Next to napping, Cresenta’s favorite thing to do in Unawatuna was to go for a beach run. He cajoled ZvonI to join him and the two of them ran past Unawatuna Beach Resort and back to Three Fishes. Covered in sweat, they joined us in the water. The water was calm, warm and the color of the most perfect Sri Lankan sapphire. We swam for a bit and got out to put in our orders for breakfast.

After putting in our orders of fresh fruit, eggs, coffee and tea we dried off on lounge chairs outside the bungalow. We looked to the tops of the palm trees and saw a family of monkeys swinging from the branches.

The staff at Three Fishes set the table beautifully. Fresh orchids were placed on the table along with a huge plate of sliced papaya and three varieties of plantains. The tea was brewing, the coffee steaming. Our table was on the beach in front of the bungalow. Cresenta and I were sitting next to each other facing the ocean. Petia and the orchids were in front of me. I asked our waiter to remove the orchids so that I could see Petia. I missed her while I was in Sri Lanka. Our waiter obliged, but Cresenta turned to look at me scornfully. He said I should not have done that because our waiter had taken great care and pride in setting the table for us. He was right.
Those were Cresenta’s last words to me. They were his last lesson to me in humanity and community.

The water came seconds later, first only to our feet. We jumped out of our seats surprised that the ocean could reach us. Petia ran to our room in an attempt to rescue our luggage, which was on the floor. Seconds later the sea rose and came gushing towards us with tremendous force. I was pushed into a side room in the bungalow and Cresenta, Zvoni and Krista went through the center atrium.

I was trapped in the small side room for what must have been only a few seconds. My right arm caught in the door. As I screamed for help more water came with even greater force, pushing the door open and setting me free. The force of the water raised the bungalow and swept me along with pieces of the antique furniture collected inside towards Unawatuna’s main road.

While I was being carried along I saw only Zvoni for an instant before I got pulled in a different direction. I tried to grab onto trees but I was moving too fast. I was pushed under water and I thought of my mother back in the United States who would be watching these events unfold on the evening news. I was absolutely terrified but did not think for a minute that I would die.

And just as quickly as the water came, the rushing of the water ceased. I was able to stand and immediately made my way to a hill where I was able to climb up and reach dry ground. The skin on my feet was torn and bruised, my lip swollen and a there was a gash at the back of my left calf nine centimeters long.

A Sri Lankan man appeared from the mountains behind me and came down to the base of the hill where I was sitting. He held me. He saw the gash in my leg and packed the open flesh with a medicinal leaf that he picked. The crushed leaf stung and he held me tighter. He ripped his shirt to make a bandage for me. He gave me the rest of his shirt to cover my bare and cut shoulders. He strengthened his grip and stayed with me. He helped me stand and then helped me up the mountain to the mount of a Temple where other foreigners and locals had escaped to. I had no idea where my friends or husband were but I was never alone.

While I was sitting at the Temple mount Petia and Krista appeared from behind me. We embraced and cried. They had seen Zvoni who had gone back into the water to look for Cresenta. Zvoni and Cresenta have a loyalty towards each other that is unmatched.

The water was gushing below us and people were screaming - screaming for loved ones, screaming for their land and homes, screaming at the gods who had given them no warning that the water might come with such height and with such force.

In the confusion Krista went back down the mountain to look for Zvoni. Petia stayed with me. We heard screams that a second wave was coming and those of us at the Temple decided to climb higher into the mountains. We climbed higher and reached a small house. The family who lived there had already opened their home to stranded foreigners who had escaped the water. Some of the foreigners knew first aid and were able to clean my wounds with antibiotic
solutions and provide make-shift bandages for my feet and leg. There was bottled water and biscuits. We stayed at that house for the rest of the day and night and into the following day.

The next day Petia and I got word that Zvoni and Krista were both okay and were staying at two separate camps. No one had seen Cresenta. By late afternoon Petia and I were transferred to The Rock House, a hotel that had transformed into both a medical and rescue facility, in order to be evacuated by helicopter to a hospital in either Galle or Colombo. The helicopter was late and in that time my brother-in-law, who had come from Colombo, had found us to bring us home.

Upon telling this story, it is clear to me that I am here not because of my own actions. Rather, I am here because of a series of gifts and blessings given to me by many strangers and a few golden friends. I am here because a Sri Lankan man decided to come down the mountain towards the water and hold me, clean me and carry me up the mountain to safety. I am here because that man gave me his shirt, perhaps his only shirt left. I am here because a girl from New York gave me her shorts to replace my torn bathing suit bottoms and then her socks to cover my bleeding feet as we ran up the mountain. I am here because another girl from Spain gave me her t-shirt and underwear. I am here because a Sri Lankan family who had hardly anything gave me everything they had including their bed, water from their well, and medicine. They kept their toilet impeccably clean during the nearly two days we stayed at their home. They stayed up talking the entire night so that we would not feel scared or alone. They cooked us a huge fish with rice. I am here because a doctor on vacation in Unawatuna with her three small children came up the mountain to tend to my wounds and give me antibiotics, and because a German man, also injured and in pain, squeezed my hand so hard to drown out the sting of the cleaned wound. I am here because of a few people who were able to keep their wits and smarts intact in the midst of total confusion in order to contact embassies, call helicopters and make lists of survivors. I am here because an Australian man sat with me for over an hour and simply rubbed my hand telling me to be strong for Cresenta. I am here because Petia did not leave my side during the entire ordeal and because Zvoni went back into the water to look for Cresenta.

Cresenta knew that our lives were not merely our own. He believed in people and in community and knew that community comprised of both the fishermen of the world and the doctors of the world. He was right. Our lives are not our own. And we have no choice but to help each other.